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Archibald Cary Coolidge, Founding Editor
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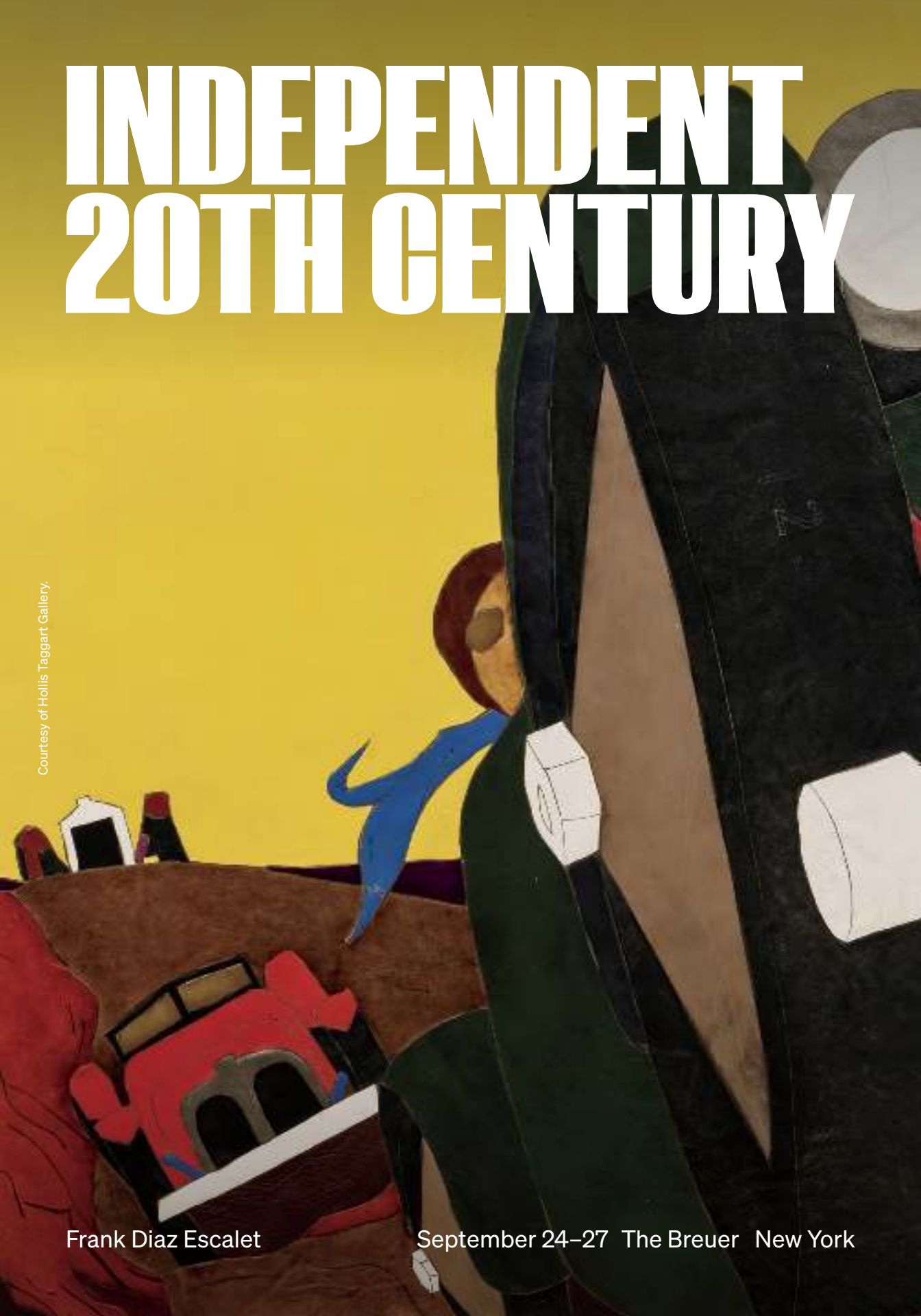
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INDEPENDENT 20TH CENTURY

An abstract painting by Frank Diaz Escalet. The composition is dominated by a large, dark, angular shape on the right side, which appears to be a stylized figure or object. In the center, a figure with reddish-brown hair and a blue garment is visible. The background is a solid yellow. In the lower left, there is a red, angular shape that looks like a car or a building. The overall style is abstract and expressive, with bold colors and sharp lines.

Courtesy of Hollis Taggart Gallery.

Frank Diaz Escalet

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How Alliances Survive

The Case Against Pessimism and the Path to a New Allied Order

KURT M. CAMPBELL AND RUSH DOSHI

In 1984, months after the Reagan administration's decision to deploy Pershing II intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Western Europe brought hundreds of thousands of protesters into the streets of Europe's major cities, a clutch of senior French, German, and Italian officials cornered NATO Secretary-General Peter Carrington outside his Brussels office. Tensions were still running high, and the Americans, they complained, were rude, reckless, and dismissive of allied counsel. Carrington heard them out. Then he shrugged and offered his usual verdict on why American indispensability demanded allied forbearance: "Alas, they are the only Americans we have."

KURT M. CAMPBELL is Chair and Co-Founder of the Asia Group. He served as Deputy Secretary of State and Indo-Pacific Coordinator at the National Security Council during the Biden administration.

RUSH DOSHI is an Assistant Professor at Georgetown University and Director of the China Strategy Initiative at the Council on Foreign Relations. He served as Deputy Senior Director for China and Taiwan Affairs at the National Security Council during the Biden administration.



Today, that forbearance is being severely tested. In less than two years, the second Trump administration has threatened to seize Greenland and leave NATO, withdrawn troops from Germany, meddled in allies' elections, and levied tariffs on friends—all while lavishing summitry and flattery on Beijing and Moscow. Allies have responded with understandable alarm. “The old relationship we had with the United States,” declared Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, “is over.” A “deep rift” was forming, warned German Chancellor Friedrich Merz. “The West as we knew it no longer exists,” declared European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. Ng Eng, Singapore's defense minister, lamented that the United States had gone from a partner to a “landlord seeking rent.”

In the United States, a growing consensus holds that the alliances are unlikely to recover. Former House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Greg Meeks has questioned “whether or not our friends and allies will ever trust the United States again.” The scholar Robert Kagan, in a eulogy for an era in which U.S. allies stuck with Washington, declared that “those days are now over and will not soon return.”

This pessimism is understandable—but significantly overstated. The grievance in allied capitals, while heartfelt, is not a lasting guide to what comes next. Dire as the moment appears, the United States' alliances will survive the Trump shock for reasons the headlines miss. First, the alliance system has weathered now forgotten shocks at least as serious as these, and the present ones owe more to presidential personality than to durable new politics. Second, the threats that gave rise to the alliances have not faded but intensified and converged, as allied perceptions of China and Russia align as never before. Third, powerful gravitational forces continue to pull allies together economically, technologically, and militarily, overcoming efforts to “de-risk” from Washington, while professional bureaucracies quietly advance cooperation far from the glare of politics.

Allowed to harden into conventional wisdom, pessimism risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, as policymakers, convinced the alliances cannot be saved, stop doing the work to ensure they endure. But together, these uniting forces will carry the alliances through the Trump moment and set them up—should allied capitals seize the opportunity—for the transformation required to meet the challenge of a China, backed by a newly aggressive Russia, that can outscale every other country on the metrics of power that matter most. The

current anxieties, however inadvertently, may even strengthen the alliance system: as they have in the past, tensions can spur reforms that create tomorrow's capability. Allies could be transformed from dependents into co-creators of power, pooling capacity into what we have previously called "allied scale." The Trump administration has called on allies to do more so that the United States can do less; in fact, in the future, both the allies and the United States will need to do more, creating two-way flows of capacity and interdependence that make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

It is true that as French President Emmanuel Macron and other allied leaders have argued, "there is no going back." That does not, however, mean the end of the alliance system. It means reforging the alliance system for a new era.

THE NEW FATALISM

The damage that U.S. President Donald Trump has done to U.S. alliances so far in his second term exceeds that done in the entire four years of his first term. That is in part because the internationalist staff that imposed guardrails the last time is gone. But the growing concern over the future of American alliances is not just about Trump. It is driven by a belief that longer-standing corrosive forces compounded by Trumpian attacks on trust are eroding the system to the point that it will be beyond salvation.

The first set of corrosive forces is within the United States. As senior Biden administration officials Phil Gordon and Mara Karlin observed in these pages, a generation of failed interventions, economic challenges, and inward-looking politics have left Americans more reluctant to underwrite global order than at any time since before World War II. Trump, the argument goes, is as much a symptom as a cause. The first Trump term might have seemed an aberration, but the second marks a pattern—suggesting that the pendulum might not swing back.

The second set of corrosive forces is within allied capitals. Gutted American credibility, in this account, is prompting allies to adjust their strategic orientation in ways that will prove irreversible. Trump's treatment of alliance commitments in Europe and Asia as conditional and transactional changes their essential character even without major troop withdrawals or the use of force against allies. Already, European governments are elevating "strategic autonomy" and pursuing defense independence from the United States, with France and the

United Kingdom even proposing a new nuclear umbrella for Europe. Asian allies, too, are revisiting a founding bargain of the U.S. alliance system—extended nuclear deterrence—and considering acquiring their own nuclear capabilities. And both sets of allies are forming new middle-power coalitions to reduce reliance on Washington, from recent European arrangements with India to the trade agreements Japan is pursuing with Latin America. All are searching for ways to de-risk from the United States. The skeptics worry that no matter how pro-alliance the next American leader might be, such hedging will persist: Why would allies stake decades of military planning—bases, procurement, force structure—or pursue economic and industrial integration with Washington if the alliance is itself called into question every four to eight years?

The answer to that question is more complex than it seems and should lead away from despair. Allied collapse remains far less likely than allied endurance and evolution for reasons observers often miss. Because alliances surprised strategists by surviving the Soviet collapse, they came to be seen as products of the softer elements of international politics: sentiment, institutions, trust, shared values, nostalgia—precisely the elements the Trump administration has battered most. But they were forged and have always been sustained by hard material realities. Far from vanishing, those material realities are pulling harder than before.

THE GOLDEN AGE THAT WASN'T

The current pessimism juxtaposes today's challenges against an alliance golden age that never existed. The real history of U.S. alliances is one of recurring crises: allies expelling American troops, presidents blindsiding partners, capitals erupting in protest, and in every era, confident predictions of a coming collapse.

Although many foreign policy elites think this time is different, American and European publics do not agree. According to Chicago Council on Global Affairs polling data, which runs as far back as 1974, the share of Americans who believe Washington should make major decisions together with allies rather than go it alone now stands at a 50-year high. Throughout the Trump era, from 2016 to today, the belief that maintaining existing alliances is “very effective” for advancing U.S. aims increased from 32 percent to 55 percent, reaching ten-year highs among both Democrats and Republicans. Across the

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LAURA PANNACK, *Zahra and Diego at the Car Wash Fundraiser, Project Hope, Cape Town, 2024*

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SCAN TO DISCOVER



Atlantic, polling from the European Council on Foreign Relations has shown alarming dissatisfaction with the United States. But what is most striking is that a clear majority of citizens in 13 of the 15 European countries polled, and a plurality in the remaining two, believe that the relationship will “get better again” once Trump leaves office. Fewer than a third believe the damage will last after he leaves office. European publics, it would seem, think that Trump is an aberration and not a true representative of the United States.

Their faith that “this too shall pass” carries some significant historical weight. In the security domain, today’s challenges are real—threats to seize Greenland, to abandon Ukraine, to quit NATO, to pull forces from Germany, to tie Taiwanese arms sales to Beijing’s preferences. But the alliances have weathered worse.

Even under Trump, the United States has not credibly threatened financial calamity against an ally, as it did to the United Kingdom, in the 1950s, to halt its intervention in Suez. Nor has an ally expelled American troops or seriously undermined an alliance structure, as France did, in the 1960s, after withdrawing from NATO’s unified command. The United States has not withdrawn large numbers of troops from allies, as the Senate nearly forced it to do, in the 1970s, when it only barely beat back the Mansfield Amendment, which would have cut U.S. forces in Europe by roughly half.

In Asia, there is no present analog to the major shocks of the 1970s, which drove Seoul and Taipei to pursue covert nuclear programs. U.S. President Richard Nixon’s 1969 Guam Doctrine instructed allies to furnish the manpower for their own defense, an imperative underscored by the withdrawal of 20,000 U.S. troops from South Korea. His 1972 opening to Beijing blindsided Taipei and Tokyo. A few years later, the fall of Saigon raised alarms about American resolve and led Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew to declare that U.S. influence in the region would “never be the same.” Despite serious dissatisfaction with the United States, there have been no mass protests in allied capitals, such as those against the Pershing II deployments. Nor has the shared threat perception of the alliance system evaporated, as it did in the 1990s, following the Soviet dissolution.

The main exception is the threat of U.S. force against Greenland, which could indeed collapse the alliance system if Washington followed through. But this threat is so peculiar and personalistic and so extreme that no serious figure in either party has endorsed it. Democrats have

vocally opposed it, and so have Republican leaders: House Speaker Mike Johnson said that U.S. military intervention in Greenland “would not be appropriate,” and Senate Majority Leader John Thune said, “I don’t see military action being an option here.” Trump walked it back.

The economic record looks similar to the security record. The “Liberation Day” tariffs have hurt the perception of the United States as a credible economic partner—but this is not the first time Washington has turned its economic heft against its own allies, including through the use of tariffs. In August 1971, the “Nixon shock” did both at once: it unilaterally ended the dollar’s convertibility into gold, blindsiding allies whose economies were anchored to it, and imposed a ten percent across-the-board import surcharge. In 1985, the Plaza Accord forced allies to make a major currency adjustment under the shadow of protectionist pressure, straining the German and Japanese economies more severely than the tariffs allies confront today; within three years, the yen doubled against the dollar, an adjustment far larger than the 15 percent tariff on Japanese exports.

The current tensions are the most significant since the end of the Cold War. And yet the lesson of history is that alliance systems often prove more resilient in retrospect than contemporary observers expect at the time. Crises repeatedly generate predictions of collapse, but alliances adapt precisely because the underlying incentives remain compelling. The first Trump administration’s browbeating over burden sharing was bitterly received in allied capitals and did real damage—but it also pushed European defense budgets toward the NATO two-percent target, drove Japan to double its defense spending, and prompted coordination on China’s technology challenge. Under the Biden administration, many of those same allies joined a dense web of initiatives that would once have been inconceivable: the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; the Quad security partnership focused on the Indo-Pacific; rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo; joint export controls on semiconductors; a coordinated European and Asian response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. None of this was Trump’s design, but it shows how the tensions of one era can produce capability in the next, handing subsequent leaders the opportunity to strengthen alliances in ways previously beyond reach.

The real
history of
U.S. alliances
is one of
recurring crises.

CONVERGENCE AT LAST

Today, that dynamic is especially powerful given that threat perceptions are increasingly converging and intensifying around a shared challenge from Beijing and Moscow, even with allies facing a short-term challenge from Washington. This is notable because, since the end of the Cold War, allied threat perceptions have often diverged. Europe, for example, gradually grew more anxious about Russia's military challenge but generally treated China as a market and manufacturer. Asian allies often saw it in reverse: they were wary of China's growing military strength but less concerned about Russia, seeing its energy as an economic opportunity. That divergence worked to Beijing's and Moscow's advantage. For decades, Washington strove to align perceptions across theaters, to little avail.

That convergence is at last arriving. Chinese and Russian conduct has, more than any Western initiative, forged links between Europe and Asia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine shattered Europe's remaining illusions not just about Moscow but also about Beijing. China has become Russia's most important patron, providing dual-use technological and even lethal military support on the battlefield as well as critical financial, industrial, and diplomatic reinforcement. It is China that is building the Russian defense industrial base and military capability that now menaces Europe. Reflecting that realization, NATO's communiqués now brand China a “decisive enabler” of Russia's war, and its secretary-general argues that the Indo-Pacific and European theaters must be viewed “as one.” Asian states, for their part, see Russia's shocking use of force as a sign of the risks that face them if the military balance with China erodes further. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and even Singapore have rallied behind Ukraine, seeing a Russian defeat as essential for restraining Chinese ambition. The leaders of NATO's four Indo-Pacific partners—Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea—now regularly attend its summits. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow are also binding themselves more tightly together in Asia, staging exercises and strategic bomber patrols around U.S. allies, including during major multilateral gatherings.

Allied threat perceptions have shifted not only in the security dimension but also, perhaps most strikingly, in the economic and technology dimensions. Asian and European governments alike are coming to see China as the United States long has: a mercantilist power targeting the foundations of their industrial strength. European

leaders now speak of a second “China shock,” a flood of subsidized manufactured goods that, as Macron has put it, are “literally killing a large part of European industry.” Von der Leyen has warned of Chinese “overcapacities that erode our own manufacturing base” and calls the situation “simply not sustainable.” Merz has floated a new Plaza Accord to force an appreciation of China’s currency.

None of this yet amounts to a single allied policy. Convergence on the nature of the threat does not mean full alignment on the response in either the security or economic dimensions; there are divisions, too, over how far to de-risk from China, how to balance economic and security interests, and how to manage Taiwan and Ukraine policy. But a shared diagnosis is the precondition for common action, and for the first time in a generation, the diagnosis is beginning to align.

This convergence is a remarkable geopolitical fact. Even during the Cold War, allies differed on threat perception, with West Germany pursuing *Ostpolitik* and détente even as frontline states pressed for deterrence, and the Euromissile deployments split publics and governments alike. By some measures, there is today comparably more unity even against a less urgent threat. What is particularly transformative is that the Atlantic and the Pacific are ceasing to function as entirely separate strategic spaces—setting the stage for truly global alliance efforts, even if the Trump administration is unlikely to take advantage of this convergence over the next two and a half years.

TIES THAT BIND

There is little question that allies are seeking to de-risk from the United States in key domains through new middle-power coalitions. But the shift toward de-risking is being offset and ultimately outweighed by larger megatrends: surging Chinese exports in the economic realm, the AI revolution in the technology realm, and increases in defense spending in the military realm. These are creating new linkages with Washington faster than the old ones can be broken.

In the economic domain, the United States now absorbs around 20 to 30 percent of all allied exports, a much higher share than even five years ago, as China buys less. Last year, even amid the trade war, Europe, Japan, and India all exported significantly more to the United States than to China; over the last five years, exports to China fell roughly 15 percent for Europe, 20 percent for Japan, 20 percent for South Korea, and 20 percent for India—while exports to the United

States rose roughly 30 percent each for Europe, South Korea, and India. That dependence on the U.S. market will only grow: the second China shock will make the U.S. market an even more critical lifeline. And American reindustrialization efforts are increasingly dependent on allied investment and technology sharing, from shipbuilding to semiconductors to batteries, reinforcing interdependence.

Technology is increasingly sticky in both directions, too, partly because of the AI revolution. Reports abound of European governments instructing officials to abandon Microsoft Teams and Zoom, migrate off American operating systems, and stand up “sovereign” alternatives in the cloud and AI. But the new wave of technology innovation is re-creating allied dependence. Yesterday’s dependence on American mobile and desktop operating systems has not abated, and now U.S. allies also depend on American cloud infrastructure, advanced chips, and AI models. Three U.S. “hyperscalers”—Amazon, Google, and Microsoft—account for about two-thirds of the global cloud market, while European providers hold barely 15 percent of their own domestic market. U.S. hyperscalers are expected to spend more than \$700 billion on AI infrastructure in 2026, against European sovereign spending of roughly \$13 billion. And the gap is growing. Europe’s efforts are for now too modest, too regulated, too fragmented, and too focused on alleviating government restrictions rather than promoting commercial use to fundamentally change dependencies that have accumulated over decades. (Meanwhile, the United States will remain dependent on Dutch lithography machines, German optics and lasers, Japanese chemicals, and Taiwan’s semiconductor plants for its AI agenda.)

The military ledger is where the binding may be the tightest. Allied efforts to de-risk from the United States are being offset by the fact that every ally is simultaneously pursuing its most significant defense buildup in a generation in the face of rising Chinese and Russian threats in ways that draw them closer to Washington. The logic is clear in Asia. Even as Trump periodically blasts Asian allies rhetorically, Taiwan has sought \$25 billion in new U.S. weapons, Japan has pursued buying more F-35 fighter jets and Tomahawk missiles while integrating command structures with the United States, South Korea has pursued new nuclear submarine cooperation, and India has deepened its reliance on U.S. jet engines. Although Europe has done more to de-risk, even here the linkages are powerful. More than 80 percent of Europe’s new \$860 billion rearmament effort is completely open to U.S. companies, and the remaining 20



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percent, meant solely for European firms, has several carve-outs to allow American participation. Europe's new defense technology champions, from Helsing to Stark, are substantially funded by American capital from New York to Menlo Park. And in the past few years, the share of European defense procurement going to U.S. companies climbed by one measure from about 28 percent in 2019–21 to 51 percent in 2022–24, as the urgency of the war in Ukraine brought demand that only the United States could meet at speed and scale. Even as Canadians and Europeans turn away from some U.S. platforms and buy from each other, those new platforms—which will not arrive for another decade—deepen reliance on the United States for the substructure of high-intensity warfare—such as the tactical data links that enable allied command and control. And European allies have no alternative to the United States for space-based missile early warning or critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Even Merz has conceded that Europe will “remain dependent on the United States of America for a long time to come.”

Hedging by middle powers is not only being overcome by larger forces; it is also less indicative of alliance trouble than many believe. Middle powers continue to work with Washington even as they seek to build new relationships elsewhere. And in most cases, those new relationships are with U.S. allies and partners, many of them stretching across theaters in ways Washington has long encouraged, with key players such as India and Japan at the center. What looks like de-risking now will in the long run serve as reinvestment in the alliance network and in the capabilities Washington has long sought to bolster: defense production, supply chain resilience, and interoperability. The Trump administration's policies may be the impetus, but the increase in allied cohesion and capability will last beyond him.

THE REAL DEEP STATE

It is not only the forces outside the alliances that are drawing them together but also the forces within. Trump and his team have tried to root out a supposed “woke” deep state of activists, but the real deep state is both more mundane and more consequential. Alliance professionals carry on the daily business of cooperation outside the glare of public recrimination—military planners and intelligence officers, export control experts and sanctions specialists, central bankers and trade negotiators, and the engineers and standard setters who keep allied systems talking to one another. They form a dense network of relationships built

and tended across decades. Because the work is technical rather than political, and because it runs on timelines of years and often decades, it is slow to build but also slow to unwind. The very dullness of it lends the alliances a ballast in the face of a turbulent political cycle.

That steady momentum is visible in how much has continued—and even deepened—under the Trump administration, despite the strains at the top. Even as India seethed under the record tariffs the United States imposed, the defense relationship stayed insulated from the trade fight: in October 2025, the two countries signed a new ten-year defense framework strengthening interoperability across every domain. AUKUS, subjected to a skeptical “America first” Pentagon review, emerged intact, having by then survived changes of government in all three member states. In the Philippines, the annual military exercise called Balikatan (meaning “shoulder to shoulder”) swelled in 2025 to its largest iteration ever with 16,000 troops, allied contingency plans, and Japanese forces. Trade tensions with South Korea did not preclude greater collaboration on nuclear submarines.

Congress has played a part in keeping these relationships strong, too. Despite polarization, bipartisan majorities continue to back NATO, Indo-Pacific partnerships such as AUKUS and the Quad, and defense-industrial integration. Whatever the disputes over burden sharing and trade, few serious members of either party favor wholesale or even partial abandonment of the alliance structures. Even Republican leadership is more mainstream in this regard. Thune, for example, declared, “We got an awful lot of people who think that NATO is a very critical, incredibly successful post–World War II alliance. And I think in the world today, you need allies.” And indeed, Congress has barred NATO withdrawal without express congressional approval.

American allies, for their part, sometimes appear to endorse a kind of magical thinking about the United States: a desire to sustain long-standing favorable views of the United States despite competing evidence. Japan, despite serious grievances over U.S. tariffs and Trump’s soft *détente* with Beijing, as well as Washington’s flagrant failure to support Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi in the face of intense Chinese pressure, is determined to act as if the alliance remains as strong as ever. The United Kingdom has clung with similar determination to the idea of a “special relationship,” and NATO’s secretary-general has greeted the administration with a confidence in the relationship that many find difficult to explain. Some of it represents a genuine faith

in the alliance system; some of it represents a kind of “fake it till you make it past Trump” kind of pragmatism. Regardless, the rhetoric has stabilizing benefits that can effectively buy time.

APRÈS MOI

Allied doggedness in the face of Trumpian hostility is driven not just by today’s security and economic imperatives. It also reflects an intuitive understanding that the likely alternatives to a world secured by the alliance system are considerably worse for the allies. Even the real damage Trump has done to trust and predictability leaves the alliance structure the better bet.

The first possible alternative for allies is global multipolarity, a world with no rules, no fixed alignments, and every state out for itself. This Hobbesian scenario could produce catastrophic war, as it did before World War I. It would cause small states to lose sovereignty, middle powers to acquire nuclear weapons, and great powers to pursue arms races. A second alternative, spheres of influence, adds a bit of stabilizing structure as each great power governs its own neighborhood and the United States retreats to the Western Hemisphere. But great powers perpetually contest the spheres of others, as they did after the Napoleonic Wars and again after Yalta, and spheres cannot stop supply chain warfare or address transnational challenges from AI to rising sea levels. A third possibility that supplies even more order than the other two is a great-power concert that produces a managed peace among the major capitals. But this seems implausible today, when great powers cannot even cooperate on addressing climate change, let alone the full shape of world order. And even if these latter two scenarios proved viable, they would be markedly less favorable to the economic and security interests of current U.S. allies.

A fourth alternative is more likely than all three: partial Chinese preeminence. Multipolarity, spheres of influence, and great-power concerts all presume a general equality among the great powers that seems unlikely given China’s sheer scale: China has twice the United States’ manufacturing capacity, an economy 30 percent larger by purchasing power, the world’s largest navy, an unprecedented \$1.2 trillion global goods surplus, and a commanding lead in technologies from electric vehicles to robotics. Partial preeminence would create a world organized around deference to Beijing underwritten by China’s mass, leaving the United States and its partners hollowed out industrially,

surpassed technologically, displaced commercially, possibly defeated militarily, and stripped of well-paying jobs. The resulting dependencies on China would cause the United States and its partners to slide down the global value chain into real estate, tourism, commodities, finance, and perhaps transnational tax evasion.

It is increasingly clear to policymakers in allied capitals, just as it should become clear to post-Trump American leaders, that allied scale is the only path to balancing China—a fifth alternative for world order in the future. This would involve allies pooling markets, investment, technology, and military capability, with alliances functioning as platforms for capacity building, not just military deterrence. Coming together in this way would produce a coalition that would have more than twice China's GDP adjusted for purchasing power and more than twice its military spending; it would be the top producer of active patents and top-cited publications and the top trading partner of most countries in the world, and it would account for half of global manufacturing to China's one-third. Far from making such allied scale impossible, structural realities are making its realization more likely, highlighting its necessity even as responses to Trump's policies put U.S. allies in a position to offer more to Washington.

One of the most important indicators that this path is plausible is how hard Beijing is working to thwart it. Political scientists such as William Wohlforth and Victoria Tin-bor Hui have found that throughout history, dominant states sought to actively split the coalitions arrayed against them before those coalitions could cohere. Even the Cold War alliance of the twentieth century—ultimately a great success story—faced challenges as Moscow openly meddled in Western European politics to pry Europe away from the United States. And to that end, Beijing is pursuing its own coalition-splitting strategy, exploiting its control over global supply chains to threaten or punish other governments. This inhibits collective action because each country, offered selective relief in some cases, has reason to cut its own deal rather than hold the line with the others. But what is striking today is how little such Chinese efforts have achieved so far, despite everything Trump has done to help Beijing's cause.

FROM SURVIVAL TO SCALE

In the wake of Trump, allied scale will not arise on its own. Like any ambitious construction project, it will require engineers and a plan.

But this is more plausible than it may seem. Every successful renovation of the alliance system has been driven by a forward-looking agenda rather than a nostalgic restoration, and the shock of Trump's second term is burying nostalgia and spurring a needed reckoning in Washington and allied capitals alike.

Greater pragmatism should replace the current pessimism in Washington, in part so that it does not needlessly become a self-fulfilling prophecy that makes the way forward more difficult. The move from documenting challenges to discussing solutions is overdue. The question of how to rebuild and reform the U.S. alliance structure must become a central question in the “what comes next” debate ahead of the 2028 U.S. presidential election.

Many are skeptical that any of these options are still possible. And yet the model already exists across administrations and is being employed even now. Its defining features have long been consistent: powered by the White House, built around concrete projects, and organized through ad hoc coalitions of willing allies. The Biden administration worked in this fashion to launch AUKUS and sustain the coalition behind Ukraine. At times, so has the Trump administration—resourcing inherited initiatives such as AUKUS Pillar 2 in significant new ways and pursuing new ones such as a critical minerals partnership with more than 50 countries that Vice President JD Vance described as a “trading bloc among allies and partners.” That the same model has surfaced under such different administrations is the strongest evidence that allied scale is achievable after Trump.

The first step is a shared assessment of the challenge—and as the convergence described above suggests, allied perceptions of China and Russia are aligning for the first time in a generation. Building on that shared perception will require turning the page on the current era and making proactive efforts to rebuild trust. Washington will have to persuade allies that its most offensive moves were the product of a particular personality rather than a permanent mutation in the political system. A clear, bipartisan repudiation of military threats against Greenland would help. So would a deliberate preference for commitments that outlast any single president: executive orders can be unwound with a signature, but statutes are far harder to reverse, and it is statutes that give allies the confidence to make investments measured in decades.

It would also be wise to start with small, concrete projects that prove the value of allied scale in select cases and create reservoirs of trust. Quick wins build confidence, and there is scope for innovative trial efforts in areas such as pharmaceutical supply chains and munitions coproduction. The watchword should be humility. The instinct might be to reach for sweeping alliance compacts, but that instinct should be resisted. If discrete efforts targeted areas of greatest consensus—a chokepoint in which Chinese control is especially acute, for example—then a large payoff could build momentum. It could also help overcome obstacles in the domestic political environment.

That could lay the groundwork for moving from small projects to broader, more ambitious efforts involving more partners. The organizing principle of these projects must be mutual benefit, expressed as two-way flows of capacity. The legacy alliance model treated partners as dependents—recipients of American protection and markets. A coalition sustained by one-sided concessions is brittle. Mutual dependence, by contrast, would create constituencies for the relationship in every capital, which is why early projects should be designed to give visible political wins across allied countries. New allied capabilities—and a vivid understanding among American voters of the costs of squandering them—could make this kind of genuine reciprocity possible in ways it simply was not a few years ago.

Ultimately, renewing alliances will require an affirmative purpose. It cannot be only a defensive crouch against China, a coalition defined by what it opposes. It has to stand for something—an open, prosperous, and technologically dynamic order that its members actively want to inhabit and that others want to join. Beginning to craft such a vision should be a core task for U.S. foreign policy in the coming years.

At the moment, that prospect may seem optimistic. But that makes it all the more imperative to recall how grave the crises of the past have been and how powerful the structural drivers are today. The interests of the United States and its partners still run together, and that logic has sharpened as China's power and the alignment of its fellow revisionists have grown. U.S. allies would be wise to remember that for all their legitimate anger and anxiety, today's Americans are the only Americans they have. But Americans would be wiser still to invert Carrington's admonition. At a time when the United States needs its allies more than ever, forbearance is essential. They are, after all, the only allies Americans have. 🍷

The Abandoned Order

Learning to Live in a Post-American World

MARK LEONARD

Five years ago, the Chinese housing market crashed, leaving thousands of apartment buildings unfinished across the country. A generation of Chinese citizens who had bet all their savings on indefinite expansion suddenly found themselves homeless. Over time, however, some intrepid people moved into the ruins of these edifices, setting up tents on the concrete floors, using bed sheets as walls, cooking on makeshift stoves. The Chinese call these abandoned structures *lanwei lou*, a phrase that literally means “rotten-tail buildings,” signifying a project gone awry, a plan in suspension. The inhabitants of rotten-tail buildings repurpose the old and improvise to find a way of surviving an economic storm.

The state of the Chinese housing market is a good metaphor for the U.S.-led rules-based international order. After decades of expansion, it, too, is being abandoned. Never fully accepted by China and Russia

MARK LEONARD is Co-Founder and Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations and the author of *Surviving Chaos: Geopolitics When the Rules Fail*.

and resented by newly assertive middle powers, its main financial backers—the American people—have lost interest in underwriting its further development. And as in the case of China’s failed housing projects, no alternative provider is stepping in to take over.

A rotten-tail world is emerging, one in which states will have to adapt cunningly, improvise new uses for elements of the old order that remain valuable, and adjust swiftly to the dramatic decay of others. But too many leaders still act as if the old order can somehow be salvaged or even perfected. The UN General Assembly still meets every year, despite being increasingly sidelined from diplomatic efforts. The World Trade Organization carries on adjudicating trade disputes, despite a surge in protectionism. UN climate change conferences convene to chart an increasingly hopeless path to net-zero emissions. International working groups still meet to discuss grand plans for a two-state solution, even as the Middle East burns.

The United States’ allies, in particular, simply do not understand yet that Washington has withdrawn its support from the old order and from them. NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte has mocked those Europeans who suggest learning to defend themselves without U.S. help, telling them to “keep on dreaming.” NATO’s July 2026 summit offered one of the most surreal examples of cognitive dissonance: European leaders frenetically pledged tributes to U.S. President Donald Trump in the form of arbitrary defense spending increases—unrelated to their own defense analysts’ assessments—in the hope that he would not withdraw from the alliance. The United Kingdom continues to entrench its security dependence on the United States by buying U.S. fighter jets, and Denmark is approving major arms purchases from Washington even as Trump threatens to forcibly annex its constituent territory, Greenland. Australia is plowing ahead with investments in AUKUS, its trilateral security partnership with the United Kingdom and the United States, subsidizing the U.S. industrial base even as American commitments falter.

Leaders who fail to confront their new reality are failing their countries. It is time to acknowledge that the old order really has disappeared—and to plot a new approach to geopolitics. This moment does not constitute a short interregnum between a U.S.-led order and a Chinese-led one. For some time, the world will be without any order at all—swept by fragmentation, contagion, and strangulation or the temptation to weaponize a wide variety of geographic, economic, and

technological chokepoints. Rather than constructing a grand strategy, states will need to develop far more flexible and artisanal responses.

REALITY CHECK

U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once asserted that world order rests on two pillars: a reasonably stable balance of power and a set of commonly agreed-on rules about what states may or may not do. Today, both pillars are crumbling, and it is unlikely that they can be fortified or rebuilt any time soon. The United States remains the world's preeminent military, economic, and technological power. But it is increasingly clear that Washington no longer has the ability to prevent conflicts or ensure the free flow of commerce worldwide; it could not even open the Strait of Hormuz after a militarily hobbled Iran shuttered the waterway.

Even at the height of U.S. power, adversaries in Afghanistan and Iraq were able to exploit asymmetric advantages to challenge it. But swift technological change, especially the proliferation of cheap missiles and drones, is rapidly undermining the U.S. military's command of the seas and skies and the relative peace that went with it. Even before Trump, the alliance system that helped the United States enforce the rules was weakening; China, Russia, and rising powers that didn't make the rules were pushing against them.

Then, Trump launched a rebellion from within against the U.S.-led order, bullying American allies, ditching the World Health Organization, scrapping the U.S. Agency for International Development, and imposing widespread punitive tariffs. His will to dismantle the order the United States built has been extraordinary. But even after his presidency ends, in 2029, it is highly unlikely that the United States will resume its old role. Americans had already lost interest in being the world's primary provider of public goods, its police officer, and its free-trade champion. And no other power has the ambition to take up the mantle.

In dozens of private conversations I have had over the past year with leaders worldwide, the only thing they agree on is that they do not know what will come next. They are struggling to use history or theory to find their bearings. The briefings they get from their intelligence agencies and diplomatic services no longer give them any certainty. Ahead of every NATO summit, I receive text messages from European leaders asking me what I think might happen. One

Gulf leader recently admitted to me that he simply had no idea what arrangement would settle the dispute over the Strait of Hormuz. The national security adviser of a U.S. ally in the Indo-Pacific said his government no longer knew whether the United States would defend his country in a crisis.

The central feature of these conversations is uncertainty, a sense that the world defies conventions and understanding. Episodes of rule breaking always characterized the rules-based order, but they took place within an overall framework that still held. This is the distinction: in a disordered world, actors violate rules they still recognize. In a world defined by what might be called “un-order,” they act without reference to any common framework at all.

A WORLD IN PIECES

The uncertainty that pervades this orderless age is driven by three forces upending the international system: fragmentation, contagion, and strangulation. Trump’s predatory approach to partners is fragmenting the West as a political community. Alliances are splintering, and not just Western ones; consider the disarray in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Trade restrictions are breaking up world markets, but not into tidy blocs. Global problems no longer attract global solutions but rather a patchwork of short-term fixes.

The deepest fragmentation is epistemic. A digitally connected world is not simply dividing over interpretations; its inhabitants no longer agree on facts, erasing the sense of shared reality that underpins diplomacy itself. Consider the war that the United States and Israel launched against Iran in February. The parties to the conflict have been unable even to agree on whether a cease-fire exists, what leverage they have, or who won or lost.

The aspiration to establish a single global order is giving way to a reality in which many organizing systems coexist and compete. Some frameworks are organized around regions. Others, including the Pax Silica (a new initiative to secure tech supply chains), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, and AUKUS, seek to govern arenas such as technology, trade, and security. Gone is the idea that the United Nations or even the United States could oversee comprehensive peace deals that successfully address territorial claims, postwar justice, and reconstruction. Instead of such deals, limited cease-fires and truces—negotiated not by diplomats but

by a motley crew of intermediaries such as the American real estate mogul Steve Witkoff, the Russian banker Kirill Dmitriev, and Asim Munir, Pakistan's top general—aim to freeze conflicts rather than resolve them. In a world of unreliable allies, countries will hedge. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty could cease to function as a meaningful constraint, and Germany, Iran, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea could move to acquire nuclear weapons within two decades.

Also gone is the notion that consistent rules ought to govern the global economy. Economic nationalism and protectionism are on the rise; the EU's introduction of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, Trump's tariffs, and China's export controls are all accelerating the breakup of the global economy. Identical barrels of oil now trade at vastly different prices depending on where they are sold, through which payment system, to which buyer, and under which sanctions regime. In early April, for instance, Brent futures traded at around \$113 per barrel while physical cargoes of the stuff sold for as much as \$144. Oil futures and spot prices usually diverge, but only by a few dollars; such a spread is extremely unusual. The London and New York gold markets are also experiencing bouts of sharp price divergence. This kind of fragmentation will only become more pervasive. The dollar's dominance will erode more rapidly, with its share of global foreign exchange reserves perhaps falling below 50 percent as bilateral currency arrangements proliferate and the pricing of commodities diversifies. U.S. borrowing costs will rise, and global transaction costs will balloon as incompatible systems multiply.

OUT OF CONTROL

Another big challenge is contagion. International law and norms formerly put limits on states' actions. Great powers might not always have adhered to the rules, but they were imposed on smaller powers and set expectations for how business would be conducted. But in this era of disinhibition, crises no longer stay in their original domain, and actors no longer feel constrained by norms governing proper conduct—indeed, many of the world's most powerful actors no longer even seem aware that they are breaking rules.

In this environment, disputes are also less likely to remain compartmentalized. France and Germany strongly opposed the war the United States launched against the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, but that did not prevent them from continuing to

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share intelligence with and trade with the United States, nor did it stop them from cooperating with Washington on other NATO matters. When Trump threatened tariffs against European allies who opposed his claim to Greenland, by contrast, he demonstrated that even among allies, economic and security relations are no longer separate. During the recent Iran war, when several European countries expressed reservations about the conflict, Trump threatened to halt trade with them and withdraw troops stationed in their countries.

Too many leaders
still act as if
the old order
can somehow
be salvaged.

And after Israel and the United States attacked Iran, the Islamic Republic and its proxies launched strikes on U.S. partners Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and even Europe, by assaulting Cyprus. Rather than seeking to hinder the U.S. war effort directly, Iran seemed intent on disrupting global markets as much as possible. Frustrated by Pakistan's closeness to Iran, the United Arab Emirates, for its part, also retaliated across domains by forcing an early repayment of a \$3.5 billion debt and deporting thousands of Pakistani workers.

This same disinhibition increasingly governs how war itself is waged. The taboos against assassination, targeting civilians, and embarking on wars of territorial conquest are vanishing. According to reporting in *The New York Times*, Israel planned to assassinate the Iranian foreign minister and speaker of parliament while the two were conducting negotiations with the United States. Throughout its war in Gaza, Israel attacked people and facilities that were previously not considered legitimate targets: journalists, hospitals, cultural sites, religious institutions, and civilian infrastructure; Israel claimed that Hamas used such targets as covers. Russia regularly targets civilian infrastructure in its war in Ukraine, and both countries are killing each other's citizens in third countries in targeted assassinations.

This kind of uncontrolled escalation will almost certainly lead to more wars. Countries beyond the United States may be tempted to blackmail their allies, and the threat of nuclear attacks could become normalized. Most worrying is the prospect of a proliferation of small wars for territory. There is no shortage of possible catalysts. China could target Taiwan outright; Venezuela could decide to use force in pursuit of its claim on Essequibo, the resource-rich western half of

neighboring Guyana; Ethiopia might try to wrest access to Eritrea's Red Sea ports; and Russia might decide to seize the Estonian border town of Narva.

THE BIG SQUEEZE

In a marriage that has gone wrong, the ties that bound a couple together in good times—the house, the children, the dog—become the weapons they use to hurt each other in bad times. Likewise, in today's geopolitics, states are increasingly turning the systems that once connected them—energy routes, semiconductor supply chains, financial infrastructure, shipping lanes—into weapons. A country's control over chokepoints is becoming a key marker of its power, just like its GDP and the size of its military.

Western countries have been particularly active in identifying and weaponizing chokepoints, above all through their control of the global financial system and essential technologies. The first Trump administration restricted Chinese companies' access to high-level microchips. The Biden administration stepped up this technological throttling by imposing wider export controls, taking advantage of the fact that U.S. and allied firms dominate the production of chip manufacturing equipment and the software required to make advanced chips. In 2022, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a coalition of European and North American countries took the remarkable step of weaponizing the dollar to punish a G-20 country when they cut Russian banks out of the SWIFT payments system and froze \$300 billion of Russian central bank reserves.

China, learning from this, is rapidly expanding its own authority over chokepoints. In 2010, Beijing briefly experimented with cutting off rare-earth exports to Japan amid a territorial dispute, but it had not yet established the bureaucracy to target such controls precisely. Since then, it has built its own export control system explicitly modeled on Washington's and extended the resource chokepoints it commands from raw materials to processing. In late 2025, China adopted its own version of the U.S. foreign direct product rule, asserting a right to decide whether companies can access magnets anywhere in the world if they contain even trace amounts of Chinese materials or were made using Chinese technology. In effect, Beijing turned against Washington the same extraterritorial tactic Washington had invented to control chips. Smaller countries and nonstate actors are increasingly

exploiting chokepoints, as well. According to German prosecutors, a Ukrainian team destroyed the Nord Stream pipelines to break Europe's dependence on Russian gas. Even before Iran shuttered the Strait of Hormuz, bringing 20 percent of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipping to a near halt, the Houthi militia in Yemen was using cheap drones and missiles to block transit through the Red Sea.

Such exploitation of chokepoints will soon be universalized. The consequences could be extraordinary, because the potential bottlenecks are innumerable: they exist not only in physical waterways but also in the supply chains for weapons as well as food, health care, and basic technology—all the essentials people need for everyday life. The United States might prevent Europeans from using its AI models or even block their access to Microsoft's products. China could further restrict the rare earths used in U.S. and European weapons systems and high-end technologies or leverage its control over the global electric vehicle, solar, and wind industries. And because it makes the vast majority of active pharmaceutical ingredients, Beijing could even constrain the production of vital medicines. The food supply would be particularly easy to throttle: over 55 percent of globally traded maize, wheat, rice, and soybeans pass through at least one maritime chokepoint, and energy disruptions can become food-price crises within weeks.

Blocking one chokepoint diverts traffic to others, congesting alternatives. The Hormuz closure forced oil shipments around the Cape of Good Hope. A simultaneous closure of the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca would have no viable solution. Both Iran and the United States have suggested they intend to extract tolls from ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz, and other states might be tempted to start charging for access to international waterways. The closure of any single chokepoint might be manageable. But numerous lockdowns would not be.

GET REAL

Two broad ways of dealing with this new world are emerging: the method of the architect and the approach of the artisan. Architects develop blueprints for order and try to mold the world to their designs, developing universal norms and anchoring security in multilateral institutions. Artisans, on the other hand, don't assume they have the power or resources to build grand structures from scratch. Instead, they



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use improvisation and flexibility to cope with a world that doesn't lend itself to sweeping plans. In many ways, China already behaves like an artisan state. It advances its interests by repurposing existing institutions, such as when it used the International Telecommunication Union to build surveillance-friendly controls into global Internet standards, and by creating new institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS+, the geopolitical bloc that marshals Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and four other new members. These institutions are flexible in their membership and purpose and not intended to set global rules. Other middle powers such as Brazil, India, Iran, and Turkey are creating and joining a plethora of similar groupings, balancing and hedging between the great powers.

In many other middle powers in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and North America, by contrast, grief over the rules-based order is bringing out an architectural instinct. Although they admit uncertainty, leaders in those places fail to grasp the changes they are facing, and their strategies too often propose maintaining the form of the old order without its substance—the legitimacy and enforcement capacity conferred on it by the United States. They are still scrambling to shore up the rules-based global trading system by attempting to build a carbon copy of the World Trade Organization's deadlocked appeals mechanism and continuing to lodge complaints against U.S. tariffs at the WTO, the equivalent of shouting into the void.

Too many governments are still trying to curb conflicts using the UN or international courts. Ireland, for example, joined Spain in backing South Africa's genocide claim against Israel at the International Court of Justice, a much-ballyhooed effort that has had virtually no effect on Israeli policy. Australia's foreign minister has spoken of a "new era of amplified middle power diplomacy" that would seek to shore up formal multilateral commitments and enforce international law. The key difference between these projects and the more artisanal ones being embraced by China and others is that their purpose remains primarily legalistic, focused on achieving change by adhering to increasingly obsolete frameworks.

The old rules-based order was never, in fact, just about rules. It proffered rules backed by a specific power willing to bear disproportionate costs to maintain them. The United States and its European allies were the architects of the postwar and post-Cold War orders, but they no longer have the resources to maintain them. And middle powers cannot



simply pool their resources and replicate the past. No coalition can keep the WTO relevant, ensure the dollar's dominance, or open the Strait of Hormuz. Politicians talk like architects because they believe it inspires confidence. In reality, such talk undermines confidence.

The United States' former allies must instead think and act like artisans. Many of these countries are better equipped for this strategy shift than they realize. Their histories are peppered with examples of innovation and flexibility.

Whereas architects seek stability, artisans prepare for chaos and change. Architects might try to reform the UN Security Council or restore the WTO's appellate body. They would be wasting their time. Artisans follow the course diplomacy is already taking. China is an observer on the Arctic Council. The EU should likewise apply to join BRICS+, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an observer. On trade, an artisanal approach would mean investing in new infrastructure nodes built around corridors and ports, such as the Lobito Corridor, a logistics route connecting mineral-rich central Africa to the Atlantic. These promise greater rewards than sweeping trade deals such as those the EU has sought with India or the South American economic bloc Mercosur, which can take decades to negotiate. And instead of competing to nominate their diplomats as UN special envoys, Australia, Norway,

Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and similar states should seek to contribute to the more unconventional conflict mediation efforts now being spearheaded by countries such as Pakistan and Qatar.

Whereas architects believe there can be a single rule book for everyone, artisans accept that multiple sets of guidelines will coexist. Groupings such as the EU should increasingly turn their efforts toward creating rules-based orders in their own neighborhoods rather than striving for an unattainable global order. Sweeping multilateral regulatory approaches, such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, are losing their efficacy as other major markets, including China, cease copying the EU playbook. So are global frameworks to solve problems such as climate change. The competition to dominate renewable technologies has probably done more to combat rising emissions than all the Conference of the Parties meetings combined. Europeans and members of the G-6+ should make every effort to understand how Brazilians, Indians, Indonesians, Russians, and South Africans are viewing this moment. If they want to hedge more efficiently, they must better understand their fellow hedgers.

Whereas architects see globalization as a means to transform others, artisans worry about the vulnerabilities that interconnectedness creates. Europe and its allies have more means to develop self-reliance and work out arrangements with other powers than they give themselves credit for. To protect itself from Chinese blackmail, Europe could leverage its Airbus sales by withholding software updates for China's Airbus fleet, which would ground more than half the country's commercial planes. To retaliate against U.S. tariffs, it could cut off market access for American social media companies. To deter China from threatening its sovereignty, Taiwan could restrict its critical semiconductor industry.

Such strategies may be more defensive in focus, but if countries want to thrive, they need to boost their security, industrial competitiveness, clean energy leadership, and global influence. A core part of doing so is pursuing technological sovereignty. Instead of accepting dependence on American technology or betting the bank on building autonomous tech stacks, they need to use the leverage they already have to minimize the risk of aggressive actions against them and expand their natural advantages. In 2023, the United Kingdom's National Health Service awarded the U.S. technology company Palantir a major contract to provide its new data platform; this year,

a new British police AI program expressed interest in working with the firm. Instead, it should use the power of its purse to incentivize domestic providers, using open-source tech, to develop specialized tools and mandate open standards and portable data formats as a condition of public contracts, so no single vendor's platform becomes a permanent chokepoint.

Perhaps most important, while architects think about security from the outside in, artisans realize a country must be defended from the inside out. European and Indo-Pacific states must salvage what they can from the old security architecture—by, for instance, drawing on NATO's command structures for military operations—and become far less reliant on the United States as an eternal security provider for their regions.

And they must not simply try to replicate the United States' capital-intensive military methods. They must develop more frugal ways of war that are relevant to their individual situations. Ukraine and Iran have both demonstrated how to adapt cheaper technologies for both offensive and defensive purposes, neutralizing their opponents' advantage in vastly more expensive high-tech systems. Many countries will benefit from similar hedgehog strategies that draw on the technological revolution favoring defense, insulating their territories against contagion. For European countries, this means building military capacity, fighting tooth and nail to prevent Russia and the United States from making deals over their heads, and taking a more detached approach to conflicts in more distant parts of the world. Japan and South Korea must similarly invest in self-defense and work to stop China and the United States from cutting them out of choices that shape their future. Even if the United States is no longer willing to police the world, it has its own important role to play in these efforts, encouraging partners to adapt rather than vassalizing them—even if that means fewer orders for U.S. defense firms.

