

Make Sense

of 2021



Fair Observer^o

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Fair Observer

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Ethiopia's Heavy Hand in Tigray Sends a Message

Corrado Cok
January 5, 2021

The Tigray crisis has shown that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will no longer tolerate direct challenges to his leadership or to Ethiopia's unity.

The crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray region has come to an end — at least on the surface. In November 2020, the Ethiopian National Defense Force quickly recaptured all urban areas in Tigray with the support of the Amhara Fano militia and the Eritrean military. Although the parties avoided major confrontation, the military operation left hundreds of casualties on the ground and displaced an estimated 1 million people across the region, with over 50,000 refugees crossing the border to Sudan.

In the meantime, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) leadership went underground, probably in the remote mountains of Tigray. Despite the initial bravado, the TPLF was unable to conduct guerrilla warfare against the Ethiopian forces, finding itself encircled and losing a considerable portion of its military assets. The TPLF's very survival will depend on popular support, which, in turn, will depend on how the Ethiopian authorities are going to handle the Tigray region and its civilian population in the foreseeable future. The situation on the ground convinced Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to declare the mission accomplished.

The heavy hand adopted against the TPLF sent a strong message in multiple directions. Domestically, it targeted Abiy's Oromo and Amhara allies, but also the movements that currently defy the federal government across Ethiopia. Externally, the prime minister made it

clear that the Tigray crisis was essentially a domestic issue, signaling to friends and foes that neither the country's unity nor is his vision of an Ethiopia-centered regional order is under question. But why was such message deemed necessary in Addis Ababa and what impact did it have?

A System Under Strain

The label of "African Yugoslavia" has been hanging over Ethiopia for quite some time. Both states have enshrined a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society reflected in a federal constitutional system. Both countries have been ruled by a strong single party that initially controlled the political system from the center but subsequently gave way to regional, ethno-nationalist components. This shift eventually caused the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In today's Ethiopia, strong party leadership might ensure a different outcome.

Since Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018, some events made observers doubt his ability to carry out his reform program and keep Ethiopia's federation together. In June 2019, an attempted coup orchestrated by the head of the Amhara security forces led to a series of clashes between the Ethiopian army and groups of Amhara rebels. In August 2019, violent protests broke out in Hawassa as local ethnic movements demanded the formation of their own state in the south. On June 29, the killing of a famous Oromo singer sparked widespread riots in Oromia, while a series of ethnic-based murders further inflamed the political climate across the country.

Then came the constitutional quarrel with the TPLF. Back in June, Addis Ababa indeterminably postponed parliamentary elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The move was criticized by all opposition parties, yet only the TPLF defied the federal government and organized local elections, resulting in a relatively high turnout in support of the Tigrayan leadership. The situation spiraled out of control amid reciprocal accusations of illegitimacy. Ultimately, the TPLF attacked the bases of the

Northern Command of the Ethiopian army on the night of November 3. Abiy's response was swift and resolute, sending a convincing message regarding the state of the federation and his personal leadership.

The operation targeted the main rival of Abiy's political project. The Tigrayans bore the brunt of the war against Eritrea and Ethiopia's Derg regime despite being a small minority in the country. When it came to power in 1991, the TPLF managed to design an ethnic federation and dominate it for nearly 30 years. This was made possible through a careful political strategy that pitted the Oromo and the Amhara, the two major ethnic groups, against one another.

After his appointment as prime minister, Abiy heralded a new course for Ethiopia based on the unity between the Amhara and Oromo elites within his Prosperity Party. Along with his allies, he began to sideline the Tigray leadership through economic reforms and judicial prosecutions against security officers. This included an array of privatizations of Tigray-dominated public companies and tighter controls over financial flows that curtailed Tigrayan leaders' grip on the Ethiopian economy. Now, by squashing the TPLF, the prime minister has killed two birds with one stone, eliminating his main domestic opposition and boosting unity among his allies.

The View from Outside

Prime Minister Abiy managed to convey a strong message abroad as well. Its first recipients have been Ethiopia's neighbors in the Horn of Africa. The heavy hand in Tigray signaled that Ethiopia's internal divisions did not affect the Addis Ababa-centered regional order currently under construction. When he came to power, Abiy understood that his country needed stability around its enormous borders in order to prosper and shield its periphery from instability. This is the reason why he developed strong relations with his Sudanese counterpart, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and, most notably, with

Ethiopia's traditional foes: Eritrea and the Somali federal government.

The peace with Asmara, in particular, which won Abiy the Nobel Prize in 2019, marked a revolution in Ethiopian foreign policy. One of Addis Ababa's key priorities is access to the Red Sea, a lack of which has made land-locked Ethiopia overly dependent on neighboring Djibouti. The main obstacle to the Asmara-Addis Ababa relations was once again the Tigrayans, Eritrea's traditional enemies. Consequently, the operation against the TPLF will help consolidate the partnership between Prime Minister Abiy and Eritrea's President Isaias Afewerki.

One collateral victim of the Tigray crisis is the African Union (AU). The Addis Ababa-based organization has become a recognized peacemaker across the continent, as witnessed in Somalia and Sudan. Last year, the Ethiopian prime minister was praised by the AU as an example of African leadership and empowerment. In turn, he demanded the union's intervention in the mediation over Ethiopia's dispute with Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). While Abiy accepted to meet with AU's envoys, he made it clear that the Tigray crisis was a domestic issue. This approach undermined the AU's peacemaking role by revealing that its efficacy is limited to small or failed states while it exerts very little influence over large African nations.

Finally, the message targets friends and foes in the Middle East, where all the regional powerhouses, especially in the Gulf, have stakes in the Horn of Africa. The United Arab Emirates has launched numerous investment projects in Ethiopia and opened a military base in Eritrea. The Tigray crisis represents a direct threat to its interests in the region and possibly provided a reason for alleged air support for the Ethiopian military operation, coupled with calls for mediation.

Cairo was also closely monitoring the operation in Tigray. With Ethiopia's dam project threatening Egypt's water security, Cairo has considered all options, including military ones, as

was echoed by US President Donald Trump during a phone call with Abdalla Hamdok and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In addition, there were allegations suggesting Egyptian support for anti-government riots that swept Oromia in the summer. The Tigray crisis could have looked like another opportunity to weaken Addis Ababa as part of the complex chess game around the GERD. But by swiftly suppressing the TPLF insurgency, Abiy eliminated a potential back door for any external power to exert pressure over his government.

Although the TPLF has never posed a serious military threat to the federal army, the impact of the Tigray conflict on the future of Ethiopia is unquestionable. It laid bare the weaknesses of the country's ethno-federal system and its propensity for crisis. At the same time, it convinced the prime minister to embrace a tougher approach to domestic challenges. The heavy hand used against the TPLF has delivered a powerful message aimed at consolidating the Amhara-Oromo partnership within the Prosperity Party and drew a red line for other opposition parties that may have considered defying Addis Ababa. Likewise, the military operation signaled to external actors that Ethiopia's position in the region and beyond is not under discussion.

Whether this new approach to Ethiopian politics will suffice to keep the federation together is yet to be seen. But the Tigray crisis has shown that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will no longer tolerate direct challenges to his leadership or to Ethiopia's unity.

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Macron's Campaign to Reveal France's Historical Sins

Peter Isackson
March 29, 2021

Emmanuel Macron has bucked a French political law of silence but shows no inclination to do anything about the truth exposed.

One of the worst humanitarian disasters of the past 30 years took place in 1994 in Rwanda. Approximately 800,000 people died in a genocidal campaign led by the Hutu majority against the Tutsi minority. The rampage began after Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was shot down. The Hutus immediately blamed the Tutsis and initiated a "well-organized campaign of slaughter" that lasted several months. A new French report on the Rwandan genocide has revealed some uglier truths about the role played by Western powers — particularly France.

Since his election, French President Emmanuel Macron has demonstrated what some French patriots feel is a morbid curiosity about the history of France's relations with the African continent. In the first three months of 2021, two reports by French historians tasked by Macron to tell the truth have been released. The first concerns France's role in the Algerian War of Independence between 1954 and 1962, and the second, the Rwandan genocide.

Le Monde describes the 1,200-page Rwandan report as "solid, established by independent researchers and founded on newly opened archives." Shortly after taking office in 2017, Macron asked historian Vincent Duclert to elucidate France's role in the Rwandan genocide. Al Jazeera describes the report as criticizing "the French authorities under [Francois] Mitterrand for adopting a 'binary view' that set Habyarimana as a 'Hutu ally' against an 'enemy' of Tutsi forces backed by Uganda, and then

offering military intervention only ‘belatedly’ when it was too late to halt the genocide.”

Today’s Daily Devil’s Dictionary definition:

Binary view:

A prevalent mindset among leaders responsible for foreign policy in powerful nations, whose tendency to reduce every problem to a contest between two diametrically opposed points of view permits them to justify the most cynical and cruelly destructive policies

Contextual Note

In the aftermath of the genocide, analysts speculated about whom to blame, not only concerning the genocide itself but also the failure to prevent it from spinning out of control. As the leader of the nation whose role as “policeman of the world” became consolidated after the fall of the Soviet Union, US President Bill Clinton exhibited an apparent “indifference” to tribal slaughter in Africa. It included deliberate “efforts to constrain U.N. peacekeeping.” Canadian General Romeo Dallaire accused Clinton of establishing “a policy that he did not want to know,” even though since 1992, US intelligence had been aware of a serious Hutu plan to carry out genocide.

French President Francois Mitterand’s guilt, it now turns out, was far more patent and direct than Clinton’s. The historians who authored the French report call it “a defeat of thinking” on the part of an administration never held accountable for its “continual blindness of its support for a racist, corrupt and violent regime.” Astonishingly, the report reveals that “French intelligence knew it was Hutu extremists that shot President Habyarimana’s plane down, which was seen as the trigger for the genocide.” Le Monde attributes Mitterand’s blindness to his “personal relationship” with the slain Hutu president.

Historical Note

By sneaking through the gaping cracks in the traditional parties on the right and left to be

elected president, Emmanuel Macron became the leader of a new party created for the purpose of providing him with a majority in the 2017 parliamentary election that followed his historic victory. As a political maverick, Macron felt himself liberated from at least some of the shackles of history.

He first dared to do what Fifth Republic presidents of the past had carefully avoided when, as a candidate, he attacked the very idea of colonization, which not only played an essential role in France’s past, but continued to produce its effects through the concept of *Francafrique*. In an interview in Algiers, the Algerian capital, early in the 2017 presidential campaign, Macron described colonization as a “genuinely barbaric” practice, adding that it “constitutes a part of our past that we have to confront by also apologising to those against whom we committed these acts.”

Politicians on the right predictably denounced what they qualified as Macron’s “hatred of our history, this perpetual repentance that is unworthy of a candidate for the presidency of the republic.” This is the usual complaint of the nationalist right in every Western nation. Recently, columnist Ben Weingarten complained that Nikole Hannah-Jones’ 1619 Project for The New York Times Magazine was motivated by “hatred for America.” Patriots in every country tend to believe that exposing any embarrassing historical truth is tantamount to hate and intolerance of their own noble traditions. Telling the truth is treasonous.

In January 2021, the historian Benjamin Stora presented the report Macron commissioned him to produce on France’s historical relationship with Algeria. Stora proposed the “creation of a joint ‘Memory and Truth’ commission.” The report also recommended “restitution, recognition of certain crimes, publication of lists of the disappeared, access to archives” and “creation of places of memory.” Suddenly, Macron realized that he had received more than he bargained for. As the website JusticeInfo.net reported, “The French presidency said there was ‘no question of showing repentance’ or of ‘presenting an

apology' for the occupation of Algeria or the bloody eight-year war that ended 132 years of French rule."

These two examples demonstrate France's curious relationship with history. They also tell us about how powerful nations elaborate and execute their foreign policy. France is not alone. Every nation's policy starts from a sense of national interest. The ensuing analysis begins by assessing threats to it. These may be military, economic or even cultural. In the case of military threat, the nation in question will be branded either an enemy or, if diplomatic politeness prevails, an adversary. When the discord is purely economic, the other nation will most likely be called a competitor or a rival. When the threat is cultural — as when Lebanon and Israel square off against each other about who makes the most authentic hummus — foreign policy experts will simply shut up and enjoy the show.

On the other hand, three forms of cultural competition — linguistic, tribal and religious rivalries — have real implications for the exercise of power and may seriously influence the perception of whether what is at stake is enmity, rivalry or friendly competition. The danger in such cases lies in confusing cultural frictions with political ambitions.

The two French reports reveal that the very idea of "national interest" may not be as innocent as it sounds. It can also mean "extranational indifference," or worse. Indifference turns out to be not just a harmless alternative to the aggressive pursuit of national interest. In some cases, it translates as a convenient pretext for the toleration or even encouragement of brutally inhuman practices. That is why Rwanda may be a stain on both Francois Mitterand's and Bill Clinton's legacies.

Another feature of modern policy may appear less extreme than the tolerance of genocide while being just as deadly. As Noam Chomsky, Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J.S. Davies and others have repeatedly asserted, the imposition of drastic sanctions has become a major weapon in the US foreign policy arsenal. Sanctions

essentially and often sadistically target civilian populations with little effect on the targeted leaders. Sanctions have become an automatic reflex mobilized not just against enemies or rivals, but also against the economically disobedient, nations that purchase goods from the wrong designated supplier.

In 2012, Saeed Kamali Dehghan, writing for The Guardian, noted that the Obama administration's sanctions on Iran were "pushing ordinary Iranians to the edge of poverty, destroying the quality of their lives, isolating them from the outside world and most importantly, blocking their path to democracy." Nine years later, those sanctions were made more extreme under Donald Trump and continue unabated under President Joe Biden. All the consequences Dehghan listed have continued, with no effect on the hard-line Iranian regime's hold on power. Can anyone pretend that such policies are consistent with a commitment to human rights? Do they reveal the existence of even an ounce of empathy for human beings other than one's own voters?

The French at least have solicited truthful historical research about their past. But politicians like Macron, who have encouraged the research, inevitably turn out to be too embarrassed by the truth to seek any form of reparation. After commissioning it, they prefer to deny the need for it.

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How the End of the Gulf Crisis Affects Sudan

Julietta Mirghani
April 9, 2021

Sudan got caught up in the rivalries between Gulf countries. At a time of economic crisis, the survival of its new transitional government depends on outside support.

Sudan has been at the center of the diverging interests of wealthy Gulf states for many years. Having been close allies of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar had longstanding business, military and political interests in the country prior to the Gulf crisis in 2017. In June of that year, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt — known as the Arab quartet — cut diplomatic and trade relations with Qatar.

After almost four years of severed ties, reconciliation in January led to the subsequent lifting of the blockade against Qatar and the formal restoration of relations. The resolution of the dispute is a positive regional development. However, it remains fragile because the issues that sparked the rift in the first place were never resolved.

It is therefore unlikely that the Gulf reconciliation will usher in a new beginning or bring about a return to pre-crisis normalcy. Deep-rooted mistrust between the Gulf countries, ongoing rivalries between them, divergence in their policies and geostrategic competition in Africa could trigger the next diplomatic crisis among member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Sudan's Attempt to Play All Sides

Most Arab and sub-Saharan African states tried to resist pressure to join the anti-Qatar coalition and delicately maneuver their way into neutrality.

These states were uneasy about their move because they feared that the Arab quartet would use their economic might against them. As a result, some African states cut or downgraded ties with Qatar.

Financial influence in Africa has helped GCC states capitalize on their geostrategic location, increase their food security and advance their diplomatic and security goals. By offering substantial economic incentives, they have been able to bolster peace agreements between warring factions. Some GCC states have achieved notable success, growing influence and African allies that support their policies. Sudan is a case in point. In 2019, Saudi investments in Sudan were estimated at \$12 billion, the UAE at \$7 billion and Qatar at \$4 billion, as per the Sudanese Bureau of Statistics.

Due to Saudi Arabia's large investments, Sudan supported the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen in 2015 by deploying Rapid Support Forces and severing diplomatic ties with Iran. However, Bashir's relationship with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi began stalling in the last few years of his rule. As part of the UAE and Saudi Arabia's regional efforts to counter what they considered political Islam, Bashir was expected to root out Islamists in Sudan. However, since Islamists were deeply engrained in Sudan's government, he could not risk alienating them and did not oblige.

The Gulf dispute put Bashir in another uncomfortable position. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar were all key investors in Sudan and he could not afford to alienate any of them. Therefore, Bashir took the safest route of remaining neutral while offering to mediate between the opposing sides.

The Sudanese leader's reaction to the Gulf rift was not surprising. Historically, he cooperated with all regional powers, never fully aligning with any of them. His hands-off approach and ability to easily switch from the role of an army leader to an advocate of political Islam, enabled Sudan to simultaneously ally with rival GCC

camps. It seems that Bashir's key goal was to benefit economically from all Gulf states.