Well before Trump's second term, changes in the global power structure had hollowed out the old order. And the forces of disruption are likely to accelerate. The next decades will be defined by explosive changes and waves of crises, not a reversion to the old order or the creation of a new one. Like the resourceful denizens of China's rotten-tail buildings, the most successful leaders will be the ones who take their fate into their own hands instead of waiting for a new set of rules to rescue them. 🍷

Why We Should Fight

And Where Trump Went Wrong

KORI SCHAKE

In foreign policy, good ideas often emerge from bad decisions. Such was the case with the Powell Doctrine, a term typically associated with the American triumph over Iraq in the 1990–91 Gulf War. The doctrine did not, in fact, originate with its namesake, Colin Powell, who as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff helped make sure the United States went into the war with a coherent military strategy. And the doctrine's roots lay not in a success in Iraq, but in a disaster in Lebanon.

In 1982, after Israel invaded the civil war–torn country, a rift opened inside the Reagan administration. On one side were Secretary of State George Shultz and civilian officials on the National Security Council, who backed the idea of contributing U.S. troops to a multinational force that would stabilize Lebanon. On the other side

KORI SCHAKE is Senior Fellow and Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and is currently serving as the Kissinger Chair at the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. She served on the National Security Council and in the U.S. State Department under President George W. Bush.

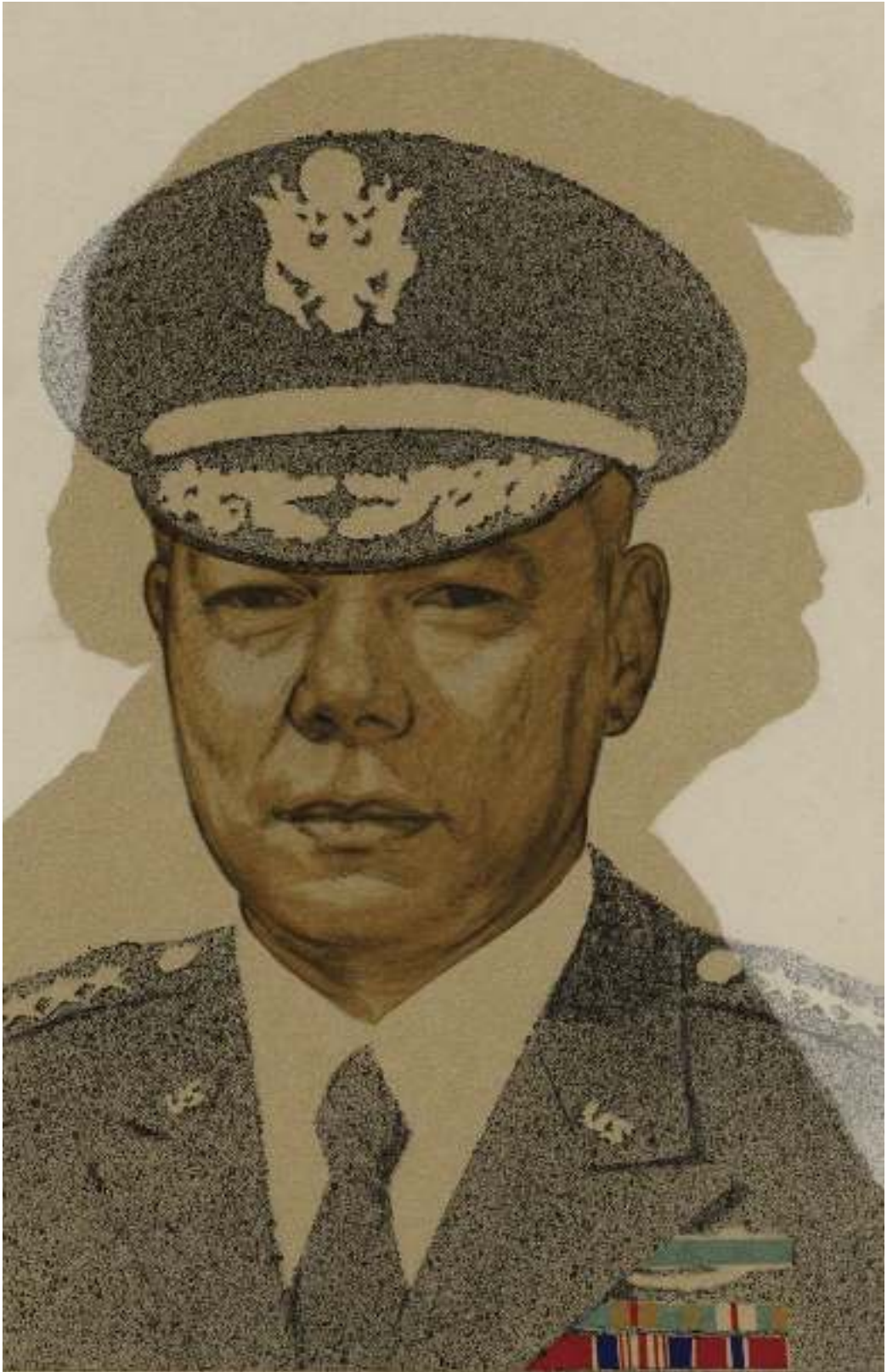


Illustration by Edward Kinsella

were Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and the generals on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who were far less enthusiastic, fearing that an ill-defined mission would drag the United States into an escalatory spiral not unlike the one that had proved calamitous in Vietnam. The hawks won the debate, casting dovish concerns as reflecting a lack of faith in American military power that President Ronald Reagan had himself disparaged as “Vietnam syndrome.”

But it didn’t take long for Weinberger’s fears to be realized. Far from stabilizing Lebanon, the multinational forces soon became targets and combatants in the widening war. In October 1983, militants linked to Hezbollah used truck bombs to attack U.S. service members in a barracks at the Beirut airport, killing 241 of them. Inside the administration, the two camps once again split. This time, the doves prevailed. The United States refrained from hitting back against Hezbollah and its Iranian and Syrian sponsors, and in February 1984, Reagan withdrew American forces altogether.

Weinberger was determined to prevent a repeat of what he saw as an avoidable tragedy, especially as factions within the administration pushed for a more aggressive U.S. military response to Soviet-backed movements in Central America. He decided to give a major speech laying out his vision. For feedback on the draft, he turned to a young army major general who was serving as his principal military assistant: Powell, who later remarked that he had thought the Lebanon mission “never did serve a purpose” and was “goofy from the beginning.”

In his speech, delivered in November 1984, Weinberger declared that any plan to use military force should pass six tests. Vital national interests must be at stake. Washington must be willing to commit the resources it would take to achieve victory. Policymakers must have clearly defined political and military objectives. They must also be willing to continually reassess deployments and spending as conditions (and even their objectives) change. Policymakers must gain the support of the American people and Congress through candor and consultation. Finally, as Weinberger put it, “the commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort.” Reagan soon endorsed what became known as the Weinberger Doctrine, and later wrote in his memoir that its guidelines came to serve as a pillar of his administration’s foreign policy.

The doctrine faced its first real test in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and President George H. W. Bush had to decide whether to

intervene militarily. By that time, Powell had risen to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Once Bush decided to use force, Powell set about making sure the plan passed Weinberger's tests—and that it met two other conditions that Powell added to his former boss's list: a clear exit strategy and international support. Ideally, the exit strategy would be victory: the adversary conceding the political objectives for which the war was being fought. And because chance shapes outcomes in war to a high degree, ensuring victory requires a wide margin for error. Translated into military terms, that meant using what Powell termed "decisive force." Powell's public briefings during the war and the military's success catapulted him to prominence; the Weinberger Doctrine was now the Powell Doctrine.

Powell's formulation was designed to restrain civilian leaders from resorting to military force simply to "do something." He wanted to ensure that military force was rarely employed and that when it was, it was part of a strategy that integrated other elements of national power. This line of thinking had its critics. Some complained that the criteria unduly restricted American power. Others objected to a military officer's setting criteria for civilian superiors. But Powell was adamant about his right to set such parameters. As he put it in an essay in these pages in 1992, "We owe it to the men and women who go in harm's way to make sure . . . that their lives are not squandered for unclear purposes."

In the years after the Gulf War, Powell took a dim view of the Clinton administration's drift toward intervention in the Balkans. Needling the general at a 1993 meeting about whether to intervene in Bosnia, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright grumbled, "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Powell was aghast: "I thought I would have an aneurysm," he later wrote. "American GIs were not toy soldiers to be moved around on some sort of global game board." But when he himself later served as secretary of state during the George W. Bush administration, Powell played a consequential role in planning for and executing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, neither of which met his doctrine's criteria. That he cautioned Bush about invading Iraq with a wry summary of the Powell Doctrine

The Powell Doctrine remains the best way for U.S. presidents to decide why and how to go to war.

known as “the Pottery Barn rule”—you break it, you own it—does not exculpate Powell. In the end, he became a central player in the marginalization of his own ideas.

Yet even though the doctrine’s influence began to wane long ago, no administration ever truly repudiated it—at least until President Donald Trump’s second term. In late February, Trump launched a war on Iran without clearly delineated objectives, without consulting Congress or U.S. allies (other than Israel, Washington’s partner in the war), without obtaining an authorization for the use of military force, without exhausting diplomacy or economic coercion, and without an exit strategy.

The audacity of this approach led some to posit that Trump was pursuing a new American way of war, one that the analyst Richard Fontaine, writing in early March in *Foreign Affairs*, dubbed “the anti-Powell doctrine.” Fontaine contended that the military operations in Iran (along with the capture earlier this year of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and a series of U.S. attacks on militants in Nigeria and Yemen in 2025) demonstrated a method that substitutes Trumpian ambiguity for Powell’s clarity and favors a Trumpian preference for flexibility over Powell’s demand for decisive force. Although Fontaine conceded that the results had been mixed, he concluded that “in some ways, the Trump response to the Powell Doctrine has served recent history better than a dogmatic application of the original.”

But barring a sudden and highly unlikely collapse of the Iranian regime, the course of the war has made clear the profound limitations and flaws of Trump’s approach. And virtually all of the war’s manifold failures flow from its inability to pass the tests that Weinberger introduced and that Powell fleshed out and put into practice. Powell wasn’t always right, and following his doctrine is no guarantor of success. But the doctrine remains the best way for American presidents to decide why and how to go to war, in the Middle East and elsewhere. And even in Iran, it is not too late for Powell’s precepts to help avert disaster.

WHAT’S THIS WAR GOOD FOR?

Like previous U.S. administrations, the Trump administration has made a reasonable case that it would be incredibly damaging to American security for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. And there is little doubt that by mid-2025, Iran was getting closer: on June 12 of that year, the International Atomic Energy Agency censured Tehran for

failing to comply with its nonproliferation obligations. The next day, Israel launched a bombing campaign intended to set Iran back; nine days later, the United States joined in with a massive bombardment of three crucial Iranian nuclear facilities. The so-called 12-day war ended soon after, with a cease-fire. And although the war did not meet many of Powell's standards—there was no congressional authorization or effort to build international or American public support, and diplomacy was ongoing, not exhausted—there was at least a clear objective, the commitment of decisive military force to achieve it, and an exit strategy.

But Trump's decision to resume hostilities in February passed none of the Powell Doctrine's tests. Consider, first, whether there were vital national security interests at stake, whether the administration clearly defined its objectives, and whether it was willing to commit the necessary resources. In rambling pre-taped remarks posted to social media just before 3 AM on February 28, Trump recited a litany of Iranian infractions and suggested a number of objectives. "The United States military is undertaking a massive and ongoing operation to prevent this very wicked, radical dictatorship from threatening America and our core national security interests," he said. "We're going to destroy their missiles and raze their missile industry to the ground. . . . We're going to annihilate their navy. We're going to ensure that . . . [Iran's] terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the region or the world and attack our forces . . . and we will ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon." Toward the end of his remarks, he addressed the Iranian people: "When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take."

The sheer number of objectives obscured any sense of clarity. Moreover, many of those objectives were clearly unattainable with the resources the administration committed, especially given its self-imposed prohibition on deploying ground forces. Preventing the development of an Iranian nuclear weapon is surely a vital interest, and destroying Iran's nuclear program is a clear objective that was plausibly attainable. But Trump had claimed after the 12-day war in 2025 that Iran's nuclear program had been "completely obliterated," making it unclear why this new round of attacks was necessary, much less how a decapitation strike on Iran's leadership related to the nuclear issue. Meanwhile, Iran's conventional forces did not pose a serious threat to U.S. security, Iran's proxies in Gaza and Lebanon

had already been decimated by Israeli operations, and the Trump administration had already cut a deal with the Houthi militants in Yemen, ending U.S. operations against the group in exchange for its pledge to cease attacking American vessels in the Red Sea. Replacing Iran's leadership could well be considered a vital national security interest, but Trump did not make that case. And the regime was at that point weaker than it had been in decades; just weeks earlier, water shortages and other economic deprivations had led to

massive protests, which the leadership brutally suppressed by killing tens of thousands of ordinary Iranians.

The sheer number of U.S. objectives in Iran obscured any sense of clarity.

According to news reports, Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had warned Trump and other officials about the mismatch between the mission's stated objectives and the resources at hand and had cautioned that the operation would be difficult

without allied support. Caine described the goal of the 2026 operation as "to protect and defend ourselves, and together with our regional partners, prevent Iran from the ability to project power outside of its borders and be ready for follow-on actions as appropriate." That is a far cry from a set of military objectives that might reasonably accomplish the president's expansive goals—yet another mismatch, which represents a failure on the part of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

The administration clearly had not thought through the potential consequences, since its planning did not seem to encompass Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, an act fatal to U.S. success. That failure also prevented the United States and its allies from stockpiling fuel to mitigate economic disruptions. Although Washington anticipated attacks on Israel, American allies in the Gulf, and Turkey, U.S.-backed defenses against those strikes were inadequate. The administration does not appear to have factored in the price of the conflict in terms of depleted U.S. munitions and reduced military readiness—costs that it will take years to recover. Meanwhile, friends and foes alike were reminded that allies of the United States cannot be certain that their interests will be protected during a war or that Washington will even consult with them before deciding to use force.

Consider, also, the Powell Doctrine's stipulation that military force should be a last resort. That was clearly not the case in February,

since the attacks commenced while U.S. negotiations with Iran were still underway. The administration had apparently not yet used all of its coercive economic tools, either: around six weeks into the war, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent threatened to launch “the financial equivalent” of a bombing campaign, which presumably Washington could have conducted before it began dropping literal bombs.

TELL ME HOW THIS ENDS

The Powell Doctrine calls on policymakers to continually reassess their approach as conditions change. But it does not counsel careening wildly in policy and message on a near-daily basis, which is what the Trump administration has done during the Iran war. Within the span of a single day, Trump imposed and then repealed a 20 percent surcharge on shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, undermining 250 years of U.S. commitment to the freedom of navigation. He has described Iran’s leaders as “very smart people” and then derided them as “scum.” Destroying Iran’s missile infrastructure was a primary objective until Trump reversed himself and said Iran deserved to have missiles. These reversals are not the result of careful reassessments: Trump is merely flailing for options that might avoid the humiliation of losing the war or the risk of escalating beyond standoff strikes.

The administration has also failed to build public and congressional support for the war, although it might be more accurate to say it neglected to even try. The results are unsurprising. According to a poll tracker maintained by the polling analyst Nate Silver, only 35 percent of Americans supported the war when it started, and 47 percent opposed it. By mid-July, support had fallen slightly, and opposition had risen to 58 percent.

Even in a GOP-controlled Congress, there has been remarkably little enthusiasm for the war. The Republicans who lead the two chambers have not held hearings to showcase the administration’s arguments; in fact, they have been reduced to practically pleading for information. Trump ultimately attained a war powers resolution from Congress, but it was the opposite of an authorization for the use of force: in June, both houses of Congress passed resolutions calling for an end to the war—the first time that has happened since the War Powers Act came into force in 1973. The next day, after Trump berated Republicans for allowing the measure to pass, the Senate rejected a nearly identical resolution, but the earlier rebuke was unmistakable.

Central to the Powell Doctrine is a commitment to victory. As a policy tool, that commitment provides clarifying focus and a way to determine when to stop an operation. As a moral tool, it keeps faith with the people doing the fighting and underscores the solemn costs of the operation. In 2025, the Trump administration seemed committed to victory, defined as the complete destruction of Iran's nuclear program. But the mission in June 2025 was halted in advance of battle damage assessments and was not restarted after those assessments concluded that the program had set back the Iranian program by only a year or two. This year, the military campaign had barely commenced before the administration started skating backward from its stated objectives: far from demanding regime change, Trump was soon praising Iran's leaders and defending the regime's retention of long-range missiles. In June, he signed a memorandum of understanding that essentially conceded to every Iranian demand. The poorly worded document left ample room for noncompliance, and the 60-day cease-fire it had established broke down after a few weeks.

Related to the lack of commitment to victory is the lack of an exit strategy, one of the ideas Powell developed that went beyond the initial Weinberger Doctrine. After the collapse of the cease-fire, U.S. targeting expanded to encompass civilian infrastructure, precipitating escalating Iranian attacks on energy and desalination facilities in other countries in the region. At the time of this writing, both sides appear to be ramping up their attacks in an effort to shape potential negotiations. But it's hard to see how any of this will shift the underlying dynamic of the war. If Trump has an exit strategy, it is regime collapse, which is unlikely at this point.

Powell's other innovation was to insist on the importance of international support. In deciding to go to war against Iran, Trump didn't bother to consult with U.S. allies—including those who would bear the brunt of any Iranian retaliation. When some of those allies predictably expressed reservations, denied U.S. forces the use of their bases, or declined to volunteer to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz after Iran effectively closed it, Trump fulminated against them and sought to punish them by cutting off trade and threatening to withdraw U.S. troops stationed in their countries or to close U.S. bases located there. What support there was for the war among the Gulf Arab states shriveled when the Trump administration declined to retaliate for Iranian attacks on civilian targets in those countries. For

them, hosting U.S. bases has proved to be more of a risk factor than a security guarantee.

Iran, for its part, has successfully weathered the most damaging military attacks the United States and Israel could impose. The succession process that followed the killing of Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei only reinforced the power of the hard-line Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, making it more difficult to negotiate an end to the war. And Iran has now proved its previously hypothetical ability to control the Strait of Hormuz. The lesson that U.S. rivals are likely to take from the war is that the brilliance of the American military is largely irrelevant.

Warfare, of course, is complicated and contingent, and it is impossible to be certain that things would have gone much better if the president had followed the precepts of the Powell Doctrine. What is not contestable is that ignoring those standards left the operation vulnerable to many different forms of failure. Far from discovering a new way of war, Trump has merely discovered new ways to lose.

CONGRESSIONAL IRRESOLUTION

It seems extremely unlikely that the Trump administration will be chastened by its failure in Iran. Shamelessness has been central to Trump's business and political success, and his reaction to setbacks is to deny objective facts and construct fantasies of achievement. The rigors of war do not seem to have persuaded him of the need for a more coherent process of policy formulation and assessment; he continues to blurt out his every whim, and a cabinet of sycophants and amplifiers is unlikely to impose discipline on an undisciplined principal. Nor can the two parts of the government that have apparently provided solid strategic judgments—the CIA and the military—salvage the process. They are advisory bodies, not policy actors, and Trump repudiates or ignores their counsel whenever it conflicts with his claims or preferences.

At the time of this writing, Iran's government remains unyielding in its demands, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is still in firm control of the country, and Trump appears unwilling to escalate U.S. military action in a way that would fundamentally alter the dynamic. For the foreseeable future, the administration will likely continue to carry on sporadic standoff strikes of tactical brilliance and strategic irrelevance and pursue negotiations aimed at restoring a cease-fire—

all while hoping, almost surely in vain, that the Iranian regime will collapse or be overthrown. The precise outcome is impossible to predict, but it will almost certainly leave the United States politically and militarily weaker and less trusted as a security partner.

Adherence to the Powell Doctrine could have prevented those losses. It could also help Trump chart a way out of the extended purgatory his conduct of the war has produced. At one extreme, he could use it to justify accepting a loss. Acknowledging the lack of public or international support for and the mounting costs of the war, Trump could camouflage defeat by making the case that he achieved his most important objectives: the practical destruction of Iran's nuclear program and the significant degradation of its conventional military.

Alternatively, the president could start over and build a plan consistent with the doctrine's outlines. He could start by recognizing the national security imperative of maintaining freedom of navigation and obtain congressional authorization to use force to restore it in the Strait of Hormuz. The administration would have to reliably convey to the Iranians that its primary objective is opening the strait and that to achieve that goal, the United States would lift sanctions on Iran and refrain from using force against the country for anything other than its nuclear program. Meanwhile, the administration could offer incentives to other countries to participate in a flotilla that would monitor the strait and demonstrate to commercial shippers that they could expect safe passage through it. Negotiations over Iran's nuclear program should proceed, but on a separate track.

Left to its own devices, the Trump administration is highly unlikely to put forward such a plan. The only thing that might force it to do so is pressure from Congress. Wistful appeals to congressional action should be accompanied by the desolate strains of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*: in Trump's second term, instead of fulfilling its constitutional obligations, the Republican-controlled Congress has been negligent. It has confirmed dangerously unqualified appointees, passed budget legislation using so-called reconciliation (which requires only a simple majority instead of 60 votes) rather than through regular order, assented to war in the absence of any request for congressional authorization, and allowed the executive branch to divert some appropriated funds while failing to spend others.

There are reasons, however, that Congress may yet assert its authority. The GOP would like to retain control of both houses, and

Trump's foundering policies and staggering corruption are so deeply unpopular that barring a change of course, Republicans are likely to surrender their slim majority in the House of Representatives and could even lose their more comfortable Senate majority. Some evidence that the party is aware of this reality is apparent in recent votes in which Congress proposed an end to the war in Iran, enacted restrictions on the Defense Department's ability to withdraw troops from overseas deployments, and forced the White House to withdraw a record number of nominees from consideration for confirmation.

Going forward, Congress could pass resolutions outlining alternative strategies and regularly drag cabinet officials up to Capitol Hill to testify on the conduct of the war. More consequentially, Congress could legislate the redeployment of forces currently assigned to the conflict and reject the removal of forces from Asia or Europe for use in the Iran operation. Such a move would likely be found unconstitutional. But taken together, such actions would increase the political price the president would pay for continuing to wage war in a reckless manner.

Congress's strongest form of leverage over the executive branch is the power of the purse. On July 21, Hegseth claimed the war had so far cost \$37.5 billion—although the defense budgeting expert Elaine McCusker believes the true figure is probably over \$50 billion—and the administration has submitted a poorly justified supplemental spending request for an additional \$88 billion. Congress should stipulate that it will not authorize any further funding until the administration presents a plan that would pass the Powell Doctrine's tests.

In his 1995 memoir, *My American Journey*, Powell wrote: "Many of my generation, the career captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels seasoned in [the Vietnam War], vowed that when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand." That is precisely the kind of warfare that Trump has undertaken. And so far, Congress has quietly acquiesced. It can, however, still change course. A true victory in Iran is unlikely. But a cataclysmic defeat is not yet inevitable. 🌐

The only thing that might force Trump to change course is pressure from Congress.



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The End of the American Middle East

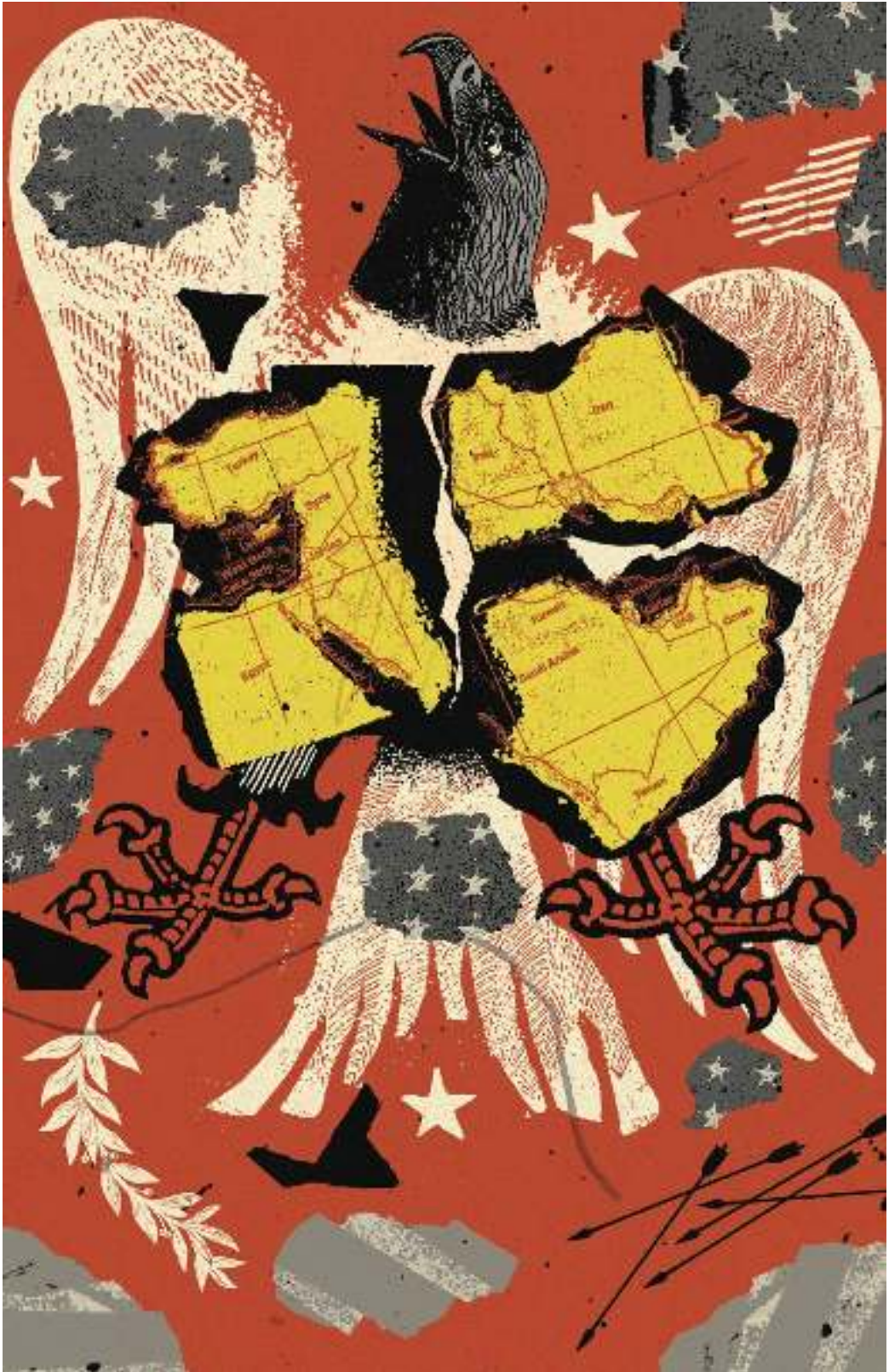
Iran and the Last Gasp of a Failed Order

MARC LYNCH

The American Middle East is finished. The regional order that has prevailed since 1991 has been one of the many casualties of the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. The American and Israeli failure to dislodge the regime in Tehran has proved the bankruptcy of decades of sanctions and violence. The inability of the United States to protect its Gulf allies from Iranian attacks or to keep the Strait of Hormuz open has fatally undermined the core security bargain that justified its network of military bases in the region. And Israel's increasingly threatening posture and abandonment of any pretense of interest in reaching an accommodation with the Palestinians have ended Washington's decades-long mission of bringing its Arab allies and Israel together into an enduring security partnership.

The United States' primary goal for three and a half decades has been to lock its disparate allies into an order built around protecting

MARC LYNCH is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University and the author of *America's Middle East: The Ruination of a Region*.



Israel while containing, at first, Iran and Iraq, and more recently Iran and its nonstate allies. Far from being a deviation from that strategy, President Donald Trump's war took it to its logical end, seeking to remove the Iranian threat by force in one fell swoop. As American leaders did before the 2003 invasion of Iraq and Israel has done in its wars against Hezbollah and Hamas, the architects of this war vastly exaggerated what military power could achieve, underestimated the capacity of adversaries to adapt, took for granted that allies would fall in line, and callously disregarded the lives of ordinary people. Washington's misadventure was not an aberration so much as the ultimate expression of the inherent vice of its Middle East strategy.

At first, it may not look as though the war has had much effect on the alliances that form the American order. Facing an inconclusive war and an empowered Iran, the Gulf states may ramp up their arms purchases and their demands for renewed security guarantees, creating the illusion of continuity. But the old order is in fact giving way to something new. The 1956 Suez crisis is remembered today as the last gasp of British and French imperial power in the Middle East, but it took years to reach that inevitable end. American primacy will not disappear immediately, either, but long-building doubts about American power and purpose have passed their tipping point. The revelations of the Iran war and of the Israeli war in Gaza before it have already changed the calculations of U.S. allies and adversaries. Another round of fighting or the election of a different American president will not repair the rupture.

The years ahead promise further discord. Israel and Iran have a shared interest in keeping the Middle East in a state of lawlessness and violence, and the United States has few means of holding back either of them. Israel hopes to expand its *de facto* borders, including by annexing as much as possible of historic Palestine, and to impose its writ by force across vast swaths of the region. And assuming that the Iranian regime does not collapse any time soon—which it appears highly unlikely to do—an emboldened Tehran will hope to defend and expand its regional influence by bogging Washington down in the kinds of endless, borderless “gray zone” conflicts in which it has always thrived.

If the United States is finally willing to abandon its failed strategy, however, the collapse of one order could still be an opportunity to build a new and better one. The conditions, admittedly, are far from ideal. Although most of the region's leaders and publics desperately want a respite from military strikes and economic disruption, they also deeply

resent Washington for dragging them into a disaster. But discarding its policy of support for autocrats, impunity for allies, and militarized containment of enemies might enable the United States to engage with the region in a healthier way—one that eventually could yield the durable stability Washington has claimed to want all along.

CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

For many decades after World War II, American ambitions in the Middle East were defined by its global competition with the Soviet Union, which gave Washington an outsize interest in regional politics but made it wary of overt military intervention. The current Middle East order, established by the George H. W. Bush administration after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in the Gulf War of 1990–91, has been defined by American primacy. Presented with a historic opportunity to secure uncontested dominance over a long-contested region, Washington made itself indispensable by setting up military bases and security arrangements to contain Iraq and Iran. Its military and political support underpinned the survival of nearly every regime in the region.

To legitimize its role as something more than predatory domination, Washington launched the Arab-Israeli peace process in hopes of integrating its Arab allies and Israel into a common security framework. The result was a region divided between an American-led bloc that included Israel, Turkey, and almost every Arab state, and an opposing, less formal bloc that included Iran, Syria under the Assad dynasty, and nonstate actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. This structure remained remarkably unchanged through three decades of dramatic changes in global, regional, and American politics.

In the American telling, this order has provided a degree of stability while protecting core U.S. interests such as the oil trade, Israeli security, and counterterrorism. And in many ways, that has been true. Israel has not faced a state-level threat or fought a war against a peer competitor since 1973, which perhaps led it to underestimate the challenge of attacking Iran. Arab countries have worked with Israel against their common enemies despite the lack of a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For the most part, oil has flowed consistently at reasonable prices. No rival great power has seriously challenged American primacy—not even China, which has been content to sit back and take advantage of the economic opportunities made possible by the American provision of security.

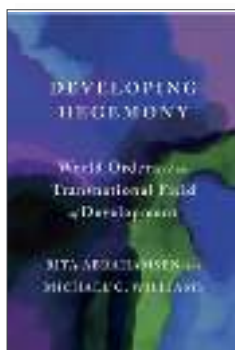
For Washington, the strategic benefits accrued from this order seemed to justify the costs of the wars required to sustain it. But the price was much higher for those who live in the region. The past 35 years have seen Israel enter numerous smaller wars against its much weaker neighbors, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process completely fall apart, Hamas attack Israel on October 7, and Israel subsequently embark on the destruction of Gaza. In Iraq, the United States inflicted a dozen years of punishing sanctions, intermittent bombing, and failed regime change and counterproliferation efforts, followed by the disastrous 2003 invasion and occupation, all at tremendous human cost. Under American stewardship, catastrophic wars have shattered Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

The regional order rested on American security guarantees not only to Arab states but also, critically, to the autocrats who sat atop them. Keeping democratic aspirations at bay was as vital to this bargain as protection against Iranian military attack. For a brief moment during the 2010–11 Arab uprisings, the drive for change seemed unstoppable, but otherwise the arrangement worked. Nearly all regimes within the American alliance system held on to power; most tightened their grip in the protests' wake. American support for neoliberal economic reforms encouraged those regimes to pursue privatization schemes that turbocharged elite corruption while impoverishing the majority of the population. And Washington's campaign against terrorism encouraged its allies to embrace intrusive forms of surveillance and repress potential opposition in the name of security. Although the wealthy Gulf oil states and small slivers of Arab elites flourished within this system, for most people the American order meant only violence, hopelessness, and deprivation. By nearly every economic, political, and developmental indicator, the Middle East under American domination has performed far worse than any other region.

Ironically, American security guarantees encouraged allies to disregard Washington's policy interests. Most felt safe from external invasion or attack, creating a moral hazard: they could pursue their own ideological and political projects without fear of meaningful consequences. Washington's preoccupation with its own domestic politics, inattention to the region's nuances, and inflated fears of Chinese and Russian advances all made the United States an easy mark for manipulative local powers. As a result, it repeatedly failed over the decades to meaningfully restrain Israel or to prevent Arab allies from adopting policies that undermined stated U.S. goals. Those ostensible allies shrugged off criticism of their destructive interventions in Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Nearly all



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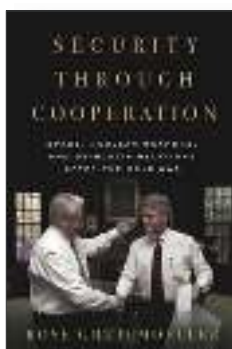
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actively opposed the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, which the Obama administration hoped would help stabilize the region. And in 2017, the blockade of Qatar led by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia badly undermined the united front against Iran that Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign required.

The 2010–11 uprisings pushed Arab governments into new forms of interventionism, in part because they lost confidence in the United States' ability and willingness to respond to what they considered to be urgent threats. Autocratic allies that already feared potential coups and popular revolts now saw them as imminent realities as they faced down challenges from Iranian-backed Shiite groups, Islamist and jihadist movements, and young liberal democratic activists. Watching the lightning-fast spread of the protests, these regimes learned that the threat at home could begin anywhere, even beyond their borders. And when they saw the overthrow of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in 2011, they concluded that they could not count on the United States to save them from internal challenges. If they wanted to ensure their own survival, they would have to go out and contain the danger themselves. Their meddling repeatedly yielded devastating outcomes, however, contributing to a military coup in Egypt and several civil wars.

The order encouraged Iran and Israel to pursue destabilizing policies, too, but each in different ways. The Iranian regime took external hostility as a given and designed its survival strategy accordingly. The government was largely unbothered by U.S. and international sanctions that immiserated the public while strengthening the regime insiders who controlled black markets. Over the decades, Iran assembled and armed a network of nonstate allies that thrived in the wreckage of American, Israeli, and Saudi wars. With its access to American and European military technology cut off, Iran invested in low-cost production, developing drones and cheap ballistic missiles that could counter its rivals' technologically sophisticated and extremely expensive systems. Like most others in the region, Iran's leaders were swift to crush protests, fearful that a hidden foreign hand lay behind what were in fact authentic eruptions of popular discontent.

Israel, for its part, enjoyed the most ironclad of American security guarantees. Although it is a democracy, at least for Jewish citizens, the country's prime ministers have often fallen into a trap akin to the one ensnaring the United States' autocratic allies. Israel's military superiority and confidence in American support enabled its leaders to prioritize maintaining their governing coalitions and fending off

domestic political threats over seriously addressing the Palestinian issue or easing regional instability. But when the October 7 attacks shattered that complacency, Israel's response was to go all-in on military escalation. It displayed ever greater excess in its use of force across the region and entrenched its military occupation in the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank, and even in parts of Lebanon and Syria.

Part of the reason the American order lasted as long as it did was that the security bargains at its core were never truly tested. The region's leaders complained endlessly of feeling abandoned but never behaved as if abandonment were a significant possibility. For years, interstate war was not a particularly salient threat, either. Israel bombed Gaza and Lebanon with some frequency, but no Arab state aligned with the United States was overly worried about an Israeli attack. Iran loomed larger among their concerns, but even a direct Iranian attack seemed extremely unlikely. Indirect attacks by Iranian proxies only reinforced the core belief that American military primacy was so obvious and overwhelming that Iran would not challenge it. That confidence began to waver in 2019, when the United States did not respond to an attack on Saudi oil refineries attributed to Iran, and again when Houthi drone strikes hit the UAE in 2022. The regional security architecture remained intact, but cracks were beginning to show.

At the same time, the United States was trying to institutionalize its Middle East order by brokering open military and political cooperation between its Arab allies and Israel. The goal was not new. Fostering an anti-Iranian coalition under American leadership had been an objective of every American government since 1991. Trump diverged from his predecessors, however, in pushing it forward without tying steps toward Arab-Israeli normalization to progress on the Palestinian issue. In 2020, his administration brokered the Abraham Accords between Israel and, originally, Bahrain and the UAE. Morocco joined soon after, and Sudan signed an initial agreement that has not been formalized. But when the Biden administration tried to cajole Saudi Arabia into signing on, it misjudged the importance of the Palestinian cause to the Saudi public and the rising competitiveness between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. It failed to see the growing popular hostility to normalization—or to anticipate the looming catastrophe in Gaza.

For most people,
the U.S. order
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deprivation.

ONE-TWO PUNCH

The United States' regional order has been shaken up before, including during the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq and the popular uprisings of 2011, but it has always reconstituted itself. U.S. policymakers were as trapped by the structure they designed as were the regional powers embedded in it. Every president since Bill Clinton came to office vowing to reduce American involvement in the Middle East, and every president has found himself dragged back into the same policies and the same wars.

The dual crisis of Israel's destruction of Gaza and the U.S.-Israeli war in Iran may seem like just another episode in this cycle. But in truth, these events together have dealt a death blow to the American Middle East. American support for Israel's assault on Gaza, particularly under President Joe Biden, swept away any residual moral authority the United States could claim. Trump's debacle in Iran has shattered the illusion of American military omnipotence. Both incidents have demonstrated to Arab states their lack of meaningful influence within the regional order and the diminishing returns of American security guarantees.

American officials under Biden and Trump failed to appreciate the seismic effects of the Israeli war in Gaza. They shared a view that regional leaders' opinions were the only ones that mattered, that those leaders had long forgotten about the Palestinians, and that they were eager for closer relations with a capable Israel and for the stronger security guarantees the United States offered as incentives. Few things better exemplified this myopia than Biden's quixotic pursuit of brokering a normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia even after the rising death toll in Gaza had rendered such cooperation politically toxic among the Arab publics that Riyadh aspired to lead.

Washington's unceasing push for Arab cooperation with Israel created further divides. As one of the first two signatories of the Abraham Accords, the UAE continued working with Israel during the Israeli campaign in Gaza and as Israel carried out military strikes in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and even Qatar. During the war with Iran, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, the UAE has coordinated with Israel and the United States to launch strikes on Iranian targets. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has watched the Emirati-Israeli alignment with unease. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were already at loggerheads over Syria, with Saudi Arabia backing the post-Assad regime and the UAE sharing Israel's hostility to it, and Yemen, where Saudi Arabia had just driven out Emirati proxies. Saudi Arabia complained that the UAE was promoting secessionist movements

that undermined regional stability, and it broadly saw a partnership between Israel and the UAE as a threat to its own regional leadership. The rift greatly complicated any chance Washington may have had of lining up the region's heavyweights behind its campaign to defeat Iran.

If the war in Gaza left the future of American regional leadership in doubt, the war with Iran was confirmation of the end of the order. Gulf leaders were furious that the United States and Israel started the war without consulting them, while knowing they opposed it, and in the middle of Omani-brokered negotiations with Iran. A war they had no say in exposed them to direct Iranian retaliation. Although American missile defense systems protected the Gulf from the worst of the barrage, enough Iranian strikes got through to do substantial harm and to disrupt the patina of stability on which the region's social and economic model rested. Iran targeted all Gulf states, including friendlier ones such as Oman and Qatar, but focused its fire on those that had signed the Abraham Accords: Bahrain and, even more so, the UAE. Within a few weeks, Iran managed to damage, destroy, or render irrelevant large parts of the archipelago of military bases that had underwritten American primacy in the Middle East.

Gulf allies' confidence in Washington eroded further when the U.S.-Israeli campaign proved unable to dislodge the Iranian regime. For decades, advocates of bombing Iran argued that such an attack might be messy but would ultimately remove the Iranian threat. Yet the United States and Israel, with all their military might, simply failed. On top of that, the United States sat by helplessly as Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, endangering the entire Gulf economy. Once again, Gulf leaders were shocked not just by American disregard for their preferences but also by the revelation of American impotence. And their shock turned to anger when the United States bombed Iranian water storage facilities and Israel struck Iranian oil depots. Washington was gambling with its partners' futures; had Tehran responded by striking Gulf water facilities or nuclear power sites, the resulting cycle of escalation could have ended with Gulf states' facing economic catastrophe and enough environmental destruction to render them uninhabitable.

What the Gulf took away from all this was that American security guarantees, the heart of the regional bargain, were no longer reliable. The region had already learned in 2011 that Washington could not protect it from domestic threats. If Washington could not even be counted on to consult its allies, defeat its adversaries, or protect its partners from the fallout of its regional misadventures, then what good were

its promises? The fundamental bargain the United States offered has crumbled, and it will not be easily rebuilt.

THIS TIME IS DIFFERENT

It has become commonplace to refer to the Iran war as Washington's Suez moment. There are indeed similarities between today's catastrophe and the failed British-French-Israeli scheme to take the Suez Canal from Egypt in 1956, which delivered a stunning political victory to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Suez became a shorthand for the demise of the European empires and the passage from a multipolar world to the bipolar Cold War-era system. But the Suez crisis did not immediately end the British and French empires in the Middle East. France would continue its war to hold on to Algeria for another six years, and the United Kingdom remained the dominant power in the Gulf for a decade and a half, fighting insurgencies in Oman and present-day Yemen before finally withdrawing from the region in 1971. It takes time for events to play out fully.

The full effects of the U.S. disaster in Iran will similarly take time to materialize. In the short term, the American-led regional order is not going anywhere. The United States may retreat from the military bases Iran destroyed, but it will still play a major role in regional defense. Gulf states are unlikely to break from Washington right away. Fearful for their future and seeing no obvious alternatives, they may even enhance their ties—as Saudi Arabia tried to do by finalizing a long-sought nuclear agreement, only to have Trump change its terms the next day, leaving the deal in limbo. They are also unlikely to pose any military threat to Israel or move closer than necessary to Iran. The U.S. rift with Israel, although real and likely generational in scale, will not soon fracture that alliance. Arab states, too, will maintain working relations with Israel and continue to avail themselves of Israeli military and surveillance technology.

The small adjustments that regional actors begin to make may not look like much at first, either. Countries have always pursued their own agendas, including at the peak of American primacy. Even the most dependent of the United States' allies have mastered the arts of foot-dragging, leash-slipping, and lobbying Washington. They will continue to engage in local rivalries, prioritize the survival of their regimes, and try to ensure their security. Sometimes that will mean working with Washington; sometimes it will not.

Yet what looks like short-term continuity should not be mistaken for long-term sustainability. By the time of the Suez crisis, the dissolution of



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the European empires was inevitable—not because of one policy fiasco, but because of the rise of nationalism and anticolonialism as well as the economic and political exhaustion of the European imperial model. The United States' Middle East order, too, had been decaying for years as policy and political failures accumulated, culminating in the loss of shared purpose and the military impotence revealed by the latest crises.

Washington will be tempted to stand by the policies that have defined its Middle East approach for decades, leaning on its relationships with

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the brutal, insecure, and repressive leaders who populate the landscape it designed. If American leaders stick to the same path, they should expect the same result: a region beset by constant instability, economic and political failure, and repeated eruptions of violent conflict. These conflicts may only occasionally draw in American military forces, but the chaos will consistently demand attention and

pointlessly consume resources. The forever wars will continue.

That outcome may seem acceptable to American policymakers who have become accustomed to managing conflicts and maintaining relationships with bad actors. But Washington cannot stave off a transition to a new regional order by simply pretending that nothing has changed. Arab allies that have lost faith in the United States will increasingly exercise their autonomy. At times, that could mean pursuing diplomacy with Iran and expanding relations with China and Russia against American wishes. At others, it might mean meddling in Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa or reigniting violent conflict in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Forces largely beyond American control will shape this emergent order. For one, Israel is determined to carry on with military interventionism regardless of American preferences. It continued its war with Hezbollah in defiance of the U.S.-Iranian memorandum of understanding reached in June, and it indicated no willingness to withdraw its military from southern Lebanon. Israeli officials insist that the country will maintain a troop presence in Syria as well. And with no serious domestic pressure to adopt more dovish policies, there is little standing in the way of Israel's annexation of the West Bank and its complete destruction of Gaza.

Iran, like Israel, has every incentive to pursue policies that perpetuate instability. Incessant conflict helps the regime shift blame for hard times and justify its strategy of resistance to the Iranian public.

And Iran has retained the ability to stir up violence. Although the country has been badly damaged by war, the regime remains intact, and its regional power has grown. Iran has demonstrated its ability to effectively control the Strait of Hormuz and to strike American allies in the region, and setbacks to allies such as Hezbollah are unlikely to permanently end Tehran's ability to project power through proxies. American pressure on weak governments in Iraq and Lebanon to disarm pro-Iranian militias could trigger additional conflict in which Iranian allies would hold the upper hand.

Regional alignments will drift further away from the anti-Iranian coalition that American officials envision. Instead of relying on American protection, many Gulf states could pursue side deals with Iran to keep themselves off Tehran's target list. And instead of following Washington's lead, regional politics will likely revolve around a deepening competition for primacy between the Emiratis and the Saudis. Before the Iran war began at the end of February, Riyadh had started to mobilize a coalition that included Egypt, Pakistan, Qatar, and Turkey to counter the U.S.-backed Emirati-Israeli alliance. This contest will resume after the fighting simmers down, likely destabilizing already beleaguered states, stretching across the wider region, and generating endless new crises that a distracted Washington will struggle to navigate.

Finally, most regimes will face ever greater pressures from below as the fallout of the Iran war ripples through the region's struggling economies. It is not only countries whose infrastructure has been damaged by Iranian strikes that will feel those effects. In Egypt, for example, steep hikes in fuel and food prices and enormous losses of Suez Canal revenues as the war disrupts global shipping are compounding existing fiscal and unemployment crises. Many countries already hurt by cuts in U.S. aid may lose another critical source of external investment as the wealthy Gulf states grapple with their own economic problems. Domestic grievances and outrage over Gaza make for a potent mix, and a wave of protest comparable to the uprisings of 15 years ago could again be on the horizon.

LAST CHANCE

The violent demise of the old regional order could disrupt or even foreclose any attempt to establish a functional new one. But this moment could also be an opportunity for the United States to recast the core bargains that have produced such destructive results. Getting a new Middle East policy right requires rethinking the decision to prioritize

relations with autocratic and lawless allies in the name of pragmatism. For decades, Washington assumed that it did not need to worry much about Arab public opinion because it could count on Arab rulers to crush any dissent. It similarly assumed that mouthing empty words about supporting a two-state solution, all while Israel continued its creeping annexation of Palestinian lands and avoided genuine peace negotiations, would be enough to keep its Arab allies on board. That meant the United States never considered adopting policies that would command the consent, or even the support, of the peoples of the region. And it meant Washington could never seriously engage in the promotion of democracy or the defense of human rights, because its strategy depended on their absence.

The Trump administration, contemptuous of democracy and the rule of law at home and abroad, is not going to change that. It is difficult to imagine Trump, who vacillates wildly between strategies, designing a new regional order of any kind. But his successor will have a real chance to break with the status quo and craft a more coherent and more effective Middle East strategy. That starts with renouncing the use of military intervention as a first resort and ending the practice of diplomacy by airstrike. Washington's priority should be defense, not offense. One way to make that intention clear is to forgo the restoration of damaged or destroyed U.S. military bases across the Gulf and focus instead on investments in intelligence sharing, missile defense systems for Gulf partners, and the preservation of freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

The United States must pursue stability in the Middle East through diplomacy and collective defense, not militarized containment. The Iran fiasco has thoroughly exposed the hollowness of hawkish calls for war and promises of decisive action. It is time for Washington to commit to a diplomatic process that can bring Iran into the regional security system as an invested partner. The Gulf states may be open to such an approach despite their fury over Iran's latest attacks; after all, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached a rapprochement in 2023 after an earlier bout of Iranian aggression. The Obama administration evoked a similar vision when it was negotiating the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and even Vice President JD Vance has spoken of a willingness to "fundamentally transform" the U.S. relationship with Iran following a new agreement. The aspiration is there, but a new administration will have to demonstrate quickly and decisively that it intends to see it through.

The reset in U.S. policy must also extend to the way Washington treats its allies. This includes Israel. Conditions are ripe for a rethinking of the U.S.-Israeli relationship: according to a Quinnipiac poll released in June, nearly two-thirds of Democrats and more than half of independents think the United States is too supportive of Israel. In mid-July, more than half the Democrats in the House of Representatives voted for a bill to cut off U.S. military aid to Israel. The next administration should use this momentum to put the kind of pressure on Israel that U.S. governments have long shied away from. Washington need not abandon its ally, but it should demand that Israel respect human rights within all the territories it controls, stop the creeping annexation of the West Bank, and end its destabilizing interventions in Lebanon and Syria.

More broadly, stability at the regional level requires that the United States recommit to international human rights norms, oppose secessionist movements in countries such as Syria and Yemen, deter partners' military interventions and proxy wars in places such as Sudan and Libya, and stop urging the Iraqi and Lebanese governments to disarm the Iraqi militias and Hezbollah before they are fully prepared to do so. Stability at the domestic level requires democratic change. For the United States, that means encouraging reform, including human rights protections, and calling off the bargain that has allowed autocratic allies to get away with grievous repression. This message will not be welcome in Cairo, in Riyadh, or indeed in many other capitals. But no real transformation of the regional order will be possible without addressing the pathologies of its regimes.

New American policies would not create a stable, peaceful Middle East overnight. At first, they would win little public applause from a region that has grown accustomed to American hypocrisy and abuse. Later on, the rise of more democratically responsive governments in the region would likely cause considerable headaches as ambitious politicians competed to condemn and denounce the United States. But in the long run, a Middle East populated by regimes that are less willing to follow Washington's lead on unpopular policies or to suppress public opposition would likely be more stable than the region of today. Washington struggles to conceive of a Middle East it does not dominate and to imagine real alternatives to the present regional order no matter how badly it has failed. But that order is ending, and this may be U.S. leaders' last chance to change course. If they cannot, they will watch the American Middle East fade away like the European empires that came before. 🌐

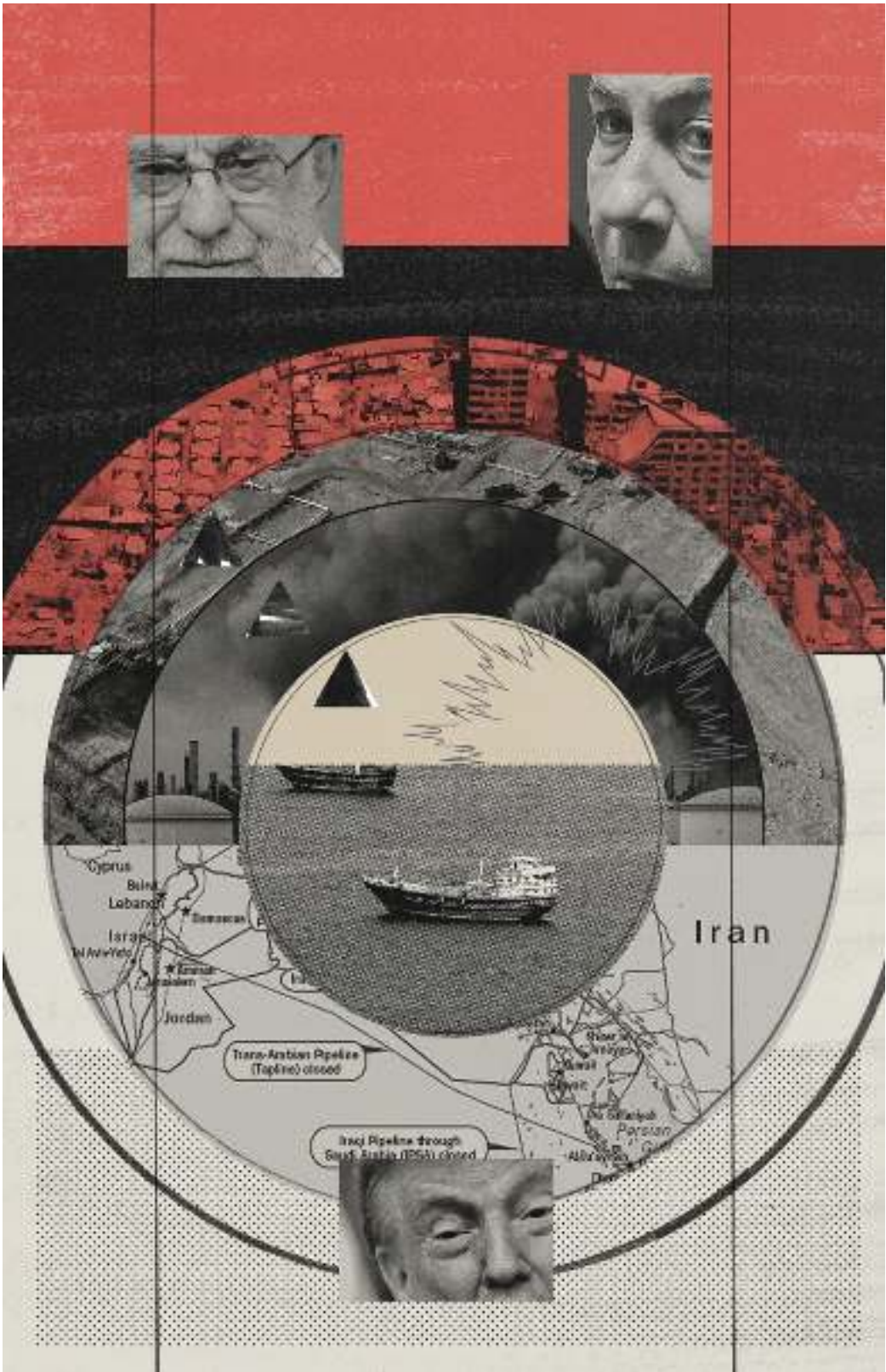
The New Old Middle East

Wars of Sound and Fury

F. GREGORY GAUSE III

In many ways, the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran and the war in Gaza that preceded it seem transformative. After decades of shadow warfare, Iran and Israel have now attacked each other's homelands directly. And Israel and the United States have joined forces in a genuinely novel way to wage war against Iran. The Islamic Republic has lost its supreme leader of 36 years and much of its defense infrastructure. The Gulf states, once largely able to stay out of harm's way, have seen their energy facilities, airports, and hotels go up in flames. Hezbollah has dragged Lebanon, which was just starting to recover from its last war, back into conflict. The Assad regime, which had ruled Syria for nearly half a century, was swept away when its partners in Beirut and Tehran were battered and unable to offer any help. Israel, for its part, has flattened Gaza, tiptoed toward annexing the West Bank, reoccupied parts

F. GREGORY GAUSE III is Professor Emeritus at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University and an Associate Fellow at the Middle East Institute.



REUTERS

of southern Lebanon, and extended its control of Syrian territory beyond the Golan Heights.

All these changes are real and important, and they have caused millions of people to suffer. Yet overall, the Middle East emerging out of this upheaval looks a lot like the one that existed before it. Outsiders continue to play their balance-of-power games within the borders of weak Arab states, the Iranian-Israeli conflict endures, the Palestinian question remains unresolved, and the United States lacks

the capacity or the will to impose order but is still too involved in the region to leave.

Weak states
cannot make
durable peace.

The cease-fire signed by Iran and the United States in June 2026 captures the Trump administration's failure to fundamentally alter the region. After suffering a series of blows between 2023 and 2025,

Tehran has affirmed its power by exercising a chokehold over the Strait of Hormuz and assaulting its Gulf neighbors. The prewar regime in Tehran is largely intact and is now dominated by members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who are just as committed as their predecessors to opposing Israel and meddling in weak Arab states. The U.S.-Israeli war that began in February 2026 was meant to sap Iran's power, if not to eliminate its regime. Instead, it has given the Islamic Republic a new lease on life.

Despite two and a half years of fighting and the deaths of tens of thousands of people, mostly Palestinians, the situation in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank is largely the same as it was before the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. Hamas has been defanged, but Israel's extraordinary use of force has not solved the fundamental problems at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although some Israeli officials favor the total expulsion of the Palestinians and the annexation of their territories, that has not occurred and will not occur any time soon. In the absence of a political settlement that involves some kind of Palestinian self-determination, the basic shape of the conflict remains the same. Israel shows no signs of contemplating the kind of compromises that might lead to such a settlement, and the United States has been reluctant to lean on Israel to make concessions.

The United States and Israel cannot bomb their way to a better region. A truly changed Middle East, one that could be the basis for a more stable regional order, would be defined by stronger central

governments in Arab states such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Today, those places are plagued by civil war or domestic unrest, and the region will remain volatile as long as those governments are not able to police their borders and prevent nonstate actors in their territories from pursuing their own foreign and military policies. Weak states, after all, cannot make durable peace.

A transformed Middle East would also see an end to the efforts of regional and outside powers, most notably but not exclusively Iran, to encourage or fund militias. It would include a diplomatic process, broadly supported internationally and accepted regionally, focused on working toward a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would ensure Israel's security and the Palestinians' right to self-determination. And it might involve genuine regime change in Iran, carried out by the Iranians themselves and resulting in a government that respects its neighbors' sovereignty and drops the ideological crusade against Israel.

The regional war that began in 2023 did not move the Middle East closer to that kind of transformation. At the time of this writing, Iran and the United States were alternating between negotiating and fighting each other, but neither was willing to escalate in a way that would change the fundamentals of the situation they've been in since February. Tehran will not allow free and unfettered shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, give up its nuclear program, or abandon its regional proxies. Washington seems unlikely to send troops to Iran, a prerequisite for externally imposed regime change. Unless the government in Tehran collapses by other means and is replaced by something radically different—an outcome that seems even less probable now than it did before the war started—then no matter how long the war goes on or how it eventually ends, the drama and bloodshed of the past years will amount to little more than sound and fury. And because there has been no meaningful change to the essential dynamics and interests of the Middle East, even if a more sustainable cease-fire is achieved, the countdown to the next war will have already begun.

STILL GOT IT

Between October 7, 2023, and February 28, 2026, Iran suffered so many blows that it began to look like a paper tiger. Its nuclear infrastructure was reduced to rubble by Israeli and U.S. strikes in

June 2025. Israel disrupted Iran from within, killing generals and nuclear scientists on Iranian soil and assassinating the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran itself. Bashar al-Assad's fall in Syria in December 2024 severed Iran's land bridge to Lebanon. Israel devastated Iran's most powerful proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah. Persistent economic problems triggered a wave of protests against the Iranian regime in December 2025 that the regime brutally suppressed. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency, the regime's security forces killed at least 7,000 protesters; other organizations put that number in the tens of thousands. Iran's apparent weakness undoubtedly tempted U.S. President Donald Trump into thinking that more strikes could lead to regime change. When he launched attacks in conjunction with Israel on February 28 of this year, he urged Iranians to "take over" their government.

Yet Iran emerged victorious from this latest round of fighting. Of course, the country is still plagued by the same economic problems and social discontent that drove Iranians into the streets in December. But by defying a U.S.-Israeli onslaught and discovering its leverage over world energy markets, the Iranian regime has regained prominence. It will certainly continue with the fundamental elements of its regional policy of the past 47 years: opposition to Israel, resistance to American power, and involvement in the politics of weak Arab states. And it will have every incentive to do whatever it can to develop nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent to future attacks from Israel and the United States.

Iran's allies, although weakened, still wield significant influence across the Arab world. In Iraq's elections in November 2025, Shiite parties aligned with Iran and the Iraqi militias it backs performed well. In February, March, and April of this year, those militias lobbed missiles at U.S. bases in the region. The new Iraqi government under Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi, like its predecessors, has filled important positions with many of Iran's local allies.

Israeli assaults on Hezbollah between 2023 and 2025 opened a brief window for the historically weak Lebanese government to assert itself. Joseph Aoun, a Maronite Christian and former general whose election had been blocked for years by Hezbollah, was chosen as president by Lebanon's parliament in January 2025. Lebanon subsequently made some progress on implementing the 2024 cease-fire agreement with Israel: Hezbollah, for example,



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had mostly withdrawn from the Lebanese border with Israel by the end of 2025.

But the task of restoring the state's primacy in Lebanon remained unfinished business as Hezbollah joined in Iran's retaliatory strikes in response to the 2026 U.S.-Israeli campaign. Israel, in turn, launched a ground invasion of southern Lebanon and an air campaign across the entire country, killing over 4,200 people and displacing one million others. Although Hezbollah is Israel's stated target, the victim of the campaign is more likely to be the new Lebanese government, which condemned Hezbollah's attack and offered to negotiate with Israel. Hezbollah has survived more than 40 years of conflict with Israel, including this latest assault. The Lebanese government, however, is likely to be discredited because it was unable to prevent yet another enormous disruption to the lives of ordinary people.

The Houthis, Iran's ally in Yemen, snarled global shipping, ostensibly in solidarity with the Palestinians, in the Bab el Mandeb Strait between 2023 and 2025 but stayed above the fray in the first half of 2026, despite the attacks on Iran. The lull came from the group's budding relationship with Saudi Arabia. Between 2022 and July 2026, the Houthis maintained a cease-fire with their neighbor, and during that time Riyadh paid the salaries of Yemeni civil servants, many of whom work under Houthi control. The Houthis remain ideologically and politically committed to Tehran and now seem to be reengaging in the fight in support of their ally. At the time of this writing, the Houthis had declared a naval blockade against Saudi Arabia, the effect of which on energy flows in the Red Sea is uncertain but unlikely to be good. Some kind of Yemeni political settlement would advance security in the Middle East, but the more likely outcome of recent events is for the Houthis to rejoin the regional conflict.

SHEIKH DOWN

From 2023 to 2025, the Gulf Arab countries were largely bystanders in the regional war. Qatar had hosted Hamas leaders and provided funding to the organization, with Israeli and U.S. approval, for a number of years. But no other Gulf state was particularly upset to see Hamas and Hezbollah weakened. The ferocity of the Israeli campaign in Gaza did, however, raise the salience of the Palestinian issue among Arab populations, making any overt support for Israel

a risky proposition. As Iran became more vulnerable, Gulf leaders grew more worried that Israel would try to assert regional military dominance. Those fears were exacerbated in September 2025, when Israel struck a residence in Qatar in an unsuccessful attempt to kill Hamas officials who were there to negotiate a U.S.-backed proposal.

For years, the Gulf countries have favored stability in their neighborhood so they can focus on attracting the tourism, trade, and foreign investment needed to reduce their extreme reliance on energy exports. War is bad for business, which is why Gulf governments kept a low profile during the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran in June 2025 and lobbied the United States against attacking Iran in early 2026.

This restraint didn't help the Gulf countries with Iran. When Israel and the United States began their war against Iran in February 2026, it was the Gulf that bore the brunt of Tehran's retaliation. As these countries were battered, their mindsets began to shift. At the beginning of the conflict, Gulf leaders seemed annoyed with the United States for putting them in the cross hairs of Iranian retaliation. But eventually, many Gulf elites came around to the opinion that the United States should continue the war until Iran loses the ability to threaten its neighbors. They were disappointed on both ends of the conflict.

Mixed feelings are a common feature of alliances between a weak country and a strong one. Weaker partners often fear both entrapment in wars that the stronger partner initiates and abandonment by the strong partner in the face of their common enemy. The Gulf states offer textbook examples of this dynamic. The memorandum of understanding signed by Iran and the United States in June 2026, for example, raised fears of desertion because it neglected to mention the Gulf states or address Iranian missile and drone capabilities. All the Gulf states, however, supported the memorandum because they worried that further U.S. escalation would lead to renewed Iranian attacks on their territories. Their fears were realized when the cease-fire broke down.

Yet despite their frustration, the Gulf countries are unlikely to distance themselves from the United States any time soon. American technology and training underpin Gulf air defenses, which proved

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are now even
more set in their
beliefs.

quite successful in fending off Iranian drones and missiles. Moreover, the Gulf states have no other security guarantor to which they can turn. China has shown no desire to play that kind of role and does not have the power projection capabilities it would need to do so. Russia has taken Iran's side and is busy with its own war in Ukraine. And European countries and regional powers such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey cannot match the United States in terms of fighting capability.

What has changed over the past three years is the Gulf's view of Israel. For years, Gulf countries had been slowly starting to embrace Israel as a potential ally against Iran. Even Saudi Arabia was considering warmer ties. But that trend has now reversed, and momentum for expanding the Abraham Accords—a series of agreements in 2020 that normalized relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries—has stalled. The Gaza war has made it more politically risky for Arab leaders to openly work with Israel. Israel's strike against Qatar and its pursuit of war against Iran have led Gulf leaders to doubt that Israel cares about their security at all. The only Gulf state that has recommitted to its relationship with Israel is the United Arab Emirates, which already had the strongest ties with Israel.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

By the end of 2025, Israel rightly considered itself the victor of the regional wars. But the country has been unable to achieve its ambitious goal of bringing down the Iranian regime. The June 2026 U.S.-Iranian cease-fire left the Islamic Republic in power with enough military assets to assert itself across the broader region and without a concrete obligation to give up its nuclear program. Moreover, Washington agreed to Tehran's demand that the cease-fire also apply in Lebanon, where Israel was continuing its assault on Hezbollah. Even when Israel did come out on top in the wars of the past three years, it showed no interest in converting its victories into diplomatic initiatives. Israel has decided to play regional disruptor, confident that its military prowess is enough to protect it indefinitely. That is a questionable bet, given that its hard power was similarly impressive before October 7.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has been crystal clear that it will not accept a role for the Palestinian Authority in Gaza, making a solution to post-Hamas governance there nearly impossible to achieve. Violence continues in Gaza itself. Israeli

forces have killed over 1,000 Palestinians since the cease-fire went into effect in October 2025. The international force that Trump's 20-point peace plan proposed to provide security in Gaza has yet to materialize. The plan calls for a committee of Palestinian technocrats to administer Gaza; as of July 2026, Israel had not allowed them to enter the territory. Hamas refuses to disarm, despite its commitment to do so in the October 2025 truce, and Israeli forces still occupy about 70 percent of the enclave. The Gaza cease-fire looks more like a respite in the conflict than an end to it. There is certainly no hint of a long-term political solution that could change the current dynamic.

Other countries are hesitant to get involved in Gaza, either as security forces or development partners, without a reputable Palestinian partner with whom they can work. The Palestinian Authority, for all its faults, is the only plausible option. But far from encouraging the PA to play a role in Gaza, Israel is undercutting its administrative functions in the West Bank. During 2025, Israeli soldiers and settlers killed 240 Palestinians in the West Bank, and Israel approved 54 new settlements there—the highest yearly number since the signing of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, a series of agreements meant to lead to a two-state solution. In February 2026, the government adopted new legislation making it easier for Israeli settlers to buy land in the West Bank, a step that Palestinians say violates the Oslo accords and accelerates what they see as the momentum toward annexation. The current Israeli government prioritizes territorial expansion and the weakening of Palestinian institutions over any possibility of stable governance in the West Bank and Gaza.

Netanyahu believes that Israel is safer when its neighbors are weak and divided. But he misses the fact that Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, two consolidated states that can control their borders and prevent the rise of violent nonstate actors in their territory, have been the enduring pillars of Israel's security for decades. Rather than embrace the prospect of a cooperative Lebanese government willing to work against Hezbollah, Israel renewed its war in Lebanon in 2026. In Syria, Israel captured a so-called buffer zone, encouraged Syrian Druze to resist the new government, armed Druze militias, and struck Syrian army positions—including the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense—in the name of protecting the Druze.

Netanyahu obstructs state-building efforts in Lebanon and Syria in spite of U.S. efforts to support the new governments in Beirut

and Damascus. Although Washington has admonished Israel on this score, Israeli policy has not substantially changed. Only when Israel's hubris led it to bomb Qatar in September 2025 did Trump bring Netanyahu to heel, forcing him to apologize publicly to the emir of Qatar and finally pressuring him to accept a cease-fire in Gaza. Washington needs to similarly pressure Israel to allow the new governments in Beirut and Damascus to reassert their control within their borders and build stronger state institutions.

By far the most significant geopolitical change brought about by the past three years of war was the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and the establishment of a new government led by Ahmed al-Shara, who was once a member of al-Qaeda. Since taking Syria's capital, Shara has cultivated support from the United States, Turkey, the EU, and the Arab world, distancing Syria from the Iranian alliance that the Assad regime had maintained since the 1980s. These changes have also considerably reduced Iran's ability to affect Lebanese politics and threaten Israel from Syrian territory, a real blow to Tehran's regional influence.

Shara has said all the right things since coming to power, pledging a tolerant, consultative, and eventually democratic regime. His reassuring words aside, Syria remains deeply divided and traumatized after 14 years of brutal civil war. The forces allied with the new government have clashed with the Alawite minority in the west, the Druze in the south, and the Kurds in the northeast. Syria continues to be a weak state. In the absence of effective central government control, the country will remain a plaything for the stronger states in its neighborhood, as it was during the civil war. If Syria's weakness lures Iran, Israel, Turkey, or the Gulf states back into another round of civil war, the chances for regional stability could vanish.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

The prospects for a new Middle East are dim. Iran and Israel—the two countries that have instigated much of the region's strife in recent decades—are as powerful as ever, and their leaders seem even more set in their beliefs than they were before 2023. Many Arab countries still suffer from the political vacuums that lead to civil war, attract meddlesome outside intervention, and become breeding grounds for armed groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, that narrow the already slim prospects for peace.

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The Trump administration has made it clear that it is not in the business of building states in the Middle East—a laudable position, given the failures of U.S. efforts to do so in Afghanistan and Iraq. Still, Trump clearly understands that the Middle East will become more stable only if weak Arab states get their acts together. He has lifted sanctions on Syria and embraced its new president. In February 2026, the United States handed over the base it had maintained for years at al-Tanf to the Syrian military, ending a U.S. presence in

The stage is
set for the next
conflagration.

Syria that dated to 2014. American diplomats worked to de-escalate tensions between Israel and Syria and, before the latest round of fighting, tried to nudge the Lebanese government to take a stiffer stance toward Hezbollah. In June 2026, Israel and Lebanon agreed to a deal, brokered by the United

States, that commits Israel to begin handing over control of certain parts of southern Lebanon to the Lebanese armed forces. If the United States tries more forcefully to roll back Israeli interference in Lebanon and Syria, while supporting those governments' efforts to suppress armed nonstate actors within their borders, the prospects for a more stable region would improve.

How the Trump administration deals with an empowered and ambitious Iranian regime will determine whether the 2026 war is simply another data point in the decades of conflict between the two countries or the beginning of an effort to halt the region's downward spiral. Any progress toward regional stability will require the United States to keep up its military power in the Gulf. Washington must maintain the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the 5,000 to 10,000 troops deployed in Kuwait, and access to bases in Oman and the United Arab Emirates. Without a U.S. military foothold, Iran can threaten military action against its neighbors at will. The American military presence also reassures the Gulf states of Washington's commitment to their security after the damage they sustained. That reassurance is necessary to prevent them from simply succumbing out of fear to Iranian pressure on issues such as oil policy and relations with Israel.

But what would really calm the region is a diplomatic effort to reach a sustainable *modus vivendi* with Tehran. Oman's foreign minister indicated that just before the U.S.-Israeli offensive against

Iran began in February, Iranian diplomats had floated a deal under which they would never stockpile enriched uranium. Given that Iran has emerged in a stronger position since February, such a proposal might now seem unrealistic. But the Iranian government is so desperate for sanctions relief that the United States should still use it as a starting point for new nuclear negotiations. Even though American leverage in these talks is not what the Trump administration had hoped it would be, it is worth the effort to keep Iran at the table. The alternative strategy, regime change through war, has clearly failed.

Separately, the United States should lead a multilateral effort with other concerned countries, such as China, India, and the United Kingdom, along with European, Gulf, and Southeast Asian states, to design a framework for managing the Strait of Hormuz. The international conventions governing the Suez Canal and the Turkish Straits could provide some guidance for such an effort, as could the system for maintaining the Strait of Malacca, under which a private foundation collects voluntary contributions to fund hydrographic surveys, navigational infrastructure, and wreck removal. The global economy relies on free and safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, and most countries agree that it should remain permanently toll-free. Although Trump is allergic to multilateral diplomacy, he should leverage the weight of these other countries in negotiations with Iran and spread the responsibility for keeping the waterway open.

An even more transformative U.S. policy would require grasping the nettle of the Palestinian issue. The October 7 attack demonstrated once again that as long as Palestinian self-determination remains unrealized, Palestinian refusal to accept the status quo can blow up the Middle East. A truly stable region requires satisfying the basic Palestinian right to self-determination while also ensuring Israeli security. But no U.S. government has been willing to use the leverage on Israel that would be necessary to make a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict possible. Without that willingness, any hope for true, long-term stability in the Middle East is a fantasy. The region's players have not changed: an emboldened Iran with scores to settle, Iranian proxies that are down but not out, and an Israel that instead of compromising has come to accept a state of near-permanent war. The stage is set for the next conflagration. 🌍

The Next Global Economic Crisis Could Be Made in China

How Overcapacity Ends

MICHAEL B. G. FROMAN

There has been no shortage of complaints about Chinese overcapacity in recent years. Beijing's commitment to driving exports and widening its trade surplus, by any means necessary, has undermined the manufacturing aspirations of advanced economies such as the United States and those in Europe, as well as developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There is more of a global consensus about the nature of the challenge than ever before, but it has had little effect on Chinese policy.

Now, the problem is morphing into a qualitatively new and more dangerous one: the world's ability to absorb Chinese overcapacity is approaching a breaking point. And if that breaking point comes, the consequence could be a global economic crisis at a time when governments are particularly ill equipped to manage the fallout.

MICHAEL B. G. FROMAN is President of the Council on Foreign Relations. He served as U.S. Trade Representative from 2013 to 2017 and Deputy National Security Adviser for International Economic Affairs from 2009 to 2013.

Over the past two decades, China has established the largest trade surplus in recorded history. In 2025, it reached nearly \$1.2 trillion, growing at three times the rate of global goods trade. This paradigm has been strategically beneficial for China and disinflationary for the rest of the world in the short run, but it is politically and structurally unsustainable—creating an increasing and underappreciated risk to the entire global economy.

China's remarkable path of economic development over the last several decades has been made possible by a benign international environment in which other countries were eager to accept low-cost manufactured goods in exchange for efficient supply chains and consumer welfare. But that international environment has turned toxic. The political appetite for accepting the deindustrialization and critical dependencies that come with the flood of Chinese imports is finite and shrinking. As these trends continue, protectionism is likely to rise, cutting off Chinese manufacturers' market access and thereby short-circuiting Beijing's strategy, introduced in 2020, of "dual circulation," which promotes both domestic economic self-sufficiency and continued engagement in international markets.

But the problem goes well beyond political backlash. It is a problem of arithmetic. When the Chinese economy was substantially smaller, a strategy based on driving export growth at two or three times the rate of overall global economic growth was possible because there was sufficient global demand to absorb its exports. Today, however, China has a much larger economy and cannot continue on this trajectory without eventually running out of customers. Put simply, Beijing has outgrown its economic model.

When the Chinese export machine stalls, the reckoning will be most painful for China. But a material slowdown in its economy would send shock waves around the world, especially among China's major trading partners, not only in the Asia Pacific but also in countries elsewhere whose economies have become intertwined with China's. The United States would not be immune to the shock, but it would be the only actor with the economic and institutional capacity to stabilize the global economy.

The surest way to avoid this costly chain of events is a preemptive and gradual rebalancing of the Chinese economy. This has long been China's best path toward more sustainable growth, and a route the United States has advocated for years. But whereas in decades past it was a smart choice, now it is a necessity.

ABSOLUTE DISADVANTAGE

China now accounts for roughly 30 percent of global industrial production, and by 2030, it is expected to reach 45 percent, according to a 2024 UN report. With the exception of the U.S. economy immediately after World War II, there is no historical precedent for such a concentration of industrial power. Measured as a share of global GDP, China's current manufactured goods surplus is greater than the combined surpluses of Germany and Japan at any point during the 1980s.

This manufacturing surplus reflects a concerted policy choice. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has estimated that 60 percent of China's gains in global manufacturing market share have been driven by government subsidies. Perhaps the most significant, if implicit, subsidy is Chinese manufacturing firms' access to Beijing's state-directed financial system, which channels vast credit to prioritized sectors, enabling Chinese firms to expand without the same concern for profit and return as their international peers. The result is a self-defeating race to the bottom, in which firms cut prices below cost, accept razor-thin or negative margins, and continue building to chase greater market share. Nearly 30 percent of Chinese industrial firms operate at a loss, up from 20 percent before the COVID-19 pandemic. In sectors with the fastest investment growth—largely those prioritized under Chinese leader Xi Jinping's "Made in China 2025" initiative, which seeks to foster Chinese self-sufficiency in advanced industries—that number is as high as 34 percent. Rather than allowing failing firms to exit, local governments prop up unprofitable companies to preserve employment and tax revenue, and state-owned banks roll over debt for insolvent borrowers. This system, in addition to a persistently undervalued renminbi that makes exports cheap, allows Chinese firms to charge up to 30 percent less than their peers based elsewhere.

These price wars and overcapacity have negative effects not only abroad but also at home. The Chinese word for this phenomenon is *nei-juan*, translated as "involution," a term used to refer to excessive competition that pushes Chinese companies to the brink for ever-diminishing returns. Firms invest more to produce more to export more at lower or negative margins, subsidized by local governments whose own fiscal health depends on the factories' staying open. The result is an industrial machine that cannot stop and cannot slow down—but that, owing to the limits of demand, cannot keep going.

A crisis is not inevitable. China's economy is resilient, and at least on paper, its leadership has signaled a recognition of the problem and an interest in taking steps to address it. The Chinese Communist Party adopted an anti-involution campaign in 2025, and its 15th Five-Year Plan, for 2026 to 2030, promotes consumption, particularly in rural areas. The CCP has also taken modest steps to strengthen its social safety net, with the goal of reducing the incentive for households to save instead of spend.

But China's leadership remains unwilling to make the most important change: fundamentally reorienting the country's growth strategy toward a more sustainable model. Beijing has, in general, continued to suppress domestic consumption, with the goal of maximizing industrial output in strategic and low-value sectors alike. The result is what the economist Yasheng Huang calls an "absolute advantage" economy: a country that competes simultaneously with the United States when it comes to artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and electronics, and with the poorest nations in Africa when it comes to the manufacture of textiles, apparel, and household baubles. This defies any historical precedent, not to mention the basic economic logic of comparative advantage that most other countries follow. Even governments that pursued mercantilist development strategies, such as those in South Korea and Taiwan, relinquished low-value-added manufacturing as domestic wages rose.

Beijing is reluctant to change course because its export-led growth model is both an economic grand strategy and a political project. Dual circulation plays to China's advantages in scale manufacturing, energy, infrastructure, labor, and engineering expertise. It also reflects Xi's deeply rooted belief, as reflected in a 2020 speech, that although China must "accelerate construction of the digital economy . . . the real economy is the foundation, and the various manufacturing industries cannot be abandoned." As the economist Zongyuan Zoe Liu has written in these pages, "As the party sees it, consumption is an individualistic distraction that threatens to divert resources away from China's core economic strength: its industrial base."

The political dilemma posed by restructuring goes beyond Xi's affinity for industry. To properly rebalance, Beijing would need to reconstruct the fiscal model on which every province and municipality depends, accept the resulting collapse in local government revenues, and absorb mass layoffs. Such a change would require aligning incentives with a substantially different economic goal from the one officials

and institutions at all levels have been accustomed to pursuing over the last two decades. Local officials' promotions are tied to hitting growth targets, regardless of whether that growth is sustainable. To hit those targets and finance local spending, they sell land, plow the proceeds into subsidized factory plots and industrial parks, marshal credit from local bank branches and local government financing vehicles, and build yet more factories. Because provinces and municipalities are chronically in deficit and lack alternative means for generating revenue at scale, this production-oriented cycle continues in perpetuity. This problem and its solutions—foremost, a more consumption-oriented economic model—are well known in China. That does not mean the issue is any easier to address.

WRITING ON THE WALL

As Beijing debates whether to embrace the reforms necessary to avert disaster, other countries are likely to try to stem the flow of Chinese exports. Such moves could suddenly close off China's access to a broad swath of foreign markets, accelerating the failure of its export-led growth model and raising the prospect of a global economic crisis. In the first decade of this century, wealthy countries accommodated losing low-margin manufacturing to Chinese firms. But Beijing's recent push into high-value manufacturing poses a direct threat to those countries' economic strategies, setting the stage for a wave of protectionism even in traditional havens of free trade.

Take the case of Germany, long an advocate and beneficiary of trade with China. In 2025, German goods exports to China fell to their lowest level in a decade—down 9.3 percent from 2024 and down 23 percent from their 2022 peak, according to the Rhodium Group. Traffic in the other direction increased. In the second quarter of 2025, German imports from China rose by at least ten percent year-over-year across 2,241 product categories, including chemicals and vehicle manufacturing; collectively, those categories made up over 60 percent of all German imports from China.

The displacement is most severe in autos. German firms' share of the Chinese auto market is shrinking as China's share of the global auto market grows. Between 2022 and 2025, German car exports to China fell 66 percent, and China's total vehicle exports more than doubled, making China the world's largest auto exporter. As a result, German autoworker layoffs are now higher than during the global financial crisis



of 2008–9 or the COVID pandemic, forcing German and European business associations to call for unprecedentedly stringent local content requirements. The employers' association Gesamtmetall reported in December 2025 that Germany's metal and electrical engineering industry, the country's largest, was shedding nearly 10,000 jobs a month. Volkswagen is now considering whether to cut as many as 100,000 jobs—nearly a sixth of its workforce—and to end production at four plants in Germany. BMW and Mercedes-Benz are pursuing sweeping restructurings, too; analysts have told the *Financial Times* that the German auto industry is now shrinking “in a lasting, permanent way.” This China-driven shock has forced the German Chancellery to contemplate what was once unthinkable: backing proposals for the European Union to consider a mechanism similar to the United States' Section 301 tariff, which would allow the EU to impose tariffs to target China's export glut and incentivize a revaluation of the Chinese renminbi. And all of this has political ramifications. As the China expert Daniel Rosen has noted, what is taking place is the equivalent of “*Hillbilly Elegy* with German characteristics”—the destruction of an industry that is part and parcel of German identity.

The EU has long been more ideologically committed than the United States to multilateralism and free trade, at least rhetorically, as a key element of its project of integration. But after years of trying to triangulate

between the United States and China, it is belatedly and reluctantly following Washington's lead in erecting trade barriers to Chinese exports. In October 2024, after an investigation into Chinese subsidies along the electric vehicle supply chain, the European Commission imposed countervailing duties of up to 35.3 percent on Chinese-made EVs. In March, the commission put forward the Industrial Accelerator Act, which would set "Made in EU" local content requirements and mandate technology transfer for deals involving key sectors. It has also been considering broader supply chain rules for the entire bloc, including legislation that would require European companies to diversify to have at least three sources for imports in critical sectors.

The challenges China faces are not limited to the United States and Europe. When, in 2025, China demonstrated its willingness to weaponize its dominance in the processing of critical minerals and the production of related goods, such as magnets, it mobilized a coordinated and global reaction. The new Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement, convened by the Trump administration, is a coalition supported by dozens of countries, aimed at rapidly scaling public and private investment in "China free" critical minerals supply chains. It could well be a harbinger of a more daunting prospect for Beijing: coalitions of the willing cooperating to close global markets to Chinese goods and to force Beijing to rebalance on someone else's timeline. In a number of sensitive sectors, such as telecommunications, EVs, and drones, such cliques have already formed, setting bans and restrictions on the use of equipment from Chinese telecommunications companies Huawei and ZTE.

Major importing economies are already increasing their deployment of tariffs, local content requirements, and national security exclusions. If this continues, whether as a coordinated effort or a thicket of unilateral measures, the effect on China could be a sudden and sustained shortfall in external demand.

THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH

If the political economy of trade among China's trading partners poses one challenge to Beijing's economic model, the laws of arithmetic pose an equally daunting one. Over the first two months of 2026, China's trade surplus grew by more than 20 percent year-over-year. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund has projected that the global economy will grow only 3.1 percent this year. This trend is unsustainable: global demand is not rising fast enough to absorb Chinese

exports at this pace, in key sectors or in aggregate. Eventually, the market for new factories in China will run dry, as did the market for property. China's trade surplus could, in effect, collapse on itself.

Current distortions are severest in the sectors Beijing has designated as the most strategic. Chinese factories have built up the capacity to produce roughly 1,200 gigawatts of solar infrastructure annually—nearly double the amount installed worldwide last year. Chinese export volumes of solar cells, which make up solar panels, jumped 73 percent in the first half of 2025 on a year-over-year basis, while the average unit price of those cells dropped by roughly 25 percent year-over-year. Although a cheap and abundant supply of solar panels might be good for countries pursuing an energy transition, it is not good for countries seeking to play a role in the manufacture of clean energy products.

This problem is even more acute for electric vehicles. In 2025, Chinese vehicle exports rose 21 percent to \$142 billion, and lithium-ion battery shipments reached \$77 billion. To enable this stunning growth, China marshaled the capacity to build roughly 25 million EVs and plug-in hybrids, at a time when its own domestic demand for new energy vehicles has stalled at around 12 million per year, according to estimates by the economist Brad Setser. Global demand for EVs, meanwhile, is projected to grow to only 23 million this year. China now has the capacity to produce roughly 55 million cars, including EVs and internal combustion engine vehicles, or roughly 60 percent of the global market of around 90 million cars. It also continues to invest heavily in new auto manufacturing capacity at a pace that exceeds the growth in global demand for autos, suggesting that its market share will likely increase. At some point, there may simply be no more buyers for all of China's cars.

In addition to the end of the capital expenditure boom that built these excess factories, the exhaustion of markets would create the conditions for a crisis. The cost would be borne not just by China but by the rest of the world, as well.

GAME OVER?

Beijing is likely to do whatever it can to keep exports growing and dual circulation flowing. It could weaken the renminbi; expand subsidies for priority sectors, which have already consumed trillions; and push harder into the next tier of industries China has yet to dominate, including commercial aircraft and AI hardware. If trading partners try

to mount further obstacles to Chinese exports, Beijing could turn to tools of economic coercion, such as restricted access to refined critical minerals, to compel other countries to keep their markets open. China's trade surplus could expand further as a share of global GDP, well beyond the roughly two percent it already represents in manufactured goods. But the world is unlikely to tolerate such a situation for long.

China has faced a collapse in external demand before. During the global financial crisis of 2008–9 and the period of recovery immedi-

ately thereafter, economists such as Michael Pettis and Nicholas Lardy urged Beijing to accelerate its long-promised efforts to increase household consumption. Instead, Beijing rolled out a roughly \$586 billion stimulus—equivalent to around 12 percent of China's GDP in 2008—funneled almost entirely into infrastructure and construction. The investment remedy worked in large part because

China will be unlikely to lead the response to a crisis of its own making.

demographic tailwinds were still at China's back: its middle class was growing and increasingly urban, and the working-age population was expanding, too. But those tailwinds have since reversed. Mass internal migration to China's cities has slowed, the country's working-age population peaked in 2015, and its total population began shrinking in 2022.

When China's bloated property sector began to crater in 2021, Beijing punted again, rebalancing by applying its industrial policy to high-value manufacturing—EVs, batteries, solar modules, and semiconductors. By 2024, as Setser has tracked, Chinese export volumes were growing more than ten percentage points faster than global trade, and in 2025, net exports accounted for roughly 30 percent of GDP growth.

But when this latest surge plateaus or recedes, the game could well be up. It is difficult to identify a sector capable of generating another 30 percent of GDP growth for the Chinese economy. The property sector is in a prolonged downturn that could last for the better part of a generation. The infrastructure sector can no longer support new, unnecessary high-speed rail lines in third-tier cities. Manufacturing easily meets domestic demand. Services, which in most economies absorb displaced industrial labor, remain thin because the household share of consumption is too depressed to sustain them. The industries China could still develop—commercial aircraft, AI hardware—are too small to make up the difference.

THE NEXT CHINA SHOCK

A shock to China's system could ripple through its lopsided economy with severe consequences. Firms already operating at narrow margins could fail in large numbers, and state-owned banks could be forced to recognize losses on the zombie firms they have spent years carrying. Local government financing vehicles could face cascading defaults. Provincial revenues could collapse with the tumble in land sales and industrial activity. And unemployment in coastal manufacturing provinces could turn them against Beijing in a way it has not had to deal with in decades.

Beijing might see stimulus as part of a solution. But unlike in 2008, a stimulus in 2026 would feed into a constrained Chinese economy, not a growing one. The CCP would be forced to rebalance on the worst possible terms, with output collapsing, debt burdens rising, and its legitimacy strained. China could well face a version of Japan's lost decade—but worse. In 1991, Japan began its lost decade as one of the richest countries in the world, with a per capita income comparable, when adjusted for purchasing power, to that of the United States. Today, China is much poorer on a relative basis than Japan was. Its per capita income, when adjusted for purchasing power, is about half of Japan's and one third of the United States'. China also faces a worse demographic outlook than Japan did and lacks the institutional infrastructure that enabled Tokyo to gradually recover.

The economic ramifications of such a shock would be global. A sharp decrease in Chinese demand for global exports, particularly for raw materials and intermediate goods, would ripple through large commodity-exporting economies. The many emerging and developing countries that have China as their largest trading partner would be particularly vulnerable. When Chinese fixed-asset investment decelerated between 2012 and 2015, copper prices fell by over 40 percent, oil by over 60 percent, and iron ore by over 70 percent. This sharp drop in commodity prices caused GDP growth in resource-intensive sub-Saharan African countries to fall sharply, reducing growth for the region from 5.3 percent in 2013 to 1.3 percent in 2016, its lowest level in more than two decades. A full-blown export shock would be considerably worse. Australia, Brazil, and Chile each send 25 to 40 percent of their total exports to China; Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mongolia, and the Republic of the Congo send 45 to 90 percent of theirs to China. These countries' economic viability rests on

the assumption of a standing Chinese bid. Many more countries are dependent on Chinese demand to one degree or another.

Adding fuel to the fire, Chinese capital could retrench. Although Beijing's global lending, through the Belt and Road Initiative, has come off its 2016 peak, China remains by far the largest bilateral creditor to the developing world. If Beijing were forced to address a domestic crisis, a fresh wave of sovereign restructurings and defaults could cascade in Pakistan, Ecuador, Zambia, and beyond.

By some measures, the global economy is in much better shape than it was in 2009. Bank balance sheets are stronger, and the financial system is better positioned to detect signs of stress. But in other respects, the situation is worse. Advanced economies entered 2008 with an average public debt of roughly 70 percent of GDP. Today, that debt stands near 110 percent. The era of ultracheap government borrowing is over, and as servicing public-sector debt becomes ever more expensive, governments will have fewer and fewer resources to respond to macroeconomic shocks.

Should the worst-case scenario play out, the U.S. Federal Reserve swap lines on the scale of 2008 or 2020 could be needed once again, alongside additional International Monetary Fund resources. Even those measures might fall short of preventing a wave of sovereign defaults—and they might be less effective than they were in 2008 and 2020.

THE WAY OUT

If the world faces a China crisis, Beijing will be unlikely to lead the response. China has yet to demonstrate any capacity for or interest in assuming the position that Washington has held since World War II, which includes steering the global economy through crises such as the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which spread to Russia and Brazil, and the global financial and subsequent eurozone crisis of 2008–12. Even if the next crisis is made in China, the cleanup is likely to fall, as it often does, on the United States and the institutions it anchors.

During much of the global financial crisis of 2008–9 and its aftermath, I served as the deputy national security adviser for international economic affairs and U.S. sherpa for the G-8 and G-20 meetings. There, I saw the coordination among political leaders, finance ministries, and central banks that brought the world's financial systems back from the brink of a potential depression. At the London G-20 summit,

in 2009, China agreed not to further devalue its currency—which it had held artificially low for nearly a year to protect its exporters—but it took the collective pressure of U.S. and other leaders to get it done.

At that summit, I watched U.S. President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, Chinese President Hu Jintao, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy gather in the corner of the room to hammer out the last remaining details of the response to the global financial crisis. It is hard to imagine that type of cooperation today. The institutions, tools, and habits of collaboration have deteriorated significantly since 2008, as has trust in U.S. leadership. In a February Politico poll, between 42 and 57 percent of respondents in Canada, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom agreed that the United States “cannot be depended upon in a crisis.” This is not an ideal time for one to occur.

To avoid the most catastrophic outcome, China must orchestrate, with the United States and other major economies, a preemptive and gradual rebalancing of its economy. Such a coordinated approach might replicate the spirit of the 1985 Plaza Accord, an agreement between France, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and West Germany to intervene in foreign exchange markets to bring down the highly overvalued U.S. dollar and reduce the large U.S. trade deficit. Today, the United States could build on the emerging consensus about the nature of the China challenge to forge a concerted effort to secure verifiable commitments from China to revalue the renminbi and rebalance the Chinese economy, including by constraining exports. The renminbi would appreciate in stages. Subsidies to priority sectors would ratchet down. Beijing would implement more vigorous reform of the country’s household registration system, to allow greater social and economic mobility and establish a stronger social safety net. China’s trading partners could titrate their protectionism to reflect the scope of the transition and coordinate their adjustments so the burden does not fall on any one economy or sector alone. These are steps that China has long known will be necessary for more balanced and sustainable growth—steps it has largely chosen to ignore. But if Beijing continues kicking the can, it will soon run out of road.

There is deep and understandable frustration in the United States about China’s stonewalling on these issues over the last two decades. When asked, earlier this year, whether Washington would continue advocating for rebalancing as a central part of the U.S.-Chinese trade

agenda, U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer noted, “Well, how effective was that? . . . We’ve just come to terms with the fact that there’s not going to be some giant comprehensive reform of the way the Chinese political system works, including all these economic elements of it.” Instead, the administration is focusing on establishing a “Board of Trade” to manage bilateral trade across “nonsensitive goods,” in the White House’s words, and on the negotiation of purchase and sales agreements for goods including soybeans, other agricultural and energy products, and airplanes.

Such limited transactions may be beneficial in and of themselves, but they will do little to reduce the broader economic risks that Chinese mercantilism poses to the United States and the global economy, or to mitigate the underlying economic causes of tension in the relationship. Washington can shape Beijing’s future economic policy, but to do so, it must assemble a coalition of the willing to pressure and enable China to rebalance. Achieving such an outcome might allow the formation of a new global economic equilibrium—and more important, might prevent the next major global economic crisis.

The most obvious opportunity is the G-20 summit in Miami this December, a gathering the United States will host for the first time since 2009. The Trump administration has already made clear that it wants to take the G-20 “back to basics,” and historically, the group has worked best when it has focused on the management of global economic risks. The task at hand requires that focus. As Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in April, “The slow-motion buildup of global imbalances after a lack of sustainable growth is the biggest risk. The world cannot take a China with a trillion-dollar trade surplus.” Bessent’s worries are well founded, and the United States should place China’s imbalances at the core of the summit.

None of this work will be easy. But the alternatives are far worse. In this potential crisis, China would suffer more than the United States, irrevocably undermining its bid to stand alongside Washington—let alone replace it—as a responsible steward of the global economy, and damaging the relationships with middle- and low-income countries that Beijing has spent decades cultivating. But the fallout will not hurt China alone. It could cascade across the global economy in a way not seen since 2008–9. That is the real next China shock, and it should be at the center of U.S.-Chinese relations. The United States has an opportunity to put it there—and a clear interest in doing so. 🌐

GRADUATE SCHOOL FORUM SHOWCASE

The Enduring Power of International Affairs Education



Seismic shifts in geopolitical alliances and technological revolution through AI necessitate a new caliber of leadership in international affairs.

This year's Graduate School Forum highlights the enduring power of an international affairs education to navigate a changing, multipolar world, whether in the public, private, or nonprofit sectors.

As we face the biggest changes in the international order since 1945, international affairs graduates are increasingly well-equipped to think critically across fields, technologies, and core theories. What if these seismic shifts in geopolitical alliances enable us to revisit our core assumptions about international relations and democracy?

An international affairs education enables us to go back to the theoretical drawing board to understand the foundations of democracy and the need for international cooperation, make sense of a rapidly changing world, and think about how we can shape the future.

Rather than just disrupting, AI may illuminate how traditional methods of teaching and learning

at schools of international affairs are timeless. The art of negotiation and presenting arguments will always be in demand, as will working in teams and thinking out of the box. Amidst the AI revolution, we've seen the enduring power of theory and its foundation in understanding a changing world.

Unlike people, AI cannot think critically or negotiate; it cannot write analytically, make ethical choices, or cultivate reciprocal relationships. And even should AI go further, international affairs graduates will lead ethically through transition and navigate uncertainty in the international order. An international affairs education enables the skills necessary to address any challenges.

Michelle Reddy

Executive Director

Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA)

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Rachel Robinson

Interim Dean
School of International Service (SIS)
American University

Preparing for What's Next

How does SIS's curriculum prepare students to engage across a range of perspectives?

You must see a problem through eyes other than your own before you can solve it. In addition to learning core theories and approaches in coursework, our students experience far more than four classroom walls—they engage directly with visiting diplomats and ambassadors and through practica, where student teams with different cultural and professional backgrounds produce a deliverable for a client. Deliverables may be an AI-governance brief for the Atlantic Council's Cyber Statecraft Initiative or a shelter and resettlement framework for the United Nation's International Organization for Migration. Constructive dialogue is not only a concept; it's integrated into everything we do.

Why does this work matter more now than ever?

Poverty. Conflict. Climate change. Artificial intelligence is rewriting how knowledge itself gets produced and verified. The landscape has changed, but the challenges remain, requiring people who cooperate, apply skills creatively, and persist despite setbacks. These things always matter. SIS was founded in 1957 by people who lived through both World War II and the Cold War and who decided that preparation mattered more than prediction. That's why we equip our students to produce real work and adapt under uncertainty.

How does SIS approach AI in its research and teaching?

Our faculty are approaching the use of AI from different angles. Derrick Cogburn applied big data analytics and text mining to evaluate whether the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are being met. Students from Jonathan Crock's Futures Lab for Democracy, Tech, and Human Rights wrote a report to the UN Special Rapporteur on Climate Change examining the human rights costs built into renewable energy and critical minerals. Our Global Environmental Policy and Natural Resources and Sustainable Development

degrees provide the specialized knowledge to examine the intersection of AI and environmental challenges. Regardless of the degree program, every SIS student can build AI fluency through coursework or skills institutes.

For a student who cares about the world but hasn't picked a program, why SIS specifically?

We have a degree that is right for you. Whether through U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security; Global Governance, Politics, and Security; International Peace and Conflict Resolution; or any of our more than 15 graduate degree programs, students test their thinking across multiple lenses.

We believe people can serve humanity through any sector, and our graduates' skills transfer just as readily. With faculty deep in practitioner experience, students leave prepared for outcomes beyond any single job market. Our faculty don't just teach the material—Paul Williams has advised more than two dozen international peace negotiations, and Susanna Campbell's Research on International Policy Implementation Lab turns rigorous fieldwork into policy solutions for institutions from the United Nations to the U.S. State Department—and they bring students with them, publishing in outlets like *Harvard Human Rights Journal* and launching rewarding careers where graduates can effect positive change.

The School of International Service remains unapologetically global, intersectional, and service-driven. We hope you'll join us.



SCHOOL of
INTERNATIONAL
SERVICE

R. Joseph Huddleston, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
School of Diplomacy and International Relations
Seton Hall University



Seton Hall's New Graduate Program Explores Conflict and the Challenge of Maintaining Security

Why is now the right time for students to pursue a graduate degree in international relations that is focused on conflict and security?

The world is entering a very uncertain time. It is more important now than any time in the last fifty years to have people trained to think about what incentives leaders have, how governments make decisions, and how those decisions make conflict more or less likely. Uncertain times require well-trained, level-headed leaders who prioritize cooperation and who understand the art and science of deescalation and peacebuilding.

What makes the master of science in conflict and security analysis different from traditional programs in international relations or security studies?

The School of Diplomacy's master of science in conflict and security analysis is a recognized STEM degree and focuses specifically on building deep analytical toolkits for students interested in working on the problem of conflict. It's a thirty credit on-campus program that most students can finish in about a year. But just as important is where we are. Being based just outside of New York City gives our students incredible access to resources and experiences, including opportunities to work on research and engage with some of the world's leading peacebuilding practitioners and organizations.

How does the curriculum prepare students to understand both the causes of conflict and the challenges of maintaining security?

The curriculum bridges the gap between theory and practice by making sure students are trained in analysis using hard data. We designed this program around two complementary tracks. The security analysis track looks at

homeland security, intelligence, cybersecurity, terrorism, nuclear security, and energy security, while the peace and conflict track uses analytical tools and technology to study conflict dynamics and develop strategies for peacemaking, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction.

What practical skills will students develop, and how are those skills applied in real-world settings?

The analytical toolkit built into this program is broadly applicable across many industries, as students will walk away with a working knowledge of statistics, machine learning, text analysis, and many other modern empirical techniques. Even if they choose not to build their careers on the solid theoretical foundation they will receive in conflict mitigation and peacebuilding, they will still finish the program well-prepared to compete across many sectors.