The New Transitional Government

Unfortunately for Bashir, Sudan's economy collapsed, nationwide protests erupted in December 2018 and none of his Gulf allies came to his rescue. The GCC states were probably influenced by growing uncertainty regarding Bashir's future. Their goal was to protect their investments, not Bashir. Without GCC financial support, the Sudanese president found his days in power numbered.

In April 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed a military coup that ended three decades of Bashir's rule and led to the creation of a Transitional Military Council (TMC). The GCC duo promptly promised a staggering \$3 billion in aid to support the TMC. However, growing international pressure pushed the TMC to sign a power-sharing agreement with Sudan's pro-democracy movement. The TMC transferred power to a sovereignty council for a transitional period. Elections to usher in a civilian-led government are planned in late 2023 or early 2024.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have vested interests in backing the Sudanese military and ensuring it maintains control of the political transition. Consequently, they continue to offer economic and humanitarian support to Sudan. In return, the TMC has supported their war efforts in Yemen and, more recently, in Libya.

After the 2019 revolution, Sudan temporarily cut ties with Qatar, accusing it of supporting Islamists. Qatar had a close relationship with Bashir's former ruling National Congress Party that drew the ire of the TMC. However, Qatar has since rebuilt its influence by supporting Sudan's removal from the US list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (SST). In October 2020, Doha announced that a peace agreement had been brokered between the transitional government and rebel forces. Qatar has also provided much-needed humanitarian relief.

Sudan remains a country of great economic and security importance to the world. It has an abundance of natural resources. The African Development Bank Group estimates that approximately 63% of Sudan's land is agricultural but only 15-20% is under cultivation. This offers vast investment opportunities in agriculture. Sudan is also strategically located on the Red Sea just south of the Suez Canal, a key shipping passage for world trade.

Major Challenges and Future Scenarios

Sudan's transitional government recently set its priorities for 2021, which include a focus on the economy, peace, security, foreign relations and the ongoing democratic transition. However, the challenges facing the transitional government are dire. Foreign debt has risen to over \$60 billion and inflation has crossed 300%. The country faces massive unemployment and chronic shortages of bread, fuel and foreign currency. Sudan is in the throes of a complex power struggle between civilians and the military. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) threatens Sudan's water security. Sudanese and Ethiopian troops have clashed at the border. If this was not daunting already, Sudan has registered nearly 32,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, as of April 9.

In response to some of these challenges, the transitional government has instituted seismic constitutional changes. After nearly three decades, the US removed Sudan from the SST list in January, eliminating a major hurdle to debt relief and bringing an end to the country's isolation from global financial systems. However, the transitional government remains under pressure to deliver quick economic wins. If it fails, power may shift back toward the military. In these tough circumstances, the transitional government's success and Sudan's democratic future depend on outside financial support.

For Sudan, the Gulf crisis served as a minor inconvenience. The revolution and Sudan's removal from the SST list are more significant developments. GCC states are now encountering

a growing number of new regional and international players who are looking at Sudan with increased interest. This could very well cause a shift in Gulf–Sudan relations.

Although GCC states have a shared strategic interest in Sudan’s stability, this takes a back seat to alliances that promote the individual interests of these Gulf countries. They are all trying to increase their regional influence and are turning post-revolution Sudan into another theater of GCC rivalry. Given Sudan’s fragile economic and political situation, it needs financial support. Economic forces played a major role in the fall of Omar al-Bashir’s regime and will determine the survival of the transitional government.

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Why Is Somalia’s Political Crisis So Difficult to Solve?

Corrado Cok
May 24, 2021

Underlying constitutional, economic and international factors drive the power struggle that is undermining Somalia’s state-building efforts.

There seems to be no end in sight for the political crisis in Somalia. On February 8, the mandate of President Muhammad Abdullahi Muhammad, commonly known as Farmajo, expired without a date set for either parliamentary or presidential elections. The protests called by the opposition Council of the Presidential Candidates in the following days were met with growing repression from

government forces. In April, Farmajo extended his already overdue term by a further two years, igniting violence between the security forces and anti-government militias in the streets of the capital Mogadishu.

In response, the international community, and the US in particular, increased pressure on Somali actors to come to an agreement, causing the states of Hirshabelle, Galmudug and South West to withdraw their support for Farmajo and call for new elections. Lacking international and domestic support, on May 1, Farmajo backtracked on his extended mandate and paved the way to new elections.

Despite optimism around recent advances, Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, who is in charge of organizing the elections, has a complicated task ahead. Armed confrontation created further distrust between political actors, and violence could easily flare up again in the run-up to the elections. Underlying constitutional, economic and international factors continue to drive this power struggle that is undermining Somalia’s already troubled state-building efforts.

Federal Tensions

On September 17, 2020, the federal government and the presidents of the member states agreed on amendments to the electoral process under pressure from the UN mission to Somalia, AMISOM. The agreement fell short of implementation, raising tensions between Mogadishu and the states of Puntland and Jubaland that staunchly oppose federal rule.

There are three contentious issues on the table. The presidents of Puntland and Jubaland, Said Abdullahi Deni and Ahmed Islam Madobe, accused President Farmajo of staffing federal and state electoral commissions with his loyalists, thereby undermining their expected neutrality. Somaliland is yet another stumbling block on the path to elections. Despite its de facto independence, the transitional constitution still assigns 57 parliamentary seats (46 in the lower and 11 in the upper house) to the region. Those seats could be decisive for the election result, so

Farmajo wants the federal government to appoint Somaliland MPs, whereas Puntland and Jubaland want the chairpersons of the houses to manage the selection.

Finally, the issue of the district of Gedo has created a deep rift between the parties. Formally, in the state of Jubaland, government forces launched a military operation in February-March 2020 to occupy the region, which is dominated by President Farmajo's Marehan sub-clan, sparking tensions between Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. If elections took place at this stage, Farmajo could secure the appointment of loyal MPs from the Gedo district; Jubaland's Madobe and his allies reject this scenario.

Behind these flashpoints, however, there are two divergent visions of Somalia's state-building. President Farmajo envisages the return to a pre-1991 centralized state with himself in the top job. On the other side of the rift, federal member states, specifically Puntland and Jubaland, want to safeguard their far-reaching autonomy within a decentralized Somali state and, therefore, reject Farmajo's centralization project. Such fear has grown after the president managed to install his allies at the head of the states of Galmudug, Hirshabelle and South West during his tenure. On top of that, the unprecedented reelection of an incumbent could strain the balance of power between the major clans which, until now, have informally rotated the top positions of Somali federal institutions.

Growing Stakes

Somalia has faced similar impasses among its elites in the past. Yet this crisis is proving more difficult to solve. One reason for this is economic. Thanks to the 2012 constitutional pact and AMISOM stabilization efforts, federal institutions are no longer powerless and can tap into the economic activities that have sprung up in recent years, especially in Mogadishu. This is consolidating clan-based patronage networks in what Transparency International considers the most corrupt country of the world along with South Sudan. Consequently, the federal

government has become a relevant actor in Somalia's political economy, raising the stakes over its control.

The most notable of these activities is the housing boom. In 2015, Mogadishu ranked second among the world's fastest-growing cities as members of the Somali diaspora and wealthy locals built new properties in and around the capital. As there is no land tenure registry, affluent people often bribe public officials to obtain property rights and forcibly evict residents. This phenomenon has also driven severe tensions between public authorities and the local population, especially internally displaced persons.

The oil and gas sector represents the most lucrative opportunity in sight for the Somali rent-seeking elites. Seen as promising by experts, the sector has been reorganized in recent years under the Ministry of Petroleum and the Somali Petroleum Agency and, after the delays due to COVID-19, the first bidding round is about to end. Despite the so-called petroleum law on the distribution of revenues and powers, some outstanding issues remain on the table and the current crisis might catalyze them. Consequently, the oil and gas sector might become another key arena of competition between the federal government and member states in the coming years.

Some relevant economic opportunities for the government also arrive from abroad. China, for example, showed its interest in Somalia given its strategic location along the Maritime Silk Road and, in turn, the Farmajo administration officially joined Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative in 2018. With the move, Somali authorities hope to attract investments in the country's infrastructure. So far, the most visible result of the China-Somali cooperation is the fishing agreement through which Mogadishu granted fishing rights in Somali waters to a group of Chinese fishing companies in exchange for a \$35,000 annual fee from each. This agreement, however, risks to upset the fragile livelihood of low-income fishing communities along the Somali coast.

Neighboring View

While cooperation with China has future potential, Turkey has been Mogadishu's strongest partner for the last decade, with partnerships spanning across all sectors, from humanitarian aid to military training. Critically, Ankara has helped the government to train Somali special forces and build major infrastructural projects, like the Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu. The Turkish Albayrak Group will soon manage the capital's seaport and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is even planning to build a spaceport for the Turkish space program on Somali territory, with an estimated investment of \$350 million.

Given its extensive influence within Somalia, Turkey proposed itself as a mediator in the current crisis, with Foreign Minister Melvut Cavusoglu conducting shuttle diplomacy in support of the September agreement. Another Farmajo ally hesitant to take sides is Ethiopia. Despite Abiy Ahmed's embedded alliance with Farmajo, the Ethiopian prime minister is probably aware that a direct endorsement could prove counterproductive to both the Somali president and to himself as a promoter of regional stability. On top of that, according to International Crisis Group Somalia analyst Omar Muhammad, Ethiopia is busy coping with its multiple domestic crises.

During his years in office, President Farmajo has built strong ties not only with Ankara and Addis Ababa, but also with Doha. After receiving funds from Qatar and refusing to take sides in the Gulf standoff, Farmajo deepened development cooperation with Doha and offered a concession for the Port of Hobyo to the Qatari operator, Mwani, in 2019. This is the reason why Qatar has long backed the Somali president in the current dispute.

However, as Farmajo's chances of staying in power are narrowing, Doha is pulling its support and looking for new candidates to back. On the other hand, in reaction to Farmajo's pro-Qatar stance, the UAE put its weight behind the presidents of Puntland and Jubaland over the past

years by providing humanitarian aid, security cooperation and investments in the ports of Bossaso and Kismayo. Abu Dhabi was also the only country openly labeling Farmajo an interim president, a statement that attracted harsh criticism from the Somali government.

Regardless of diplomatic positioning, the economic and political support provided over the years by external powers has contributed to the current crisis. Investments increased stakes in government positions, strengthened the role of the president and his regional foes, and eventually reduced their willingness to compromise. Electoral commissions, Somaliland delegates and Gedo district remain the core stumbling blocks in the rift between Somali political actors, colliding against divergent visions of governance.

In the background, the terrorist group al-Shabaab, already in control of around two-thirds of the country, scaled up its bombing campaign at the beginning of the electoral cycle last summer. The international community has spearheaded an important step toward elections and now has to shore up a peaceful path to elections with the help of Somali leaders. Without this crucial support, al-Shabaab is likely to take full advantage of the impasse and further complicate the country's fragile state-building project.

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Who Can Resolve Ethiopia's Catastrophic Conflict?

Martin Plaut
November 18, 2021

What began a year ago as the invasion of the northern region of Ethiopia has spread across large areas of the country.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is in Kenya on a mission that is critical to the future of the Horn of Africa. As the press release published at the start of the visit puts it, “the United States and Kenya are working together to address regional priorities, particularly ending the crisis in Ethiopia, fighting terrorism in Somalia, and restoring the civilian-led transition in Sudan.”

Of these, the conflict in Ethiopia is probably the most burning issue. The forces from Ethiopia's northern Tigray region are advancing toward the capital, Addis Ababa, and panic is beginning to spread. The US has warned its citizens to leave now, saying that it will not repeat the evacuation from Afghanistan. Britain has echoed the warning while putting troops currently serving in Kenya on standby to assist.

The Somali situation has remained unsolved since the collapse of the last central government with the fall of Siad Barre in 1991. Sudan's struggle to overthrow the military who have seized power is critical but unlikely to spill over into neighboring states.

From the start of the war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region in November 2020, there were warnings that the conflict could lead to the collapse of the country, with catastrophic consequences for the region. The day after the war began, Johnnie Carson and Chester Crocker, both former US assistant secretaries of state for African affairs, put their names to a statement signed by some of America's best-informed Africanists, warning that the conflict might lead

to the “fragmentation of Ethiopia,” which would be “the largest state collapse in modern history.”

They suggested the consequences could be catastrophic, and their concerns are worth quoting in full:

“Ethiopia is five times the size of pre-war Syria by population, and its breakdown would lead to mass interethnic and interreligious conflict; a dangerous vulnerability to exploitation by extremists; an acceleration of illicit trafficking, including of arms; and a humanitarian and security crisis at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East on a scale that would overshadow any existing conflict in the region, including Yemen. As Ethiopia is currently the leading Troop Contributing Country to the United Nations and the African Union peacekeeping missions in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, its collapse would also significantly impact the efforts by both to mitigate and resolve others conflicts in the Horn of Africa.”

Their warning was prescient. What began a year ago as the invasion of the northern region of Ethiopia has spread across large areas of the country. Maps of the fighting show areas across Ethiopia held by Tigrayan forces or fighters of their allies, the Oromo Liberation Army.

How Did the Tigray War Begin?

This is by no means simply a war between the Ethiopian government and Tigray. The conflict began with an attack on Tigray by Ethiopian federal forces, militia from the Amhara region, supported by invading troops from Ethiopia's northern neighbor, Eritrea, as well as forces from Somalia. The Tigrayans had ruled Ethiopia for 27 years until being ousted by the current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, in 2018. The animosity between them was predictable.

The Tigrayans, smarting from their loss of power, attempted to defy the new Ethiopian prime minister. They resisted attempts to remove heavy weaponry from the Northern Command (headquartered in Tigray's regional capital, Mekelle, which they controlled). These weapons guarded northern Ethiopia (and Tigray, in

particular) against any Eritrean attack. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) mobilized their citizens to block roads and prevent their removal.

However, the position of the Eritreans and Somalis requires some explanation. Tensions between Tigray and Eritrea can be traced to the liberation movements of the 1970s. Back then, the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had an uneasy alliance, working together to fight the Ethiopian government. This culminated in 1991 with the simultaneous fall of Addis Ababa and Asmara. The EPLF provided support to the TPLF in the assault on Addis Ababa and then gave close protection to the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi. But this alliance hid ideological and tactical disputes.

The TPLF came to power, ruling Ethiopia via the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. By 1998, this relationship had ruptured and Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bitter war that ended in 2000, leaving some 100,000 people dead. A peace agreement was signed in Algiers, but, much to the fury of Eritrea, Ethiopia refused to accept the border drawn by the boundary commission established by the treaty.

In response, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki collaborated with the Somali Islamists of al-Shabab and Ethiopian guerrilla movements in a failed attempt to oust the Tigrayan rulers of Ethiopia. However, in 2018, internal factors finally saw the TPLF lose their grip on power in Addis Ababa, to be replaced by Abiy Ahmed.

Enter the Eritreans

Ethiopia's Abiy and Eritrea's Isaias believed they shared a common enemy in the Tigrayan military and political leadership. A series of initiatives led to an end to hostilities in 2018 between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a conflict that had simmered since the 1998-2000 border war. In a series of nine joint meetings by the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, they developed a joint strategy to rid themselves of the Tigrayans. It is instructive that

their final visits were held at the military bases of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Abiy canceled scheduled elections, arguing they could not be held because of the coronavirus pandemic. But his mandate had expired and the Tigrayans said he had no right to act in this way. They proceeded with their own elections, despite being instructed by the federal authorities not to. The last straw came when Abiy sent General Jamal Muhammad to take control of the Northern Command at the end of October 2020, only to have the TPLF put him on a plane back to Addis Ababa.

The federal government and the Tigray regional authority were clearly on a collision course. Exactly what happened on November 4 last year is not clear, but fighting broke out at the Northern Command base in Mekelle, which the TPLF took control of. Tigray was under attack from the north, east and south, with reports of drones, possibly supplied by the United Arab Emirates, fired from the Eritrean port of Assab in support of the Ethiopian government's war effort.

This is not the "law-enforcement operation" described by Abiy. On November 6, 2020, he said in a tweet that operations "by federal defence forces underway in Northern Ethiopia have clear, limited & achievable objectives." Six months later, this was hardly a plausible assessment. It had evolved into a full-scale war, which the Ethiopian government and its allies appeared to be winning. After an artillery bombardment of Mekelle, Abiy could rightly claim that his forces were in "full control" of Mekelle. He said that the army's entry into the city marked the "final phase" of the conflict with the TPLF.