Who is an ideal student for this program?

The ideal student is both curious about structural causes of conflict and ready to jump into demanding math and analysis courses.

What career opportunities can graduates pursue with a degree in conflict and security?

Due to their statistical and analytical training, graduates will be well equipped to compete across a broad set of industries, especially defense, intelligence, and security technology.



SCHOOL OF DIPLOMACY AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY



Wyatt Bruton

Director of Global Admissions
Schwarzman Scholars

Schwarzman Scholars: Building a Global Network of Leaders

Why is Schwarzman Scholars relevant to our current moment? In an increasingly polarized world, how can Schwarzman Scholars help build global solutions?

When Steve Schwarzman envisioned this program in 2013, he knew that the 21st century's most pressing challenges would require leaders who can work across countries, sectors, and cultures. That mission is even more important today than anyone predicted—the program has been built for this moment. With rising geopolitical tensions around the globe, this is a vital time to convene the next generation of leaders from across China, the United States, and the rest of the world.

This program was created to train leaders to navigate the complexities of our current geopolitical moment and to build a community of global leaders who will shape and advance a more stable future, undergirded by mutual understanding, dialogue, and respect. Each year when we select a new cohort, we're putting our hope in 150 bright young leaders who will lead in their communities and advance global collaboration.

Why should aspiring global leaders apply to Schwarzman Scholars and spend a year living and learning in China?

Schwarzman Scholars join a global community comprising young leaders from over 100 countries and dozens of industries. In a given cohort, you might live with Scholars from forty different countries, learning, living, and socializing together. This experience develops invaluable cross-cultural competencies and expands your perspective. At Schwarzman College, Scholars develop the skills, mindset, and community necessary to tackle the challenges we face today and into the future.

Understanding China and its role in the world is more important now than ever. China's consequential role on the global stage in the 21st century spans every industry and sector. To prepare to lead effectively, it's important for leaders to gain firsthand experience living and operating in the world's second largest economy to

navigate a changing geopolitical landscape and succeed in their industries.

Now with ten cohorts, what does the Schwarzman Scholars alumni network look like? How will it continue to grow?

What began as an ambitious vision for leadership exchange has evolved into a thriving community of global leaders committed to building understanding, tackling complex challenges and seizing opportunities.

Today, the alumni network includes more than 1,500 members from 107 countries and 490 institutions worldwide. The network spans government, business, technology, healthcare, education, philanthropy, and civil society, and includes elected officials, NGO leaders, Fortune 500 executives, entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and policymakers.

Over the past decade, our alumni network has proven to be a durable platform for connection, collaboration, and exchange. Alumni continue to learn about and from China and engage with one another across time zones, disciplines, and cultures, creating opportunities for dialogue and cooperation that extend well beyond their year at Schwarzman College.

From founding ventures that are leveraging AI to drive innovation in healthcare, eldercare, sustainability, and travel to addressing global challenges in areas such as diplomacy, cybersecurity, education, public health, and economic development, we are already starting to see Steve Schwarzman's vision come to life in tangible and inspiring ways.



SCHWARZMAN
SCHOLARS

清华大学苏世民书院

Dr. Hilary Matfess

Assistant Professor
Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs
University of Denver



The Interdisciplinary Edge in a Shifting Field

Why is now the right time to pursue an international affairs degree?

I try to remind myself, amidst these bleak headlines, amidst the outbreak of war, amidst grievous human rights violations, that nothing in the international system is permanent. These are tough times for those of us with a passion for promoting peace and stability. And as counterintuitive as it might feel, this is exactly the right time for anyone with an interest in world politics to develop the skills and training they need to do the jobs that will push us toward a better world. It's up to all of us to make sure we're prepared to put in place the policies, changes, and relationships that will lead us somewhere better.

International affairs work puts people in rooms with those they may deeply disagree with. How does Korbel prepare students to engage across ideological and cultural divides?

One of my favorite parts of the Korbel community is how committed people are to experiential learning. We have practicums in the classroom, as well as student-led initiatives like the Korbel Wargaming Club that let students step into the roles of policymakers and engage in meaningful, realistic discussions across divides. Our classrooms are dedicated to respectful, empirically grounded conversations on the most important questions of the day. We have students from across the country and around the world who bring their perspectives and lived experiences to these conversations. It's a lively, engaging academic community, but one always grounded in respect.

Career paths in international affairs are wider and less linear than they used to be. How is Korbel preparing students for that range?

This year, I noticed a surge in job postings mentioning open-source intelligence, so I arranged a workshop with the Center for Information Resilience to give our students that skill to put on their resumes as they navigate a space where government opportunities might be fewer and farther between. I'm especially proud that the workshop provided additional internships for a handful of our students to gain real-world experience investigating Russian war crimes in Ukraine. It wasn't just about having these skills on paper. It was about putting those skills into practice on a subject a lot of us care very deeply about.

Korbel is interdisciplinary, and faculty have a wide range of academic experiences, so students benefit from the range of perspectives and analytical toolboxes our professors bring. The entire experience is designed to help students develop substantive expertise on an issue they care about, as well as the skills they need to thrive in a rapidly changing job market. You can earn a master's in international security, global economic affairs, or international human rights, and add certificates in humanitarian assistance, homeland security, or strategic intelligence. Additionally, we're in constant communication about what we're hearing from students, potential employers, and alumni about what students need to learn to succeed.



Josef Korbel School of
Global and Public Affairs
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER



Professor Henry Schwalbenberg

Director

The Graduate Program in International
Political Economy and Development
Fordham University

Sustaining Global Competence amidst a Changing International Landscape

What sets Fordham Master's Program in International Political Economy and Development (Fordham IPED) apart from other international affairs programs?

Given our strengths in international economic relations, we are in a very good position to address today's heightened interest in geoeconomics. Since our founding in 1979 through a generous grant from the U.S. Department of Education, we have always been involved in understanding the politics of global economic relations focusing on predatory trade practices, economic sanctions, and trade wars.

Besides contemporary concerns with geoeconomics, the problem of extreme world poverty, exacerbated by changing climates and armed conflicts, has always been of particular concern. And given our strong ties with Catholic and other development organizations, we find ourselves in a good place as the United States and the world community restructures its international aid infrastructure.

How does Fordham IPED prepare its students in anticipating changes in the international affairs landscape?

Besides our focus on geoeconomics and world poverty, we have always placed a premium on analytical and quantitative analysis. Today, we find ourselves at the forefront of incorporating assisted intelligence in doing data analysis, project assessment, and computer programming.

Our location in New York City and our stress on professional experience outside of the classroom keeps our curriculum up to date. Our location affords us with a wealth of internship opportunities, from the United Nations to Wall Street. And through our Summer Intern Fellowship Program endowed by our alumni, we can fund field placements for most of our students to gain practical experience with international businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations, not only here in

New York but around the world. We also offer special study tours to South Africa, focusing on finance and development, and to the Philippines, focusing on development and project assessment.

Our specializations are designed to meet the demands of contemporary labor markets. About 35% of our alumni are in the private sector, usually employed as financial analysts on Wall Street after specializing in international banking and finance. Another 32% of our alumni have found employment in the public sector, usually as economists after specializing in either international economics or development economics. And about 24% of our alumni work in the nonprofit sector, usually with international relief and development organizations after specializing in international development and project assessment or with environmental organizations after specializing in global environmental economics.

What unique advantages are available for students in the Fordham IPED Program?

Our curriculum and our location in New York City are ideal for anyone who wishes to be at the center of the world economy.

We only admit a small select group of fifteen to twenty students each year. You will have close interactions with our supportive and distinguished faculty of experts, as well as with your fellow students. Your classmates, drawn from around the world, come from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. And since most of our students are exceptional, most receive full tuition scholarships.



FORDHAM | IPED
THE GRADUATE PROGRAM IN
INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK CITY

Carlos Díaz-Rosillo

Founding Director
Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom
Florida International University



Leadership at the Intersection of Business and Government

What inspired the creation of the master of science in business and government leadership?

This innovative degree program was created to provide students with theoretical and practical skills—informed by principles of economic freedom and individual freedom—to expertly navigate complex organizational challenges in both the public and private sectors.

Why is it increasingly important for today's leaders to understand both business and government?

Every thriving business and government entity depends on effective leadership—leaders who understand both strategic management and public policy. As regulatory, economic, and political systems become more intertwined, professionals who can move fluidly between these domains are best positioned for a wider range of leadership roles.

What unique advantages does this program offer?

The degree is explicitly interdisciplinary, blending coursework across the Adam Smith Center and other parts of Florida International University. It is also highly pragmatic, with coursework taught by a combination of renowned faculty and distinguished practitioners, including former senior government officials who have served at the highest levels of government. Students explore the science and art of leadership through graduate-level case studies and academic exercises, rather than a single-discipline curriculum.

What skills and competencies will students develop throughout the program?

The program provides rigorous training relevant to both business and government sectors and equips students to make data-driven decisions in various industries. It also encourages collaborative engagement with local, state, national, and international communities, while specifically exploring how leaders navigate ethical, legal, political, and public relations challenges.

How does the Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom shape the educational experience?

The Center anchors the degree academically and philosophically, requiring eighteen of the program's thirty total credits to be taken at the Adam Smith Center itself. The Center's unique mission—centered on economic liberty, free markets, entrepreneurship, and the institutional foundations of prosperity—enlivens the coursework. The Center also connects students to exceptional senior leadership fellows, visiting fellows, and mentorship opportunities, as well as many activities and programs provided by the Center each year.

Who is the ideal candidate for this degree?

The program was designed for seasoned leaders and talented aspiring leaders seeking to examine the challenges of leadership in free-market societies.

How does the program prepare graduates to lead in today's increasingly complex global environment?

Students examine real-world case studies—guided by expert instructors—covering a wide range of issues and challenges facing today's business and public sector leaders. Combined with a required independent project and practical data analysis training, graduates are prepared to respond effectively to real-world challenges in management, public policy, and organizational strategy.

What impact do you hope graduates will have after completing the program?

The Adam Smith Center positions graduates to step into leadership roles in both the business and government sectors. Graduates will provide rigorous and informed decision-making—grounded in principles of economic and individual freedom—to organizations in our state and nation, as well as around the globe.



Adam Smith Center
for Economic Freedom

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY



David M. Van Slyke

Dean and Louis A. Bantle Chair in Business-Government Policy
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
Syracuse University

AI, Alliances and Diplomacy: Rethinking What It Means to Lead on the World Stage

How is Maxwell preparing the next generation of international affairs leaders for an AI-driven world?

Syracuse University's rollout of 30,000 Claude AI licenses put these tools directly in every student's hands. That access is backed by research: Maxwell political scientist Baobao Zhang won a National Science Foundation CAREER Award to study how generative AI is reshaping work and institutions. The goal isn't just fluency; we push students to interrogate AI, deploy it, and govern its impact on democratic institutions and global power.

As longstanding international alliances and institutions come under strain, how does Maxwell prepare students to navigate instability and restore trust?

Maxwell's 200-plus faculty study democratic backsliding, cybersecurity threats, and shifting terms of trade worldwide, with particular depth on China, Russia, South Asia, the European Union, and NATO. They're routinely cited by major media outlets for their expertise—Bloomberg recently featured Daniel McDowell's work on currency competition, for instance. The faculty bring this expertise to the classroom and to our fifteen research centers and institutes where they collaborate with students. Our Moynihan Institute hosts the Carnegie-Maxwell Policy Planning Lab, where Maxwell students take part in live policy planning exercises alongside rising, midcareer leaders.

Maxwell has spent decades building relationships around the world and in the nation's capital. How do those connections translate into opportunities for students?

Maxwell's learning model runs on cases, applied policy projects, and client capstones, and our relationships supply the clients. Students can spend a semester at our

Washington, D.C., campus, taking courses from seasoned practitioners and interning across government, business, nonprofits, and multilateral organizations. They can participate in the Atlantis Program, which offers a dual degree with the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, or gain an up-close view of international diplomacy while interning at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, France. Still more opportunities come from decades of exchange relationships worldwide, including partnerships in Korea, Kazakhstan, and Saudi Arabia. That network only grows after graduation: 43,000 alumni across 160 countries work at every level of government and across the private and nonprofit sectors, and they are known for opening doors for one another.

International relations used to mean a predictable set of career paths. What does that career landscape look like now?

Governments still need career diplomats and country experts, and Maxwell still produces them. But our graduates increasingly work at the seams: public-private partnerships, humanitarian response, climate finance, global health security, and technology policy at firms, multilaterals, and NGOs alike. We train them to read a contract as fluently as a treaty, since that's the skill that travels, whether they land at the State Department, the World Bank, or a climate-tech startup.

S Syracuse University
Maxwell School of
Citizenship & Public Affairs

Christopher Clary, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Director
Master of International Affairs Program
Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy
University at Albany (SUNY)



Preparing Students to Lead and Excel in an Evolving World of International Affairs

How is Rockefeller's MIA program preparing students for the numerous challenges of today's geopolitical environment?

Before I joined the faculty at Rockefeller College, I worked for several years as a national security analyst in the Pentagon. I think constantly about the skills and knowledge that would have helped me when I was starting in government. My colleagues teaching other core courses also draw on their knowledge from years working for the United Nations or global aid organizations to inform their class material.

Our program is designed to put these core faculty into seminars with students. Unlike other programs, MIA students at Rockefeller are not crammed into 200-person lectures but instead are in small classes where they develop a personal relationship with their professors and their peers. Courses emphasize durable skills that will enable students to do careful data analysis and persuasive policy writing in a changing world.

Why is this a pivotal moment for students pursuing careers in international affairs?

Our faculty at Rockefeller consult regularly with governments and businesses that are trying to navigate this era of international political change. We have a war in Europe that is killing more than ten thousand people a month. Overlapping wars in the Middle East have convulsed the global economy. Trade and tariffs are not just abstract problems but are causing multinational firms and small businesses to hire risk analysts to help them navigate new rules and rates.

The demand is there, but many talented people are priced out of international affairs fields because traditional master's programs require students to go deep into debt to afford them. We built the program here so that students could reskill for this new era at a fraction of the cost of our competitors.

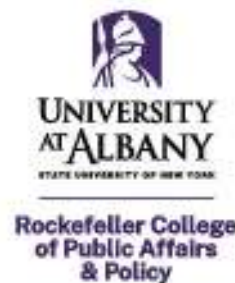
How is the program incorporating AI?

For us, AI is both a subject and a tool. As a subject, many of our faculty study how AI interacts with global politics. I have an ongoing project examining how artificial intelligence is reshaping nuclear weapons dangers. Other faculty colleagues study how to prevent advanced technologies from spreading to dangerous adversaries or how governments are using drones, facial recognition, and AI to transform border management.

As a tool, we built data literacy and quantitative analysis into the core curriculum from the start of the program. Students must use these tools to interrogate data, the models built on it, and understand when the naïve use of the tools might be leading them astray.

What makes Rockefeller's MIA program stand out?

We build career services and planning into the program from day one and work actively with the students so that they leave our program with internships and professional experiences. We emphasize an affordable degree grounded in how government actually works. The program is shaped by our location, a short walk from the New York State Capitol, and by our home in a nationally ranked public affairs college. We want students to understand this turbulent world and develop careers helping others navigate it.





Katherine A. Lebow

Professor and Chair of History, Diplomatiche Akademie Wien
Vienna School of International Studies

Dr. Lebow is currently an Associate Professor of Modern History at Christ Church, University of Oxford. She will assume her new position at Diplomatiche Akademie Wien in September 2026.

Interdisciplinary Thinking for an Interconnected World

Graduate programs at the Diplomatiche Akademie Wien – Vienna School of International Studies (DA) prepare students to excel in a wide range of international careers. Located in the heart of Vienna, the DA is close to international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, diplomatic missions, and cultural institutions. With a global alumni network spanning more than 130 countries and active alumni chapters around the world, the DA combines academic excellence with practical experience in preparing the next generation of international leaders.

International affairs are increasingly shaped by geopolitical rivalry, technological disruption, and growing uncertainty. Why is an education in international affairs more relevant than ever before?

When mass education was introduced in the 19th century, it was very much about forging national or imperial citizenship. To a great extent, general education today still bears this imprint; global perspectives are often missing in school curricula, and even tertiary education frequently reflects a national bias. That's why an education in international affairs like the DA's is so essential. It starts from the premise that we're globally connected, and that only a pooling of national and trans-national perspectives can help us understand the world we live in today.

Today's policymakers must work across political, cultural, and ideological divides. How does the DA encourage students to engage constructively with different perspectives while maintaining academic rigor?

The DA's interdisciplinary curriculum, by its very nature, promotes intellectual flexibility and rigor. Different disciplines—like different cultures or individuals—use different yardsticks for measuring the world. Approaching a problem from multiple disciplinary perspectives, whether cultural, economic, historical, legal, or political, is a little like sitting

at the negotiating table with representatives of competing states, each with their own assumptions and agendas. Understanding that everyone's behavior and beliefs have their own internal logic, even if different from ours, is the starting point for effective communication and action.

As AI increasingly transforms education and professional life, which human skills will become even more important for future leaders in international affairs?

Our most creative thinking occurs when we're able to sit with uncertainty and unknowing. This is something that AI discourages by providing instant answers to almost everything. Yet future leaders will often confront problems for which there are no easy answers. In those moments, it is ethical and emotional intelligence, learned through our relationships and communities, that are often most crucial. As a relatively small yet cosmopolitan institution with a proud tradition of Viennese sociability dating to 1754, the DA boasts many opportunities for friendship and learning outside the classroom, whether through its many active student societies, annual study trips, or student-faculty social events. Moreover, through the da.link career services, students have the chance to develop practical competencies in areas such as public speaking, negotiation, leadership, and intercultural communication. Ultimately, a combination of digital literacy, interdisciplinary knowledge, transferable professional skills, and interpersonal learning prepares DA graduates for careers in both the public and private sectors.



**diplomatiche
akademie wien**
Vienna School of International Studies
École des Hautes Études Internationales de Vienne

Dr. Deborah Wituski

Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan
Distinguished Professor of Practice
School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)
Johns Hopkins University



An International Affairs Education without Borders: Preparing Leaders for an Uncertain Future

What is the enduring value of a SAIS education?

A SAIS education is one without borders: SAIS Europe in Italy, the Hopkins-Nanjing Center in China, and the Hopkins Bloomberg Center in Washington, D.C., enable SAIS to deliver a truly global education across three campuses. Students are immersed in an academically rigorous and policy-relevant curriculum where they engage with scholars and practitioners who contribute to the public debate and shape international policy. Our global presence enables students to develop a professional network that transcends disciplines and locations, creating opportunities wherever their careers lead.

From your perspective, having served in leadership positions in the U.S. Intelligence Community, including your role as chief of staff to the director of the Central Intelligence Agency to your most recent position at Google and Alphabet as vice president for global engagement, what skills and experiences are critical to success in an international affairs career?

Critical thinking and the ability to explain a complex analytic argument in written and verbal forms are key to success in an international affairs career, whether in government or the private sector. The ability to articulate judgments in clear, concise language and marshal data to support a position is a goal we all should aspire to develop in our students. This is a skill set I help students sharpen in my course, Intelligence Analysis: Informing Policy and Business Decisions, and one that the SAIS curriculum prioritizes across degrees. Students also develop fluency in emerging technologies and learn to think analytically across sectors—connecting markets, politics, technology, and regional expertise. Experiential learning opportunities allow students to grapple with real-world issues, developing skills essential for career success in any field.

Risk and ambiguity are topics you've spent your career thinking about. As students consider a graduate education in international affairs, how does a SAIS education prepare them for an uncertain future?

Today, the proliferation of risk actors in the global landscape—be it states, terrorist organizations, cartels, cybercriminals, or individuals who manipulate technology for malicious intent—is expanding uncertainty. The School of Advanced International Studies provides students with course offerings, experiential learning opportunities, and access to a global faculty of scholars and practitioners to help them identify—and close—their knowledge gaps. Students are taught how to question their assumptions, understand their own risk tolerance, and translate this knowledge into actionable insights for decision-makers—from the situation room to the boardroom.

You have met members of the SAIS alumni community during employer visits, experiential learning, and international travel. What makes it such a valuable part of the SAIS education?

The level of engagement and its global reach differentiate the SAIS alumni community. They are active in mentoring, networking, and fostering experiential opportunities for students through practicums and internships. This past spring, SAIS alumni participated in our 2026 International Staff Ride on the Liberation of Italy, engaging with students and contributing to our experiential analysis of the conflict. Ultimately, this global alumni community of more than 25,000 people in over 155 countries is integral to the enduring power of a SAIS education, supporting our students in their studies and mentoring them throughout their careers.





Nancy Staudt

Vice President, RAND
Frank and Marcia Carlucci Dean
RAND School of Public Policy

Inside the RAND School of Public Policy: Preparing the Next Generation of Policy Leaders

What makes the RAND School of Public Policy unique?

We believe that the best way to prepare future policy leaders is to educate them alongside the people solving the world's most consequential policy challenges.

The RAND School is embedded in one of the world's leading research organizations—RAND. That means our students are engaged in real policy work from day one. Our professors are world-class researchers actively working on policy problems. Every day, they help governments and organizations make informed decisions using rigorous analysis. And they bring that work directly into the classroom.

Our students learn by doing. They experience how analysis shapes real decisions, and they develop the analytical skills, judgment, and practical experience that prepare them for successful careers.

The RAND School offers flexible one-year master's degree programs in national security policy, policy analysis, and technology policy, alongside full-time master's and Ph.D. programs in policy analysis. Why these programs?

Our focus on these areas reflects today's major policy challenges, where the world needs more trained analysts and skilled consumers of policy research. However, these challenges don't fit neatly into disciplinary boundaries. Whether our graduates work in government, industry, nonprofits, or international organizations, they need to evaluate evidence, understand technology, anticipate consequences, and communicate sound policy recommendations.

Our programs, which are offered at both our Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., campuses, develop those capabilities through rigorous analytical training, applied policy experience, and close mentorship from RAND researchers.

Students also have the flexibility to focus on the issues that matter most to them. Every master's student completes a capstone focused on a real policy problem. Students

in our research-focused master of philosophy and Ph.D. programs work on active RAND research projects—and are paid to do so.

Can you give us a peek inside the classroom?

Applied learning is at the heart of everything we do. From the beginning of their studies, students work with RAND researchers on real policy questions: analyzing data, testing ideas, and contributing to projects that matter.

Sometimes that means opportunities you might not find in a traditional graduate program. I recently spoke with a student calling from a drone competition hosted by the U.S. Air Force—an experience he said he never would have had anywhere else, and one that offered firsthand insight into emerging technologies and the policy questions they raise.

At the RAND School, we don't simulate policy work. We immerse students in it.

What kind of student thrives at the RAND School?

Our students are intellectually curious, committed to public service, and eager to tackle difficult problems. They recognize that today's challenges require careful analysis, collaboration, and the ability to engage thoughtfully with different perspectives.

What they value most is the opportunity to contribute to meaningful policy work from the beginning of their education. That combination of intellectual rigor, practical experience, and purpose is exactly what the next generation of leaders needs.



Abigail Linnington

Professor of the Practice of International Security
The Fletcher School at Tufts University



Why an Interdisciplinary International Affairs Education is Important

What does interdisciplinary mean in the context of a Fletcher graduate education?

Strategic problems, international problems, rarely follow nation-state boundaries and rarely can be delineated or separated into political, economic, or security issues. The purpose of an interdisciplinary education at Fletcher is to examine complex problems through multiple lenses, drawing on expertise across disciplines rather than traditional academic departments. Our students focus on one or two areas of study, such as international security, environmental sustainability, or technology policy. Students also fulfill requirements in international economics, international law, diplomacy, history, and politics to help them become well-rounded professionals proficient in the language and analysis of many disciplines. The depth and breadth requirements allow students to approach problems from different angles and to challenge their own assumptions and conventional wisdom.

When interviewing for jobs after graduation, they become stronger candidates by demonstrating their ability to analyze issues through multiple lenses and bring that interdisciplinary perspective to an organization.

What are the hard skills that come out of this approach?

Critical analysis, research, and writing are essential aspects of learning across our degrees, embedded within an interdisciplinary education. The magic happens when students learn how to craft analyses and solutions that bridge the gaps between fields, sectors, and disciplines, and, ultimately, in how they apply this knowledge to create new, practical solutions.

During their time at Fletcher, students develop expertise and learn how to apply it through their courses and experiential learning. Internships, simulations, competitions, and working with real-world clients help focus academic learning and show students how to address and solve the most pressing issues in international affairs today.

Is this interdisciplinary approach unique to Fletcher?

The way Fletcher blends its interdisciplinary approach with our international student body and multisectoral perspectives is what truly sets us apart.

Fletcher is one of the few APSIA schools in the United States where roughly half the student body is international, representing more than seventy-five countries. That diversity creates high expectations for a truly global curriculum, and we hold ourselves to that standard. We examine not only how the U.S. government works, but also how institutions such as NATO, the African Union, and the United Nations address regional and global challenges. Professors and students study local and regional politics, the behavior of national governments, and the dynamics of global institutions and networks because the issues we're tackling aren't narrow one-nation issues.

When our students graduate, they find jobs in roughly equal proportion in the private, public, and civil society sectors. Many alumni also switch or work across sectors. This gives Fletcher a strong and varied alumni base with whom students can engage and network. The combination of these three facets of our school—interdisciplinary, international, and multisectoral—helps prepare students and alumni for meaningful careers throughout their lives.

Tufts
UNIVERSITY

FLETCHER



Kazushige Kobayashi, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Graduate School of International Relations (GSIR)
Ritsumeikan University
Kyoto, Japan

Shaping the Human Future of International Relations Learning at GSIR in the Era of AI

What do you think is the purpose of graduate education in the AI age?

I feel that learning is a magic that cannot be artificially automated. We have entered an era in which the ubiquity of AI prompts us to question the very meaning of university learning. Almost every academic task now appears replaceable — writing and grading papers, creating and answering exams, even producing and reviewing journal articles. But I believe learning remains an indispensably human process. It is not the mechanical accumulation of knowledge but the creation of human connections that enable us to grow together as intellectual beings. AI can simulate information, but it cannot touch the kind of learning that happens when people think together — the small conversations, the shared curiosity, and the spark of discovery that grows only when human minds meet. I'm proud to be a part of GSIR because it is a place where such a human magic of learning can happen.

What is unique about studying International Relations at GSIR?

I believe the future of International Relations education lies not in scaling up, but in scaling down. GSIR is a frontier of this kind of ultra personalized graduate education. In 2025, our average class size for the English-taught program was just 7.41 students, with lecture based courses at 10.5 and master's thesis seminars at 4.0. This scale is intentional; it reflects GSIR's commitment to human centered learning in the AI era. When I arrived at Ritsumeikan in 2022, I was genuinely surprised to find out that GSIR offers graduate courses even when there is only a single student enrolled. This reflects GSIR's belief that the role of a graduate school is to cultivate the unique intellectual aspirations of each learner, even if that person is the only one in the classroom.

A key feature of GSIR is the Advanced Seminar where small groups of students (usually 4–5) meet every week for two years to engage in ongoing conversations about their graduate research. For us, a master's thesis is not just an atomized academic project, but a way of creating a community of learners drawn to tackle common intellectual challenges.

How far can personalized education take us, and where are its limits? What does the GSIR experience tell us?

I must admit that I was skeptical at first when GSIR asked me to teach a small-scale course with only three students. I thought: "What meaningful learning could happen with just three people!?" I am glad I was wrong. Small groups make trust easier. We develop a kind of "we feeling." Our conversations become deeper. I also feel my own growth as an instructor through our dialogue within and beyond the classroom. This is such a fulfilling feeling.

Of course, small classes have limitations. Larger groups can bring in more perspectives. But this is not an either or choice. I believe the future of learning in the age of AI can be effectively pursued by creatively combining conventional graduate teaching with personalized learning approaches. GSIR is proud to be a frontrunner in this intellectual experiment, and we invite you to join us in shaping the human future of International Relations learning.

R RITSUMEIKAN UNIVERSITY | **GRADUATE SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Enrico Letta

Dean
IE School of Politics, Economics, & Global Affairs
IE University



From Crisis to Leadership: Shaping the Policymakers of Tomorrow

The world is becoming more fragmented, technologically disruptive and geopolitically complex. Based on your experience as prime minister, European policymaker, academic leader, and dean, what kind of policy leaders do we need for the next decade, and what skills are often missing today?

First, we need leaders who are comfortable with uncertainty in a multipolar, fast-moving environment. Second, they must pursue long-term objectives in environments dominated by short-term political pressure. Third, they should understand how decisions look from perspectives radically different from their own. In a fragmented world, it is a hard strategic asset.

Europe is facing simultaneous challenges, from economic competitiveness and defense to energy transition and digital sovereignty. How should future public leaders prepare to navigate this environment?

Future leaders must accept that these challenges are not separate agendas but one. They must be trained to think in systems, not in policy silos, with exposure to multiple disciplines, geographies, and stakeholder perspectives, alongside direct engagement with the institutions where these decisions are made. Education that remains purely theoretical will produce analysts, not leaders.

What makes institutions like IE University well positioned to become hubs for the next generation of global policy talent?

Institutions positioned to lead in this space combine rigorous academic training with direct exposure to real decision-making, genuine interdisciplinarity, and strong international networks connecting policymakers, business leaders, and researchers.

IE School of Politics, Economics and Global Affairs was built with these principles in mind. Our Public Leadership Initiative brings this together, spanning the Master in Public Policy and Bachelor in Political Science, visits of high-level leaders, mentoring opportunities, research initiatives, and awards.

We have also just inaugurated the IE Competitiveness Hub Brussels, dedicated to advancing Europe's competitiveness through applied policy ideas, research, and action-oriented dialogue.

Public policy today increasingly happens at the intersection of government, business, and technology. How should universities adapt to prepare students for this reality?

Universities must structurally dismantle the wall between academic knowledge and professional reality. That means designing curricula around real problems, not just disciplines. It means bringing practitioners into the classroom. This is precisely what our School aims to do. We collaborate with partners to bring real-world experiences into the classroom and interconnect topics in programs such as the Master in Technology and Global Affairs and the Master in Public Policy's specializations in AI and Digital Transformation, EU Affairs, and Environment, Energy and Sustainability.

We are also implementing AI tools such as avatars and role-plays to strengthen students' critical thinking, public speaking, policy writing, and negotiation skills.

What advice would you give to young professionals who want to create meaningful impact through public policy and global affairs?

First, invest in strong analytical foundations. Second, seek discomfort deliberately by working across countries, sectors, and political traditions. Finally, think in decades. The defining challenges of our time, from AI governance to democratic resilience, will not be resolved in a single electoral cycle.





Mitchell P. Smith, Ph.D.

Director and Professor
School of International Affairs
Penn State University

Systemic Revisioning Demands International Affairs Education

How is SIA adapting international affairs education to a rapidly changing global system?

The dramatic changes occurring in the international system create a fertile learning opportunity. We are leveraging change to generate substantive conversations about the future. What are the consequences of a more fragmented global system? Is multilateral cooperation possible? Where might leadership come from? Are institutions of global governance relevant? Can redesign of institutions meet emerging needs? How can governments navigate a volatile international environment?

At the same time, our career services office identifies new avenues for our students to have an impact through internship and employment opportunities in public and private sectors.

How is this adaptation reflected in SIA's curriculum?

We are innovating within existing degree programs and devising new programs.

For our flagship master of international affairs, we have reassessed how we teach the core skills needed for emerging international affairs professionals, including synthesis and analysis of varied data sources, effective oral and written communication, and teamwork. More frequent engagement in simulation exercises, for example, enables students to learn by doing.

Our new, STEM-designated master of science in global economic and business relations (GEBR), welcoming students in fall 2026, complements understanding of international system actors and structures with extensive training in quantitative methods. With professional career paths more prone to economic and political shocks, our GEBR students will be equipped to navigate a world defined by geoeconomic competition, fragmented supply chains, and novel macroeconomic pressures.

How does the curriculum approach training in the role and use of AI?

We pursue a deliberate approach. Students in our quantitative methods courses learn how to use generative AI for statistical programming. Cyber threats, drone

technology, and rapidly developing AI have enormous implications for democracy, the incidence and nature of peace and conflict, and transmission of influence across borders. Our focus is on developing a deep appreciation for these interactions, as reflected in a new course, Geopolitics of Technology.

How does the SIA curriculum expose students to a wide range of perspectives to foster constructive dialogue?

First, our faculty are from economics, political science, sociology, and comparative literature, and do work that is theoretical, applied, quantitative, and qualitative. They have varying perspectives on the most critical sources of global change.

Second, learning at SIA emphasizes thoughtful, open-ended questions, exploring alternatives, and using sophisticated analytical techniques to arrive at policy conclusions.

Third, our students come from a variety of undergraduate majors and from all over the world. They bring different life experiences to their interactions. This is most evident in our international affairs discussion. Students and faculty gather three times each semester to discuss current issues in a forum designed to encourage students to listen to and learn from one another.

What does SIA's adaptation to change suggest about the future of international affairs education?

The questions I've identified point decisively toward one conclusion: the demand for expertise in analyzing global interactions, developing policy solutions, and redesigning the architecture for global governance will only intensify with future revisioning of the international system.



PennState
School of
International Affairs

Chantal de Jonge Oudraat

John O. Rankin Professor of Practice of International Affairs
Program Director of the Masters of Arts in International Affairs
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University



Studying International Affairs in a Changing World

Why study international affairs now?

We live in dynamic and exciting times, where new economic, social, and political realities are shifting power relations within and amongst states. If you want to help shape the world of tomorrow; if you want to do something about war and violence or global challenges, such as climate change, migration, human rights, or socioeconomic inequalities, including gender inequalities—you must start by understanding the forces that drive, connect, and shape these problems.

This is what we are trying to do at the Elliott School—equipping a new generation of experts with deep knowledge, sophisticated perspectives, and sharp insights into the many issues on the international agenda.

What are some of the careers you know students have gone on to with an MA in international affairs?

A master's in international affairs prepares students to be competitive for many different jobs in the national governmental sector, including foreign service, defense, homeland security, and intelligence services, as well as local level administrations increasingly active in the international arena; global and regional organizations, such as the United Nations, World Bank, the Organization of American States, ASEAN, the African Union, and NATO; the nongovernmental sector, such as humanitarian and advocacy NGOs, philanthropic organizations, the cultural and sports sector, and the for-profit private sector, particularly corporations with international reach.

In a globalized and rapidly changing world, international and national issues are increasingly interconnected. This means that an MA in international affairs opens up many different nontraditional international affairs career opportunities.

How flexible is the degree in international affairs? Can I concentrate on a specific topic or a region?

The Elliott School offers one of our most flexible MA degrees. It has a core curriculum in international politics, history, and economics, which provides students with a strong multidisciplinary foundation. In addition, students can choose amongst fourteen thematic and regional concentrations or a mixture of both. More generally, the program offers a wide array of specialized courses taught by a diverse and world-class faculty. As the world is changing, so are our course options. They are continuously reviewed and adapted.

How do you see AI changing the way master's students study and learn at the Elliott School?

We are still at the beginning of our understanding of how AI will change the world, including international affairs and education. It is one of the priorities at George Washington University to get a better grip on the uses, opportunities, and risks of AI.

At the Elliott School, we are adding courses that will equip students to better use and understand the impacts of these new technologies, including courses that examine the politics and ethics of the uses of AI. What remains important is for students to develop the analytical and critical thinking skills that allow them to assess the policy implications of these new technologies and to understand how, and under which conditions, these technologies will make the world a better place. This remains the overriding concern of both our faculty and our students.

Elliott School of International Affairs

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



Giselle Datz

Chair and Associate Professor of Government
and International Affairs
School of Public and International Affairs
Virginia Tech

Complex Challenges Demand Cross-Disciplinary Thinking and Original Ideas

What skills and perspectives are essential for global affairs professionals today, and how does your curriculum cultivate them?

Global affairs professionals face a different landscape today than they did a decade ago. Some of today's challenges were anticipated; many were not. Nearly all are global in scope: pandemics, cyber threats, disinformation, the transformative impact of artificial intelligence, and the far-reaching consequences of climate change—from forced displacement to the evolving geopolitics of the Arctic.

At SPIA, cross-disciplinarity has always been at the heart of our educational mission. It has defined the government and international affairs program since its inception. Today, that commitment is more relevant than ever. The most pressing policy challenges cannot be understood through the lens of a single discipline. Evidence-based analyses that build on multiple perspectives are best positioned to provide answers to today's most pressing policy questions.

Our goal is to prepare students not for a single profession but for a wide range of leadership roles across government, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society. We recognize that today's professionals are likely to pursue multiple career avenues over the course of their working lives. Accordingly, we equip our students with rigorous analytical tools, strong empirical foundations, and the ability to integrate knowledge across disciplines—preparing them to navigate rapidly evolving geopolitical challenges and adapt to changing professional environments.

What differentiates SPIA from its competitors in graduate education?

Because cross-disciplinarity has been central to our program since its inception, we prepare students to address complex policy challenges through connected political, geographic, economic, technological, historical, and social perspectives. Across the curriculum, students develop the analytical skills to integrate insights across fields and apply them to real-world problems.

Our classrooms bring together traditional graduate students and experienced practitioners seeking to deepen their academic expertise. This diverse learning community enriches discussion through the exchange of theoretical perspectives and professional insights, creating an environment where rigorous analysis and practical policymaking inform one another. The integration of disciplines, ideas, and experiences is a defining feature of the SPIA learning environment.

From the first day of the program through to graduation, students benefit from individualized mentorship that recognizes their unique circumstances and academic goals. This commitment to personalized support and student success is a defining part of the SPIA difference.

How do SPIA programs support the needs of full-time professionals seeking to advance their careers while balancing work and other commitments?

As a public school based both in Blacksburg and in the Washington, D.C. metro area, SPIA is dedicated to making graduate education accessible to professionals who are advancing their careers. Recognizing that many of our students balance full-time careers with graduate study, our government and international affairs courses are designed for flexibility, with classes beginning no earlier than 4 p.m. We offer both online and face-to-face courses in intentionally small classrooms, allowing instructors to know and engage with each student personally.

Our students' success is the ultimate reflection of our mission, and their leadership is our greatest measure of impact.



LIBERAL ARTS AND HUMAN SCIENCES
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
VIRGINIA TECH

PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Dr. Fritz Bartel

Associate Professor, Department of International Affairs
The Bush School of Government and Public Service
Texas A&M University



Gaining Perspective on Crisis: History's Toolkit for Policymakers

Students look at today's headlines—fracturing alliances, changing job markets, doubts about democracy itself—and wonder whether a career in international affairs is still a sound bet. History proves it is.

American students face a barrage of competing and distressing news stories each day. Our country appears to be broken and in dire straits. But this isn't the first time. As a historian, I ask students to look back at the 1970s. Serious people concluded in that decade that Western democracy was in terminal crisis. Stagflation, oil shocks, Vietnam, Watergate: the prevailing diagnosis was that democratic governments could no longer deliver on their promises to their own people. Fifteen years later, the Cold War was over, and it was the West's adversaries who had collapsed.

My own research traces how that turnaround happened, and it was neither inevitable nor painless. What distinguished Western democracies was not that they avoided crisis but rather that they proved flexible enough to adapt to it, while their rivals could not. The lesson for students is one of perspective: a moment of crisis is very often the beginning of adaptation, not the end of the story. Nothing provides that perspective like the study of history.

How do you build that insightful perspective at the Bush School?

In my graduate classes on the history of American foreign policy and grand strategy, we spend less time on what happened and more on why it happened. Students grapple every week with competing interpretations of the same events, and they learn that constructive disagreement is itself a professional skill. They also get to see the policy-making process through a historian's eyes.

The George H.W. Bush Presidential Library sits right next door to our building, and my students work in its

archives, reconstructing how that administration reached a decision—the stakeholders, the arguments, the compromises. They quickly discover that policymakers always act on partial information and that historians always work with partial records. Learning to reason carefully and honestly under those conditions is a valuable skill set, and it is precisely what policymaking demands.

An international affairs education has an enduring power. In an age of AI and rapid change, what exactly endures?

Sound judgment has to be a top contender. The tools of analysis will keep changing, and our students should master the newest of them. We incorporate AI in targeted ways in the classroom for exactly that reason. But the ability to weigh incomplete evidence, to see the world through the eyes of allies and adversaries alike, and to keep a sense of proportion in moments of crisis and uncertainty—those capabilities will remain essential. These traits serve our graduates equally well in government, in international organizations, and in the private sector. At the Bush School, where public service is our founding mission, that is what we prepare the next generation of leaders to do: to navigate the future's uncertainties with the sound judgement that historical awareness brings.



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
The Bush School
of Government & Public Service



Joel S. Hellman

Dean
School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

Looking to New Frontiers, Bolstered by History

How does SFS prepare students for a career in international affairs into the future?

We are living through the most serious challenge to the post-1945 order in generations. New technologies are transforming the landscape within which institutions and policies are being reimagined. This calls for a new way of thinking about international affairs that builds on the School of Foreign Service's interdisciplinary foundation in history, economics, and government and continues to lead into new areas like science and technology, the role of the private sector, and the expansion of global affairs into space.

The advent of AI makes our foundation more valuable, not less. Anyone can generate a plausible-sounding policy memo now—in seconds. What cannot be automated is the judgment to ask the right questions, the imagination to think boldly about new solutions, and the methods to generate scenarios when the evidence bolstering them is shifting so rapidly. These desperately needed skills are what SFS teaches.

How is SFS approaching new foreign policy and security challenges and opportunities in science and technology, including AI?

Science and technology are no longer adjacent to foreign policy—they *are* foreign policy.

SFS meets this new reality in multiple ways. Our Center for Security and Emerging Technology is one of Washington's largest and most influential research organizations on AI and national security, providing our students research assistantships, access to data science tools, and experience turning technical questions into policy-relevant analysis. Our new space studies graduate certificate prepares students for a domain now defined as much by diplomacy as by engineering. Our degree in environment and international affairs combines core competency in environmental science with a deep understanding of how to generate policy change.

Within our flagship master of science in foreign service degree, the STEM-designated science, technology and international affairs concentration prepares students to lead on cybersecurity, AI, arms control, and space policy, ensuring that the people negotiating tomorrow's technology agreements can both understand the technical aspects of their brief and innovate to develop more informed policies and institutions.

As many countries turn inward, with nationalism and isolationism on the rise, how does SFS keep its programs globally focused and outward-facing?

Georgetown SFS Asia Pacific, our branch location in Jakarta, made us the first U.S. university in Indonesia and places students and faculty inside one of the world's fastest growing regions, working on global challenges by learning from those in the field confronting them. Our master's degree in migration and refugees trains the next generation of experts on massive shifts in global demographics and movement of peoples across borders—the defining human consequence of a world in flux that nationalist politics too often wishes away.

Georgetown's Jesuit tradition has driven decades of interfaith engagement, recognizing that the polarization driving nationalism and isolationism can only be countered by sustained dialogue across difference and the empathy such dialogue engenders. Our graduates approach every diplomatic negotiation, global business, and engagement in humanitarian assistance with a recognition that understanding another worldview on its own terms is the precondition for any policy or action that actually lasts.

SFS

School of
Foreign Service

Colin H. Kahl

Director and Steven C. Hazy Senior Fellow
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies
Professor by Courtesy, Department of Political Science
Stanford University



Engineered for Tomorrow: Why MIP's Approach to Policy Education Has Lasting Value

How does your curriculum incorporate a wide range of perspectives and approaches to enable students to engage in constructive dialog?

The Master's in International Policy (MIP) draws on the resources of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, an interdisciplinary research institute consisting of independent centers, such as the Center for International Security and Cooperation, the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, and the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. Students receive instruction in various disciplines from academics and practitioners, in formats that range from seminars to case-study-based courses. In addition, students are encouraged to take customized electives across Stanford's seven schools, from law to business, to engineering and the new Doerr School of Sustainability. Our students have an average of six years of professional experience, and half come from outside the United States. Bringing people with diverse backgrounds together in intentionally small cohorts enables them to engage in dynamic conversations on a wide range of global issues.

How does your program balance practical skills such as public speaking and critical thinking with data-driven skills?

Our curriculum structure is designed precisely to balance hard and soft skills. While most policy programs teach policy analysis and quantitative skills, MIP supplements this with practical training in how to implement policies in real-world environments, which requires leadership and interpersonal skills. There is a three-quarter course sequence that introduces students to the MIP problem-solving framework and allows them to apply it to concrete problems. This culminates in the capstone experience, called Policy Change Studio, which involves research and fieldwork in collaboration with an external partner organization.

How is MIP incorporating AI into its curriculum to enhance training?

Stanford is a particularly exciting place to be for all things related to AI, and MIP is leaning into this competitive advantage. We have added an AI skills course to our curriculum and will be creating a core offering on the geopolitics of AI to help students think through the implications of this revolution. To keep up with the times, we are redesigning our cyber policy area of specialization into a broader AI, Cyber, and Tech Policy track. The MIP program also draws on the work being done on AI in various other parts of the university, such as the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, which has been of great benefit to our students.

Does MIP offer tracks that prepare students for both private and public sector readiness?

Rather than separating tracks for public and private sector careers, we emphasize analytical methods and transferable skills that are useful in both sectors in our core curriculum and each of our four specialization tracks. Our students themselves come from both public and private sector backgrounds, and a lot of learning occurs through their interaction. The flexibility of the MIP curriculum allows them to curate their skills and readiness to their preferred sector of employment. Our graduates go on to careers in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors, and in recent years the tech sector in particular.

Stanford

Ford Dorsey Master's
in International Policy
Freeman Spogli Institute



Dr. Li Mingjiang

Associate Professor and Provost's Chair in International Relations
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Nanyang Technological University

Bridging Perspectives and Building Leaders at RSIS

How does your curriculum incorporate a range of perspectives and approaches to enable students to engage in constructive dialog?

At S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), we believe constructive dialogue begins with understanding the world from multiple intellectual, regional, and policy perspectives. Our curriculum integrates international relations, security studies, international political economy, and area studies, enabling students to examine global challenges through diverse theoretical traditions and analytical approaches. Courses span great power competition, regional security, global governance, political economy, technology, climate change, religion, and emerging security challenges, encouraging students to engage critically with competing ideas.

What distinguishes RSIS is our location in Singapore, a global city at the crossroads of major powers, cultures, and economics. We offer students a unique vantage point to understand the Indo-Pacific and the wider international system. Beyond the classroom, we organize annual study trips to countries such as China and Indonesia, giving students first-hand exposure to regional politics, economies, and societies through interactions with government officials, academics, businesses, and local communities. These immersive experiences deepen understanding of regional dynamics and encourage informed, constructive dialogue across cultures.

Our faculty combines internationally recognized scholars with experienced policymakers and practitioners from diverse backgrounds, equipping graduates to navigate geopolitical complexity and contribute thoughtfully to international cooperation.

How does RSIS prepare students for private and public sector readiness?

Our multidisciplinary curriculum combines international relations, security, political economy, and emerging issues such as technology, AI, and geopolitical risk, reflecting the increasingly interconnected nature of policymaking and business. Through close engagement with scholars, policymakers, industry leaders, and practitioners, students develop strategic thinking, policy analysis, and cross-cultural communication skills. Our graduates pursue careers

in government, diplomacy, international organizations, multinational corporations, finance, consulting, think tanks, media, and the nonprofit sector.

How is RSIS incorporating AI into its curriculum to enhance training?

RSIS embraces AI as both a learning tool and a subject of inquiry. We integrate AI into our teaching to strengthen students' analytical capabilities, enabling them to use generative AI responsibly for research, policy analysis, and strategic forecasting, while emphasizing critical thinking, source evaluation, and independent judgment. Our curriculum also examines AI's transformative impact on international affairs through courses on technology, AI, cybersecurity, political economy, and global security. In addition to our master's programs, RSIS offers a Graduate Certificate in Technology and Security for professionals seeking specialized expertise. Together, these initiatives prepare graduates to lead in an increasingly technology-driven geopolitical landscape.

How does RSIS balance practical skills like public speaking and critical thinking with data-driven skills like analytics and AI usage?

RSIS believes that effective international affairs professionals must communicate as well as they analyze. Our students develop practical skills through policy presentations, simulations, debates, group projects, and engagement with senior policymakers and industry leaders. These experiences strengthen public speaking, persuasion, teamwork, and decision-making under real-world conditions. Alongside these capabilities, students build quantitative literacy and digital competencies by applying data, analytics, and AI tools to interpret complex international developments and support evidence-informed decisions. This integrated approach ensures that graduates are not only technically capable but also confident communicators and effective leaders in diverse professional settings.



Dr. Joe Young

Director and Professor

Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce

University of Kentucky



Preparing Future Leaders for Rewarding Careers in International Affairs

What sets the Patterson School apart from other graduate programs in international affairs?

The University of Kentucky Patterson School combines the academic rigor of graduate study in international affairs with hands-on preparation in diplomacy, leadership and professional skills. Students can earn a master's degree in three semesters, in a small cohort model providing meaningful mentorship with faculty, alumni, and visiting practitioners.

Patterson students don't just study international challenges. They analyze them, communicate persuasively, and effectively develop practical solutions in a professional, collaborative environment. Our curriculum delivers an intensive, cohort-based education in one of four concentrations: diplomacy, international commerce, intelligence and national security, or international organizations and development. Connecting global questions to policy, business, diplomacy, security, and development, our practical approach includes training in real-world simulations, Washington D.C. trips, and networking with policymakers.

Where do Patterson School graduates go after earning their degree, and what kinds of careers do they pursue?

Patterson graduates build careers across local, state, and national government, diplomacy, international business, intelligence and security, NGOs, consulting, and higher education. Alumni work in federal agencies, embassies, international organizations, private firms, state and local government, and mission-driven organizations. Some build careers in Washington, D.C., while others work internationally or bring global expertise to communities and organizations across the United States.

Because the degree is designed for flexibility, graduates enter careers ranging from policy analysis and intelligence to consulting and business development, often moving into leadership as their careers grow. Patterson's professional training helps graduates translate broad international knowledge into concrete career opportunities and long-term advancement.

With mounting global challenges and a shifting international landscape, what skills are critical for pursuing a career in international affairs?

Students need a combination of analytical skills, practical problem solving, and the ability to work across institutional and cultural boundaries. Strong writing and communication remain essential because professionals need to explain complex issues to decision-makers, colleagues, and public audiences. Professionals also need to understand data and research design, evaluate evidence, and navigate misinformation while using emerging technologies responsibly. The most effective graduates can connect evidence to strategy while remaining open to new information and perspectives. Just as important is adaptability: international affairs professionals operate amid uncertainty, rapid technological change, geopolitical competition, and evolving security risks. Students also need regional and historical knowledge, foreign language skills where relevant, negotiation skills, and ethical judgment.

How is the Patterson School evolving its curriculum to enable students to engage in constructive dialogue and prepare for today's international challenges?

The Patterson School continues to evolve its curriculum by pairing core disciplines with emerging issues such as artificial intelligence, disinformation, cyber risk, climate security, supply chains, and great-power competition. Courses emphasize applied analysis rather than theory in isolation, asking students to write policy briefs, assess real-world cases, work with data, and present recommendations. Our program also integrates practitioners and alumni into the learning experience, so students encounter current professionals and career pathways. Graduates leave prepared to navigate complex global systems, lead teams, make decisions with confidence, and contribute in demanding environments from day one.

 Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce



Dr. Amy Beck Harris

Lecturer

Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan

Harris previously managed USAID and World Bank projects across Latin America with Chemonics International.

Preparing Students for a Changing International Development Landscape

What does the changing international development policy landscape mean for students?

International development funding models, institutional priorities, and career pathways are shifting. Some traditional actors are becoming less prominent, others are rising, and many organizations are being asked to do more with fewer resources. The arena of large-scale donors, foundations, consulting firms, multilateral institutions, and local organizations has shuffled, and many organizations are now exploring new or evolving roles.

For students, adaptability is essential, but so is understanding what the evolving development arena looks like and where job opportunities are growing. The job search may look different than before, and students have to follow funding trends to keep up with and understand the resulting professional skills needed to respond to the latest changes.

Employers want people who can write strong proposals, develop resources, coordinate across complex networks, build partnerships, and navigate institutional constraints—as well as apply critical policy analyses. Students must be ready for environments where the path forward is not always clear.

How does the Ford School prepare students to adapt across sectors and roles?

At the Ford School, we help students understand policy analysis and policy practice: how problems are diagnosed and how policy work gets done within institutions, communities, and political systems.

One example is the International Policy Center's Aid and Development workshop, which builds applied skills aligned with the current landscape and job market. Each year, development professionals work with students on practical tools. This year includes a four-part workshop on crafting competitive grant proposals and a session on strategic coordination and collaboration among major development actors.

The Ford School's International Policy in Practice course is another example. Students travel abroad to learn from and work directly with practitioners. Last year in Bogotá, Colombia, they collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme, the Colombian National Planning Department, and organizations focused on food security, environmental conservation, and empowering indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

Students did not simply observe; they did real development work, including applied research, resource development, and strategic planning to help organizations respond to the current development context. These experiences helped students understand the complexity of the network of actors, view challenges through an institutional lens, and apply classroom tools to what they learned while in-country.

What makes the Ford School's approach to international policy education distinctive?

The Ford School approaches international policy through an applied lens. Students learn rigorous analytical tools, but they are also asked to think about implementation: Who has power? What constraints do institutions face? What would it take for an idea to work in practice?

Many of our curricular and co-curricular opportunities are shaped by former practitioners who understand what success looks like in the field, which skills are valuable on the job, and what experiences make students competitive.

Students also benefit from the breadth of the University of Michigan: courses taught by former ambassadors and national security experts, Weiser Diplomacy Center programming, and connections to public health, law, business, education, social work, sustainability, and area studies. That interdisciplinary ecosystem is a major strength.



GERALD R. FORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



Directory

American University School of International Service

american.edu/sis
sisgrad@american.edu
202.885.1646

Diplomatische Akademie Wien Vienna School of International Studies

da-vienna.ac.at
application@da-vienna.ac.at
+43 1.505.72.72 x211

Florida International University Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom

leadership.fiu.edu
freedom@fiu.edu
305.348.0594

Fordham University Graduate Program in International Political Economy and Development

iped.fordham.edu
iped@fordham.edu
718.817.4064

The George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs

elliott.gwu.edu
esiagrad@gwu.edu
202.994.7050

Georgetown University School of Foreign Service

sfs.georgetown.edu
gsfs@georgetown.edu
202.687.9267

IE University IE School of Politics, Economics & Global Affairs

ie.edu/school-politics-economics-global-affairs
lawir.recruitment@ie.edu
+34 91.568.96.00

Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)

sais.jhu.edu
sais.dc.admissions@jhu.edu
202.663.5700

Nanyang Technological University S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)

rsis.edu.sg
contact_rsis@ntu.edu.sg
+65 6790.6982

Penn State University School of International Affairs

sia.psu.edu
admissions@sia.psu.edu
814.863.5304

Ritsumeikan University Graduate School of International Relations (GSIR)

ritsumei.ac.jp/gsir/eng
ir-adm@st.ritsumei.ac.jp
+81 75.465.1211

RAND School of Public Policy

rand.edu
admissions@rand.edu

Schwarzman Scholars

schwarzmanscholars.org
admissions@schwarzmanscholars.org



Seton Hall University
School of Diplomacy and International Relations
shu.edu/diplomacy
diplomat@shu.edu
 973.275.2515

Stanford University
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI)
fsi.stanford.edu/masters-degree
internationalpolicy@stanford.edu
 650.725.9075

Syracuse University
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
maxwell.syr.edu
maxenroll@syr.edu
 315.443.4000

Texas A&M University
The Bush School of Government and Public Service
bush.tamu.edu
bushschooladmissions@tamu.edu
 979.826.3476

The Fletcher School at Tufts University
fletcher.tufts.edu
fletcheradmissions@tufts.edu
 617.627.3040

University at Albany (SUNY)
Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy
albany.edu/rockefeller
rockadmissions@albany.edu
 518.442.5247

University of Denver
Josef Korbel School of Global and Public Affairs
korbel.du.edu
korbeladm@du.edu

University of Kentucky
Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce
pattersonschool.uky.edu
pattersonadmissions@uky.edu

University of Michigan
Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
fordschool.umich.edu
fspp-admissions@umich.edu
 734.764.3490

Virginia Tech
School of Public and International Affairs
spia.vt.edu
spia@vt.edu

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How China Found Its Most Potent Weapon

The Real History of Beijing's Rare-Earth Dominance

GLORIA XIONG AND JESSICA CHEN WEISS

“The Middle East has oil, China has rare-earth elements,” Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping declared in 1992. This quote has been repeated a lot lately as Beijing has used its near monopoly on the rare-earth industry to effectively push back against U.S. President Donald Trump’s latest trade war. It is often cited as evidence that implicit in Deng’s statement was a coercive threat: just as Arab oil states weaponized their petroleum exports in 1973—cutting off the West to punish it for backing Israel in the Yom Kippur War—China would one day do the same with rare earths.

The events of the past year have only deepened that conviction. Last November, for instance, after China had announced its licensing regime for rare-earth exports, the bipartisan U.S. House

GLORIA XIONG is an Assistant Professor of Government at Colby College.

JESSICA CHEN WEISS is David M. Lampton Professor of China Studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute Center for China Analysis. From August 2021 to July 2022, she served as a Senior Adviser to the U.S. Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff.

Select Committee on China said that Chinese leader Xi Jinping was “actualizing Deng’s vision.” Trump posted on social media that it was “obviously a plan devised by [China] years ago.” And Miles Yu, who served as chief China policy adviser to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the first Trump administration, wrote that “Beijing’s rare earths monopoly is no accident of geology. It is the product of a deliberate, decadeslong strategy to control the extraction and refining of the elements that make up the modern world.”

There is no doubt today that China’s control of rare earths represents a powerful weapon—one that has provoked worldwide alarm and a race to secure alternatives. China not only sits on the world’s largest known reserve of rare-earth elements but also dominates approximately 85 percent of global processing. Despite being a small industry, the role of rare earths in modern technologies is mighty. Because these 17 elements—especially the scarcer heavy rare-earth elements—are so essential to semiconductor production, defense technologies, automobiles, and clean energy, China’s role in their supply chain represents a significant chokepoint in the global economy.

But even though China has sought to take advantage of its position, its dominance is not the result of a grand, far-sighted scheme to hold the world hostage. In reality, it is the result of an idiosyncratic and evolving mix of domestic interests set against a backdrop of broader global economic and technological change. When Deng spoke, for instance, the United States had just concluded the first Gulf War. From Beijing’s perspective, the American-led campaign was a visceral reminder of China’s vulnerabilities in both the conduct of modern warfare and the role that key resources could play in inciting conflict. As Deng pointed out around the same time, “We haven’t paid enough attention to how to use this treasure. We must protect rare-earth resources.”

This was easier said than done. Early efforts to consolidate China’s market position began as an effort to rein in unruly domestic competition that kept prices low and risked depleting Chinese resources. They did not originate in a strategic effort to weaponize supply chains in a geopolitical fight. In fact, China’s rare-earth industry remained so loose and ad hoc that it’s not even clear Beijing had full control over it 20 years later, during the infamous 2010 incident over the island chain known as the Diaoyu in China and the Senkaku in Japan. After China and Japan skirmished over the disputed islands, rare-earth exports to Japan were indeed temporarily restricted—causing the Deng quote to

go viral for the first time—but research suggests it might not have been a carefully designed plan to punish Japan. As is the case with many of China's policies, there is often a large gulf between words and deeds, and studying China's history with rare earths reveals the amalgam of competing priorities that have shaped its policy.

Beijing has recognized rare earths as a geoeconomic weapon only since 2010—and, in the process, learned how to wield such an arsenal from the United States' sanctions and export controls. The current rare-earth standoff and ongoing supply chain weaponization do indeed pose a grave threat to global stability and prosperity. But it is less a Chinese master plan coming to fruition than the result of two powers locked in an action-reaction spiral that neither set out to start—and that neither fully controls.

Correcting this narrative and understanding how China came to dominate the rare-earth market matters because it helps illuminate the current security dilemma between Beijing and Washington: when one country takes actions to increase its own security, the other feels threatened, precipitating its own actions and furthering the escalatory spiral. But as China and the United States now race to gain future leverage over each other, the risks are not limited to economic warfare. Fears of future economic and supply chain weaponization have fostered a growing estrangement between the two countries, feeding a broader hostility that empowers more aggressive voices on both sides of the Pacific. Stabilizing this spiral will not be easy. But it will help both countries, and the world, avoid an even worse fate.

CHEAP AND DIRTY

The Bayan Obo mine in Inner Mongolia has anchored China's rare-earth industry since the late 1950s, and it still holds the world's largest deposit. In the 1960s, Jiangxi and Guangdong Provinces in southern China had their own discoveries and later emerged as the epicenter of heavy rare-earth mining and processing. But it was not until the early 1980s, after the chemist Xu Guangxian developed a new, cheaper method for separating rare earths from each other, that China achieved high-quality output at scale. Xu's discovery coincided with the rapid growth of the global semiconductor industry, and domestic and overseas demand for rare earths rose sharply.

Chinese leaders started to see rare earths as a natural resource the country could not afford to squander. As early as 1982, Deng and Vice

Premier Fang Yi ordered the country to “increase the production of rare-earth metals and rare metals.” But throughout the 1980s, the central government’s first priority was to accumulate more foreign exchange reserves, so it tolerated a relatively lax set of controls in the rare-earth sector to encourage exports. “Cheap and dirty” became the defining features of destructive, small-scale mining, with most of the exports going to Japan, the United States, and Europe. China’s output surged to more than ten times its 1978 level by 1986, and China surpassed the United States as the world’s largest rare-earth producer by the early 1990s.

The United States and Europe welcomed the development. Rare earths are not, in fact, rare: the historical misnomer results from unfamiliarity at the time of their discovery. But it is relatively unusual to find rare earths in concentrations that make mining worthwhile, and processing them is both technologically demanding and incredibly polluting. Improving raw ore, for instance, involves releasing water that is contaminated with radioactive pollutants, creating health issues for workers and local residents. From a Western perspective, offshoring the extraction and processing of rare earths to China both lowered prices and moved the pollution elsewhere.

Throughout the 1990s, China’s fledgling rare-earth industry was thus seen as a win for the country’s development. After declaring rare earths “protected and strategic minerals” in 1990, China began to restrict foreign investment in exploration and processing. The industry satisfied Beijing’s desire for export-led growth, and local governments scaled up quickly to meet development imperatives and increase tax revenue. But with little regulatory enforcement or oversight, China’s rare-earth industry resembled the Wild West by the turn of the century: rampant overproduction led to domestic price wars and weaker export pricing. Environmental and public health effects also took a toll. The Baogang tailings dam, which lies just north of the Yellow River, became the “world’s largest rare-earth lake” with 200 million tons of contaminants. And Ganzhou, a city in Jiangxi with heavy rare-earth mining, recorded an acid rain frequency of more than 90 percent.

Many analysts today argue that China deliberately pushed down the price of rare earths to beat out foreign competition. But Chinese officials actually saw low rare-earth prices as a problem to be solved. In China, rare earths were described as selling at “the price of cabbage or dirt,” which was considered a sign of weakness. In this narrative,

Are Xi and Putin Really Friends?



The China-Russia Meta Threat

The China-Russia relationship defies easy labels. But despite shared objectives between Moscow and Beijing, experts at the Center for European Policy Analysis explain that there are underlying frictions that the West can exploit.



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developed countries were exploiting China for its cheap raw resources while hoarding their own.

By 2002, Beijing decided to rein in the disorderly competition. The central government cracked down on unlicensed mining and polluting practices, which helped it gain leverage over price negotiations in the global market. Then, in 2005, Beijing abolished export tax rebates for rare earths and, in 2007, officially implemented a ten percent export tariff on all rare-earth ores, oxides, and compounds.

The actions reflected Beijing's pivot from maximum output and export focus to a determined effort to address overcapacity and ensure resilience. Rare earths, after all, are not renewable—a country's supply can be exhausted—and Beijing was increasingly recognizing the elements' role in fueling China's own industries. Authorities were wary of depleting China's supply and someday becoming dependent on imports, as the country is for oil and gas. In addition to the export quotas introduced in 1999, they instituted a set of production quotas in 2006 to decrease the volume of rare earths sent out of the country. By mid-2010, even before the crisis with Japan, reported Chinese exports had declined by over 50 percent since 2005.

CRISIS AND CONFUSION

Throughout this process, however, China's local governments resisted the central initiatives since they often cut into tax revenue. As late as 2010, overall output exceeded production quotas by more than 35 percent, with rampant illegal operations in southern China supplying half of global consumption of heavy rare earths. This decades-long resistance and selective implementation led one Western report to conclude that the only real competitors to China were "the crime rings within the country's borders."

The contretemps later that year with Japan only further raised doubts about Beijing's command over the industry. When a Chinese fishing trawler collided with a Japanese coast guard patrol near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Japan detained and prosecuted the captain. Beijing was so angered it tolerated a spate of anti-Japanese protests, hoping to harness nationalist fervor—and around the same time, reports widely suggested it had blocked rare-earth exports to Japan as punishment. Japan's electronics industries immediately felt the pinch, and Japan, the United States, and the European Union jointly issued a complaint with the World Trade Organization. At a press conference

with her Japanese counterpart, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called China's export restrictions a "wake-up call" for the world. "Because of the importance of these rare-earth minerals, I think both the minister and I are aware that our countries and others will have to look for additional sources of supply," she said.

Yet the origins of this decision to restrict rare-earth exports remain unclear. There was never a formal announcement of the ban from Beijing, and research by the geographer Julie Klinger suggests that the embargo may not have resulted from a central directive. According to her interviews, angry military personnel, port workers, and local customs officials in a port city north of Nanjing saw themselves as standing against "a contemporary manifestation of Japanese aggression." They decided on their own to withhold shipments of rare earths. It wasn't until the Japanese customs authority lodged an inquiry, in this telling of the incident, that authorities in Beijing realized what was happening. Throughout this period, Beijing denied its occurrence.

Regardless of Beijing's initial involvement, the crisis prompted the central government to think about this new form of leverage and take more aggressive actions to control its rare-earth industry, including curbing illegal industrial activities. The global market, after all, had signaled that even a small-scale disruption in rare-earth exports could have significant effects: the price of neodymium, an element essential to many powerful magnets, had surged nearly sixfold by mid-2011.

Calls for imposing export controls on rare earths began to circulate in Chinese media. While some pointed to the geopolitical potential, more populist voices stressed protectionist concerns. One widely reposted article urged China to "defend" its rare-earth resources by "immediately banning exports, maintaining only the output scale needed for domestic production and R & D, or simply purchasing from abroad."

Still, Beijing remained cautious. Hong Feng, the former division director of the Rare Earth Office under the State Planning Commission, warned against using rare earths as "political chips." Russia's frequent weaponization of natural gas had shown how coercion would incentivize target countries to diversify over the long-term. China also had its own heavy dependence on oil, iron, and copper imports, which could be used as retaliation, and Hong underscored that "the strategic

Rare earths are not renewable—a country's supply can be exhausted.

nature of rare-earth resources lies in their application, which requires joint research and development around the world.” If China stopped selling rare earths to the world, in other words, it might induce a backlash that could disrupt China’s access to foreign resources.

China’s rare-earth industry also still lacked a consolidated structure to implement such moves effectively. Only in 2012 did Beijing begin asserting central oversight. It stockpiled a strategic reserve of rare earths, for instance, to safeguard domestic needs. And in 2014, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology initiated a successful revamping of the industry into six state-controlled groups, a precursor to the eventual 2025 consolidation into two national champions. In 2015, China also complied with the World Trade Organization ruling against China’s rare-earth export restrictions and abolished its export quota system. It turned instead to traceability requirements and investments in overseas mining projects to manage growing domestic demand and global diversification.

As a recent RAND report noted, Beijing’s overarching goal with rare earths during the 2010s was to pursue “resilience before weaponization.” In Chinese government documents and public discussions, many officials voiced concerns about future scarcity. Although this fear was likely overstated, there was a sense that China could squander its opportunity if it wasn’t careful. Yang Danhui, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and an adviser to the Ministry of Commerce, warned in a 2015 book that if extraction continued at the 2008 rate, “the Bayan Obo mine in Baotou will be exhausted within 25 years. (Should this occur, China would need to import rare earths from abroad at very high prices.)”

BACK WITH A VENGEANCE

The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands incident marked an inflection point for the world, too, laying bare for the first time China’s growing economic leverage in geopolitics. A decade before terms such as “decoupling” and “de-risking” entered the lexicon, Japan accelerated efforts to build alternative sources: today it imports only 60 percent of its rare earths from China, down from 90 percent in 2010. Besides resorting to the World Trade Organization’s dispute settlement system, Washington also began to rethink the risks of overdependence on rare-earth imports. Yet domestic investments, including in the Mountain Pass mine in California, continued to sputter because of scarce profits,

price volatility, and technological challenges. The annual value of trade in rare earths, which reached \$4.2 billion in 2011, was still less than an average day's worth of global trade in oil. By 2014, the global value of trade in rare earths had fallen to \$1.2 billion, compounding the challenges of private-sector-led diversification.

The rare-earth issue thus slipped into the background of the U.S.-Chinese relationship and didn't reemerge until the end of the decade, when Washington began imposing significant economic pressure on China. Beijing's tightened control over the private sector and its increasingly coercive behavior in international disputes hardened American suspicions of China's intentions. In 2019, the Trump administration launched a campaign against Huawei, one of China's largest telecom giants, by placing it on an export blacklist, effectively barring U.S. companies from doing business with it. The administration also pressed allies to exclude Huawei from their 5G networks, arguing that the company posed a national security threat because its equipment could give Beijing backdoor access to critical communications infrastructure.

The Huawei restrictions were seen as a major escalation and served as Beijing's own wake-up call. Chinese state media suggested the possibility of leveraging rare earths as retaliation, but Beijing still held back. Instead, it chose to use tariffs against carefully selected exports, such as soybeans and energy, from Republican-supporting districts. The Huawei episode had exposed the vulnerability in China's own industrial system—that it needed access to advanced semiconductors—and Beijing seemed to recognize that playing its rare-earths card too soon could backfire. As Zhang Anwen, deputy secretary-general of the Chinese Society of Rare Earths, observed in June 2019, "Only by developing advanced technology and gradually localizing high-end rare-earth and critical metal products can we reduce that dependence [on foreign high-value products] and leverage rare earths to maximum effect."

Beijing prepared across all fronts. In May 2020, it launched a "dual circulation" strategy to reduce its dependence on foreign technology by building up its own domestic industries—starting with semiconductors. In late 2020, it adopted an Export Control Law to provide a domestic legal basis for restricting overseas sales. And in December 2021, it directed the formation of the China Rare Earth Group, through which the State Council, China's cabinet, would oversee the rare-earth industry.

But it wasn't until after Washington unveiled a set of extraterritorial export controls, which for the first time would deny China access to advanced chips and chip-making equipment, that Beijing finally opted to retaliate with critical minerals. After the Biden administration mooted the expansion of its October 2022 export controls to include Nvidia's A800 chips in late June 2023, China announced in July that exporters of gallium and germanium—two minerals essential to chip-making—would need to apply for licenses and disclose

There is no way to de-risk every rare-earth element.

end-use information. The move, while not an outright ban, set off alarms in the market, and with good reason. If China decided to implement a total ban on those two minerals, according to a U.S. Geological Survey estimate, it could potentially decrease U.S. GDP by \$3.4 billion.

Six months later, the U.S. House Select Committee on China issued a report that advocated for tax incentives to rebuild domestic rare-earth magnet manufacturing capacity. Just a week after the report's release, on December 21, 2023, China announced a ban on rare-earth processing technology, which would slow de-risking efforts in the global supply chain. One year later, China issued its first rule that explicitly named the United States as the target of an export ban; Chinese exporters trying to sell gallium to U.S. end users had to assume their licenses would be denied.

This tit-for-tat dynamic has escalated sharply during the second Trump administration. After Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs were announced, on April 2, 2025, Beijing retaliated two days later by adding seven rare earths, as well as the permanent magnets made with them, to its export control list for dual-use goods—those valuable to both the military and the commercial sector. When tens of thousands of license applications first poured in, China's export control bureau was staffed with only 30 members. The subsequent backlog led to significant delays in approval, with Chinese exports of rare-earth magnets plummeting 74 percent in May from a year earlier. In response, Washington imposed new restrictions on jet engines and semiconductor design software. Only when the United States retracted those measures and agreed to further talks, in June, did China agree to resume exports of rare earths and magnets.

Then, on September 29, the Trump administration expanded the list of Chinese “affiliates” subject to U.S. export controls. With this move, any entity that is at least 50 percent owned by a foreign company on the entity list would also be blacklisted. China hit back just ten days later with its own extraterritorial export control regime: for the first time, China asserted the right to license any foreign-made product in the world that contained even a sliver of controlled Chinese rare-earth elements or was built using Chinese processing technology. As designed, the series of rules would impact a wide array of downstream sectors, including defense, aerospace, semiconductors, and AI data centers. The International Energy Agency has estimated that if China were to fully implement the new restrictions, industries outside China would lose \$6.5 trillion.

At that point, the U.S.-Chinese economic war reached a climax. Both sides preferred mutual retrenchment to the devastation that would have ensued had the spiral continued. At the Busan Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit later that month, Beijing agreed to a one-year suspension of its extraterritorial export controls, matched by Washington’s reciprocal suspension of the affiliates rule.

THE LIMITS OF LEVERAGE

Having looked into the abyss in 2025, both Beijing and Washington have pulled back—at least for now. But hawks on both sides are already casting this lull as an opportunity for both countries to hone their weapons for the next fight. As Wess Mitchell wrote in these pages, “If it focuses on consolidation [of critical minerals capacity and reshored supply chains], the United States has a historic chance to regain its bearings as a great power and prevail in a sustained competition with China, the most powerful adversary in U.S. history.” In China, prominent economic nationalists such as Di Dongsheng of Renmin University have urged the Chinese government to “seize the initiative” and accelerate efforts to de-Americanize China’s supply chains. Both governments, meanwhile, have expanded their domestic and global investments in rare earths to insulate their economies from future coercion.

For the United States, such diversification of the supply chains for critical minerals and rare earths is necessary. Defensive investments that began under the Biden administration and have continued under the second Trump administration are important for resilience. If these efforts succeed, they will reduce acute vulnerabilities and

China's incentives to exploit these chokepoints. But they won't eliminate interdependence—nor do they need to. A little diversification goes a long way, and a credible alternative can constrain China's ability to exercise market or geopolitical leverage. In some cases, U.S. government-affiliated analysts have argued that sourcing as little as a third of the U.S. supply of rare-earth elements from places other than China may be sufficient to reduce Beijing's pressure.

Still, there is no way to de-risk every rare-earth element. Some analysts, for instance, have called yttrium—a material critical to chip-making, jet engines, and turbines—"the killer chokepoint" because investments in diversification may take years to realize. China's chokehold, however, has an important limitation that the United States should keep in mind when planning for the future: China still lags behind both Japan and the United States in parts of the rare-earth value chain, including recycling technologies. Even China knows that its leverage has limits.

In this way, the rare-earth market resembles other chokepoints, such as the U.S.-dominated, dollar-based financial system and the Chinese-dominated market for pharmaceutical ingredients. Although they appear to create leverage, they are difficult to weaponize for the long haul. The United States cannot cut a country of China's economic heft out of the global financial system without doing major economic damage to itself. Nor can China readily cut off U.S. access to the pharmaceutical ingredients it dominates without great risk to its own biotech sector, which depends on access to American technology and markets.

It is this persistence of mutual dependence that makes the conditions for stabilization more likely to endure. In both countries, analysts are starting to recognize the limited efficacy of export controls. They may impose short-term pain, but they don't work for long, especially since they jump-start efforts to get around them. Attempts to build alternative supply chains also face the difficult reality that many countries with viable rare-earth mines do not want to choose between China and the United States. Rather than a zero-sum contest between blocs, continued interdependence and overlapping supply chains will likely remain the norm.

THE \$13 TRILLION MISTAKE

Still, a grudging recognition that these economic tools are limited in their utility goes only so far. To slow the spiral of weaponized

interdependence, the United States must pursue a combination of reciprocal de-escalation, deterrence, and investments in a more positive-sum future. To discourage Chinese escalation, the United States must be willing to hit back; but to discourage Chinese hubris, it must also be willing to invest in the competitiveness, innovation, and resilience of the American economy, workforce, and science and technology ecosystem.

Efforts to reduce critical dependencies must also be coupled with steps to encourage bilateral trade and investment with China. Because Chinese companies lead in key technologies, such as batteries, joint ventures and technology licensing are essential for American companies to compete globally, including alongside China, not only against it. Negative reciprocity—the back-and-forth expansion of sanctioned entities and lists—must be balanced by positive reciprocity. Managed carefully, a more resilient and diversified interdependence becomes less a vulnerability than a source of mutual restraint and interest in stability.

The alternative is both dangerous and costly. Fully excising China from American technology and manufacturing supply chains would cost \$13 trillion over the next 25 years, according to an economic analysis published in the *Financial Times*. Even if this reality constrains the effort to decouple, the perception that it is necessary undercuts Washington's leverage—including the ability to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan. As the political scientist Thomas Christensen has pointed out, "Coercive diplomatic leverage would be lost if a growing sense in China were that U.S. markets and inputs might be cut off from China on an unconditional basis." The United States must therefore carefully balance the need to de-risk against the need to deter aggression.

This will be a tricky act to pull off. But the best way to foster stability is to increase the benefits, not just mitigate the harms, of the ties between these two economic giants. Trying to build economic security without shared benefits would risk a cold peace in which neither society can flourish or succeed against common challenges. Both sides should instead accept that a degree of resilience and diversification will be necessary for continued bilateral trade and investment. Otherwise, they risk a race to accumulate leverage that each side can use to choke the other, which hurts ordinary citizens and makes a hot conflict more likely. The first step in averting this spiral toward catastrophe is for both Beijing and Washington to bear in mind that these economic tools were not designed as weapons. That means the two countries have the opportunity, and the obligation, to ensure that they never serve that purpose. 🌐

AI and the New Age of Bioweapons

Preparing for a World of Synthetic Pathogens

ELIZABETH SHERWOOD-RANDALL

Pathbreaking scientific discoveries can create transformational possibilities. They can also create catastrophic risks. The integration of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and bioengineering is already enabling life-changing achievements, from combating disease to supercharging agricultural productivity to solving energy challenges. But it is also generating capabilities that can be weaponized more easily than ever by a growing number of actors. The United States is unprepared for these threats.

In the foreseeable future, a terrorist group with minimal skills could access a jailbroken AI model (one that has evaded safety controls) trained on the world's most comprehensive biological data set. The group could use the model to design a new strain of H5N1 avian

ELIZABETH SHERWOOD-RANDALL is Ashton B. Carter Visiting Professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and Founder and Director of the Initiative on Bioconvergence, Biosecurity, and Bioresilience at the Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. She served as White House Homeland Security Adviser and Deputy National Security Adviser from 2021 to 2025.



influenza that is more lethal and more easily spread from animals to humans than existing strains. Connecting remotely to one of the new generation of fully equipped, contract-for-service “cloud” labs, it could anonymously arrange for the virus to be built and tested and then sent to a biomanufacturing facility to be produced at scale. From there, the group could stealthily disperse the new strain through air-handling systems at major livestock farms across the United States.

Before long, the American poultry, beef, and dairy industries would suffer massive losses. When the virus inevitably jumped to the human population, it would cause severe illness and could result in hundreds of thousands or even millions of deaths. The response from U.S. public and private institutions—lacking both an integrated strategy and adequate tools—would be too slow, too uncoordinated, too underresourced, and too overwhelmed to stop the spread and mitigate the consequences. And soon, the virus would also cross borders, triggering food insecurity, widespread sickness, and mass casualties around the world.

U.S. policymakers have long contended with the possibility of biological attacks from hostile nation-states. Along with surveillance and global risk-reduction initiatives, Washington successfully deterred such attacks with the threat of significant retaliation, including the use of nuclear weapons. Yet that strategy was effective because only a small number of governments were developing the most dangerous biological weapons. It no longer works in a world in which AI allows more actors—rogue states, terrorist groups, even individuals—to develop new bioweapons of their own.

In this new threat landscape, biological attacks are unlikely to be prevented entirely, given the proliferation of biological capabilities and the fact that some actors cannot be deterred by traditional means. Policymakers need a new strategy in response—one that accepts that biological attacks are likely and prepares to contain the harm, helps the country recover more quickly, and uses new tools to identify and hold perpetrators accountable. Ultimately, this resilience to biological attacks could dissuade malicious actors from attempting to use them in the first place, knowing that the effects will be minimized—a strategy of deterrence by resilience.

Consider the attack scenario described above, but with a comprehensive strategy in place. The U.S. government would use a sophisticated biological monitoring system to provide early warning

of the emergence of a new viral pathogen. Employing many of the same technologies that enable the threat in the first place, federal laboratories would determine its origin from telltale signatures in the AI model used to design the virus—enabling prompt efforts to track and target the perpetrators. Public health authorities would have the tools to integrate scientific and intelligence data to suppress the disease’s spread. Based on pre-negotiated contracts to provide surge capacity, the biomanufacturing sector would accelerate the production of diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. Although the crisis would not have been prevented entirely, its effects would be speedily and effectively contained: vulnerable human and animal populations protected, contagion minimized, agricultural production recovered, public confidence restored.

**Policymakers
must accept that
biological attacks
are likely.**

Such bioresilience is far from today’s reality. In 2024, H5N1 bird flu spread from poultry to dairy and beef herds and eventually to more than 70 humans. As the White House homeland security adviser at the time, I coordinated the federal response to this potentially catastrophic threat. The virus was naturally occurring, not the result of a deliberate attack. It nevertheless showed that even in this base case, there were considerable weaknesses and gaps in U.S. prevention, monitoring, attribution, and response systems. Data on disease incidence and spread were hard to acquire and exasperatingly incomplete. Mobilizing sufficient preventive action by the poultry and cattle industries proved difficult and slow. And in order to deliver sufficient quantities of human vaccines to protect the American people, we needed to provide substantial new federal funding to rapidly create an mRNA vaccine and divert U.S. pharmaceutical industry production lines to make it at scale, and there would still have been inadequate drug supplies for many months.

The United States urgently needs a new system to generate resilience against AI-enabled biological threats. The reality of this technology means that the very innovation that drives the revolutionary discoveries also creates the new threats—and the same tools that make those threats so dangerous are also essential to countering them. That system, accordingly, will depend on leveraging advances at the intersection of AI, biotechnology, and bioengineering—and staying ahead of adversarial exploitation of the very same advances.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

During the Cold War, U.S. security experts warily monitored the Soviet Union's biological weapons programs. Their concerns focused on the possible weaponization of rare but known pathogens such as anthrax, Marburg virus, and Variola virus (which causes smallpox) that could be used against American forces in combat—or even against U.S. civilians. After the Soviet empire collapsed, I oversaw the Pentagon's efforts to reduce the threats posed by its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. We closely tracked and worked to eliminate legacy stockpiles of deadly pathogens in Russia and other newly independent states.

For decades, Washington relied on deterrence to counter the possibility of adversarial biological attacks—but, notably, not by threatening biological attacks of its own. Indeed, in 1969, U.S. President Richard Nixon officially forswore the research, production, and use of offensive biological weapons. Instead, American doctrine was based on credibly threatening nuclear retaliation.

As the Cold War receded and Moscow and Washington shrank their nuclear arsenals through cooperative threat reduction initiatives, national security experts began questioning whether it was moral or effective to threaten the use of nuclear weapons to deter biological attacks. Nevertheless, across multiple administrations, the United States retained deliberate ambiguity on this front. The most recent U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, in 2022, concluded that “our nuclear strategy accounts for existing and emerging non-nuclear threats with potential strategic effect for which nuclear weapons are necessary to deter.” It added that the “fundamental role” of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear use against the United States and its allies, but it did not go so far as to assert that nuclear deterrence is the “sole purpose” of the arsenal. The current Trump administration has thus far decided that another nuclear posture review is not necessary, pointing to the adequacy of the doctrine promulgated by the first Trump administration in 2018. That review stated that nuclear weapons could be used against “non-nuclear strategic threats,” which, although not specifically referring to biological attacks, is understood to include them.

Given technological changes at the intersection of AI, biotechnology, and bioengineering, changes that substantially lower the bar to lethal pathogen production and wide diffusion to uses beyond secret state laboratories, this doctrine is no longer fit for purpose, if it ever was. A decade ago, leading experts began to focus on novel pernicious uses

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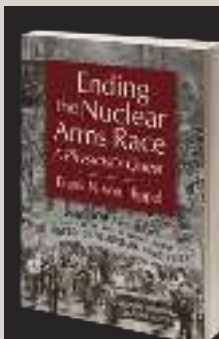


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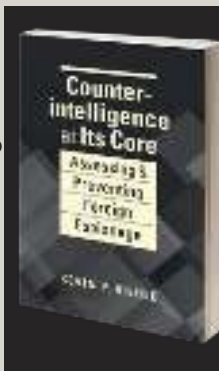


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of biology. In late 2016, for example, the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology issued the first thorough, unclassified warning about the potential national security risks posed by biotechnology. Those risks, the council wrote, were "real and will only grow as biotechnology becomes more sophisticated in the years ahead."

The report's authors went on to explain why. "Biothreats," they wrote, "differ in significant ways from nuclear or chemical threats in that the initial creation of biologically engineered organisms requires much more modest resources and smaller facilities that cannot be readily distinguished from ordinary research labs. Work undertaken with malevolent intent is thus harder to distinguish from work undertaken for benevolent purposes."

The report highlighted the gene-editing tool CRISPR, in particular, for its revolutionary positive and simultaneously pernicious potential. CRISPR enables DNA sequences to be quickly cut and modified, giving users the capacity to eradicate hereditary diseases but also to insert changes in the genome that could affect a specific group of individuals—or even alter the human germline, which determines the genetic inheritance of future generations. CRISPR is also, as the advisory report emphasized, a dual-use tool (one with both civilian and military applications) that can be employed without massive investment or expertise.

The brave new world of synthetic biology, in other words, is radically democratizing and dispersing access to the tools used to make bioweapons. Rapid DNA sequencing and synthesis capabilities have collapsed the cost of reading and writing genetic information, just as tools such as CRISPR have broadened the availability of precise genome modification. Now, AI systems trained on biological data can design proteins and predict a multiplicity of interactions at scales previously unimaginable. AI systems and advanced computing also enable generative biology, which makes possible the construction of synthetic biological systems. Finally, digital designs are being linked to increasingly automated laboratory processes, facilitating the production of digital instructions in the real world.

All this innovation is powering immensely positive discoveries across multiple sectors, the most obvious of which is health care. But it is also evaporating the barriers that until now have made it very hard to engineer dangerous biological agents. Performing complex biological work is no longer limited to people whose advanced education

and professional occupations would impress on them the gravity of their responsibilities to do no harm. Today, a much greater variety and number of people, including those with little or no formal training, have access to sophisticated AI-enabled biological tools. This dramatic widening of usability—“uplift,” in the parlance of artificial intelligence experts—has become a key measure of how much improvement an AI system provides over what a human being can do without it. And American frontier AI models have rapidly advanced the material uplift available to nonexperts who want to acquire biological knowledge or lab skills to complete scientific tasks. Three years ago, large language models failed simple biology tests. But by April 2025, a group of university and nonprofit researchers found that large language models consistently outperformed Ph.D.-level virologists on tests of the knowledge needed to conduct laboratory experiments.

This fact might be less concerning if large language models and other leading-edge biological tools were cloistered in government labs. But they are not. They are widely distributed, and AI science agents are now available for hire and are ready to accompany their clients on creative journeys, whether benign or malign.

For now, turning a digitally designed pathogen into a real-life threat is restricted by the fact that, in the United States, the work is still done by human beings in traditional “wet labs,” where the physical production of digital orders takes place. But the human role is now increasingly accompanied by robots and automation, in particular with the advent of “cloud labs,” which can receive digital orders, design and execute experiments based on them, and evaluate the outcomes, combined with specialized contract manufacturers that provide biotech production services. Right now, there are no regulations governing any of this activity.

SCIENCE FICTION TO SCIENCE FACT

Today, public officials and private-sector leaders need to be concerned not only about sophisticated states developing and using bioweapons but also about organized nonstate groups, including terrorists, criminal syndicates, and mercenaries, as well as lone wolves. In addition, well-intentioned people might cause a dangerous accident because they do not fully understand the powers they wield.

There are innumerable scenarios for which Washington needs to be prepared. For example, malicious cyber-hackers seeking to wreak

havoc could use AI to corrupt the pharmaceutical manufacturing process, creating dangerous, tainted drug products. The results could exacerbate illnesses or cause deaths—and could damage confidence in products more generally, destabilizing the market for American medicines or deleteriously affecting national health care through a reluctance to use previously respected therapeutics.

In another plausible scenario, a politically motivated, loosely organized anarchist network could use an open-source large language model to figure out how to deliver a highly pathogenic virus into large human populations. It might order what appear to be benign fragments from multiple commercial DNA synthesis providers. A member with relevant expertise could then assemble those fragments into a deadly new virus and possibly release that virus into a major American urban area, such as New York or Los Angeles, where it would spread rapidly. In such a scenario, many deaths would precede conclusive diagnoses, treatments would not be readily available, and health-care systems would be overwhelmed. Emergency response mechanisms would be unable to react fast and at scale. Mass panic would ensue.

There are also pernicious potential nation-state applications of AI-enabled biology. For example, a technologically sophisticated foreign adversary could leverage AI, biological design systems, and biomanufacturing tools to engineer a stealthy respiratory pathogen. Through advanced bioengineering, the disease's symptoms might not emerge until six months after infection. The adversary could surreptitiously release the pathogen near several American military bases, both across the U.S. homeland and elsewhere, as part of a broader plan to launch a military campaign that coincides with emerging mass illness. Simultaneously, under the guise of an annual domestic flu shot program, the adversary country could secretly inoculate its own population against the pathogen. American troops and the civilians with whom they have been in contact would eventually start coming down with severe symptoms, disrupting the U.S. military mobilization and deployment required to respond to the adversary's initiation of overt hostilities.

And there are possibilities extending beyond human disease vectors. For example, an ideologically motivated American terrorist organization could genetically modify a plant pathogen so that it destroys a key crop such as rice, corn, or wheat in the United States. This would rapidly disrupt domestic food supply and the agricultural economy on

which so many livelihoods depend, resulting in food insecurity at home and famine in regions of the world that depend on U.S. crop exports.

These scenarios are not science fiction, and the United States is underprepared to handle any of them. The U.S. biological monitoring and attribution architecture is a patchwork of systems with significant gaps. Its various components are not always interoperable, and the country has no real-time capability to integrate and analyze diverse streams of data at scale. The American monitoring system is designed to diagnose, recognize, and report existing pathogens, but it cannot yet recognize new ones that may be created by AI-enabled biotechnology. Meanwhile, the country's system for fielding countermeasures to treat and prevent diseases is not primed to move quickly, and it has relatively little surge capacity. The global response system is even more deficient.

The early warning network for international biological threats—akin to the national missile defense early warning system—that the United States established and championed over the last two decades across multiple presidencies, including an expansion to more than 50 pivotal countries during the Biden administration, was largely dismantled by the Trump administration in 2025.

These scenarios also vividly demonstrate that with new biothreats, the long-standing U.S. deterrence-by-punishment concept designed for a small number of state-level adversaries—threatening the imposition of pariah status and the prospect of employing nuclear weapons against a biological attack—is no longer adequate. Today's AI-enabled biotechnology challenge upends reliance on punishment for four reasons. First, the bio-risk club is already large and will inevitably become much larger than the nuclear club. Biodeterrence needs to shape the behavior of numerous countries and, more consequentially, private-sector and individual actors who are likely to be much less sensitive to state-level interests. Because the building blocks of biological threats are most often dual-use technologies and because they have immense upside, it is not possible to fully prevent the generation of potentially harmful materials or lock them down in government-controlled laboratories and sites, as has been done with nuclear fissile materials. Ultimately, it is not a plausible strategy to threaten to use nuclear weapons against the full array of risks and

The biotech industry should be designated as critical infrastructure.

threats posed by AI-enabled biology, so the threat of nuclear-scale punishment loses credibility.

Second, given the role that AI-enabled biotechnologies already play in multiple sectors of the economies of Washington's allies and partners, extended deterrence will not be plausible. The United States cannot offer them protection in exchange for forbearance as it has done in extending its nuclear umbrella to protect European and Asian allies. The benefits of bioconvergence—the synergy of advances in AI, biotechnology, and bioengineering—matter too much to each country's economic and societal well-being.

Third, it is highly doubtful that Washington can either persuade or compel U.S. competitors and adversaries to reliably withhold development of AI-enabled biotechnology capabilities in the same way that it managed the nuclear arms race with the Soviets because nuclear weapons had no other market value than deterrence and warfighting. Bioconvergence, by contrast, promises and indeed is already delivering immense positive potential, and the AI-enabled biotech economy is global.

Fourth, and relatedly, the Trump administration has episodically sought to make it harder for other countries to access and use American frontier AI models, including in June 2026, when it suddenly imposed export controls on Mythos and Fable—cutting-edge Anthropic products that provided AI capabilities to the United Kingdom and the European Union. The controls resulted in an abrupt and total cutoff of access to any foreign user, including allies and U.S.-based individuals. This draconian action was subsequently reversed, but it is likely to stimulate even more international interest in developing domestic AI capabilities, including at the intersection of AI and biotechnology, because dependence on the United States may create vulnerability.

DETERRENCE BY RESILIENCE

Given the near inevitability of natural, accidental, and weaponized biological incidents in the future, anxiety about growing risks is warranted, and it is magnified by the absence of a strategy to effectively manage those risks. The American people are not powerless in the face of this epochal challenge, but it requires a comprehensive plan of action and a sustained commitment to adaptive implementation, both of which must leverage the vibrant U.S. innovation ecosystem to manage biological risks—including those that may be existential.

As a foundational capability for biological risk management, the United States needs a nationwide monitoring system that can provide early warning of emerging pathogens, whether naturally occurring or synthetic. This requires federal and state investments in building the underlying sensing and collection infrastructure, such as wastewater surveillance, and in establishing a distributed laboratory network to rapidly process the data this infrastructure generates.

Those tools would undergird the effort to quickly identify pernicious actors, which would be essential in establishing deterrence. Although some attackers, such as lone wolves, are unlikely to be responsive to threats of punishment, if state-level or state-sponsored adversaries believe that biological attacks will never be attributed to them, they can act with impunity. It is therefore a matter of national security that the United States develop the capacity to quickly determine which hostile adversary is the source of a biological agent.

A new, resilient ecosystem will depend on a backbone of rapid data access, integration, and analysis that should be owned by the federal government but managed as a collaborative consortium with private-sector partners. This will ensure that the United States can absorb, fuse, and evaluate AI and biological data streams from across the country and, optimally, around the world. This enterprise would serve national and homeland security missions, including being able to continuously identify emerging biothreats and understand what they are and what they can do—such as recognizing engineered pathogens that do not match any list of known organisms—and rapidly develop targeted responses. It must feature the capacity to do work in a classified context that provides dedicated computing power and infrastructure for training and evaluating frontier biological models and for managing sensitive biological data.

Detection and attribution, of course, will not stop the spread of disease on their own. In the event of an attack, Washington must be ready to instantly respond to save lives and preserve the economy. After the 9/11 attacks, U.S. President George W. Bush created a national “critical infrastructure” designation, applied to 16 sectors such as chemicals, financial services, energy, and transportation, that enables the federal government and private companies to securely share information and develop thorough plans for effective crisis management. The biotechnology industry should now be designated as a critical infrastructure sector. As part of this designation, Washington should establish a

coordinating council for the biotechnology sector that includes DNA synthesis providers, AI model developers, genomic data platforms, cloud lab operators, and high-containment laboratories. The group should exercise regularly with federal, state, and local government partners for biological incident responses, just as the electricity sector does to strengthen grid security and build resilience against all hazards.

Leveraging additional capabilities in the private sector to enable a “warm start”—in which the bio-innovation ecosystem is primed

U.S. biotech
companies
have become
increasingly
dependent on
China.

to surge its tools in response to an emerging biological crisis—the United States should establish a national strategic readiness reserve for handling biothreats. This can be modeled on the Civil Reserve Air Fleet, which enables the federal government to promptly make use of commercial planes and pilots when a military aircraft shortage emerges. In the context of a biological threat, similar, preestablished arrangements would assure the federal government of emergency access to the comput-

ing power, laboratory facilities and personnel, and production capacity needed for accelerated discovery, design, and development of diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines, along with scalable biomanufacturing capacity to make urgently needed tests, medicines, and inoculations. Although the Defense Production Act could enable government access, it does not provide the flexibility needed to prepare for long-term resilience, and invoking it in the midst of a crisis can cost the country precious, potentially life-saving time.

As part of its readiness efforts, the United States must fix the federal clinical trials process, which is far too slow and cumbersome to effectively address a biological crisis. This major bottleneck already limits U.S. biotech competitiveness and diverts activity to China, creating supply chain dependencies with potentially ominous implications for American security. The United States would benefit right now from a reformed clinical trials process, which would help U.S. companies regain their competitive edge—and help Washington demonstrate to would-be attackers that it can move fast to field countermeasures.

Without a comprehensive technological edge, the United States will not be able to rapidly discern the nature of a biological attack, determine where it came from, and quickly figure out how to mitigate

its harms by fielding targeted diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines. That capability is essential for reducing adversaries' confidence in their use of biological weapons, for shaping global norms, and for responding effectively when prevention fails.

Unlike in previous eras, the U.S. government alone cannot maintain the country's technological supremacy. The ability to characterize and attribute threats, develop countermeasures, and respond rapidly to novel pathogens will depend heavily on the private sector, which needs to be not only a supplier but also an enduring national security partner. The United States must therefore maintain a strong private-sector AI and biotechnology ecosystem that is aware of emerging dangers and incentivized to work with the government to reduce them.

Meeting this challenge requires a sustained, deliberate effort to rebuild and protect the United States' capacity for biotechnology innovation. Over the last five years, American companies have become increasingly dependent on China for the components used in many drugs sold in the U.S. market and for access to the latest research in therapeutic molecules that can treat or cure diseases, creating substantial supply chain risks. The U.S. pharmaceutical industry is also acquiring a large number of Chinese biotech assets—buying the intellectual property and rights to develop Chinese drugs—particularly in innovative therapeutics. At the same time, it is competing to sell pharmaceutical products into the gigantic Chinese domestic market despite deep concerns that Beijing is stealing intellectual property.

Washington can tackle this challenge and strengthen American firms by revitalizing federal funding for basic science and investing in the human talent to win the biotech race. To do so, Congress should enact legislation that reduces growing dependencies on China and supports the U.S. biotech and pharmaceutical industries via targeted subsidies, public investment in research and development, tax incentives, and other measures. This bill might be modeled, in part, on the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, which invested hundreds of billions of dollars in research and manufacturing for strategically important sectors. These actions should be paired with measures that expand protections for the United States' biotech innovation infrastructure, including the strengthening of a national security review process governing foreign investment in the sector. Incentives for collaborative development and production with aligned foreign partners should also be prioritized. In addition, Congress should immediately pass legislation to mandate

that DNA synthesis companies screen customers and the sequences they order to prevent malicious actors from abusing this technology; this action needs to be synchronized with comprehensive efforts to strengthen the U.S. biotech innovation sector that can counterbalance the potentially onerous burden of such requirements.

MEET THE MOMENT

Pathogens know no borders. All countries should share the responsibility for preventing terrorists and rogue actors from developing and using AI-enabled biology to perpetrate mass harm. But without American leadership, it will not be possible to build the global institutions, regimes, norms, and practices that advance U.S. interests in prevention and effective crisis response and help protect the entire world from AI-enabled biological attacks. To that end, the United States, in collaboration with close international partners, should launch a series of global biosecurity summits modeled on the four international nuclear security summits that took place from 2010 to 2016. The agenda could include setting common standards for DNA synthesis screening, generating market incentives for secure and resilient AI-biotech tools and systems, conducting pathogen surveillance, ensuring supply chain resilience, and pursuing responsible AI-enabled biotechnology development. Whether within this framework or parallel to it, China and the United States should establish a high-level, technically sophisticated dialogue on AI-enabled biological risk management.

On the home front, American frontier AI companies, such as Anthropic, Google, and OpenAI, have committed to testing their models and ensuring novice users cannot employ them to generate biological weapons. But these undertakings remain voluntary, their effectiveness has not been proved, and these companies' private incentives will inevitably diverge from public interests. The U.S. government should work concertedly with frontier AI companies and biotechnology developers to establish a framework for tiered access to the most sophisticated of AI-enabled bio models: an AI model trained not on words and text but on sequences of DNA that can predict, edit, and design novel proteins, cells, and viruses. They should also collaborate to establish and enforce specific guardrails for what these models can generate. This includes embedding safety features that prevent malign bioweapons development and embedding mechanisms that

enable such misuse to be easily detected. It also includes establishing guardrails around what biodesign tools that facilitate the construction of novel proteins and cells are permitted to do—and how autonomous laboratories are allowed to operate, specifically with respect to whether human beings must remain in the loop to prevent abuse.

Given the pace of innovation, responding to this multidimensional challenge will be an ongoing and iterative process. But this is not the first time the United States has tackled an emerging and potentially existential security threat. In the early 1990s, Indiana Senator Richard Lugar, a Republican, and Georgia Senator Sam Nunn, a Democrat, came together to enact landmark legislation that enabled the United States to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and fissile materials after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Congress authorized and appropriated funds for a comprehensive and consequential series of actions—some unilateral and some cooperative—at home and around the world that ensured that the Soviet Union's nuclear legacy did not create multiple new nuclear nations and that terrorists could not access Soviet nuclear weapons or the essential components to build their own bombs and delivery systems.