From Defense to Offense

In reality, the Tigrayans had pulled their forces out of the cities and had headed to the countryside and the mountains to conduct a guerrilla war — just as they had done before 1991. Mekelle had fallen, but the Tigrayan administration had ordered its forces to withdraw before the attack.

The UN, in a secret report, feared the war would become an extended conflict, characterized by irregular warfare. This is indeed what has transpired. By April 4, 2021, Abiy admitted that the fighting was far from over. Capturing the cities had not ended the war. Then, in June this year, the Tigrayans burst forth from the countryside, recapturing their capital, Mekelle, by the end of the month. Instead of leaving matters there, they continued pushing south, taking cities until Addis Ababa itself felt under threat, even though the Tigrayans are still many miles away.

The United States and European Union have been working with the African Union in an attempt to end the fighting. The US has imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its role in the war and threatened to extend these to Ethiopia and Tigray. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has acted as a mediator, visiting Mekelle as well as Addis Ababa. He has had limited success.

The burden of resolving this conflict now rests on the shoulders of Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta. Whether he can succeed where others have failed remains to be seen.

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ASIA PACIFIC

Press Freedom in the Philippines: Death by a Thousand Cuts

Christianne France Collantes
March 11, 2021

Legal battles and continuous friction between the Duterte administration and the media sustain fears over the erosion of press freedom in the Philippines.

In less than two years, the editor-in-chief and CEO of the independent news site Rappler, Maria Ressa, has been issued 10 arrest warrants. The latest accusations against her involve tax evasion and failure to file accurate tax returns, which she testified against on March 4, 2021, before the Court of Tax Appeals. In addition, Ressa faces numerous other charges, including illegal foreign ownership of Rappler Holdings Corporation — the Philippine Constitution restricts foreign ownership of mass media in the country, subject to congressional regulation. The charges amount to 100 years of prison time if she is found guilty. This latest flurry of persecution is a continuum of the country's troubling history of suppressing press freedom.

The most high-profile case against Ressa, who is Filipino-American, concluded last year when she was found guilty of cyber libel. After an eight-month trial, Ressa, alongside Rappler journalist Reynaldo Santos Jr., was handed the verdict by the Manila Regional Trial Court on June 15. Ressa denied the charges, and both were released on bail pending appeal. However, they face up to six years in prison unless all appeals are rejected. The case against Ressa and Santos involves the latter's article published in 2012 by Rappler, which made allegations of businessman Wilfredo Keng's ties to then-Philippine Chief Justice Renato Corona. Santos' article also

alleged Keng's involvement in illicit activities that include drug and human trafficking.

Based on information published locally by the Philippine Star in 2002 and an intelligence report by the National Security Council, Santos's piece was published approximately four months before the Cybercrime Prevention Law came into effect in 2012. Its republication in 2014 due to a correction of a typo allowed for the court to give its guilty verdict to Ressa and Santos Jr. retroactively. The case has garnered attention and criticism from local and international media communities. Ressa herself claims the verdict and the numerous charges against her and Rappler are politically motivated. In her statement to the BBC, Ressa lamented, "I think what you're seeing is death by a thousand cuts — not just of press freedom but of democracy."

A Dangerous Place

Since his election in 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs has drawn criticism both nationally and abroad. According to The Guardian, tens of thousands of deaths in the Philippines are estimated to be the result of extrajudicial killings prompted by the president's anti-drug crackdown. Rappler has been at the forefront of extensive coverage and criticism of the campaign. The correlation between Rappler's reporting and the number of charges against Ressa has fueled the narrative of intimidation tactics by the Philippine government against the free press.

The Philippines has a long history of suppressing various forms of free speech and political activism. The current wave of persecution carries echoes of the martial law years during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s 1980s, when journalists and activists were arrested and interrogated by the military and a media lockdown was implemented as newspapers and radio stations were ordered shut.

In more recent years, hundreds of farmers, trade union leaders, activists and environmentalists have been targeted by the

Philippine government. According to a report by the UN Human Rights Office, at least 248 activists have been killed in the Philippines between 2015 and 2019. While Maria Ressa's high-profile case has regenerated national and global outrage, it is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how treacherous an environment not only the media, but human and democratic rights defenders have to navigate in the country.

The Philippines ranks 136 out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index. After the 2009 massacre of 32 journalists in Maguindanao province ordered by a local warlord, RSF has regularly deemed the country as one of the most dangerous places in Asia for journalists. Adding insight to Maria Ressa's criminal libel case, the organization noted that "Private militias, often hired by local politicians, silence journalists with complete impunity." Freedom of the press is guaranteed under the country's constitution, yet in 2018, the Philippine Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility tallied 85 attacks on the media by the Duterte administration, including death threats, killings and attempted murder.

President Duterte's public remarks against the media also contribute to the grim state of press freedom in the country. In 2016, the president stated: "Just because you're a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you're a son of a bitch. Freedom of expression cannot help you if you have done something wrong." In 2018, responding to a Rappler reporter, Duterte was captured saying, "you have been throwing trash... If you are trying to throw garbage at us, then the least that we can do is explain how about you? Are you also clean?"

The Cybercrime Prevention Law, which was used to convict Ressa, has itself been criticized by the public as having the potential to further threaten freedom of speech and expression. Signed into law by then-President Benigno Aquino III on September 12, 2012, the legislation was primarily established to address crimes such as hacking, identity theft, child pornography and

cybersex. Its additional provisions caused worry amongst the public for expanding its legal parameters to include any libelous speech or statements made by citizens on their private social media accounts. Senator Tito Sotto, who at the time was being attacked on social media for alleged plagiarism, is noted for suggesting the inclusion of the libel provision in the law. According to GMA News Online, “There were fears that even retweeting an offensive comment could land one in jail.”

Since the implementation, the law has been cited to charge journalists other than Ressa for cyber libel, including Ramon Tulfo and RJ Nieto. Prior to Ressa’s verdict, Councilor Archie Yongco, from the province of Zamboanga del Sur, was found guilty of cyber libel in March 2020 based on a scathing Facebook post against a rival politician. Although he deleted his post just minutes after its publication, screenshots of his comments were used as evidence in the case. Yongco faces up to eight years of imprisonment and is the first individual to be given a guilty verdict under the Cybercrime Prevention Law.

A Series of Threats

The guilty verdict against Maria Ressa and Reynaldo Santos Jr. was compounded by a series of legislative threats against the media in 2020. On July 10, the House Committee on Legislative Franchises voted against renewing the franchise license for the broadcasting network ABS-CBN. Ressa, commenting on the closure of the broadcaster, stated: “what happened to ABS-CBN can happen to all of us. Journalists, we have to hold power to account.... We need to continue to demand accountability.”

Shortly after the closure of ABS-CBN, there were public concerns over the introduction of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 that came into effect on July 18. The act allows the state to arrest and imprison suspects without a warrant. The alarm among citizens came from the act’s expanded definition of terrorism that broadly includes “engaging in acts intended to endanger a person’s life” and causing damage to public property.

Similar to the provisions of the Cybercrime Prevention Law, the new legislation poses threats to users on social media who express political sentiments or dissent. In this case, however, fears are not related to being accused of libel but of so-called red-tagging — the practice of targeting or blacklisting suspected members of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People’s Army, both of which have been declared as terrorist organizations by the government.

The legislation, compounded by the Duterte administration’s worrisome human rights record, incited widespread fears of the decline of freedom of speech and expression. Social media users who criticize the government also voiced concern over the act, especially since the head of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Lieutenant General Gilbert Gapay, expressed interest in including social media in the ambit of the law. Local and international press freedom advocates have filed petitions with the Supreme Court in Manila to reject the legislation, calling it unconstitutional.

After nearly a year of grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic downturn caused by lockdown measures, the Philippines continues to navigate numerous challenges. Maria Ressa’s and Rappler’s legal battles, as well as the continuous frictions between the Duterte administration and the media, exacerbate fears over the erosion of democratic rights and press freedom during these uncertain times.

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The Matter of Xi's Succession

Eyck Freymann & Ralph Su
April 21, 2021

With a largely unnoticed change in legislation, President Xi Jinping has acquired the tools to eliminate any rival, especially Premier Li Keqiang and Vice-Premier Hu Chunhua.

At the all-important two sessions (lianghui) meetings last month, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials adopted a new and surprisingly unambitious Five-Year Plan, reoriented the country's technology strategy and redoubled the crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong.

All of this was documented in the English-language media. But another crucial CCP announcement flew below the media's radar. An innocuous-sounding procedural change gave President Xi Jinping the authority to dismiss vice premiers of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, one of the last potential bastions of elite opposition to his rule.

Premier Li Keqiang, nominally the second-most powerful man in China, has now been effectively sidelined. Furthermore, Hu Chunhua, Xi's charismatic potential successor, can now be fired at will.

Xi was already on track for a third term. First, he was "reelected" to a second term at the 19th Party Congress in September 2017. A few months later, the pliant National People's Congress (NPC) lifted the two-term limit for the presidency. Despite acquiring total control, Xi remains wary of potential rivals, particularly Li Keqiang, his second-in-command. At the 19th Party Congress, Xi kept Li on largely as a figurehead, calculating that elevating anyone else to the number-two job would have anointed them as a potential successor. Since 2017, Xi repeatedly sought opportunities to undermine Li, cannily dispatching him to Wuhan in January

2020 to associate the premier with the botched response to COVID-19.

Neutralizing Potential Challengers

Xi is now looking beyond Li with the goal of neutralizing all potential challengers. Li has little practical influence in the CCP's top echelons, but he wields formidable power on paper. Formally speaking, the CCP and the Chinese state are separate institutions. Xi Jinping is both general secretary of the CCP and president of the People's Republic of China. Li is ostensibly the second-ranked official in the CCP, but his position as the head of the State Council, the executive branch of the Chinese state, is more important. Until the recent rule change, Xi had no formal authority to order direct personnel changes in the State Council. That meant Li's four main subordinates, known as vice premiers, had some level of job security and could potentially use their position as a springboard to challenge Xi.

All of that has changed at this year's lianghui with a legislative amendment. The law in question is Article 32 of the Organic Law of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China. The NPC meets only once per year, at the spring lianghui. Under the new rules, the Standing Committee of the NPC, which answers to Xi, can remove any official on the State Council, except the prime minister, at any time. This means that Xi does not have to wait for the next lianghui to get rid of Li's subordinates.

In strict formal terms, if Xi wanted to fire a vice premier, Li would still have to consent. In practice, Li's hand would be forced by Xi. The NPC is China's top legislative body, a rubber-stamp parliament that exists to legitimize the CCP's actions. If the NPC recommends personnel changes on the State Council, the premier of the State Council cannot resist. If Li were to do so, that would be tantamount to overriding the "democratic will" of the people of China.

Why is Xi bothering to amend the law if his third term is not in doubt? We do not know for sure, but we can speculate. Perhaps Xi is just generally wary of Li. But there might be another reason. There was widespread grumbling among the top brass of the CCP when Xi eliminated term limits three years ago. Rumors tell us that there is still some level of semi-organized resistance, with Li potentially involved. It might also be the case that Xi tried to replace one or more vice premiers, but Li resisted. Vice premiers of the State Council are all members of the CCP Politburo, the 20-member body that is the second-highest organ in the party bureaucracy.

Xi probably wants total control of the Politburo. Of course, Xi has other ways to take out such senior officials. In the past, “anti-corruption” crackdowns have cut many down to size. However, this anti-corruption process is disruptive and could send a signal that Xi’s control is shaky. Therefore, a sneaky legal change might be a better alternative.

Succession Matters

We suspect that Xi is targeting a particular leader. China has four vice premiers: Han Zheng, Liu He, Sun Chunlan and Hu Chunhua. Han is a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, the CCP’s top body. This legal amendment would not be enough to get rid of Han. So, he is not the target of Xi’s ire. Neither is Liu, Xi’s personal friend who won the economic policy argument in the 14th Five-Year Plan. In the shady world of CCP politics, Liu’s job seems safe as of now. Sun, the highest-ranking woman in the modern history of Chinese politics, is past the mandatory retirement age and poses no threat to Xi. This leaves Hu as the only possible target for the amendment. The fact that he is the most charismatic and popular of the vice premiers makes him a potential threat to Xi.

From 2012 to 2017, Hu was the party secretary of Guangdong, China’s most prosperous province. For decades, this position has been a stepping stone for national leadership. Ironically, Xi’s father served as party secretary of

Guangdong, as did other CCP luminaries such as Zhao Ziyang, Li Changchun, Zhang Dejiang and Wang Yang. Hu is the youngest official at his level of seniority in the CCP. He is also connected, though not related, to Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao. Before the 2017 NPC, there was widespread speculation that Hu Chunhua would leapfrog straight into the Politburo Standing Committee and be groomed as a putative future leader. Xi prevented this, giving Hu the position of vice premier instead. Now, Xi has gone further and hung a sword over Hu’s head.

Xi is determined to ensure an orderly confirmation of his third term at the next NPC in 2022. For three years, the Chinese media have humored Xi by resolutely avoiding the topic of his succession. Xi knows that it cannot be avoided indefinitely. According to longstanding CCP custom, anyone featuring in the succession sequence needs experience in the positions of vice premier, national vice chairman and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. Those who currently occupy these positions are either too old or not close enough to Xi to be considered successor material. The only exception is Hu who now holds office at the pleasure of Xi.

The study of Chinese elite politics is as much an art as a science. Like Kremlinologists at the height of the Cold War, China analysts make educated inferences from a small number of highly choreographed public events and documents. As a result, the line between speculation and analysis is often blurry. Nevertheless, as US-China relations deteriorate, the CCP’s succession plans are more important now than at any point since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

Coming out of the lianghai, all signs indicate that Xi remains at the height of his power at home. Furthermore, he is likely to enter his third term in 2022 with a new suite of tools to deter — and, if necessary, eliminate — potential elite rivals. In this context, pushing for Xi’s ouster, as one anonymous senior US official recently

recommended, would be reckless as it is likely to backfire.

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Young People Are the Key to Reconciling China and Hong Kong

Zoe Leung & Eric Yang
June 28, 2021

Young people in Mainland China and Hong Kong must work to overcome different education systems, political traditions and historical experiences.

In 2019-20, a pro-democracy movement erupted in Hong Kong. Students from both high schools and universities took to the streets. They gambled with their futures for democratic ideals. Instead of getting inspired by the youth in Hong Kong, many of their counterparts in mainland China turned against them. Some mainland Chinese youth even supported the harsh crackdown by authorities and other repressive measures.

The divide between mainland Chinese and Hong Kong youth has reached alarming levels. Multiple surveys have revealed that almost no one under 30 in Hong Kong identifies as Chinese. The clash between these two groups has now arrived at university campuses around the world as both sides are adamant in presenting their side of the story. COVID-19 has only exacerbated these differences. Mainland Chinese see the success of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

in managing the pandemic as proof of its competence. Hong Kongers do not trust their CCP-influenced government and view the measures to control the pandemic as another excuse for increased repression.

Despite the Differences

The divergent beliefs among young people in mainland China and Hong Kong assume importance in the context of new geopolitical realities. US President Joe Biden is championing a democratic agenda for the world, corralling like-minded countries to counter growing Chinese influence. Hong Kong is key in this new global struggle between democracy and autocracy. Having been under British rule until 1997, the territory is still governed by common law and has enjoyed greater relative freedom than mainland China. Now, that era seems to be ending.

Since 1997, many mainland Chinese have moved to Hong Kong. In particular, students have arrived in large numbers. At the end of 2019, more than 38,000 mainlanders were studying in Hong Kong. Greater interaction between these young people was supposed to increase mutual understanding. Instead, they still live in parallel universes. Mainland students live together, hang out with each other and tend to share similar beliefs. As hosts, Hong Kongers have made little effort to reach out.

Despite many differences, both groups of students have a lot in common. Both are tired of the rat race, the decreasing social mobility and widening inequality. Mainlanders celebrate slacking off during work. They speak of “mō yú,” a phrase that means “feeling the fish.” They also speak of “tǎngpíng,” or “lying flat.” This is a refusal to participate in the economic rat race. Hong Kongers are equally, if not more jaded about the economic system. They see the city’s economy in decline. They worry about getting decent jobs, buying an apartment and raising children. Prima facie, mainland and Hong Kong students should be uniting around common economic concerns.

Yet Chinese and Hong Kong youth have very different perspectives. The former has strong feelings of national pride due to ideological indoctrination. For many Chinese students, the CCP has delivered good governance, economic growth and social stability. The CCP's "performance legitimacy" has increased among mainlanders. They are wary of Western democracies that criticize the Chinese model. This wariness is rooted in an education system that the CCP developed in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

The education system highlights the "century of national humiliation" that began when late imperial China was forced to cede sovereignty and territory to foreign powers. It glamorizes the CCP-led "national rejuvenation" that entails China reclaiming its seat at the top table as a great power. Under President Xi Jinping, the CCP has redoubled its drive to promulgate nationalist education. In 2019, the government published a new outline for Chinese patriotic education that emphasizes rejuvenation even further. As per this document, national rejuvenation is "the Chinese Dream," Xi's pet slogan from November 2012.