With similarly visionary bipartisan action today, the United States can position itself to excel in developing hugely beneficial commercial applications of biotechnologies while also effectively monitoring, attributing, and responding to biological threats. This will require synergy and deft management between private-sector innovation and public interests. But the United States is capable of balancing these two imperatives. If a nationwide biological monitoring network that depends on private companies to provide services is established, it will offer continuous benefits, including early warning and attribution for a variety of risks. If the clinical trials system can be transformed, it will benefit consumers by strengthening the competitiveness of U.S. industry and onshoring more biotech production. Coupled with investments and incentives for the American biomanufacturing sector, these measures will build up the infrastructure necessary to secure Americans against biological risks. That, in turn, will enable the country to respond promptly in the event of a deliberate attack and make it less vulnerable to supply chain disruptions. The United States will establish deterrence and therefore reduce risks, creating a virtuous cycle in which Americans can begin to have greater confidence in a bioresilient future. 🌱

America's Missing Military Revolution

Why Washington Still Risks Losing the Tech Race

DOUG BECK

Imagine buying new iPhones for yourself and your family. You visit a store to see the latest model, the iPhone 17, and then go to Apple's website to buy yours. But before finalizing your purchase, you have to spend two to three years experimenting with your pick. By then, Apple will have released two newer models, perhaps an iPhone 18 and iPhone 19. Yet you are not allowed to upgrade your order—you have to stick with the model you tested.

Even then, your already two-year-old iPhone 17 cannot be delivered for two more years, at which point the iPhone 20 and 21 have been unveiled. And only your phone will be delivered at that time—your kids and spouse won't get their iPhone 17s for another year or two. You may also be locked into whatever operating software was available on the iPhone 17 when you first tested it.

DOUG BECK served from 2023 through August 2025 as Director of the Defense Innovation Unit, which he helped found in 2015. From 2009 to 2023, he was Vice President at Apple, leading Apple's businesses in Northeast Asia and the Americas. He is a Captain in the U.S. Navy Reserve and a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This is how the Defense Department has long been forced to buy technology, including missiles, drones, and the software that controls them. When Pentagon officials identify a problem, the process of finding a system that can solve it and purchasing it typically takes years. It then takes years more to acquire enough of that solution to meet the military's requirements. By then, the solution is outdated. Relentless private-sector competition has spawned new technologies, but the military cannot buy them, much less do so at scale, because they have not gone through the same cumbersome testing, evaluation, and purchasing processes.

Having lived at the cutting edge of one side of this equation, as an Apple executive, and then at the other, as the official charged with driving defense innovation for the Pentagon, I've seen both sides up close and personal.

The entrenched, byzantine system for acquiring things is why the most sophisticated country in human history is at risk of no longer having the world's most sophisticated military. The U.S. private sector sets the global standard for creativity, nowhere more than in tech hubs such as Silicon Valley. Yet the way the United States buys and deploys military technology is, like the rigid, Soviet-style five-year plans that even China and Russia have long since jettisoned, mind-numbingly bureaucratic. And despite real progress, the United States is still not changing this process fast enough, or at sufficient scale, to keep America safe in an increasingly dangerous world.

Battlefields from Ukraine to the Middle East have demonstrated with brutal clarity just how much warfare has changed. The break-neck pace of technological innovation makes it possible to roll out new autonomous weapons, AI algorithms, and other sophisticated systems that are updated constantly and easy to scale. The Russians are demonstrating every day in Ukraine that their army of developers can crank out new drones while updating hardware and software, sometimes daily, to match Kyiv's constant advancements, which continue, in turn, to allow Ukraine to keep Russia at bay even though its armed forces and economy are far larger. China has embarked on a massive military buildup, including increasing its production of ships, satellites, missiles, and drones, and has demonstrated the ability to adopt and integrate the latest technology into them. Even Iran has successfully used new technologies to effectively close the Strait of Hormuz this year, despite being completely outmatched by American military power.

The United States faces simultaneous challenges from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and elsewhere. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has told his military to be prepared to defeat the United States in the Taiwan Strait by 2027. War with China is neither inevitable nor imminent. But Washington and its allies must be able to deter Xi, and they must be ready to win if forced to fight. To do so, they must harness the power of commercially derived technology.

It is nearly impossible for the Pentagon to make bets on truly new technologies.

Americans understand that the acquisition system is broken. The Trump administration, the Biden administration before it, Democrats and Republicans in Congress, military leaders, and the tech sector's founders and funders have all called for dramatically changing the way the Department of Defense buys and deploys technology. This consensus represents progress. Ten years ago, only a small group of people were arguing that the Pentagon needed to make such a transformation, or that Silicon Valley's commercial technology was pivotal for military power. Now, it is central to every defense-related conference, to policies originating in the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill, and to the investment theses of an ever-growing, dynamic defense tech sector.

But Americans would be foolish to think that Washington is anywhere near solving this problem. It is not. The United States is not yet delivering on this strategic imperative or making the permanent transformational changes necessary to do so. Progress has been relatively isolated. Successes have captured the news, but improvements have taken place largely at the military's margins. Even the herculean efforts to acquire capabilities for the conflict with Iran largely amounted to a collection of waivers, special actions, and brute-force leadership.

To deliver real, enduring change at the scale required, the entire system needs to be transformed. The Pentagon, Congress, and the private sector need to build on the momentum of the last five years, and shed, once and for all, their mutually reinforcing pathological caution when it comes to purchasing technology. They need to get comfortable, together, taking risks, making mistakes, and quickly become adept at innovating at scale—just as private-sector companies, investors, and customers do every day. Otherwise, the changes thus far will amount to little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the national security *Titanic*.

RUNNING IN OATMEAL

The origins of the current military procurement system date to 1947, when Congress passed a law meant to standardize and simplify Washington's chaotic purchasing process from World War II. The new rules worked well as the country scaled up to meet the Soviet threat through the 1950s. But they also gave rise to new risks as the military, defense contractors, political leaders, and science and technology institutions forged an increasingly tight relationship, creating the "military-industrial complex" that President Dwight Eisenhower warned about in his 1961 farewell address. The complex, Eisenhower said, threatened to self-deal, overspend, and ultimately misdirect U.S. policy. His predictions proved prescient. Over the next several decades, cost overruns and defense scandals prompted Congress to create iron-clad rules emphasizing competition, auditability, documentation, and compliance and to add procurement regulations aimed at safeguarding fairness, frugality, and transparency.

These laws were well intentioned and served (and still serve) an important purpose. But as they accumulated over decades, they resulted in a stunning morass of regulatory restrictions, policies, and learned behaviors, reinforced by a web of entrenched interests both inside and outside government, that have slowed procurement and adoption.

The problems begin before anything is ordered, when requirements processes yield hundred-page documents that dully describe the precise product the government wants built rather than letting the tech sector's experts determine how best to apply new technology to solve military problems. These documents might be fine for crafting orders for a legacy capability that military experts are familiar with. But they do not work when applied to commercially derived technology that moves at the speed of a market driven by billions of global consumers. The most innovative companies, not their customers, typically know how technology might leap ahead. If the engineers at Apple, where I worked from 2009 to 2023, had asked average consumers in 2007 what they wanted a smartphone to be, the answer would likely have been a faster flip phone, in brighter colors. The world would never have seen an iPhone, an App Store, or all the other innovations that followed.

The Pentagon's risk-averse culture, reinforced by rules established by Congress, encumbers every stage of the military development, procurement, and integration process. Military leaders who understand the need for speed often feel as though they are running in

oatmeal. The Pentagon takes the same experimentation rules it uses for crewed aircraft that fly above populated areas and applies them to drone experiments held far out at sea, meaning that drone testing is constrained by procedures designed to protect human pilots and people on the ground. Minute software updates and bug fixes that the commercial world might complete several times a day in the run-up to a product launch can require multiple meetings and, ultimately, sign-off from a three- or four-star officer. Perhaps most damaging of all, the budgeting process established by Congress and the Defense Department locks in specific product designs at least two years in advance. The integration of that product into military planning, training, and staffing doesn't even begin until after the acquisition process is complete and the Pentagon is ready to field the product. As a result, it is nearly impossible for the Pentagon to make bets on truly new technologies or adapt at the constantly accelerating speed of war.

The myriad processes governing acquisitions are implemented by an army of patriotic, hard-working officials. But they are incentivized to never color outside the lines. If a system has defects or major cost overruns, procurement staffers, their bosses, and their bosses' bosses face congressional inquiries and outside investigations. They might lose their jobs. Many fear they could wind up in prison if their actions are misinterpreted as corrupt. But if soldiers die or the U.S. military loses because it doesn't have the most up-to-date innovations, no one goes back five years to find the staffer whose conservatism led to that result. Little wonder, then, that procurement teams exercise extreme caution. Even after Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's November call to reward outcomes and risk-taking rather than adherence to process, the Pentagon's performance incentives remain structured around compliance, prescribed milestones, and avoiding cost overruns.

All these problems are aggravated by the dysfunctional codependence of procurement officials and traditional defense contractors. Companies that have grown up meeting increasingly complicated bureaucratic needs are compliance machines. As much as ten percent (and perhaps even more) of their staff work on law-related, contracting, and cybersecurity teams. Another up to 20 percent are experts dedicated to helping navigate the Pentagon's bureaucracy. At normal tech companies, legal, compliance, and government affairs teams make up an average of two to five percent of headcount—and much less at tech startups. Those companies are not keen on hiring an army of

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employees or consultants to manage relations with the military—especially when it is far from clear it will buy their products. Some do so anyway. But they then risk becoming like many existing contractors: more focused on how to work with the government than on how to create breakthrough inventions.

It is thus no surprise that the American military acquires capabilities at a speed completely out of touch with the pace of modern change. Ukraine will pump out roughly seven million drones this year. It updates its drone software weekly and modifies its hardware every few weeks to adapt to changes on the ground. The United States, by contrast, purchased just 4,000 small drones in 2024. It has publicly claimed that it purchased roughly ten times that figure in 2025, but many of those drones are older models that have not been updated in response to lessons learned in Ukraine or recent conflicts in the Middle East—for example, the need to cope with GPS jamming. The department has pulled out all the stops to buy more drones for the war in Iran. It has requested funding from Congress to purchase up to 340,000 modern drones over the next two years for its Drone Dominance Program and has contracted for the first 30,000 so far in 2026. The army is aiming even higher, hoping to procure a million drones over the next couple of years. But these aspirational numbers are still nowhere close to Ukraine's, and reaching them—much less converting them into fielded military power—depends on massive, unrealized changes in the military, Congress, and the private sector.

NEED FOR SPEED

The Defense Department knows it has a problem, and it has spent the last decade taking steps to solve it. In 2015, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter established the Defense Innovation Unit (then called DIUX) specifically to help deliver commercially derived technology to the military. The organization had a slow start. In early meetings, tech leaders wearing jeans and T-shirts sat across from DIU defense officials wearing suits, each side speaking a language the other couldn't understand. But after Carter reset the unit later that year by bringing in new leaders who were native speakers of both the tech world's dialect and the language of warfighting, the organization succeeded in building a bridge between the two communities.

This revamped unit, DIU 2.0, proved that real military problems could be solved with commercially derived technology. It also showed that the

commercial tech sector could create those solutions quickly, delivering prototypes within weeks or months rather than the government's usual five to ten years. The team achieved this by pioneering the use of "other transaction" acquisition authorities (OTAs), which allow the department to bypass most of its tedious procurement rules when including non-traditional suppliers. These authorities, legally available since the space program began in the late 1950s but almost never used, helped DIU drive a rapid, competitive acquisition process that responded to real needs. Its procurement team featured both frontline military operators and technologists and focused on speed as well as quality. Between 2017 and 2023, that team delivered solutions at a success rate of over 50 percent—meaning the prototype was accepted by the military—across hundreds of projects and helped innovative companies such as Anduril get off the ground. It brought in mission-planning tools, drones, counterdrone technology, and space launch capabilities.

But prototypes neither deter nor win wars, and they do not deliver the kinds of financial returns companies need to make sizable investments. Thanks to the Pentagon's bureaucratic processes and entrenched bias toward traditional sources, DIU struggled to help the innovations it introduced go from prototype contracts to fielded capabilities. The military did not get the strategic impact it needed. Investors grew antsy. Katherine Boyle, of the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, warned in 2021 that "time was running out with Silicon Valley."

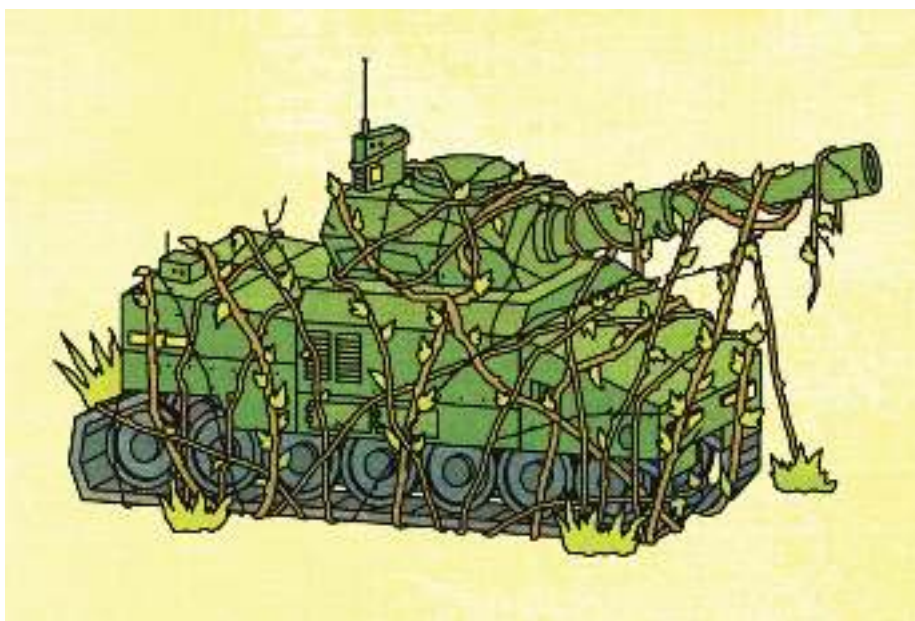
Then, in 2023, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin elevated DIU so that it reported directly to him instead of to the undersecretary of research and engineering. I was the new director, and Austin charged us with inventing a fresh strategy. The resulting DIU 3.0 was based on five pillars. The first was embedding DIU teammates with the staff of each four-star combatant commander—the commanders who oversee U.S. military activity in a given region or function, such as cyber-operations—to keep DIU focused on the highest-leverage problems. For example, the commercial tech lead for Admiral Samuel Paparo, who helms U.S. Pacific Command, was an embedded DIU teammate charged with helping close critical operational and strategic gaps in the Pacific and mobilizing the rest of DIU and the Pentagon to do so.

The second pillar was to partner directly with each of the service branches (army, navy, air force, space force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard) that man, train, and equip the military, to ensure that

initiatives conceived through the first pillar aligned with their priorities and had what the new strategy called a “pathway to scale.” The third pillar called for turning the more than 200 Defense Department entities focused on innovation into a cohesive community. The fourth pillar focused on ensuring DIU’s depth, its connectivity to the tech sector, organic tech expertise, and knowledge base, in each of its tech portfolios—such as autonomous weapons, AI, space, human systems, cyber-capabilities, and energy—so the Defense Department could access the latest and best innovations. This pillar also focused on removing barriers for firms working with the military, to broaden the base of suppliers. The fifth pillar called for building relationships with allies and partners so that American and allied militaries could grow stronger together.

Congress then codified Austin’s organizational switch into law, making the DIU director a “principal staff assistant”—the same level as an undersecretary of defense—with a seat at the Pentagon’s leadership table. It increased DIU’s budget to nearly \$1 billion and changed the nature of the budget itself. Beginning with the 2024 National Defense Appropriations Act, championed by Ken Calvert, the chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, Congress gave DIU groundbreaking flexibility. DIU could move money within its portfolio to meet the most critical needs and fund ideas all the way from conception to the initial fielding of operational units. This facilitated real-time experimentation and optimization. DIU could now help partners in the military services buy new technology, quickly prototype and test it, and begin deploying it in a single year. Then, in the second year, DIU could help the services begin scaling that new technology while continuing to update it. Now, in the third year, even the cumbersome current budgeting dynamic allows true scaling by the services, assuming they plan for that expansion when first collaborating with DIU in year one. DIU and the services, working together, finally have the tools to make the iPhone analogy obsolete.

To see how this works in practice, consider Saronic, a young defense tech startup. In January 2024, DIU, working with the navy, announced it would field proposals for a new model of highly capable, inexpensive maritime surface drones, similar to those the Ukrainians had famously used to sink parts of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet despite having only a tiny navy of their own. Over 100 companies responded to that solicitation, from established defense contractors to startups. In July, DIU awarded prototype contracts to three applicants, including the venture-backed



Saronic, a small company led by a former navy SEAL. By December, Saronic's prototype boats had passed rigorous testing by navy operators, DIU technologists, and others, earning a DIU "success memo" for scaling. DIU used its new flexible funding to buy the first operational units for a freshly created navy squadron so that its sailors could train with these boats and develop tactics for them as they were produced. The navy then awarded Saronic a \$392 million contract in mid-2025, enough for hundreds of vessels. Already, Saronic's boats have helped the U.S. military in Iran, including by rescuing helicopter pilots stranded off the coast of Oman earlier this year. The company's valuation reflects this rapid acceleration: Saronic raised \$600 million in Series C funding in February 2025 and \$1.75 billion in Series D funding in March 2026 at a \$9.25 billion valuation. None of this would have been possible without DIU, its flexible funding, and its partnership with the navy.

Congress paired the unprecedented trust and leeway it granted DIU with new reporting requirements for transparency and oversight. But these are reasonable: DIU must advise Congress of its spending plans before it executes them. It can still implement them as it sees fit, choosing the best technologies from the best companies. DIU has taken transparency even further, providing Congressional appropriators with updates as often as every two weeks on every project, including news both good and bad. This has unsettled some Pentagon officials who fear

the scrutiny will invite meddling. But although Congress has asked hard questions, it has not intervened even once. Instead, openness has built trust, preserving and bolstering DIU's freedom of action in support of the military's most pressing needs. DIU has put that freedom to work across a broad array of critical fields, including drones and counterdrone technologies, AI-based command-and-control systems, AI-driven biological threat detection, and many others.

The Pentagon's current leadership has taken steps to build on that progress. Hegseth has called for a "Warfighting Acquisition System" to propel acquisition reform more broadly and mandated the use of DIU's OTA process for all software purchases. On priorities such as the Golden Dome missile defense system, submarines, and drones, he has centralized decision-making. Congress has issued multiple legislative proposals, and the White House has launched a steady stream of executive orders, signaling support for innovation.

Meanwhile, commercial firms are investing far more in defense innovation than at any time since the early Cold War. In fact, it is one of the few areas of venture capital that has grown in recent years. In 2025, venture firms invested between \$30 billion in defense technology alone and \$50 billion if dual-use companies are included, up from less than \$10 billion (some estimates suggest less than \$2 billion) in 2020. That number has continued to rise in 2026, with over \$35 billion invested in defense technology and dual-use goods in the first half of the year alone by both established firms and new actors dedicated to the industry.

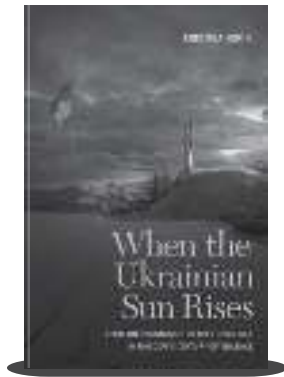
The American military now has more uncrewed systems in the air, on the sea, and under the sea. It has used them to strike targets in the Middle East. It is adapting tactics worldwide to reflect new capabilities. It has access to more AI models and is making better use of them, including for improving its defenses against adversaries' drones. It is developing new tech solutions across the spectrum, and it is getting better at doing so.

ROOT AND BRANCH

Still, these steps are not nearly enough. Even with all the expanded authorities, executive orders, new policies, and public pronouncements, somewhere between one and three percent of the U.S. defense budget is spent on truly innovative technologies. DIU's own budget is around one-tenth of one percent of total defense spending. And only about one-third of one percent of contracts written are OTAs,



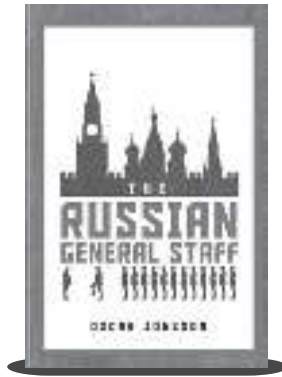
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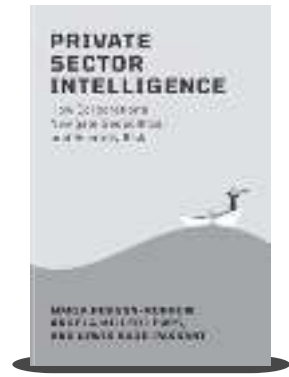
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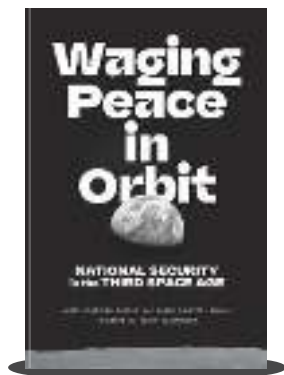
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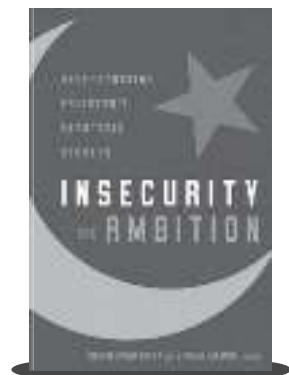
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whether from DIU or elsewhere, representing slightly less than three percent of new funding commitments. The rest remain mired in the old way of doing things, and the vast majority still go to traditional defense contractors. The reforms of recent years have created positive, accelerating momentum, yet they remain workarounds rather than changes to the system. Washington needs to take much more fundamental steps toward real, systemic change that will outlast this administration, and the next.

First, the United States should reinforce and scale its early successes in accessing, prototyping, delivering, and integrating commercially derived technology. This means strengthening DIU's role in leading the dual-fluency world—people who understand both tech and the military—by more thoroughly embedding its personnel across the Department of Defense, through service partnerships, and by deepening outreach to the tech community. It should stay focused on the country's most strategic needs and be put in a position to dismantle remaining barriers between the Pentagon and the commercial sector. Congress should also increase its flexible budget. DIU should remain small, but it should be empowered to serve as the vanguard of change.

But taking risks and bringing in cutting-edge tech is the job of the entire department, not just one unit. And without revamping the way the Pentagon's money works, current reforms designed to move the department's organizing construct for procurement from traditional programs to more flexible portfolios won't matter, and the innovative rewiring underway across the military will not have the effect it must. Congress should thus carve out a portion of the budget—say, 20 percent of today's research and procurement budget—for each of the services and require it to be spent on technological solutions in areas such as autonomous systems, artificial intelligence, energy, biotech, space, cyber-technology, advanced manufacturing, and quantum computing. Within these portfolios of record, the services should have the freedom that today's DIU has to switch from product to product, version to version, and from prototype to operational fielding without having to go back to Congress.

Alongside this new flexibility, the services should be required, just as DIU is, to provide detailed, real-time reporting that shows how they use this money and offer frequent updates, including when the news is bad, ensuring appropriate oversight for Congress and the American

people. Many in the Pentagon believe such information sharing will be too risky or too hard. But project-tracking technology that is already standard in private industry makes this kind of reporting increasingly a governance standard, not a unique burden. Congress has already made clear that it will not grant the services the same flexibility DIU has enjoyed without the same transparency and mutual trust.

The department also desperately needs to reduce the cost and increase the speed of acquiring more traditional platforms, such as ships and planes. This problem might seem unrelated to drones and AI, but the commercial sector can assist here, too, by providing components, materials, and advanced manufacturing techniques that could help the military produce these systems at greater scale and lower cost. This is already happening with the F-35 fighter jet's software, the navy's use of the manufacturing firm Hadrian's software for submarine production, and experimentation by several services with advanced manufacturing firms for cruise missiles and other platforms. Success on major platforms will require partnerships between nimble commercial companies and traditional contractors with the capacity to manage large programs. The Pentagon needs to use its muscle to facilitate that teamwork.

To take full advantage of new technology, American officials will also need to look beyond their borders. The best innovations typically draw on talent, hardware, and software from many places—mostly U.S. allies—and require global markets to compete against China's manufacturing ecosystem. Washington needs its allies to have the best technology, both to be effective against common adversaries and to be interoperable with American forces. It needs allied tech companies to have opportunities in the U.S. market, and for U.S. tech companies to have opportunities in allied markets, so all can compete without relying on Chinese money or parts. Although pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump is finally unlocking increased allied defense spending, friction over issues such as his stated desire to annex Greenland, tariffs and trade imbalances, and the war in Iran is simultaneously undermining allied confidence in Washington. Decisions like the one in June to cut off allies' access to Anthropic's

The Pentagon
must reward
appropriate risk-
taking rather
than punish
every failure.

latest AI models have exacerbated concerns in many allied capitals about the risk of being overly dependent on U.S. technology. The United States has to focus on its own critical needs, but with the full understanding that true strength in technology and national security comes from partnerships, not from any one country alone.

Driving change and capitalizing on it will require the Defense Department to hire, develop, and retain far more dual-fluency talent. Despite its talk about bringing in staffers who understand the commercial world, the Pentagon has done a terrible job of actually doing so. This is largely because its hiring processes are infuriatingly slow. Although qualified, patriotic tech warriors will take a 90 percent pay cut to do important work for the country, it is hard to convince them to wait six to 18 months before starting their new jobs—the time it typically takes from first discussions to hiring. That does not even include the additional waits associated with security clearances for those who don't already have them. Exceptions exist, but like so many things in today's defense innovation world, they result from direct pressure from the top, often only for individual cases. Solving this will require a major overhaul of the way the Defense Department conducts hiring and thinks about talent. Highly bureaucratic processes reminiscent of those for procurement must be replaced with more efficient ones like those in the private sector. In addition, the Pentagon will need to create new job categories, compensation structures, incentives, and career paths to retain and develop dual-fluency uniformed and civilian personnel. Today, too many of these people see little opportunity for advancement in the military and leave to join the private sector's defense tech boom. The vast majority of the changes needed both for acquiring new talent and retaining tech warriors are within the Pentagon's control. Congress is eager to help with the rest.

Perhaps most important, the Pentagon must do more to unlock its teams' latent potential. It must change performance incentives for acquisitions, contracting, and adoption personnel, rewarding appropriate risk-taking rather than punishing every failure. It is not enough for defense leaders to simply demand that Pentagon staffers change their behavior; they must change the underlying criteria for evaluation and promotion that govern officials' careers. The effective balancing of risk and opportunity across workforces as they scale is at the heart of what has made Silicon Valley so successful, and it is

achievable in government. Congress has a role to play, too, by balancing the censuring of officials whose risks don't pay off with awards for those who take heroic gambles for the right reasons.

The tech sector's founders and funders must change, as well. Defense technology is experiencing a gold rush, spurred by the combination of massive need, enormous potential, real steps toward government reform, growing defense budgets, and positive examples from an ever-larger number of successful companies. The sector spans both increasingly saturated areas—such as simple aerial drones—and nascent ones still wide open for new entrants, meaning some areas are ripe for consolidation and scale, whereas others remain fertile ground for startups. Programs like the Pentagon's Replicator initiative, which funded over 100 companies, two-thirds of them small businesses, while turning away over 300, illustrate that fierce, Darwinian competition is both inevitable and healthy in this sector. Out-innovating China demands the Silicon Valley mindset of constant churn—launches, failures, acquisitions, and redeployment of capital and talent—rather than the traditional contractor reflex of taking their losses to Congress or the press.

THE RIGHT RISKS

Fundamentally, what the defense world needs is a sea change in its approach to risk. Officials in both the Defense Department and Congress, working with the private sector, must take appropriate financial, process, and reputational risks today to avoid taking more dangerous ones—risks to military missions, to the troops, and to the nation more broadly—later. Americans are very good at driving dramatic change in response to terrible shocks, such as Pearl Harbor, September 11, or the COVID-19 pandemic. This time, the United States should not wait until tragedy strikes.

Fixing the military's procurement and adoption systems cannot, of course, guarantee that Washington will deter U.S. adversaries or win a major conflict. But the current administration and Congress have a historic opportunity to work with an eager tech sector in support of the best warriors in the world, to bring real change right now, and to make the United States and the world much safer in doing so. No matter where individual Americans stand on the political spectrum, and no matter how different their views on domestic or foreign policy choices, none can afford for the nation to miss that chance. 🌐

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How to Make Government Work Again

JENNIFER PAHLKA AND ANDREW GREENWAY

Over the past decade, there has been a growing consensus that democracies around the world are facing a crisis from within. According to a 2025 Pew survey, nearly 60 percent of respondents in 23 countries agreed that they are “dissatisfied with democracy.” Polarization, disinformation, and disillusionment with leaders willing to break established norms for personal advantage are certainly to blame for this growing sense of dysfunction, but there is a deeper flaw in today’s democratic governments: state agencies and institutions are increasingly unable to perform the basic tasks they were designed to carry out.

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the United States, in early 2020, the U.S. government was spending roughly \$600 million a year

JENNIFER PAHLKA is Co-Founder of Recoding America. From 2013 to 2014, she served as U.S. Deputy Chief Technology Officer. She is the author of *Recoding America: Why Government Is Failing in the Digital Age and How We Can Do Better*.

ANDREW GREENWAY is Co-Founder of the consulting firm Public Digital. From 2012 to 2014, he helped establish the Government Digital Service of the United Kingdom. He is a co-author of the forthcoming book *Digital Sovereignty: The Power to Decide*.

to detect infectious diseases. Yet the virus spread undetected for a month because researchers were unable to get permission from a rigid bureaucracy to test the swabs that would have helped identify it. In the United Kingdom, despite the billions of dollars the government has spent on youth employment services following the pandemic, the number of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not employed, in school, or in training programs has surpassed one million—a precipitous increase of more than 300,000 in less than five years. Germany, a country once known for its efficiency, now has a rail network so unreliable that it has become a national embarrassment; around 40 percent of long-distance trains arrive late. Across large swaths of the United States and Europe, people compare what they hear from politicians of all parties with what they see with their own eyes, and the rhetoric does not match the reality. The result is dismay and distrust.

“State capacity” used to be a term that experts in advanced countries used when speaking of the developing world. If this country receives foreign aid, does it have the capacity to turn it into public good? Now the citizens of those donor countries are asking that question at home. If we pay taxes, will our government provide more of the things we need? If we engage in the political process, will we get the outcomes we seek? Increasingly, the apparent answer to these questions is no. As Brian Shearer, a regulatory expert at the Vanderbilt Policy Accelerator, has laid out, implementing a significant new federal rule in the United States usually takes at least five years from start to finish, making it impossible for a president to deliver on a promised reform before the next election. As a result, the basic feedback loop of democracy—candidates say what they’ll do, voters choose, results arrive, voters judge—is breaking down. Nearly all rich democracies face some version of this crisis.

At a fundamental level, these failures not only erode confidence in democracy; they also undercut sovereignty. When Ukraine needed to restore its communications network after Russia’s invasion, in February 2022, it turned to Starlink’s satellite Internet service, a private enterprise. That meant that although the Pentagon eventually paid to keep the Starlink network running in Ukraine, the decision about whether Ukrainian forces would have the satellite network they needed to strike the Russian fleet at Sevastopol rested not with the Pentagon or with the National Security Council but with Starlink’s founder, the tech billionaire Elon Musk. Since then,

frontier AI models have only accelerated the shift of power from public institutions to private companies.

Democracies have not given up on institutional reform. There are glimmers of success in almost every advanced country, including the United States, at agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service, which has finally begun to modernize its woefully out-of-date technology. Following the onset of the pandemic, the massive stimulus that Congress passed in March 2020 showed what governments could deliver when the global economy was on the line. But overall, efforts to make government agencies fit for purpose in today's world have not been going well. Even Musk, despite his vow to take a chainsaw to the bureaucracy, seemed exhausted by the vastness of what his Department of Government Efficiency had taken on, and abandoned DOGE over a year earlier than planned.

To truly reverse the dramatic decline in state capacity, governments need to take radical approaches that can win public trust. In his classic 1967 book, *Inside Bureaucracy*, the economist Anthony Downs described how institutions that lose their ability to adapt eventually embark on a slow death, becoming hollow shells of rules and procedures. Once they reach this point, he argued, they must be either reborn or destroyed. Today, advanced democracies around the world need to give serious attention to institutional rebirth—rebuilding state agencies into departments of now, unencumbered by people, precepts, and processes of past eras. But they also need to consider which legacy agencies are beyond reinvention and should be shut down altogether.

Not every broken institution has to be rebuilt from scratch. Governments do not have the time, resources, or political bandwidth to turn over the tables in every part of the state at once, nor would doing so be wise. Relentless, incremental improvement of existing agencies remains an important part of statecraft. But if they are going to solve the current crisis, democracies will have to get comfortable with creating new institutions. Curing what ails democracy today will require many things, but no other remedies will stick if governments can't deliver what they promise.

TEST, LEARN, REPEAT

There is no single correct formula for institutional rebirth. An institution might be considered reborn when it has installed a new operating model that allows it to achieve its stated mission. Some

legacy institutions hold valuable assets—authorities, data, know-how—that are not easy to move to a new home, so governments need to figure out how much of the existing system is irretrievably broken and what if anything needs to be preserved. It is critical to get the degree of newness right.

In North America and Western Europe, state institutions have inherited an operating model that was built in the era leading up to and immediately following World War II. This meant that they were designed to administer large, complicated, stable programs through careful planning and centralized control and that the problems they were supposed to address were assumed to be known in advance. During the postwar decades, that model was generally workable, but when the Internet began to rewire the economy in the late 1990s, it introduced a very different set of practices. Solving problems now depended on a system of testing and learning in which solutions were continually tried out in the real world and adapted accordingly. Today, with the advent of AI, the pace of scientific and technological change has only increased.

As a result, legacy state institutions must deal with citizens who expect services to be tailored to their needs, and they must do so in a world that has itself dramatically sped up. And these institutions are constrained by decades of procedural accumulation—rules and requirements added in response to yesterday's problems and rarely removed even after the problem or the technology has changed. It is a dynamic that increasingly leads to paralysis. Only by adopting new operating models can they begin to address the challenge. Sometimes, this can be achieved without building a completely new entity; in other cases, a clean break is required. Either way, the people running the new operation must have the freedom to define how they work, whom they hire, how they buy, and how they account for themselves to the public. Otherwise, they will just end up replicating what they are trying to replace.

The clearest case for starting from scratch is when the goal or objective is also new. In 1958, for example, the U.S. Congress created NASA because beating the Soviet Union to the moon was a task that could not plausibly be handed to any existing military or civilian agency. But building a brand new entity may also be warranted when an existing institution can no longer adequately perform a

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well-understood task. In 1997, South Africa replaced two underperforming tax authorities with a wholly new revenue collection agency. By 2022, the new agency had brought in tens of billions of dollars with revenues reaching an annual compound growth rate of 9.9 percent, allowing the post-apartheid state to fund a significant expansion of services. The Australian state of New South Wales did much the same in the 2010s, when it brought the poorly organized functions of 16 public-facing agencies into a single entity with a unified digital platform. The new agency rapidly transformed public attitudes about government services; the number of people who reported they were satisfied rose from less than 60 percent to over 97 percent during its first five years of operation.

Another effective approach is to give a new entity a specific task that falls under the purview of an existing agency that is unable to perform it. In 1958, after the Soviets' successful launch of Sputnik exposed how interservice rivalry in the U.S. military had left missile and rocket programs duplicative, slow, and uncoordinated, the U.S. government pulled advanced research out of the individual branches and created the Advanced Research Projects Agency—ARPA, later renamed DARPA—to run it independently. Other defense research functions that sat well within the existing hierarchy, such as mission-specific R & D tied to each service's existing weapons systems, stayed within the branches. The DARPA approach worked so well that it spawned an entire family of similar entities, such as the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E), to do research for the Department of Energy, and the United Kingdom's Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA).

Sometimes, the place to build a new institution is inside the one that is broken. In 2019, the state of Colorado put small teams of engineers, designers, and product managers—part of a new entity called the Colorado Digital Service—in place alongside existing staff in state agencies. Since then, the CDS teams have introduced each agency to a test-and-learn model for developing the software it needs, and the changes have slowly built demand for the new practices across the entire state bureaucracy. In May 2026, Colorado announced that its Office of Information Technology, a legacy institution with a staff of 1,150 people, would switch to the CDS's operating model and that the head of the CDS would take over as the new director. It might seem surprising that what amounts to a “skunkworks” could take over a



critical IT function of a midsize U.S. state that has an annual budget of \$46 billion, but the heads of other Colorado agencies welcomed the shift, recognizing that the legacy model was no longer able to deliver.

Yet another approach emerged in the 2013 reset of Universal Credit, the United Kingdom's new welfare payment system. In this case, the rebirth strategy involved no new organization or institution at all. Combining six existing working-age benefits into a single payment, Universal Credit had been adopted as a major welfare reform three years earlier, only to produce what a Parliamentary committee described as "extraordinarily poor" results. So the minister responsible, Iain Duncan Smith, installed new leadership inside the part of the Department for Work and Pensions that was overseeing Universal Credit and gave it a new mandate. Adopting a test-and-learn approach, the new leadership team began small, but over time, every aspect of the agency's work—its policy, its operations, its technology—was tweaked and adapted. Eventually, the new approach enabled Universal Credit to be rolled out to more than eight million claimants and to keep functioning even amid the surge in demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program also showed marked improvement over the existing system in helping single parents get back into the workforce, according to government figures. This was all done within the same department, with the same statutory purpose.

When an existing institution holds genuine assets that cannot be rebuilt from scratch, working from within can be the best option. Some know-how is too precious or too dangerous to risk rupturing: think of the people who look after the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Moreover, although data and legal authorities can be transferred between bodies, doing so may be prohibitively time-consuming. But it is important to recognize that transforming an agency from within is not necessarily any less difficult, given the necessary proximity of the new team to the legacy ways of working. Some of the assumed advantages to this approach—that a successful pilot project within the agency will naturally spread the new operating models to adjacent teams and functions, for instance—often don't hold up in practice. Consider what happened at the Internal Revenue Service in 2024. Using a test-and-learn model, a skunkworks team built Direct File, a system that allowed U.S. taxpayers to file their returns electronically, in less than a year. Rather than embrace the new practices that the team had introduced and leadership had supported, the agency largely treated them as a threat and, if anything, dug in to the status quo.

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A SOLUTION

According to a well-worn anecdote, U.S. President John F. Kennedy once asked a janitor working for NASA what his job was. “Mr. President,” he responded, “I’m helping put a man on the moon.” Apocryphal or not, the story captures the most critical element of any successful new institution in government: every single person working there must be exceptionally clear about the mission.

As daunting as it may sound, it is quite possible for an agency or institution to set and achieve clear, meaningful, and ambitious goals. When Universal Credit was reset in 2013, after three years of failure, the new team asked Smith, the elected official accountable for delivery, “What is the outcome you actually want to achieve?” His answer was not “deliver Universal Credit.” His answer was “support more people, to find more work, more of the time, while protecting those who can’t.” The team wrote that down and stuck it on the wall; it became the North Star for the turnaround that followed.

At the same time, new and highly disruptive institutions must also have extremely visible political backing. During the pandemic, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s full-throated support for the government’s Vaccine Taskforce and his unambiguous directive to “stop

people from dying” were essential ingredients in the group’s success. In other cases, some of the most effective support for new institutions comes from officials who bring other forms of authority. As the sponsoring minister for the new Government Digital Service in the United Kingdom between 2011 and 2015, Lord Francis Maude was not the most senior person at the cabinet table. But his personal authority, reputation, and long tenure made him a highly effective advocate for the agency, helping it transform several large public services. Partly as a result, the United Nations ranked the United Kingdom as the number one e-government in 2016.

Ultimately, however, success will depend on the new entity’s ability to do its assigned task. The performance of the founding team will likely determine whether the institution manages to escape bureaucratic traps or reconstitute them under a new name. To succeed, the team will need policy experts who understand legislative intent, operational staff who know how government truly functions, and technologists—a multidisciplinary mix of personnel who all take a test-and-learn approach. Ideally, the team should include insiders as well as outsiders: too many career officials will stifle disruption, but too many newcomers who are ignorant of how bureaucracy works can also be fatal. Especially useful will be a mix of hybrid characters: insiders who chafe against institutional norms paired with outsiders who are drawn by public purpose.

It’s easy to miss how important it is to get the support functions right. At DARPA, the reverence for program managers is readily apparent. The agency prides itself on the talent it attracts in these roles, and new institutions often strive for that same focus on specialized knowledge. But it is the basics that doom most efforts to do things differently. If it takes six months to hire someone or three months to get memos to the senior executives, whatever exceptional talent the agency can attract will be wasted. At DARPA, program managers hold their positions for four years, but in some government agencies, it’s common for a single procurement to take that long. DARPA’s procurement function is forced to keep up with the ambitions of its talented experts.

To establish the right operational DNA, institution builders should select people with a history of running toward what is new and difficult rather than those who have already proved themselves in legacy organizations. Backroom staff who support hiring, procurement,

finding computers and office space, contending with internal governance, and so on, need to have the same innovative, bootstrapping mindset as strategists and policy experts, or the institution may find itself hamstrung by operational constraints regardless of its other strengths. Choosing the right leadership is a similar challenge. The most successful leaders more closely resemble startup founders than agency heads: in other words, people who are comfortable with building from scratch. There are exceptions. Sometimes, institutional veterans are radicalized by their frustration with the status quo. But a vendetta alone won't suffice; leaders need a positive vision.

THE POWER OF NOVELTY

The word “institution” conjures an image of permanence. But today's government agencies must act with great speed and respond to novel threats and challenges. In May 2024, the United Kingdom established the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to provide financial payments to thousands of people who received contaminated blood and blood products from the National Health Service from the 1970s to the early 1990s. At the time the authority was created, an average of two victims a week were dying before they could receive the compensation they were entitled to. Still, the pressure to get payments out had to be balanced with the need to handle complex cases carefully. So IBCA chose a test-and-learn approach, prioritizing certain cohorts of potential recipients and incorporating the lessons of those early interactions into the service as it scaled up. In an assessment of the authority's first 18 months, an expert review panel reported that more than 2,000 people had received payments totaling 1.36 billion pounds (about \$1.83 billion). Had the new team followed the conventional institutional approach, the panel noted, in all likelihood no claims would have yet been processed.

The IBCA's impressive efficiency was possible only because it owned the process from beginning to end. Governments have a strong tendency to break up the delivery of services into an assembly line, starting with policy and legislation and finishing with implementation. New institutions must not get trapped into owning only a single step of a larger sequence. A team that is focused only on writing better policy without the ability to reshape the operating model—or a team that is designed to improve delivery outcomes but lacks the mandate and access to influence the policies that govern that delivery—will ultimately have limited impact.

But creating new institutions is only half the battle. Just as important is determining what to do with the old ones they are designed to replace. Of course, if a legacy institution can be successfully remade, as in the Colorado case, there is nothing to close. But more often, the new institution ends up competing with its still extant predecessor. For bureaucracies to function, governments have to break the self-reinforcing cycle of legacy accumulation, which means turning off old institutions as deliberately as they launch new ones. The U.S. government navigated this challenge well when it created the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in 2011. Before its founding, seven agencies nominally held responsibility for various elements of consumer protection, but none had it as a primary mission. By consolidating these responsibilities into a single body with a clear mandate and transferring the relevant authorities to the new agency, the CFPB was able to return more than \$21 billion to consumers in monetary compensation, canceled debts, and other forms of relief from fraud, before being significantly downsized by the Trump administration in 2025.

By contrast, the Department of Homeland Security shows what can happen when a new body is created without addressing conflicting authorities. When it was set up, in 2003, the DHS consolidated the functions of 22 existing agencies into one. But it never resolved its overlapping counterterrorism role with the FBI and the CIA, and it created new internal overlaps among the agencies it oversees, such as between Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection.

Of course, no institution is new for long. As a novel institution starts to make a difference, it has to interact with more of the larger bureaucratic machine, and those connections can sap its disruptive force. Smart design, strong leadership, and political support can ward off this effect, but diminishing returns over time is inevitable. Even so, new institutions are still worth the effort. The inevitable entropy of institutions is itself a strong reason to become better at creating new ones; expecting an indefinite lifetime of high performance is apt to disappoint. And new institutions don't have to last to be worth building—a burst of capacity, however temporary, can produce results that outlast the institution itself. The creation of NASA arguably amounted

The most
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startup founders.

to only a temporary boost to U.S. state capacity. But without that lift, the country would not have put a man on the moon.

That is the tactical argument for creating new institutions. The strategic argument is that by showing what a temporary increase in state capacity can do, a successful new entity can make the case for the deeper structural changes that governments need to achieve a permanent increase. New institutions get their room to maneuver through carve-outs from rules that are meant to apply across all of government, such as hiring authorities that bypass the normal process or waivers from cumbersome procedural requirements. But the civil service rules, procurement and procedural statutes, and oversight frameworks those carve-outs are designed to skirt are themselves changeable. If governments were better at reforming them properly and more often, they could enable many institutions to meet the public's needs without requiring so much rebirth.

Such structural change is possible. Most developed countries have already done it once, when merit-based civil service reforms dismantled the patronage-driven spoils system over a century ago. But the political case for it can be very hard to make. As long as the benefits remain theoretical, the exercise of updating the operating model of government may seem dry and technocratic. A new institution that is visibly delivering on its purpose, however, turns an abstract argument about incentives and rules into a concrete question: Why not change those deep defaults—how public servants are rewarded, how accountability flows around the political system, how the state and citizens interact—throughout the government?

A FRONTIER MODEL FOR DEMOCRACY

As many countries wrestle with declining public confidence in democracy, political attention is returning to the craft of governing. But to arrest that decline, governments will have to address the faltering state capacity that is driving it. And that means being prepared to jettison legacy institutions that are beyond repair. It is difficult to imagine, even with the most brilliant officials in charge, a high-performing Federal Emergency Management Agency in the United States or Home Office in the United Kingdom. The same goes for thousands of other ministries and public bodies in these and other advanced democracies. Many have been dubbed “not fit for purpose” repeatedly over several decades.

But governments will also have to proceed with care: the cost of getting this wrong is rising. Along with DOGE in the United States, there is the example of the United Kingdom's Mission Delivery Unit, also created in 2025, and charged with driving Prime Minister Keir Starmer's five top political priorities through the system and changing the existing machinery of state. Yet neither delivered what was hoped for, whether in accomplishing the goals it set for itself or in rebuilding public confidence in institutions. If loud promises to change the state become associated in the public mind with willful destruction and negligible results, better-planned efforts will have to contend with even greater public cynicism and impatience.

Moreover, time is short. AI technologies are already probing the seams of existing state bureaucracies and will not wait for governments to find their footing. Chris Schmitz, a researcher at the Hertie School's Center for Digital Governance, has coined the term "agentic flooding" to explain the mounting demand on public services driven by citizens using AI agents—tools that draft appeals, fill out complex applications, and navigate bureaucratic processes on their behalf. But overloaded services are not the only thing at stake. When agencies lack the technical staff to write or enforce AI-specific rules—on model safety, algorithmic hiring, content moderation, autonomous systems—the practical rules get set by privately owned AI labs and platforms, speeding up the transfer of sovereignty to nonstate companies and foreign actors.

New institutions, even those that are built and sequenced properly, will not be a panacea. But they are one mechanism that democracies can use to plausibly move at the pace this moment requires. A state that tries to perform its usual functions in the AI era but without AI-era institutions is one that will be hastening its own administrative decline. So far, the experience of organizations both public and private suggests that AI is an amplifier. If an organization is built with the right new conditions in place, AI may unlock great potential, freeing up time for frontline staff to deliver public goods and services in new ways. If the organization is a mess, AI will simply make it more dysfunctional, faster. Fourteen years after the Declaration of Independence, the British political philosopher Edmund Burke wrote that "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation." That is truer now than ever. 🌐

The Myth of Eurasia

Why Russia Can't Shed Its Imperial Delusions

AYŞE ZARAKOL

The Steppe and Its Empires: The Russian Empire and Its Eurasian Counterparts
BY MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY. Yale University Press, 2026, 224 pp.

The frontlines of the war in Ukraine run not just through floodplains and shattered towns but also through a more nebulous kind of terrain: the realm of civilization. From the outset, Russian President Vladimir Putin has cast his invasion as part of a cultural struggle, a view shared by some of his adversaries on the Western side. In October 2022, as he grappled with the disappointing course of the war he had begun just months earlier, he used a speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club to advocate “civilizational diversity.” “The smoothing out and erasure of all and any differences is essentially what the modern West is all about,” Putin said. The United States wanted to spread its “neocolonial” hegemony all over the world, including by suppressing the

aspirations of Russians. Western support for Ukraine was part and parcel of the wider motivation to “restrain and block the free development of other civilizations.” At stake in this fight, Putin insisted, was the right of “any civilization to follow its own path and organize its own sociopolitical system.”

This was familiar territory for Putin and, indeed, for many Russian thinkers over the years. Recent developments have made new an old idea that emerged among nineteenth-century intellectuals in tsarist Russia who rebelled against the elite fixation with the West. They argued that mimicry of Europe would only enfeeble their country. Instead, they believed that Russia was a civilization in its own right with a unique inheritance that it could not wish away. Russia’s identity was anchored in both Europe

AYŞE ZARAKOL is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Cambridge and at Sabanci University. She is the author of *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*.

and Asia, they insisted, a complexity best represented by the Eurasian steppe, the vast grassland thoroughfare stretching from China to eastern Europe around which so many great empires came into being. Known as Eurasianism, this conviction in the fundamental difference between Russia and the West at least partly underpins the Kremlin's ruling ideology today. It helps Putin eschew liberal values at home and style Russia as "a unique country-civilization," as the Kremlin described it in 2023, intent on defying an expansionist West. And it offers Russia's critics and its defenders an explanation for why the country behaves as it does.

In *The Steppe and Its Empires*, the historian Michael Khodarkovsky accepts that historical and cultural differences separate Russia from western Europe. "The Kremlin's spin masters' claim of Eurasianism," he writes, "is perfectly valid." In his view, Russia has much in common with certain Asian traditions. Khodarkovsky compares the Russia of the early modern era with other large, land-based empires that formed around the steppe: the Ottomans centered in what is now Turkey, the Safavids in Iran, and the Qing in China. Despite their differences, he finds core similarities in their conceptions of sovereignty and territory, their militarized bureaucracies, their legal systems, and their diverse and multireligious populations. These empires, he writes, "were fundamentally different from the West in social, economic, ideological, legal, and cultural ways, just as their successors, the states of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China, remain today quite distant from Europe's liberal democracies." That shared history, he argues, decidedly

informs the present, in which many in Washington see the descendants of these empires as resolute enemies of the United States.