A Different Reading of History

Hong Kong students have a different reading of history. In 2012, they took to the streets to protest against a proposed curriculum that emphasized China's model of political meritocracy over the messiness of Western democracies and downplayed political events like the Tiananmen Square massacre. In 2014, students rose up again in what came to be known as Occupy Central, or the Umbrella Movement. They demanded universal suffrage as promised in the Basic Law, the city's constitution.

Hong Kong students have a very different experience when compared to their mainland peers. Hong Kongers have opposed the CCP's increasing interference in the territory's governance. Mainlanders see the CCP as the torchbearer of national rejuvenation. Hong Kong students want the autonomy and freedoms of the

"one country, two systems" model to continue. Mainlanders want China's sovereignty over Hong Kong asserted.

Importantly, young Hong Kongers are increasingly cynical of authority. They are prepared for prolonged underground resistance to the harsh new national security law. Some have adopted a destructive philosophy of "ultimate burnism" because they have lost faith in the future. Today, almost 60% of those between 15 to 30 would leave Hong Kong if they had the chance to do so.

Different Memories

It is clear that young mainlanders and Hong Kongers have different historical memories and political aspirations. Consequently, prospects for long-term reconciliation between the two sides appear grim. However, such reconciliation is more important than ever. Hong Kong was once a model for the coexistence of Western democracy and Chinese one-party rule. Its political fate is a bellwether for the future relationship between China and the West.

As such, it is important to build trust among young people on both sides of the divide. Only when they start understanding each other's history and grasping their respective cultural nuances does reconciliation stand a chance.

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Indonesia's Balancing Act Between China and Taiwan

M. Habib Pashya
July 20, 2021

Indonesia has been boosting cooperation with both China and Taiwan but must navigate carefully as Beijing-Taipei tensions rise.

On July 1, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated its 100th anniversary. During his commemorative speech at Tiananmen Square, President Xi Jinping claimed that China has never oppressed the people of any other country. Xi is clearly ignoring China's treatment of Taiwan.

Since 2016, relations between China and Taiwan have worsened. Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won both the presidential and legislative elections in 2016, displacing the Kuomintang (KMT) as Taiwanese voters became skeptical of the KMT's policy of engaging with China.

Since becoming president, DPP leader Tsai Ing-wen has challenged Beijing's "one-China policy." In 2020, she declared that Taiwan could not accept reunification with China under its "one country, two systems" offer of autonomy. Taiwan's first female president said that "Both sides have a duty to find a way to coexist over the long term and prevent the intensification of antagonism and differences," pouring cold water over Beijing's long-cherished hopes of reunification.

Chinese Aggression, Taiwanese Response

China has responded aggressively to Taiwan's position. In a recent article, Lee Hsi-min, a retired Taiwanese admiral, and Eric Lee, an Indo-Pacific security analyst, point out that the CCP "is already taking action against Taiwan." For years, China has undertaken incremental military measures against its tiny neighbor. Beijing has

been careful not to cross the threshold of armed conflict, but its sub-conflict operations have been relentless.

These operations have come to be known as gray zone aggression. They involve airspace incursions, coastal violations, cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns. A recent report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that Chinese aircraft had entered Taiwan's airspace 20 times in the first eight months of 2020. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has stepped up its air and naval operations. Fighter and bomber aircraft frequently circumnavigate Taiwan as a show of force. Chinese aircraft carriers have been on military exercises and "routine" drills in waters near Taiwan.

This is part of China's increased aggression in its neighborhood since Xi took charge of the CCP, with Beijing doing all it can to undermine Taiwan's institutions, demoralize its society and undermine popular support for a democratically elected government. However, Taiwan has responded robustly to this aggression. In April, the Taiwanese foreign minister vowed that his country would defend itself to "the very last day." Taiwan is spending more on defense, strengthening military ties with allied powers and even preparing for a potential war to retain its independence.

Indonesia's Balancing Act

As tensions rise between China and Taiwan, Indonesia has been forced into a delicate balancing act. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, a big source of investment and a supplier of COVID-19 vaccines. In 2019, bilateral trade reached \$79.4 billion, rising tenfold since 2000. Indonesia has even started using Chinese currency for trade in a historic move away from the US dollar.

In 2020, Chinese foreign direct investment in Indonesia, including flows from Hong Kong, reached \$8.4 billion, rising by 11% in a year. A 142-kilometer Indonesian rail project is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative and is expected

to cost \$4.57 billion. In April, Xi met Indonesian President Joko Widodo and promised to boost Chinese investment further. Xi said the two countries should increase infrastructure projects such as the high-speed rail link between the capital Jakarta and Bandung, a major Indonesian city.

Before the pandemic, 2 million Chinese tourists visited Indonesia every year. Jakarta's nationwide vaccination campaign is using China's Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine. (So far, the West has failed to provide Indonesia with vaccines.) Derek Grossman, a senior analyst at the RAND Corporation, has argued that Indonesia is quietly warming up to China.

Even as Indonesia develops closer ties with China, it is also deepening its relationship with Taipei. Taiwan's track record in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic has been spectacularly successful, and Taipei has donated 200 oxygen concentrators to Jakarta. Even though it has been criticized for the recent rise in cases, Taiwan is still a role model for a country like Indonesia, which needs all the help it can get.

Like the US, the UK and many other countries, Indonesia does not recognize Taiwan's independence. However, trade between the two countries is rising.

In 2019, Taiwanese investment in Indonesia crossed \$400 million. The previous year, trade between the two countries surpassed \$8 billion, growing by 15.7% in a year. President Tsai's "new southbound policy" is starting to yield results.

Treading Carefully

Indonesia has to be careful in handling its relationship with both China and Taiwan. Recently, Japan's deputy defense minister suggested that Taiwan "as a democratic country" should be protected from China.

The statement triggered fierce condemnation from Beijing. Jakarta should to avoid any pronouncement that may upset Beijing, Taipei or even Washington. Indonesia needs economic

growth, increased investment and collaboration with all major powers.

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ASEAN's Myanmar Strategy, Slow But Steady

Tzyy Wei Siu
December 21, 2021

Despite repeated urgency for stronger action, ASEAN recognizes that coercive strategies are not effective in seeking a final resolution in Myanmar.

On December 6, the world saw Myanmar's leaders ousted by a military takeover earlier this year receive their first verdict in a series of trials. National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint were both initially sentenced to four years in prison for inciting dissent and breaking COVID-19 rules. While her sentence was subsequently halved after a partial pardon by General Min Aung Hlaing, Suu Kyi faces a total of 11 charges that might see her spend the rest of her life in prison.

When the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) declared Min Aung Hlaing persona non grata at the leaders' summit back in October, it resulted in the quick release of over 5,600 political prisoners. However, it also precipitated resistance to ASEAN's plan for a non-violent ceasefire. This was characterized by the rejection of the request by ASEAN's envoy to Myanmar, Dato Erywan Yusof, to meet Aung San Suu Kyi and other detained leaders. With

more verdicts pending, what will ASEAN's next steps be?

Bitter Pill

It is easy to berate ASEAN for its delayed response to the February coup and to what has now become a humanitarian crisis, with nearly 1,300 dead, 200,000 displaced and 3 million in need of assistance. However, the immediate move by the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom to enforce economic sanctions on Myanmar has not produced the hoped-for results.

Although economic sanctions affect many industries across the country, such as the military conglomerates Myanmar Economic Corporation and Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd, they have done little to nudge the military leaders toward a ceasefire. Instead, repression and bloodshed intensify by the day.

The inefficacy of economic sanctions is a difficult pill to swallow, but it forces us to confront two realities.

First, the military leaders assign very low importance to economic growth vis-à-vis the pursuit of their political agenda. In this crisis, the main focus of the military leaders is to right what they believe is wrong, namely nurturing a "true and disciplined democracy" based on the claim that the landslide NLD win in November 2020 was rigged.

The verdict against Aung San Suu Kyi is an indicator that despite a persistent international backlash, the economy has taken a backseat and will continue to be compromised if it means that the junta can legitimize its position.

Economic and travel sanctions like those implemented by the European Union, the US Treasury, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, among others, will limit the movement of the military leaders and hold businesses in a tight chokehold. As the fight for survival continues, economic sanctions will only cause the skyrocketing of prices on goods most people will no longer be able to afford. Along with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this will only help

to drag half of Myanmar's population into poverty in 2022.

Second, curtailing Myanmar's dealings with global actors like the US, the EU and the UN is not as fruitful as many would like to think. To offset the newest round of sanctions, Myanmar's military leaders have linked arms with superpowers on the other side of the political spectrum, like China and Russia. Therefore, the remaining challenge for ASEAN is to develop a non-violent strategy that can bring a quick end to the bloodshed while making room for negotiations aimed at giving the people of Myanmar a say in their own future.

From 1988 to 2021

Despite the suppression of the 1988 uprising, when a military junta again seized power, and the ensuing crackdown on civil rights, then-Burma was admitted to ASEAN in 1997. The move was not without controversy, with continuing international pressure to make the admission contingent on democratic concessions from Yangon, but geopolitical and economic considerations drove ASEAN's decision. Unsurprisingly, Myanmar's accession opened a new set of challenges for the bloc, especially vis-à-vis its non-interference principle.

The policy discourages states from intervening in the internal affairs of fellow members, including criticism of state actions against its citizens, and condemns those perceived to be in breach of the non-intervention principle. It also denies support to any rebel group seeking to destabilize the government of a neighboring state, providing political support and material assistance to members to counter disruptive activity. To put it broadly, the non-interference policy means that all member states tend to take a hands-off approach when it comes to the national affairs of their regional counterparts.

As a result, one of the main criticisms faced by ASEAN over the decades has to do with its delay in interfering in regional emergencies, like the 2015 Rohingya crisis that was later identified as ethnic cleansing by the United Nations. Thus,

it was only by 2005 that ASEAN arrived at a collective consensus to bar Myanmar from the 2006 chairmanship to void a boycott by the West, with the US and the EU condemning the military's refusal to implement democratic transition and release Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the 1990 election but was placed under house arrest instead of assuming office.

The association's silence on its member states has become a significant liability for ASEAN's reputation. Seeking to enhance the bloc's international standing and to attract financial support and foreign investment, ASEAN nations finally had a common cause to intervene for the sake of regional stability. Myanmar's eventual agreement to give up the chairmanship that year also meant the bloc was effective in keeping the military leaders updated on its incremental steps in having a more active approach for the sake of the social and economic stability of all member states.

Fast forward to February 2021, and both Myanmar and ASEAN find themselves in a near-identical predicament. After international criticism fueled lengthy discussions that lasted over two months, ASEAN reached the Five Point Consensus as its action plan.

The surprise election of Dato Erywan Yusof as the bloc's special envoy for Myanmar outside the original list of nominees followed, demonstrating not only the internal divides within the bloc but also indicating that Yusof was the only sound choice for ASEAN to earn the trust of all stakeholders and to make decisions with required caution.

These moves show that extensive efforts have been taken in order for ASEAN to reach a consensus with the Myanmar leaders and, more importantly, for ASEAN to ensure Myanmar was still included in the process. The Five Point Consensus is a gradual strategy that offers a way for ASEAN to begin negotiations with the Myanmar military through diplomatic engagement and respecting the hard-fought national independence of other member states.

Middle Ground

To find a middle ground, Yusof has proposed measured, non-violent strategies that would begin with humanitarian assistance and policy guidance through the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Centre, followed by a more substantive discussion with the junta in exchange for full access to all parties. ASEAN is currently playing a calculated game of push-and-pull. The military leaders need their relevance in Myanmar politics to be acknowledged, which ASEAN has already indirectly provided; in response, the junta's lack of cooperation and reciprocity to the consensus protocol provided room for ASEAN to plan its next step.

In comparison to the economic sanctions, by barring Myanmar's representatives from this year's summit, ASEAN has taken a more calculative approach in allowing the junta to consider the consequences of non-cooperation. Simultaneously, ASEAN's secretary general, Dato Lim Jock Hoi, stressed that humanitarian assistance "should not be politicised." At the end of the October leaders' summit, His Majesty Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah reiterated that "Myanmar is an integral part of the ASEAN family and their membership has not been questioned."

Despite repeated urgency for stronger action, ASEAN recognizes that coercive strategies are not effective in seeking a final resolution. As much as this is a race against time, it is also unproductive to rush political negotiations that can result in more harm than good. It is clear that ASEAN has moved beyond its non-interference principle and is exercising both caution and effort as the sole moderator in this crisis. Ultimately, continuous criticism can only achieve so much.

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Why Are India's Farmers Protesting?

Atul Singh & Manu Sharma
February 17, 2021

India is adopting a market-based system to replace a Soviet-inspired model that benefited a limited number of farmers who fear losing their advantages.

Indian farmers have lately made international headlines. Popstar Rihanna, actor Susan Sarandon and activist Greta Thunberg have taken up their cause. Ozy, a glitzy Silicon Valley publication posed a provocative question: “Will the World Step In?”

The story playing out in international media appears to be a simple one. Indian farmers are the noble David standing up to an evil Goliath-like government beholden to greedy billionaires. In an era of increasing inequality and decreasing social mobility, this narrative resonates. The fact that elite journalists in New Delhi or New York see the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a Hindu fascist party adds to its appeal.

Publications such as Ozy convey that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has brought in agricultural reforms solely to benefit large corporations. As per this narrative, the government is in thrall to big business and against poor farmers. Is this narrative true, or is there something more complicated going on?

The Burden of History

Ever since the British Raj, Indian farmers have led tough lives. The colonial power imposed extortionate taxes on farmers, taking away at least 45% of harvests, often confiscating the whole yield. British imperialists took Niccolo Machiavelli's advice to heart and patronized a new feudal class of landlords to act as their middlemen. They did the dirty work of squeezing

farmers, enabling them to escape much of the blame. The British also created an extractive colonial bureaucracy to suck wealth out from India. Few realize that the primary job of the now-glamorous district collector — an elite civil servant who does the job elected mayors do in western democracies — was to collect taxes from poor Indian farmers.

Writing in The World Financial Review last year, Kalim Siddiqui explained in some detail why famine stalked British India. Great Britain industrialized and became a great power partly through ruthless exploitation of farmers in what are now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which then comprised British India. As a result, millions died of starvation, and those who survived the famines suffered constant malnourishment.

The first priority for independent India was feeding its people. Indian farmers were dirt poor with no access to credit, reliable irrigation or modern agricultural tools and farming methods. They were often in the clutches of predatory moneylenders. Yet farmers had experience of mass movements. Mahatma Gandhi led his first satyagraha in Champaran against exploitation by British landlords, mobilizing thousands of poor farmers. In India's new democracy, farmers might have been poor but, for the first time in centuries, they wielded real political power.

That power has carried over to today. Even as India has urbanized, farmers disproportionately decide elections. A staggering 83.5% of seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament, still primarily comprise rural areas. The political power of farmers has given them many benefits.

Since 1947, governments have formulated multiple economic policies to overcome India's colonial-era rural poverty. India abolished zamindari, an indigenous form of landlordship, immediately after independence. It overturned centuries of tradition by abolishing income tax for farmers. A key purpose of the 1969 bank nationalization was to provide cash-starved farmers access to credit.

The Green Revolution

In the 1960s, India launched its famous Green Revolution, which subsidized farmers in India's northwest region, comprising the states of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. This part of the country is a flat fertile plain irrigated by Himalayan snow-fed perennial rivers and with relatively large landholdings. Inspired by the American agronomist Norman Borlaug, India's government encouraged farmers in this region to grow high-yield varieties of wheat, rice and cotton. It also gave farmers massive subsidies for fertilizers, seeds and equipment, investing large sums of capital to build dams and a network of canals and giving farmers access to easy credit. As a result, the farmers of landholding communities in northwest India became the most prosperous in the country.

The Green Revolution ended India's ship-to-mouth existence. India's population had exploded after independence in 1947. In a poor country, agriculture was inefficient and rain-fed. A bad monsoon meant poor harvests. Demand would outstrip supply and the specter of famine was never far off. Until production took off in India, the US supplied grains to Indian masses under the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, commonly known as PL-480 or Food for Peace. Lyndon B. Johnson limited even critical famine aid to India, demanding the country implement agricultural reforms and temper criticism of US intervention in Vietnam. The Green Revolution provided India with food security after two centuries of rapacious British rule.

Yet like any policy, the Green Revolution had unintended consequences. In 2009, Daniel Zwerdling chronicled how this fabled revolution was "heading for collapse." With an emphasis on high-yield varieties, the traditional mix of crops grown in the region for centuries has been abandoned. Yields increased dramatically but only through an insatiable thirst for water. Groundwater levels have fallen by 75%-85% over the decade. In Punjab and Haryana, farmers are boring deeper and deeper for water. In 2018,

61% of wells were dug deeper than 10 meters. In a land crisscrossed by rivers fed by Himalayan snow, such water levels mark historic lows. India might have achieved food security at the cost of water security.

Parts of India are not just running out of water. The soil itself is turning toxic. Intense use of fertilizers and pesticides over decades has pumped harmful chemicals into the soil. More than 10 years ago, astute journalists like Daniel Pepper were reporting on villagers who spoke about rising cases of cancer, renal failure, stillborn babies and birth defects. These health problems have increased since. Researchers attribute these conditions to the "overuse and misuse of pesticides and herbicides." As Pepper reported in 2008, Punjab comprised 1.5% of India's area but accounted for nearly 20% of the country's pesticide consumption. Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh suffer similarly high soil pollution and consequent health problems.

Another consequence of the Green Revolution has been the overproduction of cereals. So much wheat and rice are produced that a storage crisis has ensued. India now lacks the capacity to store grains, with millions of tons are stockpiled in poor conditions. In particular, India lacks cold storage facilities for fruits and vegetables because of restrictions on farmers, the stranglehold of Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) and a lack of incentives for the private sector to invest in the rural economy.

A Soviet Procurement System

After independence, India opted for the Soviet economic model. Five-year plans set out ambitious targets for a command-and-control economy. The so-called quota-permit-license raj emerged, with bureaucrats dictating "which company would produce what, but also the amount of production, as well as the price of commodities." Agriculture was no different. In a top-down, command-and-control system, the government set targets that farmers had to meet.

In an indigenous twist to the Soviet system, India created the institution of the Agricultural

Produce Market Committee. Thousands of APMCs were to run local agricultural markets, known as mandis. Farmers could only sell to APMC-controlled mandis and only at fixed prices. Unlike their American or European counterparts, Indian farmers could not sell wheat or rice on the open market. This prohibition had two reasons. First, APMCs allowed the government to control both production and price in its planned economy model. Second, APMCs were meant to protect farmers from the vagaries of the free market and save them from exploitation.

Over time, APMCs become the new oppressors. Local politicians and special interest groups came to control APMCs. Since they were the only buyers by law, APMC mandis began to set ceilings on what farmers received for their produce, offering precipitously low prices. Commission agents started taking greater cuts. APMCs delayed payments to farmers, forcing them to borrow from “[commission agents], local money lenders and savings for their daily expenses.” In addition, APMCs rarely gave receipts to farmers. This meant that they were denied the option of applying to banks for much cheaper credit. Instead, they were pushed into India’s infamous informal economy and became prey to exploitative lending. Tragically, inevitable and unbearable debt burdens have led to thousands of farmer suicides.

Apart from the APMCs, the government instituted a minimum price support mechanism as part of its planned economy model. New Delhi wanted high and stable production of key crops. Farmers wanted, and still want, stable income. In a pure market system, too much production leads to falling prices. This is not ideal for farmers. Therefore, they are careful to avoid overproduction. So, India’s economic planners instituted a system that provided a floor below which prices would not fall, encouraging farmers to grow crops deemed essential for food security and economic interests.

Over time, powerful lobbies in northwestern India, the heartland of the Green Revolution,

pressured the government to put the minimum support price well above the price the market would have otherwise set. What began as limited support to ensure price and production stability eventually morphed into a substantial taxpayer-funded direct subsidy.

Support prices differed widely from one state to another. At the same time, restrictive laws compelled farmers to sell to designated APMCs within their districts. Crossing state and even district boundaries to get a better price for their produce was illegal and could land farmers in jail. For instance, Punjab’s support prices have been higher than those in Bihar. Therefore, Bihari farmers have been illegally selling paddy to markets in Punjab at a price lower than the minimum support price but higher than what they would get back home. A flourishing black market and widespread corruption emerged as a result.

New Agricultural Reforms

In December 2019, the parliamentary standing committee on agriculture published a major report. It concluded that APMC markets were not working in the interest of farmers. Instead, they were reducing competition, causing cartelization of traders and unduly deducting money due to farmers through market fees and commission charges. Corruption and malpractices in APMCs were rife. The committee observed that “there [was] urgent need for radical reform” and asked the government to inform parliament “about steps taken in this direction within three months.” It is noteworthy that the opposition and farmers’ unions agreed with the committee’s observations.

Last year, the government finally instituted long overdue agricultural reforms. Several economists and policy wonks welcomed them, arguing that these reforms would “unshackle farmers from the restrictive marketing regime that has managed the marketing of agriculture produce for decades.” In their view, these reforms promised “to bring the entire world of farming technology, post-harvest management and marketing channels at the doorstep of the farmer.”

The reforms have three key aspects. First, farmers will be able to sell their produce to anyone, including agricultural businesses, supermarket chains, online grocers or, as before, APMC mandis. The key difference from the status quo is that farmers are no longer required to sell only to APMC mandis. A Bihari farmer would now have the legal right to sell in Punjab and vice versa without fear of arrest.

Second, the reforms have created a framework for agricultural commercial agreements. When farmers engage directly with processors, agribusiness firms and large retailers, their counterparties will have to guarantee a price and make timely payments.

Third, regulations on farm produce have been simplified and eased. The command-and-control system that determined the crops or quantities farmers would grow is being dismantled. Only in extraordinary circumstances such as war, famine, a natural calamity or an extraordinary price rise will the government have the right to direct production of cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, onions, potatoes or any other crops.

In 2020, agricultural reforms became inevitable because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A nationwide lockdown caused a massive migration of urban workers back to their villages. This increased pressure on already scarce land — something needed to be done. Restrictive laws on sale, pricing and storage of produce had to go. Therefore, after two decades of endless discussion, reforms finally transpired. They seek to increase investment in agriculture, boost farmer incomes and create a national agricultural market to emerge for the first time since India's independence.

Who Is Protesting and Why?

From the outset, the reforms have proved controversial. In September, the BBC wondered whether they were a “death warrant” for farmers. Some farmers worry whether the reforms might lead to the end of wholesale markets and guaranteed prices. Currently, the government offers a minimum support price that acts as a

safety net for farmers. Even though the government has promised to retain such a price, farmers fear its withdrawal over time.

There is an added fear that big private players will offer good money to farmers in the beginning, kill off their competition and then pay little for agricultural produce. Farmers might go from the local monopsonies of the APMCs to the national oligopoly of Amazon-like behemoths. It is important to remember that the government offers price support only for the staple crops of the Green Revolution. Other crops do not qualify, nor do fruits and vegetables.

Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming number of protesters are farmers from India's northwest, the region that has benefited most from the old system. In particular, they belong to Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, the birthplace of the Green Revolution. In 2018-19, APMCs procured 73% and 80% of the total wheat production in Punjab and Haryana respectively at a minimum support price. This was higher than the market price, but a hefty chunk of the support price ends up in the hands of middlemen through various fees and charges. Unknown to most, price support does not necessarily mean income support in the current system.

Farmers in the Himalayas, the Nilgiris or most other parts of India never benefited from the status quo. As a result, farmers in 25 of India's 28 states and all eight union territories have not taken to the streets. The Shetkari Sanghatana, a Maharashtra-based farmers' union founded by the economist-turned-farmer leader Sharad Joshi, and other unions support the government's agricultural reforms.

The late Joshi was convinced that “the root cause of farmers' problems lay in their limited access to the market.” As per this farmer leader, open and competitive markets, instead of a top-down command-and-control agricultural economy, served farmer interests better. Joshi opposed the APMCs, and his organization naturally supports recent reforms. In fact, it wants to go much further. It wants the government to

remove the ban on the export of onions and threatened to pelt BJP MPs with onion bulbs if the government fails to do so.

Journalists unfamiliar with rural India, including those working for the market-friendly Financial Times, have failed to capture this nuance. Not all farmers are protesting. Protests are largely confined to Punjab, Haryana and Jat strongholds in western Uttar Pradesh. This northwest region around Delhi comprises less than 8% of the Indian population. It elects 38 out of 543 MPs in the Lok Sabha, but its proximity to the capital gives it disproportionate power. Home to the Green Revolution, it has benefited from massive government spending for decades.

As per the managing editor of the Financial Express, farming households in Punjab get an average of \$2,385 per year in fertilizer and electricity subsidies alone. Irrigation subsidies account for another \$190 per year. Households in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh benefit from other subsidies as well. To put these figures into context, in 2019, GDP per capita in India was less than \$2,100, with most farmers earning a much lower figure.

Many of those protesting are large farmers from northwestern India. Some of their family members are part of the Indian diaspora in Australia, Canada, the UK, the US and elsewhere. Some of them continue to be absentee landlords. They have petitioned their representatives to raise the issue with the Indian government, organized demonstrations and raised the matter with the press. As a result, a narrative has emerged in the English-speaking press that is not entirely unbiased.

On January 26, India's Republic Day, protesting farmers marched through New Delhi. Some attacked the police, destroyed public property and flew flags on the Mughal-built Red Fort from where prime ministers address the nation. This caused outrage and weakened the movement. However, Rakesh Tikait, a farmer leader, rallied his protesters with an emotive appeal. He broke down in tears and threatened to hang himself if the BJP government did not

repeal its reforms. Tikait is the son of the late farmer leader Mahendra Singh Tikait who took over the nation's capital with nearly 500,000 farmers in 1988. Per the Indian press, Rakesh Tikait is a former policeman with assets worth 80 crore rupees (\$11 million), a significant sum for a farmer in India.

It is clear that the likes of Tikait are not poor, helpless farmers crushed by debt, contemplating suicide. They form part of the almost feudal elite that has dominated the APMCs and the rural economy for decades. Many media outlets fail to realize that such farmers have enjoyed price support, subsidies on agricultural inputs, free electricity, waived water charges, cheap credit from the state-led banking sector and no tax on farm income. They are the winners of the old system and are desperate not to lose what they have.

Small farmers in northwestern India have joined large farmers too. They fear the unknown. Since British rule, agrarian distress has been persistent in India. Well-meaning measures like APMCs have backfired. The Indian countryside faces the unique challenge of extreme overpopulation. Low productivity, fragmented landholdings, lack of storage infrastructure, high indebtedness, strangulating red tape and entrenched corruption have held rural India back and caused simmering discontent. Leaders like Tikait are tapping into this discontent much like Donald Trump harnessed the rage of those left behind.

What Lies Ahead?

The government has clearly been shaken by the duration and intensity of the protests. Sustained negative media coverage in the West has rattled New Delhi. For decades, the West in general and the US in particular criticized India's agricultural subsidies. At the World Trade Organization (WTO), the US consistently argued that Indian subsidies distort trade. The WTO has been a hostile place for India. Over the last three years, Canada raised 65 questions against India's farm policies. Australia has complained against India's

sugar subsidies. Yet reform has led to brickbats, not plaudits, in Western capitals.

In fact, contrary to many press reports, the government has behaved with remarkable restraint. It did not act against protesters even when they blocked highways and hindered railway traffic. Swarajya, a center-right publication, called for the government to “demonstrate it [meant] business when it comes to law and order.” Yet it did nothing. When British coal miners challenged Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s authority, she used mounted police to crack down on them.

In contrast, the Modi government has been rather conciliatory, engaging in 11 rounds of talks with protesters. The government offered key concessions and proposed amendments to its reforms. In the final round, the government even offered to suspend the implementation of its reforms for 18 months. Protest leaders rejected this offer and demanded nothing less than a complete repeal of all reforms. No government was likely to accept such an intemperate demand, especially one that was reelected with a thumping majority in 2019.

The Economist, a longtime critic of Modi and the BJP, takes the view that “agronomists and economists are in nearly uniform agreement” with India’s agricultural reforms. It attributes protests to the “trust deficit” of the BJP government. The publication sees large-scale cold storage as the most obvious benefit of the reforms. Such storage would involve removing limits on stockpiling commodities for future sale. Farmers fear that this could give large companies too much power and undue advantage. They could buy large quantities of produce from farmers within a few days of harvest, hoard this produce and sell it when the price was high.

Such fears of change are only natural. No entrenched system changes without upheaval even when the status quo is untenable. The Indian agricultural system no longer works, economically, environmentally or ethically. Agriculture needs investment. Neither the government nor the farmers have the ability to

provide this investment. In the post-1991 world, India’s private sector has been a success. It is the only player in the Indian economy with the ability to invest in the villages. Hence, Modi has called for a greater role for the private sector in an unexpectedly candid parliamentary speech.

Despite the current sound and fury, India’s farmer protests will simmer down. Like the Green Revolution, India’s agricultural reforms will have intended and unintended consequences, both positive and negative.

Finally, it may be prudent to think about agriculture in the global context. Most countries subsidize agriculture in one way or another for reasons ranging from food security to cultural preservation. The country of Jean Jacques Rousseau has championed the Common Agricultural Policy. Even the free-market US is generous with its farm subsidies. If either France or the United States were to implement agricultural reforms, demonstrations would ensue, legislators would face pressure from electors and sections of the media would accuse them of one sin or another. India is doing something that both the EU and the US may need — but have not yet dared — to do.

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Pakistan's New "Goeconomics" Lawfare

Hassan Shad
March 9, 2021

Instead of getting sucked into global and regional power rivalries, Pakistan has extended an olive branch to the US and the world at large.

Of late, statements from the highest level in Pakistan's government have urged the global community to build a relationship with the country centered around "goeoeconomic security." The new policy posture is aimed at the Biden administration, but it appears in equal proportion in Pakistan's recent diplomatic overtures to other countries.

In the past, Pakistan's global pitch was peppered with terms such as "geostrategic pivot" — an umbrella concept for military and security nuances — to emphasize its indispensability in South Asia. This predisposition informed the overall trajectory of the US–Pakistan relationship since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, as well as the burgeoning China–Pakistan bonhomie that has manifested through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Pakistan's sojourn from "geostrategy" to "goeoeconomics" is led by the country's national security adviser, Moeed Yusuf. In his speech at the Wilson Center in January, Yusuf reminded the United States that it would be engaging with a "very different Pakistan" that is now focused on the "economic security paradigm." He said Pakistan should be seen beyond the Afghanistan "prism" as an economic partner. He also cautioned against viewing Pakistan from a "third country lens and keeping India at the center of all conversations."

Similar sentiments were echoed later during the launch of a report titled, "Pak-Americana — Ushering in a New Era of Pakistan–U.S.

Relations," published by Tabadlab, an Islamabad-based think tank. The speakers at the event unerringly ground the future of US–Pakistan relations in economic terms. This paradigm shift was also mentioned by Prime Minister Imran Khan during his recent trip to Sri Lanka, which he invited to join the CPEC.

Interestingly, Pakistan's new pitch has also gone in lockstep with recent international publications. For example, writing for the Atlantic Council, Shamila Chaudhary and Vali Nasr have argued that Pakistan's strategic calculus has changed over the years and US policy toward the country should be informed by considerations of a broad-based economic partnership.

The Driver

The underlying driver behind these new policy utterances could be the attempted pushback against entrenched perceptions in US policy circles where Pakistan has been viewed with suspicion. In the best of times, Pakistan has been seen as a security hedge for protecting US regional interests. Since 9/11, the US–Pakistan relationship has been largely about the South Asian nation conducting counterterrorism operations and supporting US military action in Afghanistan. Lately, Pakistan has been trying to put an end to the 20-year-long war in Afghanistan to help the US extricate itself from the Afghan imbroglio.

It is therefore no surprise that Islamabad's goeoeconomic messaging attempts to clear the air about the misconception that Pakistan's relationship with China is a bar to broader US–Pakistan cooperation. The thrust is to decouple Pakistan's relationship with China and to showcase it as a "neutral" partner of the US.

What possibly ungirds Pakistan's embrace of goeoeconomics? After all, this would be a major breakaway from entrenched patterns of the past. Pakistan is perceived to firmly reside in the Chinese camp, which explains former US Assistant Secretary of State Alice Wells' animus toward the CPEC, which she vehemently

criticized for its “predatory loans” and “lack of transparency.”

Despite China and Pakistan embarking on the ambitious CPEC some seven years ago, the Pakistani economy remains its Achilles’ heel. A quick economic turnaround does not seem to be on the horizon with the country on the Financial Action Task Force’s gray list since June 2018. With peace in Afghanistan also a distant prospect, Pakistan’s strategic choices made over the years seem to have outlived their utility.