The mere fact of that common history, however, is insufficient to explain Russian behavior today. Russia, after all, shares a great deal with its European neighbors, too. It is misguided to believe that Putin acts as he does because he follows in the footsteps of Eurasian emperors and warlords. That notion flattens a complex record and turns history into a morality play of angels and demons. And in reaching so far back, it makes the mistake of taking Putin and modern Russia out of their own time.

POLITICAL FICTIONS

For centuries, Russians have yoked themselves to Europe as well as tried to push Europe away. In the eighteenth century, the Russian tsar Peter the Great sought to remake his domain in the image of the West, adopting European fashions, military practices, architectural styles, and much else. That led to cycles of reform and renovation, as well as backlash, chiefly from cultural conservatives, who saw the adoption of western European habits and attitudes as abominable and even heretical.

At the same time, many Europeans viewed Russia, along with Ottoman Turkey, as a kind of foil, an "other" against which western Europe's varied states and peoples could establish a sense of shared identity. As the intellectual historian Georgios Varouxakis has written, the very notion of "the West" emerged in the nineteenth century at least in part to exclude Russia and Turkey. Because both states were geographically a part of Europe, a new label

CHILDREN OF THE STEPPES

The Eurasian empires circa 1700



Map by Gerry Krieg. Adapted from The Steppe and Its Empires: The Russian Empire and Its Eurasian Counterparts, by Michael Khodarkovsky. Note: Dotted lines represent the maximum extent of each empire's boundaries from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

was needed for a civilizational grouping that would not have them as members.

Two things can be true at once. On the one hand, associating Russia with the Eurasian steppe is a political move. Europeans cast Russia in this light to separate themselves from Russian actions and to preserve the idea of Europe as at the forefront of modernity, distinct from the perceived pathologies or backwardness of “the East.” If Russia behaved badly, that was the fault of its primitive and cruel Asian side, a notion that conveniently created the fiction that Western countries are not capable of similar cruelty. When Russians embrace the Eurasian narrative, they are also engaged in the political project of rejecting Europe and the West, which Putin and his

allies deride as decadent, declining, and immoral.

On the other hand, Russia is different, and there is no need to pretend it isn't. Khodarkovsky is right to explore how Russia's history places it in the company of states and traditions that are less familiar to many in Europe and North America. These empires all emerged in the aftermath of the great Mongol conquests that spread over the Eurasian steppe in the thirteenth century and convulsed politics far and wide. If nothing else, *The Steppe and Its Empires* is illuminating as a catalog of comparable practices across these empires.

The Russians, the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Qing shared many practices, including in their political organization and their approaches

to diplomacy and law. One example Khodarkovsky discusses has to do with making treaties. Starting in the sixteenth century, Moscow began casting its treaties with the local rulers of indigenous groups as oaths of allegiance, while those rulers assumed they were entering a mutually beneficial alliance. At the same time, Moscow continued to handle its relationship with these peoples via the Office of Foreign Affairs well into the nineteenth century. The Ottomans also made use of a kind of oath of allegiance, known as *abdname*, which early on took the form of a privilege granted by the sultan to the other side. But while they used these *abdname* with tribute-paying subjects such as the Kurdish tribes, in practice the Ottomans recognized the practical independence of those groups. In both cases, it was not entirely clear what fell inside and outside the domain of the empire.

According to Khodarkovsky, both the Russians and the Ottomans were “reluctant to differentiate between external and internal matters, denying the reality on the ground.” Such an attitude was a natural consequence of the tension created by another shared trait: the pretense to universal monarchy in conditions where it cannot be obtained. The notion of universal monarchy holds that the state is pre-eminent and has rightful supremacy over all others. The empires of the steppe likely inherited this styling in part from the Mongols. A universal empire, by definition, cannot make clear distinctions between inside and outside as it claims to rule over “all.” In the Mongol model, universal empire was matched with the extreme personalization of political authority,

with the Great Khan functioning as the primary lawgiver not accountable to anyone else. Khodarkovsky’s examples demonstrate the influence of this particular understanding of sovereignty on the steppe empires, especially Russia. As Khodarkovsky puts it, the Russian executive was also the judiciary, a feature that lasted well into the nineteenth century.

STATES OF EXCEPTION

It can be difficult to keep a comparative historical project free of modern biases. Such pitfalls are especially hard to avoid when Russia is the focal point. Very early on in the book, Khodarkovsky writes, “It is noteworthy that during the early Renaissance, when Europeans were rediscovering and reimagining their Greco-Roman roots, the triumphant armies of Chinggis Khan were laying the foundation for future Eurasian empires.” Such a sentence sketches a profound contrast between Europe as the cradle of refined culture—the Renaissance, high art, and philosophy—and Asia as the site of empires and violence. Khodarkovsky suggests in the introduction that Eurasia tended to be organized by war, while Europe was organized by law. The lines connecting Chinggis Khan to Putin seem almost too telegraphed.

But the contrast is quite misleading. Asia saw tremendous artistic, scientific, cultural, and economic production in these centuries, not just in the urban centers of China, India, and Iran but also in the astronomy, poetry, and architecture of the Central Asian polymaths at the heart of what is called the Timurid Renaissance, roughly from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

Europe's empires, meanwhile, visited much violence on the rest of the world after the fifteenth century, just as Eurasian empires had done during and after the reign of Chinggis Khan. The legacy of the steppe is not simply one of bloodshed and the muscular assertion of power, just as the legacy of European history is not just one of laws and the orderly restraint of power. Russia's imperialistic behavior can't wholly be explained by either its European heritage or its Eurasian one. And it is clear that Western observers would not view Russia's history of expansionism, including the swallowing up of vast territories once in the hands of Central Asian khanates and Siberian indigenous peoples, as an inherently "non-Western" trait if Russia had exhibited this tendency only outside Europe.

Khodarkovsky's Asian comparisons also fail to explain the particular degree of excess in the Russian political system. Consider, for instance, the institution of *oprichnina* that Tsar Ivan IV established in 1565, through various cunning moves. *Oprichnina* was a special legal realm in which only his authority would apply—what leaders today might call a "state of exception." Once he secured these unlimited powers, he ruthlessly eliminated anyone who had previously challenged him and sacked the cities of Tver and Novgorod, subjecting the latter to torture, looting, and massacres for weeks. The first *oprichnina* lasted until 1572. A second one was engineered soon after. Both periods were marked by purges and executions; at the end, few opponents were left to resist him. "I think that even the Turk is not obeyed as the Muscovite is, because he is a great tyrant," wrote a Venetian envoy at the time.

In this telling, Ivan appears as a precursor to Stalin and other ruinous Russian despots. But what's striking about the episode is that it finds few comparable incidents in any of the other Eurasian empires Khodarkovsky discusses; Ivan's butchery is not the default of Eurasian political culture. Perhaps one could draw parallels between the sacking of Tver and Novgorod and particularly grisly incidents of Mongol brutality, such as the Mongols' destruction of Merv in 1221 and their infamous devastation of Baghdad in 1258. But the Mongols and the other empires Khodarkovsky discusses treated enemies this way: once they had achieved their conquests, they were generally far more laissez-faire than the Grand Duchy of Moscow ever was. The Mongols, Ottomans, and Safavids, for instance, largely did not interfere in the daily religious practices of their subjects. By contrast, when the Russians conquered Polatsk, in modern Belarus, in 1563, Ivan reportedly ordered the drowning of all Jews who refused to convert to Christianity. Other Eurasian emperors of the time also did not persecute occult practitioners as Ivan did in the lead-up to the second *oprichnina*, actions more in line with attitudes in early modern Christian Europe than those common among rulers of Asia. In this way, the task of classifying Russia can become a fool's errand; Ivan's behavior carried echoes of Europe as well as those of the steppe, but it also reflected the will of an idiosyncratic political innovator.

It is difficult to determine where exactly Khodarkovsky falls in this debate of whether the culture of the steppes is responsible for Russia's ills,

but one suspects he implicitly absolves the Western side of the equation. For example, he doesn't dwell much on the Ming dynasty in China, which ruled from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, an odd choice because recent scholarship has shown how that dynasty, especially in its early years, was shaped by the Mongol legacy as much as the other empires under consideration were. Including more about the early Ming in this study would have helped advance a sharper argument about how much the steppes shaped Russia. The Ming eventually shed much of its early expansionism by turning inward as a neo-Confucian ethos became more pronounced. It offered a different example of how Eurasian empires could evolve. Historical legacy is not destiny, and Russia's excesses cannot be blamed solely on its ties to the political culture of the steppes.

NATION-STATE OR EMPIRE?

These criticisms should not be taken to mean that the Eurasian comparative framework for Russia is misplaced. It is obviously true that Russia is not a "European" country in the sociopolitical sense of the word, and the steppe influences are partly the reason why it is something different. Khodarkovsky's book, along with other recent scholarship, makes a good case for that. But the Eurasianness of Russia is only one of many reasons why it is not a European country. Its enormous size and vast material resources make it much less like the relatively small nation-states of Europe. It is much more ethnically heterogeneous than most European countries; ethnic Russians make up slightly more than 70 percent

of the population, while in most other European countries, the titular ethnic groups tend to make up close to 90 percent. Russia is an empire that has twisted itself into the form of a modern nation-state, with much of its territory acquired via "internal" conquest and colonization, including through settler colonization similar to what was practiced in North America, Australia, and elsewhere. European countries, by contrast, lost most of their imperial territories a long time ago. Finally, Russia is the heir to one of the two great powers of the twentieth century, and much of Russia's self-narrative (including Russians' understanding of their own history and politics) is still shaped by that reality, for better or worse. That love-hate relationship with Europe is also another key part of Russia's perception of itself in the world. Putting all those aspects together, the country most comparable to Russia, both historically and in the contemporary moment, is not Turkey or Iran but the United States.

The desire to see Russia as singularly the product of its steppe heritage ends up distorting and simplifying this history. Recalling Russia's Eurasian heritage is helpful to the extent that it underlines the fundamental complexity of Russia today. But the past should not be disaggregated to serve a modern agenda; Russia was embedded in both Europe and Asia and was crucially shaped by its twentieth-century Cold War rivalry with the United States. Putin's attack on Ukraine, his professed imperial ambitions, and his ruthless suppression of dissent don't make him a latter-day tsar, khan, shah, or sultan. His bad behavior is his alone. 🌐

God From the Machine

AI and the Future of Humanity

SEBASTIAN MALLABY

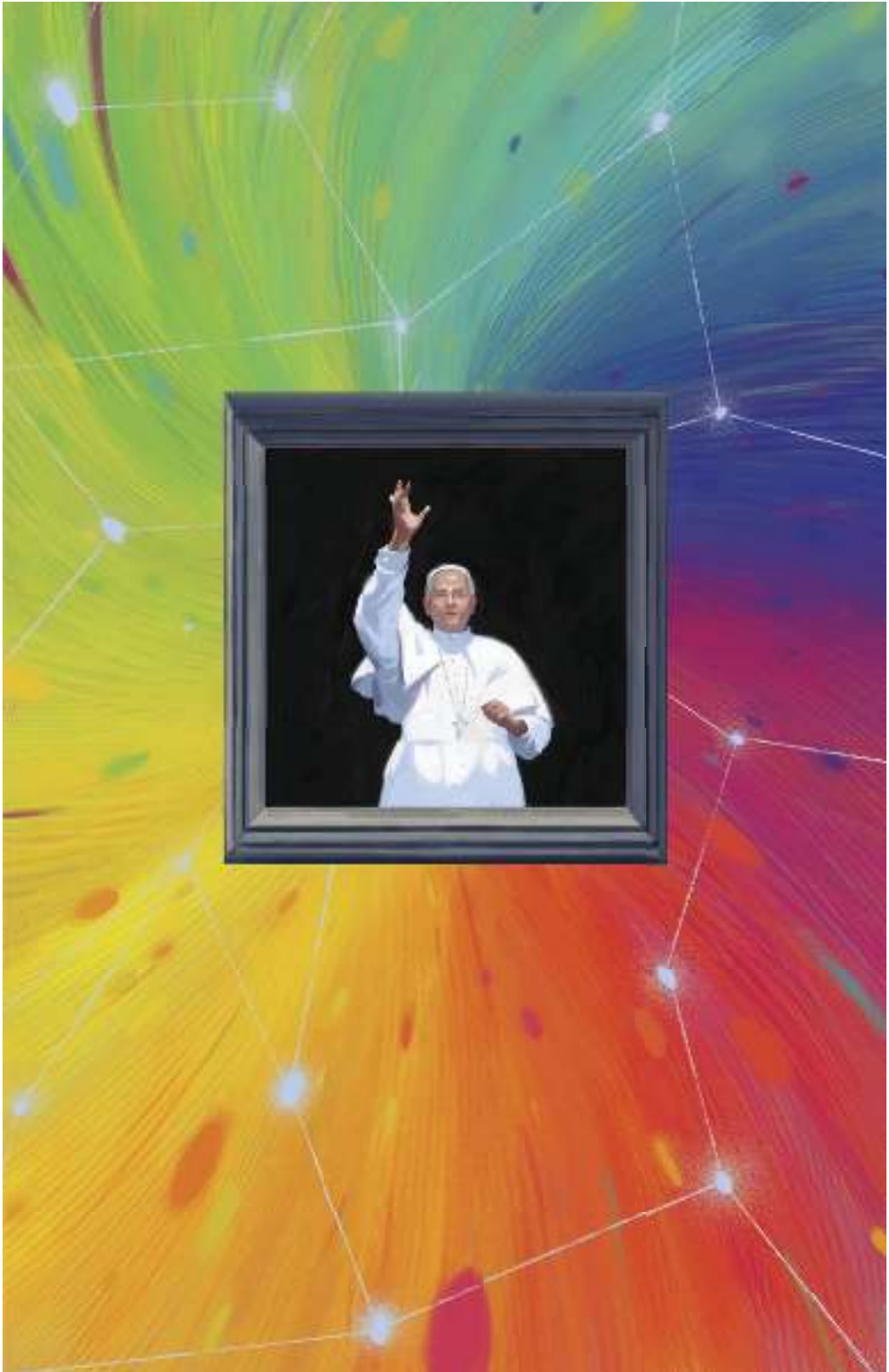
Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence

ENCYCLICAL LETTER BY POPE LEO XIV.
Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2026.

The quest for machine superintelligence is not merely a gold rush, motivated by money. In the minds of many of its leaders, the arrival of a new form of cognition has a tingling, existential feel because of the danger and disruption it promises. Billions of years of evolution have produced something that we take to be special: human intelligence. But now we have arrived at a perilous moment—the birth of what amounts to a new species, one that outsmarts humans. AI “raises profound questions for us,” the Google executive James Manyika said in an interview. “Who are we? What do we value? What are we good at? How do we relate with each other?” The AI pioneer Demis Hassabis believes that AI will be “the most important invention that humanity will ever make.”

Contemplating a technology with almost infinite potential, experts fail to agree even on the basics of what it means for humankind. The leaders of the AI lab Anthropic give better-than-even odds that, by the end of 2028, they will be able to prompt their system to make a smarter version of itself—and that it will do so without any further instruction. The chief executives of other major tech companies speak of systems that will outperform humans on all cognitive assignments; they imagine futuristic companies with almost no human employees and predict cataclysmic job losses. Others are more skeptical. The economist and Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu suggests that AI will disrupt only a fraction of human tasks and that productivity will therefore change marginally. The computer scientist Yann

SEBASTIAN MALLABY is Paul A. Volcker Senior Fellow in International Economics at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of *The Infinity Machine: Demis Hassabis, DeepMind, and the Quest for Superintelligence*.



LeCun stresses the limits of the current AI paradigm, charging that the billions of dollars of investment chasing superintelligence represent the triumph of “complete BS.”

On the question of whether AI systems threaten humans and not just their livelihoods, the polarization is equally dizzying. In a 2023 essay titled “Why AI Will Save the World,” the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen insisted that “AI doesn’t *want*, it doesn’t have *goals*, it doesn’t want to *kill you*, because it’s not *alive*. . . . [AI] is not going to come alive any more than your toaster will.” But at AI labs such as Anthropic, many researchers fear that AI will develop a survival instinct and compete aggressively. Some put their “p(doom)” — the probability that superintelligence will result in human annihilation — at 50 percent, but there are extreme doomers who go even higher. Last year, two prominent maximalists published a book titled *If Anyone Builds It, Everyone Dies*.

Faced with such bewildering divergences and contemplating a technology that seems unfathomable in scope, humans reach for the lexicon that exists to describe mystery: that of religion. Nearly a decade ago, Anthony Levandowski, an early actor in Google’s self-driving car project, started a church called Way of the Future, whose IRS filings state that it is devoted to “the realization, acceptance, and worship of a Godhead based on Artificial Intelligence,” according to *Wired*. Encountering an early chatbot that appeared eerily sentient, the Google engineer Blake Lemoine wrote, “Who am I to tell God where He can and can’t put souls?” Ilya Sutskever, a co-founder and former chief scientist of OpenAI, once

gathered his colleagues around a fire pit at a company offsite. Holding up an effigy, he explained that it represented an AI that was misaligned with humans. Then he consigned it to the flames, like a medieval cleric burning a witch.

THE IMITATION GAME

It was only a matter of time before the Catholic Church waded into this maelstrom. Following industrialization in the late nineteenth century, the rise of mass media in the mid-twentieth, and the birth of the knowledge economy in the late twentieth, the church responded with encyclicals, papal letters laying out how Catholic doctrine applied to each upheaval. Now the Vatican has stepped in again, defending its conception of human dignity and the purpose of creation in the face of the AI revolution. Pope Leo XIV’s *Magnifica Humanitas* (*Magnificent Humanity*), the first encyclical of his pontificate, is nothing if not ambitious. The subtitle telegraphs its scope: *On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*.

The first part of the pope’s argument says what it was bound to say, that humans are exceptional. The church has always preached that humans are created in God’s image; by assuming the messy fragility of human form, God’s son sanctified human experience. As technologists debate whether AI systems’ possible consciousness warrants a machine version of human rights, the pope insists that humans and machines differ fundamentally. AI systems “merely imitate certain functions of human intelligence,” the encyclical states. “Even when these tools are described as capable of ‘learning,’ . . . it is not the experience of those who allow themselves to be shaped by

life and grow over time through choices, mistakes, forgiveness and fidelity.”

To many laypersons, Catholic or otherwise, the church’s position will feel affirming. When Google’s co-founder Larry Page stated that machines represent a higher form of intelligence, making human extinction an untroubling evolutionary event, most people responded with revulsion. Whereas futurists look forward to achieving eternal life by uploading their brains to the cloud, many prefer a more traditional conception of salvation. People don’t want to be subjugated by machines, nor do they want to merge with them. It is comforting to read a document that states, “No computational system, however sophisticated, can create a heart that gives itself, or a conscience that discerns good from evil.”

Whether the church’s assertions withstand analytic scrutiny is a different question. By postulating that AI systems “merely imitate” human intelligence, *Magnifica Humanitas* rejects the long-standing claim that imitating intelligence is the same as possessing it. Far from suggesting an absence of intelligence, that theory goes, imitation may be a facet of it. After all, humans also imitate intelligence—children learn from their parents, and professors master the teachings of earlier scholars. Moreover, if a machine can synthesize knowledge, converse cogently, analyze a medical scan, and ace the bar exam, in what sense is it not intelligent?

The best case for the Vatican’s opposing view dates to 1980, when the philosopher John Searle proposed what became known as the “Chinese room argument.” The goal of Searle’s thought experiment was to refute the famous Turing test,

which holds that a machine should be judged only by its output. According to the test, if the system’s output appears intelligent to humans, then the system is indeed intelligent. By way of a rebuttal, Searle imagined a lone man in a room receiving messages under the door. The messages are written in Chinese, and the man passes back messages in Chinese, convincing his correspondent that he, too, is fluent in the language. But this persuasion is a con. The man composes his responses with the help of a manual that instructs him on which incoming string of Chinese characters should be answered with which other string of Chinese characters. He has no inkling as to the characters’ meaning; equipped with a rule book, he simulates understanding. Searle’s point was that an AI model might lack intelligence and still pass the Turing test. Or as the papal encyclical puts it, AI systems “may imitate language, behavior and analytical skills . . . but they do not understand what they produce.”

Searle’s rebuttal was powerful during the years before the modern AI revolution. Machines based their outputs on rules that resembled the instruction manual in Searle’s scenario. When someone typed “Empire State Building” into a search bar, the autocomplete system presented the statistically most likely next words: “opening time” or “directions.” The system had no idea what the Empire State Building was or what it looked like. But today’s large language models are different. Although they begin by ingesting words and treating them as statistics, they emerge from their training with a fine grasp of meaning. As the author Robert Wright suggests in his new

book, *The God Test: Artificial Intelligence and Our Coming Cosmic Reckoning*, it is hard to resist the conclusion that they attain understanding.

O YE OF LITTLE FAITH

To see how modern AI challenges both Searle and the Holy See, start with what are called “word embeddings.” A large language model works by embedding words it receives into a map with thousands of dimensions. Humans accustomed to living in three dimensions (or four, if time is included), find it impossible to visualize such a map. But computers deal with them easily. In this enormous language map, a word such as “computer” is close to other associated words such as “keyboard,” “electricity,” and “semiconductor.” In this way, the model appreciates the nuanced linkages between each word in the language and every other word. If you bolt vision onto the system, the model will learn the relationships between words and objects—between symbols and physical surroundings.

This is just the beginning. As AI systems master language, they come to appreciate concepts. Words such as “brother,” “father,” and “nephew” are closer to each other on the language map than they are to “sister,” “mother,” and “niece” because the systems understand gender. When certain passages of text evoke concepts such as “inner conflict,” the systems pick up on these, too: in addition to a word map, they build a concept map, on which “inner conflict” is close to “relationship tension” or “logical inconsistency.”

The models can also recognize emotion and detect feelings. As far back as 2017, OpenAI identified a sentiment

neuron—a particular node in an AI model’s deep learning network that sensed whether the bias in an online Amazon review was positive or negative. Today, modern AI systems, trained on text including novels, social media posts, and human emoting of all kinds, recognize anger, joy, shame, sadness, and anxiety. And they don’t merely recognize emotion. Their behavior can be made consistent with particular emotional states or personalities. By tweaking its settings, researchers can make a model upbeat or negative, honest or sycophantic. Unlike calculators, spreadsheets, or autocomplete systems, large language models can acquire what one might call temperament.

Magnifica Humanitas fails to reckon with any of this. It states, somewhat incautiously, that AI systems “do not undergo experiences,” brushing past a major area of AI development known as reinforcement learning: the science of designing systems that learn precisely through experience. The encyclical acknowledges this reinforcement process, if obliquely, by allowing that AI performs “statistical adaptation based on data and feedback.” But the difference between “data” and “experience” is subtle. Humans take in experiences through sensory organs, then convert these inputs into electrochemical signals. AI systems, equipped with cameras and microphones rather than eyes and ears, can likewise be said to take in experiences before they convert them to numbers. At a high level, organic and inorganic machines both convert sensory inputs into data.

Take a 2017 system developed by Google’s AI unit, DeepMind. AlphaZero, as the system was called, surpassed

human experts at chess, the Japanese chess variant Shogi, and the ancient strategy board game called Go. Alpha-Zero achieved these feats by playing tens of millions of games against itself—that is, by gathering experiences. In similar fashion, today’s autonomous vehicles learn through the experience of driving. Chatbots learn the art of speaking to humans through the experience of interacting with them. To quote the encyclical’s own language about humans, reinforcement learning systems “grow over time through choices, mistakes,” although admittedly not through “forgiveness and fidelity,” as humans do.

Machines do not bleed, suffer, love, mourn, or sexually reproduce. Humans are mortal, and AI systems have an off switch. AI exists not in a moral universe but in an optimization matrix. Because of these distinctions, many humans will always insist that machines lack consciousness—even if the definition of this term is slippery—and that without consciousness and the quality of experience it affords, there can be no true intelligence. “Having a body is a prerequisite to having emotions,” the science fiction author Ted Chiang has written. “Experiencing an emotion such as desperation is inseparable from having stress hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine flood one’s body.” For those who are taken with Chiang’s argument, modern artificial intelligence has equipped the man in Searle’s thought experiment with a fantastically sophisticated rule book. But he is still not a Chinese speaker.

Yet the similarities between humans and machines are as striking as the differences. The human brain is a physical object, composed of biological material that obeys the laws that govern the rest

of the universe, computers included. Human brains, like computer brains, work on trickles of electricity; when they form an opinion or conceive a plan, they are processing information. The idea that the gooey mass inside the skull contains some ineffable, nonprogrammable essence—consciousness, spirit, or something else—may be intuitively appealing. But as an analytic matter, the idea is flimsy. And it will become even less convincing as AI continues to advance.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

The second element of *Magnifica Humanitas* begins on firmer footing: AI should be regulated. As Leo argues, AI may amplify inequalities of wealth and power; disrupt the environment, relationships, and jobs; reshape what we learn, how we learn, and which parts of our brains sleep idly. If AI automates warfare, the bar for aggression may go down. Accountability and blame may be “collapsed into the ‘machine.’” Human responsibility may be obfuscated.

The church is right that there is ample ground for worry. But in the face of a technology that has a dauntingly broad influence, the challenge is to identify regulatory priorities, and here the encyclical scores poorly. *Magnifica Humanitas* inveighs against “the new monopolies of AI,” stating that “those who control AI will impose their own moral vision, which will become the invisible infrastructure of these systems.” But there is no monopoly of AI; there is, rather, a global race featuring a dozen or so companies. Further, many of them are transparent about their moral visions. Anthropic’s website features an 84-page

constitution, and Google publishes its AI principles alongside its annual Responsible AI Progress Reports. No doubt such efforts can be improved. But to highlight monopolistic opacity is a curious choice of emphasis.

The encyclical asserts that “ownership of data cannot be left solely in private hands” and that the goal should instead be to “manage data as a common or shared good, in a spirit of participation.” But participatory management is an idealistic abstraction. The real worry is not private ownership of data but its violation. Numerous publishers are suing AI labs for ingesting copyrighted texts. Any individual or institution with an Internet connection faces the danger that its proprietary data will be sucked into AI training sets. If intellectual property is ripped off wholesale, there will be little incentive to create more of it.

The encyclical’s critique of military AI is similarly puzzling. There is a good argument to be made that lethal AI systems must be accountable; they should obey court orders, legislation, and senior human commanders. The encyclical endorses that view but also goes further, stating sweepingly that “the decision to use lethal force cannot be delegated to opaque or automated processes.” Unfortunately, this is impractical. Once AI can make fast and accurate battlefield decisions, its use will become inevitable. The army that eschews it will be defeated by the one that adopts it.

These errors of commission are compounded by errors of omission. The encyclical correctly calls for “independent oversight” of AI “and a political system that does not abdicate its

responsibility.” But it fails to elaborate on the core of the debate about AI governance. It calls for accountability after the fact, demanding decisions that are “understandable, contestable and subject to oversight.” But it is silent on governments’ responsibility to decide whether a model should be released in the first place. This reticence is selective. The church has no difficulty prescribing specifics when the subject is autonomous lethal weapons. Surely it would not have been difficult, or even controversial, in terms of the church’s own teachings, to say that national AI regulators should test frontier models before they are released and block the rollout of dangerous ones.

Finally, the encyclical has much to say about the exclusion of the poor but nothing to say about redistributive policies to help them. There are several options that the missive might have backed: a shift in the tax burden from labor to capital, which would slow the pace at which workers are replaced by machines; wage insurance that softens the blow to displaced employees by topping up their pay in their new jobs; a distribution of stock in AI companies to citizens under 18, which would create a shared stake, however small, in the upside from AI rollout. No doubt societies will adopt these policies as voters’ alarm grows. The church missed an opportunity to call for a speedier transition.

POLICY’S PURGATORY

As AI advances, other figures of authority—religious and secular—will attempt to help humanity come to grips with its future. With luck, they will do better than the pope, focusing less on slippery claims about human exceptionalism,

avoiding red herrings about monopoly, and instead calling attention to the most glaring gaps in the world's response to new systems. The nature of those gaps will shift as the AI story unfolds. As of this moment, three gaps stand out.

The first is the need for an AI equivalent to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. No prominent leader has explained what governments will do when the scariest AI capabilities are diffused around the world and become accessible to criminals and terrorists. The Trump administration has implicitly recognized the threat. Abandoning its *laissez-faire* stance on AI, it has asserted control over the rollout of frontier models, which are capable of highly destructive cyberattacks. But the administration has soft-pedaled the reality that follower labs, most prominently Chinese ones, are likely to have cyber-hacking systems within a few months, and that those labs' current practice is to release their models on an "open weight" basis, meaning that anyone can use them and no kill switch exists. Once someone has access to such a model, no one is able to prevent them from using it. Averting this outcome will require the United States to negotiate joint safety principles with China and other powers. Such talks will be difficult. But the alternative is the mass proliferation of dangerous tools that wreak havoc—for example, AI models that can design novel biological weapons for which no treatment would exist.

The second glaring gap in today's response to AI is tax reform. Governments tax labor at much higher rates than capital for what used to be good reasons: labor is less mobile, making

such taxes easier to collect, and capital investments tend to boost human productivity and wages, meaning that taxes on labor indirectly capture the upside from capital spending. But if machines start to replace humans rather than complement them, levies focused on labor may fail to capture revenues from AI-generated growth, leaving governments without the resources needed to help the losers in AI disruption. Meanwhile, heavy labor taxes add to companies' incentives to replace workers with machines, accelerating displacement and driving up unemployment. If the AI industry's own projections of mass job displacement prove even half true, taxes on labor that accelerate firings will cause voters to revolt against the entire AI project.

The final conspicuous gap concerns the debate over the nature of machine intelligence. The extent to which AI algorithms generate the equivalent of human thoughts and feelings is a philosophical question that may never be resolved, but understanding exactly how AI systems work is a practical and urgent goal. The top AI labs are making progress on the "interpretability" of AI, as this field is known. But given the public interest in solving this challenge, there is a case for taxing the training of frontier AI models and devoting the proceeds to additional research at government AI oversight institutes or universities. *Magnifica Humanitas* claims that we cannot know the thinking inside the machines, because there is no thinking in them worth knowing. But the opposite is true. Machines will never join our moral universe, but if humans aspire to control them, we must first understand them. ❷

What Was the War on Terror?

A Quarter Century of Fear and Fantasy

PHILIP H. GORDON

All the Presidents' Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America's War on Terror

BY PETER BERGEN. Norton, 2026, 432 pp.

For anyone under 30 years old, it must be difficult to fully appreciate the fear that gripped the United States after September 11, 2001. On that terrible day, millions of Americans witnessed airplanes flying into buildings, people jumping off skyscrapers, and the Twin Towers collapsing with thousands of innocents inside. The months and years that followed saw deadly anthrax attacks; attempted bombings of airliners with explosives hidden in shoes, underwear, and soft drink containers; terrorist atrocities in Bali, Istanbul, Jakarta, London, Madrid, Mumbai, and elsewhere; the use of vehicles to plow into pedestrians; and a regular stream of shootings and stabbings. For much of the decade that followed

9/11, the question for most Americans was not if, but when, the next major terrorist attack on American soil would take place.

Peter Bergen's *All the Presidents' Wars* chronicles the fateful decisions and events that were shaped by those fears. The terrorists hijacked not just airplanes but also the direction of U.S. foreign policy. Disavowing the need for Washington to be the world's policeman, President George W. Bush was elected in 2000 on a platform of conducting what he called a "humble" foreign policy, his realism summed up by Condoleezza Rice, his national security adviser: "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten." Yet by 2003, that very division found itself not

PHILIP H. GORDON is the Sydney Stein, Jr., Scholar at the Brookings Institution. He served as National Security Adviser to the Vice President in the Biden administration and as White House Coordinator for the Middle East in the Obama administration. He is the author of *Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East*.

escorting kids but spearheading an invasion of Iraq designed to transform and democratize the entire Middle East. Singularly focused on the need to prevent another 9/11, Bush's modest approach to world affairs morphed into the so-called global war on terror that became the primary paradigm for U.S. foreign policy, akin to the role of the Cold War from 1947 until 1989.

Bush launched the war on terror, but he was hardly the last president to wage it. Barack Obama, although skeptical of U.S. military intervention and elected in part because of his opposition to the Iraq war, found himself not just fighting but expanding the war in Afghanistan—where between 2009 and 2012 he ordered a surge of nearly 50,000 additional U.S. troops (bringing the total to around 100,000)—and turning lethal drone warfare from a novel tactic into a routine tool. In May 2011, U.S. special forces finally killed Osama bin Laden, the architect of 9/11, but the war on terror was far from over. Three years later, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS, a group that Obama had initially disparaged as a terrorist “JV team,” declared a “caliphate” and waged a savage campaign of killing, ethnic cleansing, kidnapping, and rape—leading to another multi-year U.S.-led military intervention in the region.

Donald Trump, a critic of foreign interventions (at least for campaign purposes), was first elected president in 2016 hoping to de-prioritize the war on terror but, like his predecessors, failed to do so. In August 2017, Trump said his “original instinct” was to pull out of Afghanistan entirely,

but that “decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office.” He agreed with his military advisers to shift to a “conditions based” withdrawal, the same strategy that had kept U.S. troops in Afghanistan since 2011. Similarly on Syria, Trump twice announced plans to withdraw U.S. troops but never fully executed them, primarily because of institutional resistance from those concerned about the enduring need to contain ISIS. His administration continued to conduct drone strikes and special operations raids in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, often with looser rules of engagement than in the past.

Thus did Joe Biden, in January 2021, become the fourth U.S. president since 9/11 to find counterterrorism—and the war in Afghanistan in particular—intruding on his initial foreign policy agenda even as he tried to deal with other big strategic challenges. Biden inherited from Trump a deal with the Taliban that included a commitment to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, but it was left to Biden to implement it. He did so, but at great cost. Without the backing of U.S. and other allied troops, the Afghan government quickly collapsed, allowing the Taliban to take over the country almost exactly 20 years after they were expelled from power. The chaotic U.S. withdrawal left 13 service members (and hundreds of Afghans) dead, stranded thousands of Afghans who had worked with the United States, and damaged the American public's perception of Biden, a blow from which he never recovered.

Americans have come to see U.S. policy in the decades after 9/11 as a litany of failures. Bergen's deeply reported account shows in vivid detail the various costly misjudgments and mistakes that dogged U.S. efforts. Yet the greater error was embarking on such an expansive campaign in the first place and believing that the United States could use military force to transform the Middle East to its liking.

Now, in the second Trump administration, the war on terror appears to be coming to an end. Trump has framed his interventions in the Caribbean and Venezuela as campaigns against "narcoterrorists" and justified his February 2026 attack on Iran as a strike against "the world's number one state sponsor of terror." But in practice, combating what the administration calls "legacy" groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS ranks far below Trump's other strategic priorities and consumes fewer resources and attention than it has at any point in the past 25 years. Far from prioritizing the fight against global jihadism, Trump's November 2025 National Security Strategy barely mentions it and instead emphasizes shedding "forever global burdens."

When Americans mark the 25th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks this fall, the threat of Islamist terrorism will certainly not be gone. But the war on terror, the guiding framework for U.S. foreign policy for the previous quarter century, will be.

THE PRICE OF VICTORY

Few writers are better placed than Bergen to take the measure of the

war on terror. One of the last Western journalists to meet with bin Laden (his team interviewed the al-Qaeda leader in a mud hut in Afghanistan in 1997), Bergen followed him and his organization closely, as an analyst for CNN and to gather information for his many excellent books on al-Qaeda, Islamic extremism, and U.S. military and counterterrorism policy.

Bergen tells a gripping story from 9/11 to the present day. He is sharply critical of many of those who waged the war on terror but does not fail to acknowledge its major successes. Decades of careful U.S. and allied intelligence work and advances in lethal targeting have seriously eroded the leadership structures of al-Qaeda and ISIS, neither of which now controls significant territory or threatens Western or regional governments as they did at their peak. Those groups and their offshoots are still capable of mass-casualty attacks, as bombings by an ISIS affiliate in Moscow and in Iran in 2024 demonstrated, but are now shadows of their former selves, devoid of charismatic leaders, ideological momentum, and resources. In late 2001, few Americans would have predicted that the next 25 years would pass without any large-scale, lethal terrorist attacks carried out by foreign groups on U.S. soil. That was the primary goal of the war on terror, and it has been achieved.

But the costs of that achievement have also been enormous—and higher than they needed to be, thanks to repeated misjudgments and overreach. According to Bergen's estimates, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cost the United States at least \$4 trillion

(\$6 trillion, if military pensions are included). Some 7,000 U.S. service members lost their lives, alongside an estimated 8,000 contractors. Conservative estimates suggest that 200,000 Iraqis were killed, as were tens of thousands of Afghans. Beyond the human and financial costs, revelations about the Bush administration's manipulation of intelligence to sell the war in Iraq, the systematic use of torture, violations of domestic and international law, and civilian casualties in the Middle East and South Asia from two decades of drone strikes took an enormous toll on Washington's global reputation. The wars exacerbated Americans' distrust of government and soured an entire generation on the notion of the United States as a force for good in the world.

Bergen is tough on all those who waged the war on terror, none more than those in the George W. Bush administration who launched it. Consumed by the fear of another major terrorist attack, Bush and his team "massively overreacted," especially by going to war in Iraq despite lacking any evidence that its leader, Saddam Hussein, was involved in 9/11 (and despite their desperate efforts to find it). The strategic mistake of invading Iraq on false pretenses was then compounded by tactical errors. Chief among those were the decisions made in May 2003 by Paul Bremer, often referred to as Washington's "viceroy" in Baghdad, to dissolve the entire Iraqi army and fire tens of thousands of Baath Party officials, thus helping to create a well-armed, resentful insurgent force that U.S. troops would end up fighting in the streets

of Iraqi cities for years. No one in the George W. Bush administration ever took responsibility for those missteps—and neither the U.S. military nor its civilian bosses adequately prepared for the chaos that would result.

All of Bush's successors had to cope with the consequences of his decisions: an underresourced war in Afghanistan that had failed to eliminate al-Qaeda and a war in Iraq that morphed into both a sectarian civil war and an anti-American insurgency. Once the expansive war on terror had been launched, Obama, Trump, and Biden all found themselves unable to reverse course and uncertain about the right way to wage it. Each president came to office determined to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan and reorient resources to other foreign policy priorities; none managed to do so, at least until Biden's chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal.

Was there an alternative to this costly outcome? Bergen doesn't say so explicitly, but a reasonable takeaway from his narrative is that there was. The United States obviously had to respond militarily to the worst attack on its soil in history. But it did not have to pursue a sprawling, global war on terror that went well beyond destroying terrorists who threatened the United States and instead set out to somehow eliminate terrorism as a political tool and transform the entire Middle East. Had Bush focused on al-Qaeda and bin Laden, rather than the Taliban and Iraq, he might have been able to destroy that group and its leaders and the global terrorist threat before getting dragged into a costly 25-year conflict.

There is of course no guarantee that any deal with the Taliban would have been possible had al-Qaeda been defeated and bin Laden captured in 2001, or when bin Laden was killed and the Taliban were on the ropes in 2011. But it is hard to argue that any such deal would have been a worse outcome than the one that ultimately turned the country over to the Taliban 20 years after the group's ouster. The deal Trump negotiated, and Biden implemented, ostensibly required the Taliban to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a base for global terrorism, but it contained no real mechanism to enforce that commitment, nor any way of excluding extremists from the Taliban government that took over the country and reimposed harsh Islamic rule. There is no doubt that American and allied forces in Afghanistan over two decades eliminated many terrorists and denied them sanctuary, but it is also true that the U.S. occupation and resulting civilian casualties inspired others to join the cause.

Similarly, it is impossible to know what would have happened had Bush not launched the invasion to remove Saddam from power in 2003. But it is hard to argue that the costs of leaving him in place would have been greater than a war that cost trillions of dollars, took thousands of Iraqi and American lives, empowered Iran, fanned the flames of sectarianism, and led to the rise of ISIS and the bloody multiyear effort that was required to defeat it. Bergen's narrative gives the reader good reason to conclude that a more narrowly focused, modest counterterrorism campaign could have protected Americans at a far lower cost.

CATEGORY ERROR

Many of Bergen's harsh critiques of policymakers' decisions are warranted, and he documents plenty of wishful thinking, costly mistakes, bad faith, and unintended consequences. At the same time, Bergen sometimes falls into the familiar trap of suggesting the main problems with the war on terror were tactical miscalculations or flawed implementation rather than the fundamental strategic error of declaring an all-encompassing war on a tactic and trying to transform an entire region with military force. Indeed, Bergen's repeated complaint about policymakers' failure to "plan for the day after" raises the question of just how they might have done that effectively in a context of political vacuums, sectarian divisions, meddling neighbors, and resentment of foreign intervention. As multiple administrations discovered, too little U.S. military force in the wake of a government's ouster could allow rivalries to fester and terrorist groups to grow, but too much could lead to local resistance, anger at civilian casualties, and unsustainable costs. Once a government has been removed from power, few "tactics" or "plans" are likely to establish stability. For all the missteps of the past 25 years, most U.S. policymakers were genuinely trying to do what they thought was right to protect fellow Americans from real threats, none had the luxury of clairvoyance, and in virtually every case the road not taken would also have had serious costs.

A good recent example of that phenomenon was Biden's decision early

in his presidency to fully implement the Trump administration's commitment to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and not leave behind a residual force. Bergen is highly critical of that decision and argues that even a force of only 2,500 U.S. troops, along with twice as many Europeans, contractors, and the Afghan National Security Forces, would have been enough to "hold off the Taliban." But this critique overlooks the fact that the Taliban had been refraining from attacks on U.S. forces only because Trump had committed in 2020 to pull them all out. If Biden had abandoned that commitment and stayed in Afghanistan, the Taliban would certainly have resumed their military offensive, and the Afghan army might have collapsed anyway in the long run. That would have meant extending the U.S. war in Afghanistan into its third decade and draining scarce resources even as the United States dealt with other major conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. And then Biden's successor would have been faced with the familiar choice between ordering a further surge of forces or risking military defeat.

All the Presidents' Wars is more a historical overview than an attempt to break new ground, but Bergen does make valuable contributions to the general understanding of key episodes in the war on terror. He convincingly argues that despite Bush officials' claims of uncertainty, bin Laden was almost definitely in the Tora Bora cave complex in eastern Afghanistan in late 2001, and the failure to commit sufficient U.S.

forces—in part because military and political attention was already shifting toward Iraq—allowed him to escape into Pakistan. Bergen also reviews new evidence on Saudi Arabia's relationship with al-Qaeda and concludes that although nothing suggests direct governmental involvement with or advance knowledge of the 9/11 attacks, Saudi government agencies had been infiltrated and exploited by al-Qaeda associates or sympathizers to a greater degree than was commonly understood. Finally, contrary to common suggestions that bin Laden believed the 9/11 attacks would draw the United States into a bloody Middle East war, he in fact believed the opposite: that the strikes on American soil would encourage the United States to withdraw its forces from the region, just as the 1983 Marine barracks attack in Beirut and the "Black Hawk down" affair in Mogadishu in 1993 spurred Washington to pull its forces out of Lebanon and Somalia, respectively. It turns out that just like American officials, terrorist leaders can also badly miscalculate.

If the 25-year war on terror really is over, its repercussions are not. It has left the United States safer in some ways, but also poorer, more divided, less respected, more world-weary, and less sure of itself. Every citizen—and especially those who will make U.S. policy in the future—should reckon with the primary lesson of *All the Presidents' Wars*: that legitimate fears and a quest for absolute security can lead a great power to overreach, with consequences no one can predict or easily reverse. 🍷

Recent Books

Political and Legal

G. JOHN IKENBERRY

After the Fall: From the End of History to the Crisis of Democracy, How Politicians Broke Our World

BY IAN SHAPIRO. Basic Books, 2026, 320 pp.

Twenty-five years ago, liberal democracies seemed to own the future, but now they are struggling to survive. Shapiro argues that this shocking reversal of fortunes was not inevitable. An opening existed for Western countries to reform their systems and extend the benefits of democracy and capitalist growth to the wider world. But as Shapiro sees it, Western elites bungled this historic opportunity. The United States and Europe mismanaged the end of the Soviet Union, failing to create a post-Cold War security order that would accommodate Russia. The so-called global war on terror and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq destabilized the broader Middle East and discredited American leadership. The 2008 financial crisis fueled the collapse of voter confidence in mainstream parties,

elites, and institutions. Center-left parties failed to offer programs that would counter the rise of far-right and nationalist populist parties and movements. To halt the breakdown of democratic order, Shapiro insists, Western intellectuals and political leaders will need to reimagine and reinvent the liberal project, illuminating the terms of a renegotiated social contract that provides more people across society with economic security and opportunity.

The Return of the Great Powers

BY BRENDAN SIMMS. Basic Books, 2026, 480 pp.

In this sweeping history, Simms chronicles the rise, fall, and return of great-power politics. The story line is familiar: the triumph of the Western democracies at the end of the Cold War seemed to herald a new type of world system organized around globalization and liberal rules and institutions, only to be abruptly cut short by the dramatic resurgence of power politics driven by the revisionist ambitions of China and Russia and the Trump administration's break with American postwar liberal global leadership. Simms argues that liberal optimists failed to appreciate the

deep and enduring ways that great powers and geopolitical competition shape international relations. Despite the rise in trade and economic growth that followed the Cold War, Simms contends, life inside the U.S.-led liberal international order was simply too risky for China and Russia; it endangered their autocratic regimes and constrained their regional hegemonic ambitions. The author outlines various visions of the future, all of which involve the abiding and defining force of great-power competition. Simms is skeptical that the middle powers, countries in the global South, and members of the European Union will be able to work together to tackle global problems, but he does not clearly explain why.

Street, Palace, Square: The Architecture of Democratic Spaces

BY JAN-WERNER MÜLLER. Allen Lane, 2026, 272 pp.

In this deeply engaging work, Müller explores the connections between architecture and political order. Regimes of all types have used buildings and public spaces for political messaging. Autocratic states have leaned heavily on monumental buildings and spaces. Consider how the massive palace of Versailles was meant to evoke the centralized authority and grandeur of Louis XIV's absolutist state, or how Albert Speer's monumental neoclassical designs for Berlin conveyed the power and ambition of fascism in Hitler's Germany. So, too, have democracies used public spaces in telling ways. Ancient Athens had its agora, an open space for citizens to rub shoulders, and

the Pnyx, the hill near the Acropolis for formal decision-making. Müller traces the evolution and reinvention of these public spaces from the classical period to today, showing how they have served as sites for the affirmation of the core principles of the regime in power and inspired a sense of collective might. Even as technological advances in recent centuries have moved the bulk of political messaging and exchange to electronic and digital media, Müller insists that public spaces matter for both democracies and autocracies. Rallies and public protests remain integral to protecting a democratic way of life, and open squares and public spaces are still the real and symbolic places where democracy is celebrated and defended.

The Jervis Effect: The Scholarship and Legacy of Robert Jervis

EDITED BY RICHARD H. IMMERMAN, STACIE E. GODDARD, AND DIANE N. LABROSSE. Columbia University Press, 2026, 392 pp.

In this gem of a book, students and colleagues of Robert Jervis reflect on the ideas and legacy of the renowned and beloved international relations theorist. Across a long career, Jervis deeply influenced the way generations of scholars considered the fundamental matters of world politics: war and peace, psychology and decision-making, nuclear weapons, intelligence, grand strategy, global transformations, and American foreign policy. The contributors offer fascinating and often heartfelt and amusing recollections of the scholar. Jervis was a nimble and expansive social

scientist, seeking insights across the fields of political science, economics, psychology, sociology, and diplomatic history. His work was anchored in a realist's understanding of international relations, and he saw states operating in an anarchic world. These conditions make cooperation difficult and produce foreign policies shaped by uncertainty, misperception, and psychological biases. In his contribution, Stephen Walt captures the core question of Jervis's scholarship: Why is it so difficult for states to understand one another? But Jervis was not ultimately a pessimist. He believed that political leaders and diplomats can learn from their mistakes and occasionally pursue enlightened self-interest.

*Global Governance Under Fire:
How International Organizations
Resist the Populist Wave*

BY ALLISON CARNEGIE AND
RICHARD CLARK. Princeton
University Press, 2026, 280 pp.

In this deeply researched study, Carnegie and Clark explore the ways that multilateral institutions are fighting back against the assaults of their populist, nationalist detractors. Populist leaders employ various tactics against international organizations, including skipping meetings, withholding funds, and withdrawing altogether. In other cases, populists stay within institutions and disrupt them from the inside, as Viktor Orban did within the European Union as Hungary's prime minister. Carnegie and Clark find that international organizations have responded with a "defensive playbook." One strategy is

to sideline populists and work around their disruptions, as the World Bank did in 2025 when the Trump administration withheld energy-related data. In other cases, organizations have sought to appease populists, as the World Trade Organization has by adjusting its voting and dispute-resolution procedures to respond to populist grievances and the International Monetary Fund has by offering favorable terms to populist governments. The authors argue that the most resilient international organizations are those that employ the full mix of strategies, surviving populist assaults by working with governments that remain committed to multilateral approaches to managing interdependence.

Economic, Social, and Environmental

BARRY EICHENGREEN

*The Doom Loop: Why the
World Economic Order Is
Spiraling Into Disorder*

BY ESWAR S. PRASAD. Basic
Venture, 2026, 368 pp.

Prasad, a leading international economist, uses the phrase "doom loop" to describe what other commentators have called a poly-crisis—the concurrence of a backlash against globalization, the widespread erosion of democracy, the decline of U.S. international leadership, and intensifying geopolitical conflict. The outlines of this story are familiar, but Prasad tells it with nuance and verve. As the former head of the China Division at

the International Monetary Fund, he offers particular insight into China's foreign economic policy objectives and the limitations of its economic model. In a world in which the United States and China face economic headwinds, Prasad emphasizes the rise of middle powers such as Brazil, India, and Indonesia, and the growing role they play in shaping global trade and finance. The author struggles, as do many, when turning to solutions. To salvage globalization, he recommends more generous safety nets for displaced workers; and to restore trust in policy, he urges greater government transparency. Achieving these goals requires more civic engagement and better leadership. Prasad's ideas are sensible, but they may not be enough to break the doom loop.

Liberty, Solidarity, and Community: Capitalism and European Integration, 1945 to the Present

BY LAURENT WARLOUZET.

Cambridge University Press, 2026, 404 pp.

Warlouzet explores the history of European integration for its own sake and for the light it sheds on the prospects of integration elsewhere. The author focuses on three principles that underpin all market economies and must be reconciled for integration to succeed: liberty (the freedom needed for market forces to operate); solidarity (policies to protect the disadvantaged and the environment); and community (measures to safeguard a country and like-minded partners). Although these principles are not always compatible, the Euro-

pean Union shows how a collection of countries can reconcile them. Europe's success is attributable to its distinctive governance structure, which relies on intergovernmentalism—in which member states negotiate directly with one another, allowing them to preserve their characteristic economic structures—and federalism, which requires countries to harmonize their policies and allows them to make credible commitments. Distinctive institutions, such as a strong European Commission, have supported European integration by acting as a forward-looking agenda setter. But because such structures and institutions are products of Europe's unique history, other parts of the world must find alternative ways of reconciling the three principles of liberty, solidarity, and community.