It is perhaps in this context that Pakistan has realized that stale policy positions need to be discarded. A realization seems to have crept in that if Pakistan is to resurrect its economy and, concomitantly, enhance its global stature, it would have to appear “sexy” and offer the world something more than its geostrategic location.

Giving It Some Thought

If this policy direction is meaningfully implemented, it augurs well for Pakistan’s future. However, to convince the world to view it from a new lens, the country will need to give a concrete direction to this new strand of thought.

First, Pakistan will have to provide an equal opportunity level playing field to all countries looking to develop a broader economic relationship with it. This will mean undoing the perception of elusiveness surrounding CPEC and the “guilt-by-association” blemish on Pakistan that is largely the result of the broader US–China power rivalry. It would be equally important for Pakistan to balance things out vis-à-vis China, which now has deeply entrenched strategic and economic interests in Pakistan.

Second, Pakistan’s India-centric lens that has only blurred its policy vision will need to change. This will require Pakistan to delink its relationship with the US and other countries from India, in the same vein that those countries have delinked their India relationship from their relationship with Pakistan. The increasing coziness between the US and India is a reality that Pakistan cannot wish away. Despite the animosity with India, Pakistan must never close

the door for dialogue because a sustainable geoeconomic integration will eventually require an India–Pakistan thaw. The recent announcement by top military officials of India and Pakistan to strictly observe all agreements and the ceasefire along the Line of Control — the frontier that separates Indian-controlled and Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir — is a much-needed respite.

Faced with some cold, hard facts, Pakistan seems to be undergoing a policy catharsis. Instead of getting sucked into global and regional power rivalries, it has wisely extended an olive branch to the US and the world at large. It is too early in the day to know how Pakistan’s new strategic posture will interact with political developments in South Asia. However, for its geoeconomics foray to be truly protean in nature, Pakistan’s best bet is to become a regional bridge of connectivity that is firmly hinged on transnational economic pursuits, instead of being tethered to stale hyperbolic policy postures that have led the country nowhere.

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Joe Biden Meets Afghanistan’s Leaders as the Country Faces Collapse

Tabish Forugh & Atul Singh
June 25, 2021

The US must push through a credible peace process and back Afghan leaders with integrity if it is serious about global leadership, democracy and world peace.

The security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating dramatically. The Taliban have captured the country’s border

crossing to Tajikistan. Prospects of civil war have risen.

Even as the US withdrawal gains momentum, Afghan leaders are visiting Washington to meet President Joe Biden on June 25. This includes President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the chairperson of the High Peace Council for Reconciliation.

The Taliban are filling the vacuum that Americans are leaving behind. Violence has surged across Afghanistan and the government is losing territory by the day. As September 11, the deadline for the departure of American troops, draws nigh, the Taliban are becoming increasingly emboldened.

The government in Kabul has a reputation for corruption and is proving to be ineffective. People are dying every day in cities, towns and villages from terror, crime and hunger. The US is leaving behind a royal mess. If its presence in Afghanistan was problematic, its withdrawal promises to be doubly so.

Ghani Is Running Out of Time

Stakes are high in Biden's first meeting with the Afghan leaders even if expectations are low. Ghani is not an ideal interlocutor. He has presided over a notoriously corrupt administration of a failing state. Kabul's writ does not even run in the city. Even if Biden and Ghani do a dream deal, the latter is highly unlikely to be able to uphold his part of the bargain.

Biden wants to bring back American troops and minimize the instability that will inevitably follow in Afghanistan. He needs a good partner to work with. Once, Ghani was the blue-eyed boy of Washington. His academic credentials and bureaucratic experience gave him a halo that few Afghans possessed. Ghani has squandered all the resources that the US provided him. He has few, if any, opportunities left. Ghani's government is on the verge of total collapse.

According to a new assessment of the US intelligence community, Ghani's government could collapse within six months of the American

military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The government has lost credibility because it has failed to provide basic public services to the people. Consequently, the people have lost hope. Yet again, Afghans are voting with their feet and leaving the country in droves.

Like many African strongmen, Ghani has surrounded himself with sycophantic cronies. He sees himself as the savior and messiah of Afghanistan. The president has no idea that he has lost all credibility in his second term. His lofty rhetoric fails to reflect Afghanistan's grim realities.

Ghani is not entirely delusional, though. He realized fully well that he occupies his fancy palace in Kabul thanks to the barrels of American guns. Once the Americans leave, he is toast. Therefore, he has opposed Biden's peace plan that calls for a political settlement between warring parties, including the Taliban. Unsurprisingly, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has lauded Biden's plan.

What Joe Biden Must Do

Afghans fear that the US might be leaving their country to the mercy of the Pakistani generals. After the last Soviet troops departed from Afghanistan in 1989, the Pakistan-trained Taliban took over. This provided Pakistan with strategic depth, jihadis to send to India and a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Washington. History might be about to repeat itself and Afghans are terrified of another tragedy.

Biden is meeting Ghani to reassure Afghans that he is not leaving them to the Taliban wolves. The official American line is that the US will continue to support the legitimately elected government in Kabul. Yet the Americans are infamous for short attention spans and Afghans fear they will be forgotten again. After all, Charlie Wilson could raise a ton of money to fight the Soviets but very little for schools or hospitals afterward. As the iconic American movie on the late congressman records, no one cared.

There is another historical parallel. When US troops left Saigon in 1975, the Viet Cong overran Vietnam. As the last American planes fly back from Bagram, the Taliban could do the same in Afghanistan. Washington must act differently this time around. The US has to back Afghan security forces, put its weight behind a people-centered peace process and uphold Biden's much-touted democracy agenda.

If the US fails, the Taliban will be in charge. Pakistan will make Afghanistan a puppet state. Bagram, the closest American airbase to China's western borders, might well fall to Beijing. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) might expand into Afghanistan too. The risks for Afghanistan, the region and the US are only too real.

In an article for The Washington Post, David Ignatius argues that "a summer of pain awaits" Afghanistan. Over the years, American leaders have found themselves in a Catch-22 regarding Afghanistan. They cannot tell the public that Afghanistan deserves American blood and treasure forever. Nearly 20 years have passed since the tragic 9/11 attacks in the United States. American troops have patrolled Afghanistan's dusty roads, fighter jets have flown endless sorties and drones have liquidated fearsome foes. Yet peace is nowhere in sight. At the same time, packing up and leaving only fuels the raging violence further, leaves behind a geopolitical vacuum and allows rival powers leverage against American interests.

Donald Trump promised American troops would come home when he was president. Biden has set a date for the final withdrawal. By doing so, he has tied his hands. The Taliban now know that American troops are preparing to leave and will soon be gone.

In their worldview, the Taliban have made history. After humbling the Soviets, they have defeated the evil Uncle Sam. They see themselves as superiors of super powers in their own backyard. With morale sky high, they have launched bold military operations to take over

Afghanistan. It seems the US can do little to prevent the Taliban from taking over.

Yet things are never as dire or as rosy as they seem. Many Afghans have fought the Taliban and are willing to fight them again. The Ghani government may be incorrigibly corrupt, but its officials want to avoid the fate of the Soviet-backed leader Mohammad Najibullah whose corpse was strung for public display. Crises tend to focus minds and this might be the best time to deal with Afghanistan's manifestly flawed leaders.

Support

Even as American troops are leaving, Biden must support Afghan leaders against the Taliban. He must make that support conditional on Ghani and his cronies leaving office by a certain date. They must put in place a more credible Afghan leadership to take on the Taliban.

After all, the British replaced Neville Chamberlain with Winston Churchill during World War II. For Afghanistan, this is a time of national crisis.

The Taliban could take over much of the country but will struggle to hold it together. A civil war might break out. The disintegration of Afghanistan might move from the realm of possibility to reality. Ambitious powers in the near neighborhood will take advantage of the ensuing chaos. Unlike Vietnam, Afghanistan will not become a nation of high literacy, low infant mortality and better nutrition. It will yet again become an impoverished land where fanatics and terrorists will find refuge and a base for their global jihadist operations.

President Biden has long declared that "America is back." Afghanistan could smash that assertion to smithereens and demonstrate that America is just going back home. If he is serious about American leadership and holding aloft the torch for democracy, Biden cannot throw Afghanistan to the dogs of war. He has to build an international coalition that pushes through a peace process, backs credible leaders in Afghanistan and provides aerial, if not ground

assistance to those putting their lives on the line against the Taliban.

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Liberalizing India's Economy Is Critical for Global Stability

Surya Kanegaonkar
September 7, 2021

As China becomes an increasingly unreliable trading partner, India can step up if it makes the right reforms and adopts prescient policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing inequality globally and even advanced economies have not been spared. Before the pandemic began in 2020, inequality was on the rise. Decades of globalization, loose monetary policy and the rise of oligopolies have contributed to this phenomenon. In many ways, globalization has kept inflation down. When Walmart imports Chinese goods, Americans get more for less.

China can manufacture cheaply because labor costs are low. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also runs an authoritarian regime. The regime has repressive land and labor laws with scant regard for human rights. Legally, the CCP owns all the land in China and can appropriate any property it wants. Similarly, workers have little recourse to courts and sometimes work in slave-like conditions.

A rising China is challenging the postwar global order. Democracies, including the United States, are finding it difficult to meet the challenge for two reasons. First, loose monetary

policies in recent years have brought back the specter of inflation. Second, no economy other than China's can meet the supply needs of advanced economies. From laptops to toys, most goods are made in China.

Labor arbitrage has defined globalization from its early years. Companies set up factories where wages tend to be lower. This increases revenues and profits, making consumers and shareholders happy. Given rising inflationary expectations, advanced economies need labor arbitrage to keep costs of goods down. At the same time, these democratic societies want to decouple their supply chain from China.

With the size of its young workforce, India has a unique opportunity to become the new workshop of the world and emerge as a stabilizing global force in a multipolar world. To grasp this historic opportunity, it has to liberalize its economy wisely.

The Legacy of the Past

India could do well to heed the lessons of the past. The Soviet Union, Western Europe and the US emerged as strong economies after World War II by leveraging their manufacturing base. The war economy had led to a relentless focus on infrastructure, mass production and industrialization. In the case of Western Europe, the Marshall Plan helped put shattered economies back on track.

Over time, these advanced economies deindustrialized and production started shifting to emerging economies. China's rapprochement with the US allowed it to enter the postwar Western economic system. Reforms in 1978 were critical to its success. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a brave new world where companies chased cheap production. China, with its size, scale and speedy centralized decision-making, emerged as the big winner.

As production moved to China, workers lost jobs in advanced economies and other industries did not emerge to retrain and employ them. The Rust Belt in the US has become a synonym for down-at-heel places left behind by globalization.

Even as workers grew poorer, shareholders grew wealthier, exacerbating inequality.

Today, the United States finds itself in a complicated position with China. On the one hand, the Middle Kingdom steals intellectual property, transgresses international law and challenges the US. On the other hand, it supplies American consumers with cheap goods they need. America's economic stimulus during the pandemic has, in fact, reinforced the country's dependency on China. So, Washington cannot hold China's feet to the fire and penalize its bad behavior. Beijing follows its policy of pinpricks short of outright conflict.

The US dollar is the reserve currency of the world. Since the days of Alan Greenspan, the Federal Reserve has followed a loose monetary policy. After the 2007-08 financial crisis, the US adopted the Japanese playbook from the 1990s and introduced quantitative easing. In practice, this means buying treasury and even corporate bonds to release money into the economy after interest rates touch zero. Such increased liquidity in the US has led to bloated company valuations and allowed the likes of Amazon or Uber to expand their operations. The cost of capital has been so low that profitability in the short or even medium run matters little.

Loose monetary policy has enabled the US to counter China's state-subsidized companies to some degree. Yet both policies have distorted the market. The US can only continue with loose monetary policy as long as inflation is low. Should inflation rise, interest rates would also have to rise. This might trigger a stock market collapse, increase the cost of capital for its companies and weaken the global dominance of the US economy.

To persist with its economic model and simultaneously contain China, the US needs to curb inflation. This is only possible by shifting some if not all production away from China. Mexico, Vietnam and Bangladesh are possible alternatives. Mexico has a major drug, violence and governance problem. Vietnam and Bangladesh benefit from huge Chinese

investment. Therefore, they might not be the best hedge for securing supply chains from the Middle Kingdom, especially if the companies manufacturing in these countries are Chinese.

As a vibrant democracy with a formidable military, India offers the US and the West a unique hedge against China. For geopolitical reasons alone, manufacturing in India makes sense. However, doing business in the country continues to be difficult because of red tape, corruption, erratic policymaking, a colonial bureaucracy with a socialistic culture and more.

India's Nehruvian past still hobbles the nation's economy. The country adopted socialist command-and-control policies using a colonial-era bureaucracy that prevented the economy from achieving high economic growth. Manufacturing suffered the most. To start a factory, any entrepreneur needed multiple licenses that cost time, money and energy. Poor infrastructure made it difficult for manufacturers to compete with their East Asian counterparts. While wages were low in India, the cost of doing business made many manufacturers uncompetitive.

Acquiring land in India is still a challenge. The experience of the Tata group in Singur revealed both political and legal risks that still exist. Similarly, convoluted labor laws made hiring and firing onerous, rendering companies inflexible and unable to respond quickly to market demand. Liberalization in 1991 improved matters, but the state continues to choke the supply side of the Indian economy.

In the second half of the 1990s, liberalization lost momentum. Coalition governments supported by strong interest groups stalled reforms. In fact, India drifted back to left-leaning policies starting 2004 and this severely limited economic growth. For instance, many industrial and infrastructure projects were killed by ministers to protect the environment. India's toxic legacy of Nehruvian socialism persisted in terms of continuing state intervention. The country never meaningfully transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy and still suffers from low productivity. This in turn has

constrained consumption and slowed down growth.

India's much-heralded information technology sector only grew because it was new. The government did not exactly know what was going on and, as a result, there were fewer regulations to constrain this sector. Fewer regulations meant that the likes of Infosys and Wipro had greater autonomy in decision-making and fewer bribes to pay.

Reduce Red Tape

The first thing that India needs is an overhaul of its colonial-era bureaucracy that resolutely strives to occupy the commanding heights of the economy. It foists endless red tape on business, strangles entrepreneurship and takes too long to make most decisions. Government service is seen as lifelong employment. Once people become bureaucrats, they have little incentive to perform. Like their colonial predecessors, they lord over citizens instead of serving them. Rarely do they craft sensible policies. Even when a government comes up with a good policy, bureaucrats implement it poorly when they are not sabotaging it actively. This must change. Bureaucrats must be accountable to citizens. Performance-linked promotions and dismissal for underperformance are long overdue.

Over the years, politicians have tried to deliver benefits and services to citizens to win reelection. To get around a corrupt, colonial and dysfunctional bureaucracy, they instituted direct benefit transfers for welfare schemes, emulating other emerging economies like Brazil. This move is necessary but not sufficient. India needs sound economic policymaking directed by domain experts in each administrative department.

Only members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) occupy key positions in the finance ministry. Instead, India needs economists, chartered accountants, finance professionals and those with varied skill sets in this ministry. The treasuries of the US, Britain, Germany and almost every advanced economies have this diversity of talent in their upper echelons.

There is no reason why economic policymaking in 21st-century India should be monopolized by an archaic IAS. The government has made noise about the lateral entry of professionals into policymaking, but tangible results have been few and far between.

If the bureaucracy holds India back, so does the judiciary. Nearly 37 million cases are pending in the courts. It takes around six years for a case to be resolved in a subordinate court, over three years in the high courts and another three years in the supreme court. A case that goes all the way to the supreme court takes an average of 10 years to resolve. Many cases get stuck for 20 to 30 years or more.

India needs to reform its judicial system if its economy is to thrive. Justice is invariably delayed, if not denied, and it also costs an arm and a leg. Not only does it add to transaction costs, but it also undermines business confidence. Virtual courts have already shown the way forward during the pandemic. A higher number of judges using both in-person and online technology could reduce the seemingly unending number of pending cases.

Create Efficient Markets

To improve labor productivity and consumption, the government must reduce inflation and improve purchasing power. For decades after independence in 1947, India was united politically but divided economically. Producers in one state could not sell in other states without paying taxes and, in some cases, bribes. In agricultural markets, they could not even sell in other districts. India's new goods and services tax (GST) might be imperfect, but it has already made a difference. Even during a pandemic, interstate goods movement rose by 20% and menu costs, a term in economics used for the costs of adapting to changing prices or taxes, dropped because tax filings were done online.

The 2016 Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code has led to major efficiency gains. Now, lenders can recover their debt more speedily. Bankruptcy proceedings are now much simpler even if

haircuts remain high. Unsurprisingly, India has risen in the World Bank Doing Business rankings from 130 in 2016 to 63 in 2020.