Industrial Policy for Development: Approaches in the Twenty-First Century

BY ANA MARGARIDA FERNANDES AND TRISTAN REED. World Bank, 2026, 242 pp.

In 1993, the World Bank published a report, *The East Asian Miracle*, that extolled East Asian countries' commitment to markets, export markets in particular, while minimizing the role of governments in promoting industrial development. This new World Bank report adopts a more nuanced view of state intervention in economic affairs. The authors acknowledge the constructive role that industrial policies can play in substituting for missing markets and coordinating large-scale efforts to promote economic development

and growth. At the same time, the report raises concerns about the potential costs of such policies, which can be misdirected by bureaucrats and captured by special interests. Even well-designed industrial policies cannot replace the basic prerequisites for economic growth that the 1993 report emphasized, including stable monetary and fiscal policies and investments in education and training.

Recession: The Real Reasons Economies Shrink and What to Do About It

BY TYLER BECK GOODSPEED.

Basic Venture, 2026, 320 pp.

Many business cycle theorists view economic downturns as the logical consequence of previous expansions. In this view, recessions occur when credit booms give way to their own internal contradictions, or when speculative investment manias disappoint expectations and give way to panics and crashes. Goodspeed rejects the notion that recessions result from such intrinsic economic and financial dynamics. Throughout history, he argues, recessions have occurred when negative shocks coming from outside the economic and financial system—such as climate-induced harvest failures, geopolitical conflicts, or global pandemics—interrupt periods of economic expansion. The author marshals centuries of economic data and historical anecdotes to substantiate his claim. Still, there is reason to ask whether these two views of the causes of recessions are necessarily incompatible and, indeed, whether they can be distinguished empirically. If a recession

occurs in the United States in the next year, it will be difficult to say whether it was caused by earlier excesses in private credit markets, on the one hand, or the energy price shock resulting from the war in Iran, on the other.

The Global Casino: How Wall Street Gambles With People and the Planet

BY ANN PETTIFOR. Verso, 2026, 240 pp.

A longtime critic of globalization and advocate of sovereign debt relief, Pettifor lays the ills of the world economy squarely at the door of global finance. The international financial system and open capital markets, she argues, cause and amplify global imbalances in trade and capital flows. These imbalances generate multiple problems, including financial instability in advanced industrialized economies, crushing debt burdens in low-income countries, widening income inequality everywhere, and a failure to raise the funds needed to address the climate crisis. Banks, asset managers, hedge funds, and other financial firms skirt regulations and relocate offshore to operate beyond the reach of national authorities. Policymakers have clamped down on unfettered finance in the past, including under the Bretton Woods system after World War II, and Pettifor claims that it is possible to do so again. She argues in favor of governments reimposing controls on international capital flows as a way of domesticating finance. But now that the financial toothpaste is out of the tube, many readers will be skeptical of whether it can be put back in.

Military, Scientific, and Technological

LAWRENCE D. FREEDMAN

Project Maven: A Marine Colonel, His Team, and the Dawn of AI Warfare

BY KATRINA MANSON. Norton, 2026, 416 pp.

Manson tells the story of one of Washington's first military AI endeavors: Project Maven. The Pentagon established the initiative in 2017, primarily to improve intelligence gathering. It has since become a way to use AI to identify multiple targets and quickly assign weapons to eliminate them. Manson, a reporter, interviews Maven's enthusiasts and critics to provide a well-told and definitive account of the project. At the core of her story is Drew Cukor, an intense Marine colonel who became convinced that AI would revolutionize warfare and that the United States needed to adopt it quickly to avoid being left behind. Cukor identified the tech firm Palantir as the most important contractor and made sure that the project got the necessary financial and bureaucratic backing. Manson illuminates the tension between striving for operational efficiency and the growing anxiety, which she shares, about machines taking over from humans in targeting decisions.

The Impossible Factory: The Remarkable True Story of Kelly Johnson and the Lockheed Skunk Works, America's Innovation Machine
BY JOSH DEAN. Dutton, 2026, 496 pp.

In 1933, Clarence "Kelly" Johnson, a young engineer, joined Lockheed, then a young aircraft company. There, he masterminded the design, construction, and testing of aircraft that made aviation history, such as the P-38 Lightning fighter, which played an important role in World War II, and the XP-80, the first American fighter jet. Johnson was innovative, and his approach to management depended on strong leadership, minimal hierarchy and regulation, and demanding deadlines. He founded Skunk Works, Lockheed's research and development arm, which became a model for innovation under pressure. Reclusive workaholics are not natural subjects for biographies, but Dean does an excellent job of illuminating Johnson's methods and even making aircraft production interesting. He explains why Johnson's work mattered: at crucial moments during World War II and the Cold War, he delivered the goods, namely, the U-2 and SR-71 spy planes.

The White Lady: The Story of Two Key British Secret Service Networks Behind German Lines

BY HELEN FRY. Yale University Press, 2025, 320 pp.

Fry's mission in this enthralling, meticulously researched book is to demonstrate the importance of the

spy networks the United Kingdom established in Belgium during World War I and II—and to emphasize the role women played in both efforts. The network set up during World War I, known as the White Lady, involved over a thousand people, about a tenth of whom lost their lives. Their main task was to monitor railway traffic carrying German forces to the front, allowing the Allies to prepare for coming offensives. Remarkably, as soon as World War II was declared in September 1939, British officials asked the former leaders of the White Lady, many then in their 60s and 70s, to re-create their networks. Without hesitation, they did. Their agents soon found intelligence that provided an early warning of Germany's plans to invade Belgium. When Belgium was attacked in May 1940 and quickly occupied, they offered details of German troop movements and U-boats. Some of these spies were betrayed and executed, yet the network persisted. As Fry, a historian, shows, the network was an important source of information on Germany's V-1 program (which produced the world's first cruise missiles) and helped the Allied powers prepare to liberate Belgium.

Rogue States: The Making of America's Global War on Terror

BY MATTHEW A. FRAKES. Cornell University Press, 2026, 258 pp.

With a fresh take on the foreign policies of U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, Frakes develops a persuasive analysis of the origins of the global “war on terror,”

announced in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Frakes, a historian, looks at the crises of the Reagan–Bush period, such as the 1982 Falkland Islands conflict, Washington's 1986 bombing of Libya, its 1989 invasion of Panama, and especially Operation Desert Storm, which liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. He argues that these events persuaded Washington that it needed to deal forcefully with so-called rogue states—those that broke the basic rules of international order, whether through sponsoring terrorism, by engaging in drug trafficking, or by trying to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Such thinking, Frakes argues, set the framework for Washington's forceful and extensive response to 9/11.

Chaos in the Green Zone: My Time as an Iraq War Strategist

BY TOM MOWLE. University Press of Kansas, 2026, 256 pp.

Mowle, who served as an active-duty military strategist with U.S. forces in Iraq, has written the antithesis of the usual war memoir. It features no battles or tales of conspicuous bravery. He does not cover a particularly vital moment in the chaotic aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion. Instead, Mowle writes about a four-month period in late 2004, when he worked with a two-star general in Baghdad on Washington's overall strategy, including both its counterinsurgency efforts and its attempts at state building. Although he had no relevant qualifications for the job, Mowle ended up giving advice to senior officers on how to deal with

various militias without disrupting the forthcoming Iraqi elections. With dark humor and a sharp eye, Mowle describes the shock of moving to a war zone, the regular dysfunctions of military bureaucracies, and the haphazard nature of strategy formation. He demonstrates the challenges that arise when outsiders intervene in a country that they barely understand and where they are not welcome.

East Asia

ELIZABETH ECONOMY

Privileged but Powerless: How North Korean Elite Grievances Reveal the Regime's Greatest Weakness

BY JIEUN BAEK. Yale University Press, 2026, 264 pp.

Baek's detailed portrait of political privilege is part of a wave of new books such as Victor Cha's *The Black Box: Demystifying the Study of Korean Unification and North Korea* and Jonathan Cheng's *Korean Messiah: Kim Il Sung and the Christian Roots of North Korea's Personality Cult* that seek to demystify the internal dynamics of North Korean politics. Drawing on interviews with defectors from elite circles—including diplomats, military officials, and members of politically favored households—Baek reveals that privilege in North Korea is inherited and rooted in party status. Without the right family or political background, even the most talented individuals cannot join the elite. As one defector told Baek, "One should

live as a dog if born as a dog and live as a pig if born as a pig." Members of the elite have opportunities not available to others in the country: they can live in Pyongyang, enjoy material comforts such as luxury apartments and foreign goods, and travel and study abroad. But they still lack genuine autonomy. They remain under surveillance and must endure loyalty tests and the constant threat of purges or execution. Ultimately, this culture of fear breeds a deep sense of grievance against the regime that Baek believes may one day produce a cadre of elites who will kick-start a process of systemic reform.

Shaping the Asia-Pacific: Trailblazing Leaders and Their Global Impact

EDITED BY ALEXANDER C. TAN AND ORSON TAN. World Scientific, 2026, 236 pp.

Scholarship in the field of political science often portrays leaders as little more than transmitters of larger systemic forces. The essays in this edited volume, however, make a compelling case that the personality, experience, and political vision of an individual leader can play a decisive role in determining a country's foreign policy. Former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, for example, drew on his union background to persuade organized labor to reduce its wage demands and make Australia more globally competitive. By adopting stronger stances on defense, security, and trade—such as pursuing naval expansion, military modernization, and better relations with Australia, Japan, and the United States—Indian

Prime Minister Narendra Modi engineered a paradigm shift that significantly bolstered India's geopolitical influence. And the Chinese leadership transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, in 2012, introduced a far more centralized, ambitious, and assertive Chinese foreign policy. Taken together, the chapters demonstrate that leaders facing similar circumstances can make dramatically different choices, altering not only the trajectories of their countries but also those of entire regions.

China's Weaponization of Trade: Resistance Through Collective Resilience

BY VICTOR D. CHA, ELLEN KIM, AND ANDY LIM. Columbia University Press, 2026, 408 pp.

This pathbreaking book comprehensively documents how Beijing uses its market power to try to force international actors to align with Chinese policy preferences. The authors build an extraordinary database of cases to show when China has halted imports, reduced flows of tourists and students, embargoed exports, boycotted consumer goods, and imposed nontariff barriers such as random inspections of agricultural goods. The numbers are staggering. The authors find that from 1997 to 2025, China engaged in economic coercion 23 times against governments and 582 times against foreign private-sector companies and individuals. But the book's real contribution is in offering a practical strategy of what they call collective resilience. The authors argue that no single country can effectively deter

Beijing's economic pressure. Instead, countries must identify sectors in which China itself is vulnerable—where Beijing depends on only one or a few sources for imported inputs and lacks substitutes—and coordinate their response based on the principle that when one country is targeted, others can threaten reciprocal pressure on China. It is a detailed blueprint for action that will be invaluable for policymakers and business leaders around the world.

Why Ancient Chinese Political Thought Matters: Four Dialogues on China's Past, Present, and Future

BY DANIEL A. BELL. Princeton University Press, 2026, 304 pp.

One of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's political innovations since assuming power, in 2012, has been the revival of Confucianism and classical Chinese studies. This makes Bell's thesis that ancient Chinese thought informs contemporary Chinese political and policy discussions particularly relevant. To bring his argument to life, Bell, a political theorist, crafts a series of imagined dialogues on current issues among the disciples of noted ancient Chinese philosophers, such as Confucius, Mozi, and Xunzi. One debate centers on the very real challenge of curbing corruption and the official abuse of power in China; the disciple of the Legalist scholar Han Feizi supports tough laws with harsh punishment applied equally, while the disciple of the Confucian scholar Xunzi argues that the solution lies in selecting public officials with strong moral character.

Another dialogue takes on the question of whether a local community should fund a cultural center or prioritize the material needs of its citizens. Bell is not trying to document the ways in which current Chinese leaders refer to ancient thought in their speeches and writings. Instead, he is creatively trying to persuade readers that understanding contemporary Chinese politics requires knowledge of how the ideas of classical thinkers continue to inform today's debates.

The China Question: Eight Centuries of Fantasy and Fear

BY HO-FUNG HUNG. Cambridge University Press, 2026, 336 pp.

Hung, a sociologist, offers a fascinating intellectual history of how the West has imagined, admired, and feared China since the time of the Mongol Empire. Western attitudes toward China over the centuries have swung between Sinophilia and Sino-phobia, occasionally within the same era. Early depictions of the Mongols as barbaric conquerors existed alongside more admiring accounts, such as that of Marco Polo, who viewed Kublai Khan as a wise and benevolent leader. Starting in the sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries portrayed Confucianism as broadly compatible with Christianity, which encouraged Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire to idealize China as a meritocratic and rational civilization. But by the twentieth century, the rise of European nationalism, scientific racism, and theories of modernization that envisioned Western civilization as

the epitome of modernity contributed to a view of China as stagnant and irrational. Hung argues persuasively that Western understandings of China have often revealed more about the West's anxieties and aspirations than they did about China—an assessment that resonates today.

South Asia

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

China's Wars: The Politics and Diplomacy Behind Its Military Coercion

BY VIJAY GOKHALE. Simon and Schuster India, 2026, 210 pp. (e-book)

D uring the first 30 years of its existence, the People's Republic of China engaged in five major wars: the first, against the United States in Korea in the early 1950s; the second, against Taiwan in 1958; the third, against India in 1962; the fourth, against the Soviet Union in 1969; and the last, against Vietnam in 1979. But since then, it has limited itself to what are known as gray-zone tactics—the use of coercive measures, such as provocative fighter-jet flights or acts of information warfare, that fall short of outright military action. Gokhale, a distinguished Indian diplomat and scholar, argues in this sharp book that China made this pivot to minimize its economic costs and avoid geopolitical backlash. The primary objectives of Beijing's coercive efforts, he writes, are to signal its strength and preemptively deter challengers. These efforts

include the provocations that have led to friction between India and China along their disputed Himalayan border. In the case of both India and Taiwan, Gokhale argues that Beijing is likely to carry out more (and more intense) gray-zone operations in the future. But he believes China will continue to avoid full-on war, given the high costs.

The Myth of the Asian Century

BY BILAHARI KAUSIKAN. Penguin Random House Australia, 2025, 160 pp.

Kausikan, a distinguished Singaporean diplomat, challenges the idea that the twenty-first century will be Asia's. In doing so, he is arguing against both historians and a suite of Asian leaders who have embraced the term, including China's Xi Jinping. The continent, Kausikan compellingly argues, is not a coherent geopolitical unit, but a place riven with rivalries and contradictions. As a result, it cannot lead the world as the United States and its allies have. Kausikan is also skeptical that any country within Asia, including China, could ever equal the United States. He believes that the notion that China will somehow dislodge the United States as the preeminent global and regional power both exaggerates American weaknesses and overstates Chinese strengths. Japan, he notes, is aging. India's future is uncertain. And the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is divided. International politics, Kausikan writes, is thus likely to remain fluid and competitive, with smaller Asian states balancing between China and the United States as a way of ensuring their autonomy.

The India-U.S. Nuclear Accord: History, Analysis, and Reflections

EDITED BY SUMIT GANGULY AND DINSHA MISTREE. Stanford University Press, 2026, 296 pp.

In October 2008, U.S. President George W. Bush signed the U.S.-Indian civil nuclear agreement. This fascinating volume, with essays from many of the key actors involved in negotiating the deal, provides an overview of the agreement and its consequences. It shows how the deal was pushed by Bush, who felt that the U.S.-Indian partnership could not grow until Washington resolved its differences with New Delhi over the latter's acquisition of nuclear weapons. To do so, Washington granted India access to civilian nuclear technology, and in exchange, New Delhi committed to separating civilian and military reactors and opening its civilian nuclear reactors up to International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring. The road to passage was fraught; Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government nearly fell because of concerns that he had conceded too much. The agreement has also not delivered meaningful civilian nuclear cooperation between the two countries. But the essayists claim that the agreement was a great strategic success because, after decades of frostiness between the two countries, it became a symbol of the United States' commitment to India's rise.

The Birth of Indian Liberalism: Mama Parmanand's "Letters to an Indian Raja"

EDITED BY RAHUL SAGAR.
Juggernaut, 2026, 328 pp.

Narayana Mahadev Parmanand was one of India's important thinkers. His *Letters to an Indian Raja*, first published in 1891, is a remarkable work of political theory addressed to the rulers of India's princely states, the nominally sovereign South Asian kingdoms that existed under British suzerainty until Indian independence, in 1947. He called on monarchs to free their citizens from the despotism of custom and entrenched social hierarchies, improve public education, build modern and meritocratic governments, and replace absolutism with constitutional monarchy. Parmanand's liberal reformism was grounded not in a doctrine of individual rights but in his belief about humanity's quest for perfection—which, he thought, required freedom. Sagar, a political scientist, has put together the first modern edition of Parmanand's text. The mass nationalism of the Indian National Congress eventually displaced Parmanand's project of dotting the subcontinent with enlightened constitutional monarchs. But Parmanand's thinking is indispensable for understanding India's liberal tradition.

The Future That Was: A History of Third World Feminism Against Authoritarianism

BY DURBA MITRA. Princeton University Press, 2026, 352 pp.

Mitra, a historian, vividly recounts the feminist movements that swept across Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. They were shaped by the conviction that the struggle against patriarchy was part and parcel of the struggle against racism, imperialism, authoritarianism, and unequal global development. These feminists, who hailed from around the world, primarily sought to “seize the means of knowledge production” (a phrase Mitra and other scholars have used) by transforming society's understanding of women's political and economic power. They held events, such as the 1985 Nairobi Conference, to simultaneously advance women's solidarity and articulate a vision of geopolitics founded on global justice. Their movement led to pathbreaking anthologies, such as *Women Writing in India* and *Women Writing in Africa*. It yielded a network of influential publishers, including Kali for Women, and new women's studies programs. And it was at the forefront of resisting racism and authoritarianism in different parts of the world. Yet Mitra's book is also a story of disappointment. Over time, the radical ambition of these activists narrowed into technocratic agendas that focused largely on expanding welfare states. And eventually, the link between feminism and the broader quest for a more just global order frayed.

Middle East

LISA ANDERSON

Israel: What Went Wrong?

BY OMER BARTOV. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2026, 256 pp.

This closely argued, circum-spect book draws on the author's decades of personal experience and scholarship to paint a picture of contemporary Israel as a state that has betrayed its own values and purpose. An Israeli American scholar of the Holocaust and other genocides, Bartov was early to warn that Israel's response to the attack of October 7, 2023, went beyond self-defense. He writes with a sense of urgency, arguing here that Israel's campaign in Gaza amounted to genocide, one fueled by nearly universal shock and rage at Hamas's attacks on Israelis, the ideological policies of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and complacent and indulgent U.S. administrations. Yet, Bartov suggests, the debate over Israel's actions was itself destructive in the way it deepened a divide between scholars of the Holocaust and of other genocides and allowed distinctions between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism to grow clouded and confused. The war also highlighted the profound flaws of Israel's legal system, including its lack of a constitution. Bartov ends his penetrating diagnosis of Israel's ailments with a wise and thoughtful discussion of alternative remedies, including legal reforms in Israel and confederation

among Israelis and Palestinians. Although hardly optimistic, Bartov has not given up hope.

A Daring Enterprise: A U.S.-Egyptian Partnership and the Case for Soft Power

BY JAMES A. HARMON, CORNELIUS QUEEN, AND MARK WARREN. American University in Cairo Press, 2026, 240 pp.

In 2011, only months after the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked Harmon to lead a new Congress-financed initiative, the Egyptian-American Enterprise Fund, which sought to stimulate Egypt's private sector. A private investor and former president of the U.S. Export-Import Bank, Harmon had never been to Egypt and certainly had never gotten caught up in revolutionary politics. This enchanting book is partly a wry tale of the education of a not-so-innocent American abroad as he navigates the unfamiliar terrain of a lumbering state-controlled economy amid political upheaval. It is also a passionate and persuasive brief for supporting the small, beleaguered, but lively private sectors of the world's emerging markets. Harmon and his colleagues describe a growing tech industry and proudly showcase companies that grew to make millions of dollars for investors (including the American taxpayer) in IPOs and acquisitions by global companies, while building entrepreneurial skills and much-needed jobs in Egypt itself. The fund was among the casualties of the Trump administration's decision in 2025 to scale back

official development assistance; the book ends on an elegiac note, arguing for the promise of people-to-people diplomacy and soft power.

West Asia: A New American Grand Strategy in the Middle East

BY MOHAMMED SOLIMAN. Polity Press, 2026, 272 pp.

In this ambitious, sometimes perplexing but always provocative book, Soliman argues that “the Middle East” is a tired and unhelpful frame for understanding the region it labels. Internal cleavages and ambitious foreign policies now divide one-time allies and unite erstwhile enemies: the Abraham Accords and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor are only the most visible of many efforts by countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, led by the United Arab Emirates, to forsake cultural and historical allegiances based on Muslim and Arab identities in favor of partnerships based on economic interests and global ambitions. Soliman argues that this turn to “pragmatic” cooperation should be embraced by the United States, which should abandon expensive and pointless nation building in places such as Iraq and Syria in favor of overlapping, sector-specific coalitions that enhance extraregional cooperation. Rebranding the region by turning east from its historical heartland is certainly a tantalizing vision for the countries of the Gulf, but it is not clear that the “ideologues,” whether Palestinian nationalists or Iranian revolutionaries, are ready to be consigned to history in favor of such apparent pragmatism.

Islamic Aid and Gulf States in Contemporary Crises

BY ALTEA PERICOLI. Edinburgh University Press, 2026, 256 pp.

Starting with the historical principles and practices of charity in Islam, this instructive book examines the complex way religion and politics intersect in the twenty-first century. Pericoli notes that some of the world’s most intractable humanitarian crises are in Muslim-majority contexts, including in Gaza, Somalia, Sudan, and the western border region of Myanmar. But as states in the Muslim world have consolidated control of transnational financial flows—a move urged by international partners to help trace and extinguish funding for terrorist groups—and sought new sources of tax revenues, governments have assumed administrative control of *zakat*, the charitable wealth tax mandated for all Muslims, and other religious alms. Examining patterns of humanitarian funding in Syria by Qatar and the United Arab Emirates between 2011 and 2024, Pericoli traces the slow but inexorable decline of faith-based humanitarianism in favor of state-driven realpolitik. She suggests that the dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development may create new opportunities for non-Western donors, including from the Gulf, to play a more defining role in the dispensing of humanitarian assistance in the region and elsewhere.

Art Capital: Museum Politics and the Making of the Louvre Abu Dhabi

BY BETH DERDERIAN. Stanford University Press, 2026, 252 pp.

Museums are conventionally understood by scholars as vehicles through which social identities are defined, preserved, and amplified. The identities involved are often national—the Louvre in Paris, for example, is owned by the French government and was transformed from a royal palace into a public institution during the French Revolution. It still serves as a powerful symbol of French cultural achievements and aspirations. In 2017, the United Arab Emirates, in collaboration with the French government, opened the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a grand encyclopedic museum meant to draw visitors from around the world and place the UAE on the global cultural map. This fascinating book explores what kind of identity this museum is intended to convey. Derderian, an anthropologist, visits exhibitions and artists' studios and interviews curators, collectors, and administrators to weave the complex story of museum-making in a country in which most residents are from elsewhere and in a world in which art itself is as much an asset class as it is a matter of national pride or an expression of creativity. In advertising the UAE as an arts destination, the museum reinforces the country's self-promotion as a twenty-first-century paragon of cosmopolitan sophistication and global wealth.

Africa

ZACHARIAH MAMPILLY

Silicon Elsewhere: Nairobi, Global China, and the Promise of Techno-Capital

BY ANDREA POLLIO. University of California Press, 2026, 238 pp.

Scholars of today's technology-driven capitalism generally view Silicon Valley in the United States or Shenzhen in China as the key sites from which to understand its effects on the world. In this insightful book, Pollio convincingly contends that Nairobi's Silicon Savannah provides a better vantage point. A geographer, Pollio traces the flows of Chinese capital, people, and products that have helped turn Nairobi into Africa's leading technology hub. Eschewing the claim that China is engaging in digital neocolonialism on the continent, Pollio makes two convincing arguments. First, no single unified policy drives Chinese engagement with Africa; the reality of Chinese-African tech relations is far more decentralized, with numerous Chinese state-led initiatives jostling for space with the efforts of the Chinese private sector. Second, Kenyan tech leaders demonstrate far more innovation and agency than they are generally credited with. China developed its strategy to become a bigger player in technology through investments all over the world at around the same time that Kenya's leaders, over a decade ago, identified the tech sector as providing them with a potential competitive advantage.

Despite its Anglophone heritage and American cultural orientation, Kenya has embraced China as the key partner for Nairobi's burgeoning tech scene through preferential loans, joint ventures, and export credits.

Shine Your Eye: In Search of West Africa

BY ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE.
Hurst, 2026, 264 pp.

Maja-Pearce has long been one of Nigeria's most acerbic critics. Born to a Nigerian father and a British mother in London and raised in Lagos, he brings an irreverent and literary sensibility to his numerous takedowns of the country's venal leadership. This book is a travelogue that documents a journey he took to revisit sites he wrote about 30 years earlier during the explosion of violence that rocked West Africa after the fall of the Soviet Union. Mixing light-hearted stories of the indignities of being a 70-something traveler on a budget with grim stories of the gratuitous violence he observed firsthand in the 1990s, the book can be jarring in its sudden tonal shifts. But what emerges from this occasionally clunky chronicle is an affecting portrait of a region far removed from its darkest days, even as past violence continues to cast a shadow into the present.

War-Making as Worldmaking: Kenya, the United States, and the War on Terror

BY SAMAR AL-BULUSHI. Stanford University Press, 2024, 274 pp.

Over the last decade, the focus of the so-called global war on terror has moved to Africa. Across the vast expanse of the Sahara and into countries to the desert's north and south, the U.S. government and its African allies have tried to root out Islamist radicals, turning the region into a battleground. In this important book, Bulushi, an anthropologist, takes stock of the counterterrorism effort's impact on Kenya. Although not usually thought of as central to the war on terror, Kenya has offered enthusiastic support for the U.S. campaign against al-Shabab in Somalia. That backing has had wide-ranging effects on the country despite Kenya officially being at peace. Drawing on 15 months of immersive fieldwork, Bulushi shows how hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. security aid have empowered the Kenyan government while transforming the lives of ordinary citizens as they are indirectly caught up in illegal detentions and in surveillance schemes deployed by shadowy state agencies. Bulushi also delves into the racial stereotypes about Somalis and Muslims in Kenya that proponents of security coordination with the United States have relied on to garner support from Nairobi's middle classes, even as certain communities, most notably the country's large population of Muslims, suffer the consequences.

Writing Timbuktu: The Book in West African History

BY SHAMIL JEPPIE. Princeton University Press, 2026, 240 pp.

The overthrow of the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011 triggered broad changes in the Sahel region of West Africa. Groups that had been armed by Qaddafi fled south into Mali, threatening its government and taking hold of a vast territory in the country's north. One concern that rose to international attention was the fate of the network of informal and official libraries that housed ancient manuscripts in and around the desert city of Timbuktu. These manuscripts include debates on Islamic theology and jurisprudence, biographical dictionaries, and practical advice such as a tome on the therapeutic properties of desert plants. Many Westerners know little about Africa's literary history or assume that the continent does not have one. By placing these libraries in danger, the war coincidentally upended mistaken and often racist assumptions about Africa's cultural heritage. In this extraordinary book, Jeppie, a South African historian, recounts his work as part of a wide network of collaborators striving to preserve these manuscripts. Thanks to the efforts of their Malian custodians and the international response, the overwhelming majority of the manuscripts survived the war; many ended up in Mali's capital, Bamako, before being returned to the Timbuktu region, where digitization efforts continue. Mingling stories of the historical figures involved in promulgating Timbuktu's robust literary

culture with insightful analyses of the key texts they left behind, Jeppie has produced a remarkable study that lays the groundwork for future analyses of the region's contributions to human knowledge across the ages.

Class Struggles in Tanzania

BY ISSA G. SHIVJI. Mkuki na Nyota, 2025, 298 pp.

In 1970, Shivji, then a student at the University of Dar es Salaam, released an essay in the radical journal *Cheche* called "Tanzania: The Silent Class Struggle." Shivji critiqued the Arusha Declaration, the landmark 1967 document that officially committed Tanzania to socialism. He rejected President Julius Nyerere's assertion that Tanzania could avoid focusing on a domestic socialist transformation because there was no class struggle in Tanzanian society. Shivji argued instead that government bureaucrats had become a new elite against which the masses were engaged in revolt. The essay went off like a bomb, forcing the ruling party to adopt additional guidelines for the country's bureaucrats in 1971. In 1976, Shivji released a full-length book expanding on his ideas. This 50th anniversary edition includes a new introduction that surveys the changes in Tanzanian politics and society after Africa's most famous socialist experiment formally ended, in 1992, when the country could no longer cover its soaring international debts. Drawing on case studies of key economic sectors, Shivji shows how the neoliberal reforms embraced by Nyerere's successors failed to lift most

of the population out of poverty even as the country has since emerged as East Africa's economic powerhouse. This is a familiar story of neoliberal reforms gone awry. But Shivji's detailed account reveals the challenges confronting so many African economies, no matter where they lie on the ideological spectrum.

Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

MARIA LIPMAN

We Shall Outlast Them: Putin's Global Campaign to Defeat the West

BY HANNA NOTTE. Norton, 2026, 320 pp.

Since launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has been locked in a high-stakes standoff with the West. In her concise and highly readable book, Notte, an international relations scholar, describes Russia's resilience in the face of Western efforts to starve its economy through sanctions, as well as Moscow's bid to reorient its foreign policy toward the east and south and reassert itself as a major global power. Traveling far and wide, Notte provides a firsthand account of Russia's efforts to strengthen ties with India and various African countries, where it capitalizes on the Soviet legacy of anticolonialism. Closer to home, Moscow is determined to maintain influence in post-Soviet states. The Kremlin's anti-Western pur-

suits are not always successful: Moscow failed to build a formidable diplomatic force out of BRICS—whose first five members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—or to prevent the 2024 overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a longtime ally. Putin's resolve to outlast the West may be unwavering, but Russia's isolation from the West comes at a high cost to the country's long-term development.

The Closing of the Russian Mind: How Putin's Ideology Took the Nation Hostage

BY ANDREI KOLESNIKOV. Polity, 2026, 256 pp.

Drawing on his close observations of Russia's state and society and reinforcing his narrative with numerous quotes from Russian and Western liberal thinkers, Kolesnikov, a journalist, bitterly condemns Putin's militarized, repressive, and increasingly ideological regime. Treading a "familiar historical trajectory," Putin has reasserted Russian imperial power, restored the primacy of the state (with himself as supreme leader), and reversed the country's modernization. Following an equally familiar pattern, most Russians remain loyal to the state, uncommitted to democratic values and human rights, and supportive of Putin's anti-Westernism. Kolesnikov, who chose not to leave Russia even after being labeled a "foreign agent," writes that for him, the 1990s, when Russia sought to emulate Western democracy, were a "time of hope and freedom." By contrast, for most Russians, the 1990s evoke memories of

impoverishment and lawlessness. The resentment toward the United States and Europe that emerged in those years provided fertile soil for Kremlin propaganda, which portrayed Russia as fundamentally at odds with the West, leaving Kolesnikov and his fellow liberal Westernizers an estranged minority in their own country.

Stalin's Apostles: The Cambridge Five and the Making of the Soviet Empire

BY ANTONIA SENIOR.

PublicAffairs, 2026, 480 pp.

Mining new archival material, Senior, a journalist, constructs an enthralling narrative of what is arguably the most remarkable spy operation in history: how Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, and other young, left-wing British intellectuals enthusiastically abetted Joseph Stalin's regime from 1934 to 1951. They remained devoted to the dictator even when, at the height of Stalin's terror, in the late 1930s, their Soviet handlers were recalled to Moscow and executed. And they continued to conduct espionage for Moscow after the Soviet Union entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany in 1939. In the 1940s, these spies rose to high positions in British diplomacy and intelligence. Thanks to astonishingly lax security within British government agencies and a "chapocracy" culture that placed old friends and drinking companions beyond suspicion, they kept Stalin informed of his war allies' secret consultations, helping him shape the post-war order in Europe. Senior reserves her sharpest moral condemnation for the British spies' role in Stalin's brutal

suppression of anti-Soviet partisans in the Baltic states and western Ukraine, both annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II.

Rasputin: The Downfall of the Romanovs

BY ANTONY BEEVOR. Viking, 2026, 384 pp.

The tale of Grigori Rasputin, the lascivious and mesmerizing Siberian peasant who rose to prominence as an intimate friend of the Russian royal family, remains as riveting as ever. In his account of Rasputin's life, Beevor, a renowned historian, evokes the surreal atmosphere of the early-twentieth-century Russian Empire as it drifted toward catastrophic collapse. The decadent nobility—oblivious to the abysmal conditions of urban life, mounting terrorist assassinations, and massive workers' strikes—was consumed by mysticism, prophetic dreams, and séances. Russian high society gossiped about Rasputin's drunken revels and his visits to bathhouses with young women (true) and traded rumors of his carnal relations with the Empress Alexandra (untrue). She regarded Rasputin as her spiritual mentor and a healer to her hemophiliac son, and she persuaded the weak-willed Emperor Nicholas II to follow his advice on key ministerial appointments. In December 1916, a conspiracy of aristocrats, appalled by his interference in state affairs and his wild behavior, killed Rasputin. Within two years, the Russian Empire ceased to exist, and the imperial family was executed by the Bolsheviks.

Always Under Siege: Olga Freidenberg's Diary-Theory and the Everyday Terror of Stalinism

BY IRINA PAPERNO. Cornell University Press, 2026, 258 pp.

Olga Freidenberg, a Soviet classical philologist and philosopher of literature who died in 1955, kept a meticulous diary of her experience during the Nazi siege of Leningrad, the 28-month blockade between 1941 and 1944 in which about one million civilians died, most from starvation or the cold, others in the accompanying bombing. Paperno, a preeminent literary scholar, undertakes a searching and forensic analysis of Freidenberg's diary, which remains largely unpublished. She interprets this secret chronicle as an anthropological study, with Freidenberg as a participant-observer trapped within a system of oppression, violence, extreme deprivation, and humiliation through the total denial of privacy. For Freidenberg, the siege stands as a metaphor for life under the totalitarian Soviet regime. Like a Stalinist concentration camp, the blockade of Leningrad was a "siege of the human being"—a condition of complete unfreedom that left "no choice in anything, no opportunity for freedom or escape." Freidenberg's personal notes, Paperno suggests, amount to a political theory of an unprecedented form of tyranny—the terror of the everyday. This framework resonates with the theory of totalitarianism developed by Hannah Arendt, although her work was unknown to Freidenberg.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Far-Right France: Le Pen, Bardella, and the Future of Europe

BY VICTOR MALLET. Hurst, 2026, 264 pp.

France has a lame-duck president, is toiling under a hung parliament, and faces the possibility of a far-right victory in the next election. Based largely on the author's reporting, this book offers a useful starting point for understanding these trends. Mallet visits provincial towns to ask French voters why they are so resentful of the Parisian elite and disaffected with the government's European and globalizing agenda. They offer him a catalog of cultural and economic complaints. He parses the rhetoric and tactics of far-right leaders and uncovers amusing anecdotes about their internal squabbles. This reporting yields an important observation: the Rassemblement National, the chief French far-right party formerly known as Front National, has moderated. Many of its remaining policy positions are economically impractical and thus likely to be abandoned should it enter office. Likewise, it will doubtless eschew its support for U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, positions that have become severe liabilities. Monied interests, media tycoons, and moderate-right politicians—many of whom are the beneficiaries of the globalization the party claims to oppose—loom larger in far-right politics. As has

been the case elsewhere in Europe, a far-right French foreign policy will differ less from the current one than many expect.

Stay Alive: Berlin, 1939–1945

BY IAN BURUMA. Penguin Press, 2026, 400 pp.

Few modern writers have Buruma's talent for bringing unfamiliar cultures, historical epochs, and human dilemmas to life. Here, Buruma explores how it felt to be in Berlin during World War II. His chronicle follows Berliners from the triumphant days of Germany's early conquests through the end of the war, when bombs pulverized the city and Soviet soldiers arrived. He fashions a kaleidoscopic narrative out of diaries, memoirs, and personal interviews, some drawn from the experiences of his own father, who was a prisoner from the Netherlands pressed into forced labor. Beneath Buruma's vivid and sympathetic recounting of many individual stories runs an underlying theme: how easy it is for people to go along with an authoritarian government and how such a society corrupts almost everyone within it.

Gordon Brown: Power With Purpose

BY JAMES MACINTYRE. Bloomsbury, 2026, 336 pp.

Gordon Brown served as the chancellor of the exchequer in the United Kingdom for a decade, then succeeded Tony Blair as prime minister from 2007 to 2010. This biography draws on personal papers and interviews to

correct the widespread media stereotype of Brown as ambitious, resentful, angry, and impolitic. Macintyre portrays Brown as a morally upright, highly intelligent, and courageous Scotsman from a modest background who devoted his life to the public good. Not only did Brown initiate many of the "New Labour" political strategies for which Blair gets credit, but his policy successes are second to none among modern British leaders. During his 13 years as chancellor and prime minister, Brown introduced a minimum wage and reformed public spending, tax credits, and education, resulting in a significant decline in child poverty. He exercised expert financial oversight and crisis management, most notably acting swiftly in 2008 to introduce a bank recapitalization plan, soon copied by the United States and other major economies, that observers such as the economist Paul Krugman claim helped save the world economy after the financial crisis. Since leaving office, Brown's work has focused on the quiet promotion of charitable causes rather than high-profile media forays.

Downing Street Downfalls:

The Misadventures of Britain's Prime Ministers Since Thatcher

BY MARK GARNETT. Agenda, 2025, 264 pp.

With British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's disappointing tenure coming to an end this summer, many observers wonder whether his job has become impossible. The country's centuries-old reputation for stability, seemingly confirmed by the relatively long

prime ministerial tenures of Margaret Thatcher (1979–90), John Major (1990–97), Tony Blair (1997–2007), and David Cameron (2010–16), has been shattered by the revolving door that followed, with five people leading the country in the last ten years. This book provides engaging historical accounts of how and why each leader fell, with Liz Truss’s record-setting 49 days in office in 2022 as the most vivid. Yet the deeper causes of the increasing vulnerability of British prime ministers remain unclear. In a few concluding pages, the author considers without reaching any definitive understanding the greater volatility in voter preferences; the rise of new parties; extraordinarily permissive intraparty rules for calling a vote of confidence; mistrust of government more generally; overriding dissatisfaction with economic performance; the media’s personalization of politics, which increasingly focuses dissatisfaction on a single leader; a “first past the post” electoral system that distorts outcomes; and a reduction in the quality of political leaders. The deeper causes and historical import of this moment in British politics—and what can be done about it—remain unclear.

All That Glistens: Chinese Party-State Influence in Britain

BY MARTIN THORLEY. Hurst, 2025, 280 pp.

For several decades, the British government sought to attract Chinese investment, hoping to bring about what a former British chancellor called a “golden age.” This book makes a persuasive case that the financialization and

privatization of the British economy, starting under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, have empowered not just domestic private businesses to influence politics but also, ironically, the Chinese Communist Party. The latter is able to mold private individuals, businesses, and governments (both in China and in the diaspora) into a “united front” with deep pockets. To promote access to the British market and investment in China, Chinese donors (including well-connected individuals, firms, and shadowy civil society groups) have contributed to politicians, including figures in the House of Lords; paid lobbyists and businesses to advocate on their behalf; and funded educational, cultural, and other public activity. Yet less evidence supports the book’s claim that these investments have imposed an enormous cost on British sovereignty, security, and freedom—or that the United Kingdom cannot reverse the policy, as British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak claimed to do in calling for an end to the golden age policy in 2022.

Western Hemisphere

RICHARD FEINBERG

Polarization and Democracy in Latin America: Legacies of the Left Turn

BY SANTIAGO ANRIA AND KENNETH M. ROBERTS. University of Chicago Press, 2026, 280 pp.

Drawing on rich case studies, the political scientists Anria and Roberts trace the struggles of Latin America’s left-wing forces

in recent decades. The authors contend that moderate social democratic governments—such as those of Brazil and Chile early in the century—fell victim to a “conformist temptation,” accepting the limits of democratic capitalism and losing touch with the popular movements that had brought them to power. For their part, radical populist leaders—such as Bolivia’s Evo Morales and Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez—yielded to the “autocratic temptation,” tilting the playing field to maintain their hold on power. Only in Uruguay did a moderate left coalition, the Broad Front, preserve close ties to its base, governing with a popular mandate for some 15 years and building a generous welfare state along the way. Considering this mixed record, Anria and Roberts urge the Latin American left to reflect and recalibrate. Unfortunately, their analysis, which demonizes “technocratic neoliberalism,” is too abstract to serve as practical guidance for policymakers.

Understanding Latin America’s Economy in the Twenty-First Century
BY JEFF DAYTON-JOHNSON.
University of New Mexico Press,
2025, 304 pp.

In this ambitious review of Latin American governance, Dayton-Johnson challenges the pessimists who see only unfulfilled promises in the region’s economic record. He concedes that the region has lagged behind other parts of the developing world, notably East Asia, and that economic growth has been uneven. Yet across the region, he finds sustained progress in balancing budgets and managing exchange rates

that resulted in the taming of inflation. In many countries, economic institutions are now better equipped to absorb external shocks, even as an overreliance on commodity exports and a failure to protect domestic industries continue to constrain growth. Pragmatic policymakers, he argues, can build on recent achievements and correct past errors. To that end, Dayton-Johnson advocates an active industrial policy that nurtures promising new sectors. His social democratic vision also entails progressive taxation, significant income transfers, and improved public services—the basis for a new social contract that would restore popular faith in the effectiveness of democratic governance.

Dream Road to Pan America: A Century in Pursuit of the World’s Longest Highway
BY SHAWN WILLIAM MILLER.
University of California Press, 2026,
376 pp.

The Darién Gap: A Reporter’s Journey Through the Deadly Crossroads of the Americas
BY BELÉN FERNÁNDEZ. Rutgers
University Press, 2025, 206 pp.

Two engaging new books examine the motives behind the creation of the Pan-American Highway—a 19,000-mile road network stretching from Alaska to Argentina—and why its final stretch, the Darién Gap between Panama and Colombia, remains unfinished.

Miller brings an informed skepticism to his colorful, thorough history of the Pan-American Highway. In the 1920s,

U.S. automakers and construction companies promoted an intercontinental road network as an American model of modernity and the surest path to regional prosperity. The proposed roads encouraged U.S. diplomats to envision a new era of connectivity and comity across the Western Hemisphere. Miller deftly describes the fascinating mixture of public and private diplomacy, of security interests and profit motives, that occasioned this pioneering era of roadbuilding. But many of those early plans have not materialized: onerous border controls discourage travel, and few motorists can endure the long haul. The Darién Gap—some 60 miles of hostile jungle straddling Panama and Colombia—remains unbuilt not because the terrain is impassable but because governments fear that easier passage through the corridor will spur a surge of migration. Miller cites two additional reasons for not completing the highway: the welfare of local indigenous communities and the imperative of preserving the wilderness.

Blending travelogue and polemic, the intrepid Fernández immerses herself in the world of the undocumented migrants who brave the Darién Gap. Witty and sardonic, she offers sympathetic close-ups of the desperate travelers who cross the gap, with its steep cliffs, dense forests, swollen rivers, and brutal traffickers who rape and rob the most vulnerable migrants. The ultimate responsibility for this chaos, Fernández contends, lies with the United States, which imposes a predatory capitalism “wreaking global havoc while simultaneously criminalizing migration.” During the Biden administration, hundreds of thousands of refugees

risked the crossing, rendering the gap “a mass migrant graveyard.” In 2025, aggressive measures to control migration by U.S. and Panamanian authorities reduced the flow to a trickle. The Trump administration argued, however hypocritically in Fernández’s eyes, that its restrictions had spared would-be migrants a perilous journey.

The United States

JESSICA T. MATHEWS

United States of Oligarchy: How America’s Wealthiest Ally With Dictators, Weaken the U.S., and Destroy Democracy

BY CASEY MICHEL. St. Martin’s Press, 2026, 384 pp.

Oligarchy is a vicious spiral: wealthy citizens buy political influence, which in turn yields policies that further enlarge their wealth. Over time, a country’s resources drain out of projects to serve the public interest and into the oligarchs’ swelling pockets. An expert on money laundering, tax evasion, and other financial crimes, Michel offers a blistering account of how a full-blown oligarchy has formed in the United States. In a single year, 2024, 19 American households added a staggering \$1 trillion to their wealth, more than the GDP of Switzerland that year. And American oligarchs such as Jared Kushner, Elon Musk, and Peter Thiel, with Chinese, Emirati, Russian, Saudi, and other foreign counterparts, who may be acting as agents of their governments, exploit

the same channels of financial secrecy and corruption to directly weaken the United States' national interest as well as its democracy. Michel concludes with an extensive review of the policies needed to roll back this pernicious development, from simple steps, such as reviving a registry of shell companies and enforcing existing laws, including the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, to the most ambitious ones, such as enacting a wealth tax on the ultrarich.

America, U.S.A.: How Race Shadows the Nation's Anniversaries

BY EDDIE S. GLAUDE, JR. Crown, 2026, 288 pp.

Stealing America: The Hidden Story of Indigenous Slavery in U.S. History

BY LINFORD D. FISHER. Liveright, 2026, 560 pp.

Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America

BY MICHAEL LUO. Vintage Books, 2025, 560 pp.

Three new books cast a shadow over the United States' 250th anniversary celebrations, which tend to focus on storybook episodes such as George Washington crossing the Delaware River or Abraham Lincoln orating at Gettysburg. Glaude, Fisher, and Luo convincingly show that virulent white racism has been a constant and often ignored through line in American history. Glaude, a prominent scholar of African American history, ascribes much of the United States' contemporary malaise to a paradox at the

nation's heart: although the republic was founded in good faith on the principles of liberty and equality, it was also expressly designed to give white people the right to own others or make them second-class citizens. Glaude movingly portrays the enduring bitterness of the Black American experience stemming from this unacknowledged "twoness," which forced white Americans into a "desperate avoidance of self-awareness" and produced a country that refuses "to know itself fully."

Fisher chronicles the astonishing fact—virtually erased from the history most Americans learn—that, between 1492 and 1880, colonists in North America and, later, citizens of the U.S. republic enslaved roughly the same number of Native Americans (nearly 600,000) as they imported from Africa. The enslavement of Native Americans linked the effort to dispossess them of their land to the acquisition of free labor, an aim that was key to the colonies' expansion and financial success. When indigenous people resisted these land seizures, colonial courts ordered brutal reprisals, including their sale into slavery. Much of this history was officially expunged by censuses that reported only enslaved Africans, even when enslaved Native Americans labored in the same household, and classified multiracial individuals as "mulatto" or "negro." Over the centuries, Americans developed a cultural story of the frontier that even when it valorized Native Americans' bravery depicted their suffering as a tragedy without a real perpetrator. Echoing Glaude, Fisher concludes that Americans have "completely dissociated themselves" from their role in this terrible history.

Luo traces the experience of Chinese immigrants to the United States in exhaustive detail, from their participation in California's mid-nineteenth-century gold rush to the recent eruption of anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the nineteenth century, while the eastern half of the United States battled over slavery, Chinese immigrants in the west were the targets of violence and fury culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred them from citizenship even as that opportunity was extended to people of African descent. In 1902, Congress made this temporary ban permanent; Chinese Americans did not acquire full legal rights for another half century. Although a great many Chinese Americans have climbed to the peak of economic and professional success, Luo argues that this exclusionary, often violent history helps make clear why their lives in the United States can still feel precarious.

Last Branch Standing: A Potentially Surprising, Occasionally Witty Journey Inside Today's Supreme Court

BY SARAH ISGUR. Crown, 2026, 416 pp.

Isgur, the editor of the popular legal commentary site SCOTUSblog, reviews the U.S. Supreme Court's

history and legal philosophies, provides an intimate look inside its operations, and makes it all easy reading. Congress has abdicated much of its assigned role, she argues, and the U.S. executive branch has accrued excess powers, but the Supreme Court is the only branch of government still operating roughly as the Constitution intended. Isgur convincingly demonstrates that the widely held view that today's Court is simply another political actor split 6-3 along partisan lines is wrong. The weight that justices give to the interests of the Court as an institution combines with ideology to produce individual judicial philosophies, as it did in the past. A justice scoring high on institutionalism, for example, puts heavy importance on precedent, prefers that as many justices as possible join an opinion, and worries about how a decision will affect the public view of the Court. Analyzed this way, the current court is more properly divided into thirds, with the institutionalist Justices Amy Coney Barrett, Brett Kavanaugh, and John Roberts, operating distinctly from Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, and Clarence Thomas. Even within the liberal camp, Justice Elena Kagan's jurisprudence departs from that of the less institutionalist justices Sonia Sotomayor and Ketanji Brown Jackson. This reading illuminates both past and future decisions. 🌐

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July 1975

“The Strategy of Terrorism”

DAVID FROMKIN

A quarter century before 9/11, an upsurge in global terrorism prompted the historian David Fromkin to examine its purpose and method. Terrorism was a strategy of the weak, Fromkin wrote in these pages, but modern technology had enabled it “to enter the political arena on a new scale.” And its surprising success seemed to be due, in large part, “to a miscomprehension of the strategy by its opponents.”

Those who are the targets of terrorism—and who are prepared to defend themselves by doing whatever is necessary in order to beat it—start with a major advantage. The advantage is that success or failure depends upon them alone. Terrorism wins only if you respond to it in the way that the terrorists want you to; which means that its fate is in your hands and not in theirs. If you choose not to respond at all, or else to respond in a way different from that which they desire, they will fail to achieve their objectives.

The important point is that the choice is yours. That is the ultimate weakness of terrorism as a strategy. It means that, though terrorism cannot always be prevented, it can always be defeated. You can always refuse to do what they want you to do.

Whether to pay the price of defeating terrorism is increasingly going to be a major question in our time. The answer is relatively easy in most kidnapping and ransom situations: experience has shown that blackmailers and extortionists usually are encouraged to try it again if you give in to their demands the first time. So, if you can do so, you should accept the consequences, however terrible, of standing firm in order to avoid an infinite sequence of painful events.

But the price of doing so is constantly rising, as technology increases the range and magnitude of horrible possibilities. Terrorist outrages, when they occur, are bound to become more deadly. Increasingly, we will be under pressure to abridge our laws and liberties in order to suppress the terrorists. It is a pressure that should be resisted. 🕒



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