As Atul Singh and Manu Sharma explained in an article on Fair Observer in 2018, non-performing assets of Indian banks have led to a financial crisis. The government could do well to adopt some if not all the reforms the authors suggested. Given rising inflationary pressures because of rising oil prices, India's central bank can no longer cut rates. So, the government has to be creative in tackling its banking issues and free up liquidity for Indian businesses with great potential to grow. Banks burnt by poor lending in the past and fearful of corruption charges as well must discover the judgment and appetite to lend to deserving businesses in a fast-growing economy that needs credit for capital formation.

A little-noticed need of the Indian economy is to strengthen its own credit rating systems and agencies. Capital flows are aided by accurate corporate and political risk assessment. The US enjoys a global comparative advantage in attracting investments thanks to the big three homegrown agencies: S&P, Moody's and Fitch. These agencies tend to fall short in their India assessment. The standards they set give American companies an advantage over Indian ones.

Therefore, both the private sector and the government must strengthen Indian rating agencies such as CRISIL and ICRA. These agencies are improving continuously. They now have access to increased digital high-frequency data, which they can interpret in the domestic context. As a result, Indian agencies can benchmark corporate or sovereign risk better than their American counterparts for domestic markets. A better benchmarking of risk is likely to deepen the bond market and cause a multiplier effect by enabling companies to raise money for increased capital expenditure.

For decades, India followed a socialist model of agriculture, doling out large unsustainable subsidies. As Singh and Sharma explained in a separate article, the Soviet model was the

inspiration for the Indian one. Indian agriculture denuded groundwater, emptied government coffers and lowered farm productivity. The current reforms allow farmers to grow what they want and sell wherever they want to bypass parasitic middlemen. The new legislation emulates the US farm bills and promises to boost agricultural production, lower inflation and increase exports. This legislation might also lower rural hunger and improve India's human capital in the long term.

India has to transition hundreds of millions from agriculture to industry. Currently, 58% of the country's population is dependent on agriculture and contributes just 20% to gross domestic product (GDP). All advanced and industrialized economies have a much lower percentage of their populations engaged in agriculture. In the US, the figure is 1.3% and in Vietnam, 43% work in agriculture. The last time the US had 50% of its population engaged in agriculture was in 1870.

Improve Infrastructure

To facilitate movement from agriculture to industry, India must invest in infrastructure and urbanization. For decades, its infrastructure has been woefully inadequate. Indian cities are known to be chaotic and do not provide basic services to their citizens. Recently, India launched a \$1.9-trillion National Infrastructure Pipeline that is engaged in a rollout of road, rail, seaport and airports to connect centers of manufacturing with points of export. This focus on infrastructure has to be consistent and relentless.

India could emulate Chinese cities like Chongqing and Shenzhen that could be home to industry and hubs of trade, both domestic and international. Projects like the smart city in Dholera, 80 kilometers from Gujarat's capital of Ahmedabad, are the way forward. Similarly, the new Production Linked Incentive scheme is the sort of policy India needs. The Tatas are setting up a plant to manufacture lithium-ion batteries under this scheme. Not only could Indian

industry meet the needs of a fast-growing market, but it could also be a source of cheap imports for many other countries.

India must not only focus on metropolises, but also smaller cities and towns where the cost of living is lower. Digitalization of work will allow people to stay in such urban areas. Of course, they will need investment and organization for which India must tap capital and talent not only nationally but internationally. For instance, pension funds in North America and Europe are seeking growth to meet their increasing liabilities. If India could get its act together, investment into Indian markets could be significant.

A key part of infrastructure that needs reform in a low energy consumption society is the power sector. Gujarat's growth is underpinned by increased production and improved distribution of electricity. The rest of the country must emulate this westernmost state and Gujarat itself must bring in further reforms. Renewable energy sources such as gas, solar, wind and hydro must grow further. A nationwide energy market would bring in efficiency gains and boost growth.

A focus on renewable energy also brings risks and opportunities. Currently, China controls critical metals and rare earths required in electric vehicle and battery manufacturing. Beijing has an effective monopoly over 80% of the world's cobalt, 50% of lithium, 85% of rare earth oxides and 90% of rare earth metals. A decarbonized future cannot be intrinsically linked to an authoritarian state that has a history of not playing by free market rules.

India's \$1.1-billion "Deep Ocean Mission" offers a unique opportunity for the country to provide energy security to democratic nations in North America, Europe and elsewhere. As they transition to clean technologies, India can provide a safer, more reliable and benign alternative to an increasingly belligerent China.

In 2021, India has a historic opportunity to enter a new economic arc. The global conditions could not be more favorable. Advanced economies are looking to decouple from China

without triggering inflation. India is the only country with the size and the scale to be an alternative. Its large youth population and rising middle class are powerful tailwinds for high economic growth. Indeed, India owes it not only to its citizens, but also to the rest of the world to get its act together and become a force for global stability at a time of much volatility and uncertainty.

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Why Do Some Women Support the Taliban?

Ahmed Ezzeldin
September 28, 2021

In Afghanistan, the picture is more complicated than a simple fight between women-hating extremists and freedom-loving feminists.

With the Taliban's recent takeover of Afghanistan, the fate of around 14 million women remains uncertain. From when they ruled the country between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban were notorious for their mistreatment of women and girls, imposing restrictions on almost all aspects of their lives, from the daily dress code to their participation in the public sphere. Thus, it is no surprise that women took to the streets to oppose the Taliban's fundamentalist policies, hoping to maintain some of the gains they have made over the last two decades.

However, a non-trivial proportion of Afghan women might not be bothered enough by the Taliban's rule in order to protest. Some might even support the group's fundamentalist policies. Days after the Taliban took over the Afghan

capital on August 15, hundreds of women took to the streets to welcome the group's return to power. Millions of Afghan women took no public stance over the fundamentalist movement.

Given the Taliban's long history of misogyny and extremism, it might be puzzling that some women might express their public support or indifference to the loss of their rights.

Why Some Women Support Extremist Groups

Whether globally or in the Muslim world, it is not an anomaly that some women might support misogynistic leaders or political organizations. In the Middle East, women played a role in different political Islam movements with varying degrees of conservatism. At its peak, recruiters for the Islamic State (IS) group managed to attract female supporters and convince them to migrate to their territories in Syria and Iraq at a time when harrowing stories were emerging about the organization's treatment of women. So, even if such extremist movements are enemies of women, not all women view them in these black and white terms.

In a research paper published in the *World Politics* journal, Lisa Blaydes and Drew Linzer investigate why women might support Muslim fundamentalists. Their answer focuses on the availability of economic opportunities for women. When women lack enough opportunities to achieve their economic and social independence, they might choose to increase their attractiveness in the marriage market of a patriarchal society by becoming more conservative. Thus, limited economic possibilities can push women to trade some of their rights in exchange for financial security.

Afghan women have made significant gains over the last two decades. For example, according to the International Labor Organization's estimates, female participation in the labor force grew from 15.5% to 22.74% of the female working-age population between 2001 and 2019. This means that more women are looking for inclusion in the labor market.

Yet when it comes to unemployment rates among Afghan women, there is barely any change over the same period. The unemployment rate among women in the labor force moved from 14.75% in 2001 to 13.81% in 2019. Hence, the opportunities available to the increasing numbers of women who choose to work have not significantly increased.

Other Reasons

This economic explanation is only one side of the story. Indoctrination through various processes of socialization can also contribute to women's conservative attitudes. Households, schools, religious institutions and online spaces are all realms where such attitudes are cultivated and reinforced.

Fundamentalist groups understand the importance of women's indoctrination. Contemporary extremists such as IS and the Taliban rely on female recruiters to attract female members and build ideological support for their movements among women. In the early days of political Islam movements, Egypt's Muslim Sisterhood was the female side of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Sisterhood was concerned with educating women about their roles in an ideal Islamic society.

But a more cynical explanation is that the lives of the vast majority of Afghan women are less affected by the rule of the Taliban. As anthropologists Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood point out, the decry against the Taliban's rule is merely an urban phenomenon. Most Afghan women — about 76% — live in rural communities, where conservative social norms are enforced independently of who is in charge of the capital city. For example, in 2017, the percentage of rural women aged 20 to 24 who got married before 15 and 18 were 5% and 31.9%, respectively. This is compared to 2.1% and 18.4% among their urban counterparts.

Being away from the capital in a country plagued with underdevelopment, rural women also suffered disproportionately due to their higher economic vulnerability and exposure to the two-

decade violent conflict between the Taliban and the government. Putting an end to the civil conflict may provide hope to some that their situation might improve.

We do not know precisely how prominent female support is for the Taliban. Yet the picture is more complicated than a simple fight between women-hating extremists and freedom-loving feminists. With successive Afghan governments failing to address the root causes of gender inequalities, seeing women protesting in the streets with Taliban flags becomes a less surprising anecdote.

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EUROPE

Brexit Trade Deal Brings Temporary, If Not Lasting, Relief

Paul Hardy & Daniel Jones
January 13, 2021

The trade deal signed by the United Kingdom and the European Union means short-term relief but longer-term uncertainty for business.

“**W**hat we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning.” So said Ursula van der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, announcing the completion of Brexit negotiations on Christmas Eve, quoting from T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” the final quartet of his last great poem. Van der

Leyen’s words perfectly capture the defining trait of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA): It is a platform for further ambition in cross-border partnership between the UK and EU rather than a ceiling on current ambitions.

Relief was the predominant emotion amongst the business community on both sides of the Channel before the New Year. Now that the dust has settled and attention has turned to the detail of the deal reached, there should be no illusions that the TCA ends EU-UK negotiations. We set out below what, in high-level terms, the TCA means for EU-UK trade in goods and services, and where there are gaps to fill and questions to still be answered over the coming months and years.

What the TCA Means for Trade in Goods

Firstly, the good news. Under the TCA, there are no tariffs or quotas on cross-border trade in qualifying goods between the United Kingdom and the European Union. In this regard, the TCA goes further than any EU trade agreement negotiated with a third country. This is a hugely positive outcome for businesses with UK and EU supply chains, particularly in sectors such as the automotive and agri-food industries, where tariffs imposed on so-called World Trade Organization terms under a no-deal Brexit would have been high.

However, it is crucial for those involved in cross-border trade to appreciate that only goods that are of EU or UK origin benefit from zero tariffs and zero quotas under the TCA. Rules of origin are a key component of every trade agreement and determine the “economic nationality” of products. Under the TCA, a product will attract a tariff if a certain percentage (beyond a “tolerance level”) of its pre-finished value or components are not of either UK or EU origin.

The tolerance levels vary from product to product and require careful analysis. Therefore, businesses will need to understand the originating status of all the goods they trade between the UK and the EU to ensure they benefit from the zero

tariffs and quotas under the agreement. Businesses will also need to ensure that their supply chains understand the new self-certification procedures to prove the origin of goods.

Beyond the qualified good news on tariffs and quotas, the deal is less helpful in that full regulatory approvals are required for goods being imported into the EU from the UK and vice versa. While in certain important sectors (automotive, chemicals and pharmaceuticals) the UK and the EU agreed on specific rules to reduce technical barriers to trade, the UK government did not achieve its longstanding negotiating objective of securing broad mutual recognition on product standards.

Therefore, from January 1, 2021, all products exported from the EU to the UK will have to comply with the UK's technical regulations and will be subject to any applicable regulatory compliance checks and controls. Similarly, all products imported from the UK to the EU will need to comply with EU technical regulations and will be subject to all applicable regulatory compliance obligations, checks and controls.

There will also be specific changes to food and plant safety standards under the TCA. UK agri-food exporters will have to meet all EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) import requirements with immediate effect. In this sector, UK exports will be subject to official controls carried out by member state authorities at border control posts. Similarly, EU agri-food exporters will have to meet all UK SPS import requirements, following certain phase-in periods the UK government has provided.

Far from being a “bonfire of red tape” promised by certain advocates of Brexit before the 2016 referendum, the TCA introduces a “bonanza of new red tape” for businesses who wish to sell their products in both UK and EU markets. On January 8, UK Cabinet Office minister, Michael Gove, acknowledged that there would be “significant additional disruption” at UK borders over the coming weeks as a result of customs changes and regulatory checks.

What the TCA Means for Trade in Services

As has been widely noted by commentators, the deal on services is far thinner than on goods. More than 40% of the UK's exports to the EU are services, and the sector accounts for around 80% of the UK's economic activity. As an inevitable consequence of leaving the EU single market, UK service suppliers will lose their automatic right to offer services across the union. UK business will have to comply with a patchwork of complex host-country rules which vary from country to country and may need to establish themselves in the EU to continue operating. Many have already done so.

The level of market access will also depend on the way the service is supplied. There are four “modes” for this. Services can be supplied on a cross-border basis from the home country of the supplier, for example over the internet; to the consumer in the country of the supplier, such as a tourist traveling abroad and purchasing services; via a locally-established enterprise owned by the foreign service supplier; or through the temporary presence in the territory of another country by a service supplier who is a natural person.

All of this means that UK-established businesses will need to look at domestic regulations on service access in each EU member state in which they seek to operate, and vice versa for EU-established businesses seeking market access in the UK.

A Basis for Ongoing Negotiations

The TCA does not mark the end of EU-UK negotiations, and in some areas these discussions start immediately. For example, the agreement has provided an end to so-called passporting of financial services under which banks, insurers and other financial service firms authorized in the UK had automatic right to access EU markets and vice versa.

The EU and the UK have committed to agree on a memorandum of understanding that will establish a framework of regulatory cooperation in financial services by March this year. With an end to passporting, it is likely that there will be

more friction in cross-border financial services, but the extent of that friction depends on the outcome of future negotiations between EU and UK governments and regulators.

To take another example of importance to the UK economy, the TCA does not provide for the automatic mutual recognition of professional qualifications. As of January 1, UK nationals, irrespective of where they acquired their qualifications, and EU citizens with qualifications acquired in the UK, will need to have their qualifications recognized in the relevant EU member state on the basis of that state's domestic rules. However, the TCA leaves the door open for the EU and the UK to agree on additional arrangements in the future for the mutual recognition of qualifications, something that professional bodies will be pushing for immediately.

Whilst there has been understandable relief from politicians, businesses and populations on both sides of the Channel suffering from Brexit fatigue that a deal — any deal — has been reached, the sheer extent to which the TCA envisages ongoing negotiations between the UK and the EU on issues both large and small over the months and years ahead has not been widely appreciated.

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Angela Merkel: A Retrospective

Hans-Georg Betz
January 21, 2021

Despite a vigorous 15-year resume as chancellor, it is now clear that COVID-19 will define how Angela Merkel will be judged once she leaves office.

Americans like to rate their presidents. In fact, presidential rankings have become something of a cottage industry in political science, ever since the eminent Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Sr. started the tradition in the late 1940s.

In Germany, we don't do that, at least not in a formal way. We do have, however, a sense of who was a good chancellor and who wasn't, and there probably is something of a common understanding as to why.

Chancellors stand out if they accomplished extraordinary feats. Konrad Adenauer will always be remembered for accomplishing Franco-German reconciliation and anchoring the Federal Republic firmly in the West; Willy Brandt for initiating a radical turn in West German foreign policy toward the East, culminating in the reconciliation with Poland; and Helmut Kohl for seizing the historic opportunity in 1989 and bringing about the peaceful reunification of the two Germanies.

What about Angela Merkel, the first woman to hold Germany's most powerful political office? Her tenure will end in a few months' time, at the end, one hopes, of a horrific pandemic. On September 26, Germany will elect a new parliament, and Merkel will retire.

By then, she will have been in office for more than 15 years, second only to Helmut Kohl, who managed to hold on to the office a few months longer. When Merkel took over in November 2005, she was largely dismissed as "Kohl's girl" who was likely to have a hard time asserting

herself in a political party, the Christian Democrats (CDU) largely dominated by men.

The Anti-Trump

In fact, shortly after the election, then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder insisted on national television that there was no way that his Social Democratic Party would ever accept an offer from Angela Merkel to form a coalition with the CDU under her leadership. As it so happened, the Social Democrats did, and Schröder was finished. In the years that followed, it became increasingly clear that Merkel was quite capable of asserting herself in the treacherous waters of Berlin's political scene. In fact, in 2020, *Forbes* magazine ranked Merkel as the most powerful woman in the world — for the 10th consecutive year.

Throughout her 15 years in office, the chancellor has, on average, received high satisfaction scores. As recently as December, more than 80% of respondents in a representative survey said that Merkel was doing a good job. Appreciation for Merkel, however, has hardly been limited to Germany. In an international Pew poll from September 2020 covering 13 nations, Merkel was by far seen as the most trusted major world leader. More than three-quarters of respondents rated her positively; by contrast, more than 80% saw then-US President Donald Trump in a negative light.

Poll data also suggest that during Merkel's tenure, Germany's stature in the world has substantially increased. In a Pew study of 10 European nations from early 2019, almost 50% of respondents agreed that Germany played a more significant role in the world than a decade ago; fewer than half said the same thing about France and the UK.

Germans are, for obvious historical reasons, understandably concerned about the country's international image and reputation. Not for nothing, Canada's *The Globe and Mail* referred to her in 2018 as the "anti-Trump," only to add that "We need her kind more than ever." This in itself will secure Merkel an eminent place in post-reunification German history.

Ironically enough, the article was written at a time when Merkel's star appeared to be rapidly waning, the result of serious electoral setbacks on the national and regional level. In the election to the German Bundestag in September 2017, the Christian Democrats lost more than 8 percentage points compared to the previous election, which meant a loss of 65 seats in parliament. At the same time, the radical right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered parliament, garnering more than 12% of the vote. In subsequent regional elections in Bavaria and Hesse, the Christian Democrats lost more than 10% of the vote, setting off alarm bells in Munich and Berlin.

By the end of 2018, Merkel appeared to be up against the ropes, her days numbered. Particularly the upsurge in support for the radical populist right caused alarm, particularly in Bavaria. In response, the powerful Christian Social Union (CSU), Bavaria's independent arm of the Christian Democrats, seriously contemplated once again to reach beyond Bavaria and create a genuinely national-conservative party, competing with both the AfD and the CDU. The CSU had always maintained that there must never be a democratically legitimated party to the right of the CSU. With the AfD, there clearly was, and Merkel's Christian Democrats appeared not in a position to stem the tide.

Corona Winner

Yet Merkel managed to survive the various challenges to her leadership, despite continued electoral setbacks, which largely benefited the AfD. But skepticism abounded. In late 2018, a majority of Germans thought that Merkel would not serve out her mandate, due to expire at the 2021 parliamentary election.

At about the same time, however, 70% of respondents in a representative survey said they wished she would finish her mandate. Once the pandemic hit Germany in the spring of 2020, Merkel's stock started to soar once again. International media celebrated Germany as a

most likely pandemic winner that had proven particularly resilient to the virus.

What a joke. Only this time, nobody's laughing. At the time of writing, Germany is a coronavirus disaster zone. The country has proved, once again, to be completely unprepared in the face of the second wave of infections that threatens to overwhelm the health care system. Starting in early December, Germany posted record new infections, and this before the arrival of the UK mutation. By now, the situation in some parts of Germany is nothing short of catastrophic. At the same time, the situation on the vaccination front leaves much to be desired.

In mid-January, Germany recorded more than 22,000 new infections on a single day and more than 1,100 new COVID-19-related deaths. This is at least partly the result of the German government's indecisive, hesitant and confusing response to the pandemic, made worse by Germany's federal system, which provides for a plethora of veto points. This means that not only has it been difficult and quite tedious to arrive at a coordinated policy but also that every Land introduced its own measures, some more stringent than others. The result has been a certain degree of public exasperation. In a recent survey, more than half of respondents said they were annoyed at the measures that were "often contradictory."

To be sure, Merkel cannot be held personally responsible for the dramatic deterioration of the situation once the second wave hit Germany with full force. A lot of time was lost in December in attempts to get the various political officials from Germany's 16 Länder to agree on a common strategy. And even in the face of a potential disaster in early January, Merkel had to do a lot of convincing to get support for more restrictive measures.

Cultural Revolution

Under the circumstances, Angela Merkel's other accomplishments as well as her failures are bound to fall by the wayside. They shouldn't. On one hand, Merkel has dragged the Christian

Democrats into the 21st century. The CDU used to be the party of "Kinder, Kirche, Küche" (children, church, kitchen). Politics were a men's world for, as my neighbor, a woman, used to tell me, politics is a "dirty business" — and dirty businesses should be left to men.

Merkel dared to appoint a woman to the most male of all ministerial portfolios, defense. The German armed forces did not like her, despite the fact — as even Germany's conservative flagship publication, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, has conceded — that she managed to substantially increase their budget as well as and their image. Today, that former defense minister, Ursula von der Leyen, heads the European Commission, another novum. She was replaced by another woman, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who in 2018 succeeded Merkel as the head of the CDU.

Probably nothing exemplifies the cultural revolution Merkel set in motion than the question of sexual and gender identity. Those of us who grew up in the postwar period probably recall that once in a while, our parents would hint that somebody was a "175er."

This was in reference to Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code according to which homosexuality was a punishable offense. The paragraph goes back all the way to 1871, establishing that any sexual activity between two males (there was no formal mention of lesbians) was subject to criminal persecution and punishment.

During the Nazi period, gays suffered from severe persecution, many of them ended up in concentration camps. After the war, the Federal Republic not only retained the paragraph; it also used the Nazis' "pink lists" — in the camps, homosexuals were marked by a pink triangle on their prisoners' shirts — to initiate some 100,000 proceedings against homosexuals. It was not until 1994 that the "gay paragraph" was finally abolished, not least because of East German insistence during the negotiations on reunification.

More than 20 years and many gay parades later, in 2017, the German Bundestag voted on legalizing same-sex marriage. On the occasion, Merkel allowed representatives to vote their conscience rather than following party discipline. Quite a few Christian Democrats came out in the support of the law, which was passed by a substantial majority, much to the chagrin of Germany's conservatives. Some of them defected to the AfD given its vocal opposition to the law, which, as one of its leaders suggested, threatens to undermine Germany's traditional values and harm society. Polls showed, however, that a substantial majority supported the law. In June 2017, 60% of men and more than 70% of women came out in favor of same-sex marriage across Germany.

We Can Handle This

Angela Merkel's resolute position during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-16 also comes out as a positive. In order to understand the enormity of the event, it might be useful to recall one of the great *Lebenlügen* (delusions) of the Federal Republic, the notion that Germany was "not a country of immigration." Given the fact that by the 1980s, Germany was home to millions of guest workers and their families, many of whom had permanently settled in Germany, the notion ignored the reality on the ground. Yet it was not until 2001 that an expert commission of the German Bundestag came to the conclusion that the notion was "no longer tenable." By 2015, a significant majority of Germans agreed with that statement, and in 2019, more than 70% of respondents agreed that in the future, Germany should accept as many refugees as in the past.

This is quite remarkable, given the storm Merkel provoked when in 2015 she cleared the way for welcoming a million refugees, many of them from war-torn Syria. Her main argument was that Germany is a strong country: "Wir schaffen das," Merkel announced — "We can handle this." The German public was not entirely convinced. Perhaps they remembered Merkel's predecessor, Helmut Kohl, who in 1990 had

promised that unification would lead to "blossoming landscapes" in the eastern part of the country. The reality, of course, was the opposite. The West German taxpayers would have to pay the bills for decades to come while in the east, resentment continued to grow only to erupt in substantial support for the AfD.

Under the circumstances, German skepticism in 2015 was quite understandable. In early 2016, around 80% of the population expressed concern that the government had lost control over the refugee situation; among AfD supporters, it was virtually 100%.

As expected, the radical right made the refugee crisis the central focus of their mobilization — a winning strategy, as the party's success in subsequent elections demonstrated. But in the end, Merkel prevailed; early concerns that the refugee influx would lead to major social problems were largely proved wrong, and, in late 2018, a comfortable majority of Germany's public agreed that the chancellor had done a good job with respect to her refugee policy.

With Merkel, the CDU moved to the left — or so her critics have insisted and complained. Others have argued that the left-wing turn of the CDU is largely a myth. The reality is somewhere in between. Empirical studies suggest that in the aftermath of reunification, all major German parties gradually moved to the center. With reunification, Germany added millions of citizens from a socialist regime whose value system and views on major social issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, were considerably to the left of the dominant value system that prevailed in the western part of the country.

As a result, the conservative ideational elements in the CDU got progressively weakened, provoking vocal protest from the party's right wing. A study from 2017 (but based on interviews held before the refugee crisis of 2015) found that CDU members largely agreed. They saw their own party "distinctly to the left" of their own position and that way before Merkel's now-famous "Wir schaffen das."

Gray Spots

Yet against all party-internal resistance and opposition, despite calls for her to hand in her resignation, Merkel once again prevailed — a remarkable feat in these turbulent times. Future historians are likely to consider Angela Merkel's 15-year tenure in an overall positive light. To be sure, there are grey spots, such as Germany's handling of the fallout of the financial crisis of 2007-08 and, more recently, Berlin's intransigence with regard to Italian pleas for "Corona bonds" during the first wave of the pandemic.

Another gray spot regards the question of gender equality. Officially, the European Union has been committed to gender mainstreaming since the mid-1990s. More often than not, the results are wide off the mark, particularly in Germany. To be sure, even here critics would concede that Merkel has "contributed fundamentally to the recognition of women as leaders and decision-makers in Germany."

In other essential areas of gender politics, her record is rather dismal. Her government did little to nothing to narrow the pay gap between men and women or to do away with Germany's "anachronistic tax system" that privileges married couples "as long as one of the two (usually the husband) has a high income and the other one (usually the wife) earns little or nothing."

And actual reforms, for instance regarding child care and parental leave, were less intended to promote gender equality than to enhance the position of the family, in line with traditional Christian Democratic doctrine.

The record was equally dismal with regard to public life. As a semi-official account from late 2018 put online by the Federal Center for Political Education noted, in the course of Merkel's tenure, the number of women in her cabinets progressively declined, from 40% in her first cabinet to 30% in her fourth. At the same time, the CDU failed to attract new women members. In 2018, women made up around 25% of party ranks.

Things were not any better with respect to the composition of Germany's Bundestag. At the end of the red-Green coalition in 2005, the share of women MPs had been more than 40%. After the election of 2017, it had fallen to a bit more than 30%. In the Christian Democratic parliamentary group, women made up barely 20%. And although Merkel appointed a woman as defense minister, the most important ministries — interior, foreign affairs and finance — remained firmly in the hands of men.

This was to a large extent also true for Germany's civil service. In 2020, 35% of top positions in the public sector were held by women. And, as the ministry for justice and consumer protection recently noted, "the higher up in the hierarchy, the lower the share of women." But at least here, change is underway. By 2025, all senior positions are supposed to have closed the gender gap.

Klimakanzlerin

If Germany is a laggard with regard to gender equality, it has prided itself to be a leader when it comes to the environment. The reality, however, is somewhat different. In fact, when it comes to arguably the greatest global challenge, the fight against global warming and climate change, Angela Merkel has been a major disappointment.

As a reminder: Merkel entered office as a strong advocate of decisive action against climate change. In fact, in the years that followed, German media nicknamed her the "Klimakanzlerin" — climate chancellor. Yet over time, she gradually abandoned her convictions, caving in first to the demands of German's powerful automobile sector and then to the coal industry. Germany continues to rely heavily on coal for the production of energy. To a significant extent, it is the environmentally most disastrous type of coal, lignite.

Lignite power plants are among Europe's worst polluters. Most of them operate in Germany and Poland. And while a number of EU countries, such as France, Italy and the Netherlands, have decided to stop coal-fired

power production by or before 2030, Germany won't phase out its coal plants until 2038. Mining lignite is an important sector in the southeastern part of former East Germany, in Lusatia, around the city of Cottbus. Electoral considerations, particularly given the AfD's strength in that part of the country, of course have nothing to do with the Merkel government's reluctance when it comes to coal. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

Overall, Merkel's climate policy has been suboptimal, to put it mildly. As a former environmental minister recently put it, for the government, political opportunism and convenience counted more than tackling an essential problem. That was before the pandemic hit. COVID-19 appears to have caused somewhat of a reconversion.

By now, Merkel has once again started to promote herself as the Klimakanzlerin. And for good reasons. COVID-19 has largely been associated with environmental destruction, the dramatic loss of biodiversity and global warming. Polls show that Germans are quite sensitive when it comes to these issues. A recent survey found around 85% of the German population not only concerned about these issues, but also willing to make lifestyle changes to "protect the climate." Under the circumstances, Merkel's return to her environmentalist roots is hardly surprising. It makes a lot of sense, politically speaking.

Despite a vigorous 15-year resume as chancellor, it is now clear that COVID-19 will define how Merkel will be judged once she leaves office and by how well Germany will master this challenge over the months to come. This might be unfair.

After all, Merkel is what Americans call a "lame duck." But, as Donald Trump so eloquently put it, it is what it is. The German government's recent frantic attempts to regain control of a situation that has largely spun out of control are an admission of unpreparedness paired with incompetence and mismanagement paired with wishful thinking. In March 2020, Merkel stated on national television that COVID-

19 represented the "greatest challenge since the Second World War." She was right.

As long as Merkel holds Germany's most powerful political position, she is in charge and ultimately bears responsibility. At the moment, a large majority of Germans have full confidence that once again, she will be at the top of her game and handle the challenge. It is to be hoped that their confidence is justified.

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What Led to Europe's Vaccine Disaster?

Hans-Georg Betz
April 15, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed Europe's unpreparedness to confront a major crisis. The continent needs to learn lessons for future challenges.

In late December 2020, it was announced that Switzerland would start its COVID-19 vaccination campaign. Eligible persons were asked to make an appointment. Those of a particular age with certain health risks — such as diabetes, high blood pressure and allergies — were encouraged to register.

Given my age and the fact that I suffer from pollen allergies in the spring, I filled out an online form and was informed I was eligible for a jab. So, I went through to the registration page only to be told that there were no appointments available. Two months have since passed and

there are still no openings. The way things are going, I probably won't get vaccinated before the end of summer — or perhaps by fall or Christmas.

“Unacceptably Slow”

Switzerland is not alone. The pace of vaccination is proceeding at a snail's pace throughout the European Union. Just weeks ago, Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization's director for Europe, vented his frustration, charging that the vaccine rollout in Europe was “unacceptably slow.”

Germany is a key example. By the first week of April, 13% of the population had received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 5.6% had received the second dose. In comparison, around the same time, more than a third of the US adult population had received at least one dose and 20% were fully vaccinated. In the UK, which is no longer a member of the European Union, the vaccination rate was even higher.

In the face of heavy criticism for its alleged mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Thierry Breton, the EU's internal market commissioner, speaking on behalf of the union, went on the offensive. On French television, he defended the European Commission's vaccine procurement strategy and affirmed that Europe had the capacity to deliver 300 to 350 million doses by the end of June. He also claimed that Europe would be able to attain “collective immunity” by July 14, France's national day.

France's premier conservative daily *Le Figaro* was not the least impressed. In a biting response, it characterized the EU's vaccine procurement strategy as nothing short of a “fiasco” and frontally attacked Breton and, with him, the European Commission.

Not only had Breton refused to admit “the slightest error,” continuing instead to defend his vaccine policy, but he also took French citizens for fools. Clearly, Breton's statements had hit a raw nerve, at least in France.

Why Is Europe Behind?

There are a number of reasons why the European Union is trailing the US and the UK. One of the most important ones is the union itself. Its sheer size allowed the EU initially to negotiate lower prices for vaccines by buying in bulk for all 27 member states. Reducing costs, however, came at a heavy price in the form of the slow delivery of the vaccines.

In addition, the European Commission had to get the green light from EU member states before it could arrive at a decision over which vaccines to purchase. As a result, the EU “ordered too few vaccines too late,” wrote Guntram Wolff, director of the Bruegel think tank in Brussels. Hesitation on the part of member states, given “the novelty of the technological approach,” led to delays in authorizing the leading vaccines, including the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine that had been developed in Germany.

According to *Le Canard Enchaîné*, a French weekly known for its investigative journalism, the UK ordered the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine in late July 2020; the EU did so in November. The same held true for Moderna. The EU was so late that by mid-November, Stéphane Bancel, the CEO of Moderna, warned that if the EU continued “dragging out negotiations to buy its promising Covid-19 vaccine,” deliveries would “slow down” since nations that had already signed agreements would get priority.

Add to that what Spain's premier daily *El País* has called the “AstraZeneca fiasco.” The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was supposed “to power the bulk of the continent's inoculation campaign,” according to *El País*.

Instead, holdups and delays in the distribution of the vaccine, together with pauses in the vaccination campaign following reports about suspected side-effects from the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab — rare cases of blood clots — seriously jeopardized the EU's strategy. In Germany, at the end of March, it was decided that AstraZeneca would no longer be administered to people under the age of 60.

Denmark has ceased administering the vaccine completely.

By now, the fallout of a strategy that was more concerned with saving money than potentially saving lives is obvious to all — as is the damage done to the image of the European Union. As Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, recently put it, the EU's vaccine crisis "has been catastrophic for the reputation of the European Union." Ironically enough, this is the very same Leonard who, in late December, celebrated "the return of faith in government." The pandemic, he stated, had "reminded everyone just how valuable competent public administration can be." Three months later, his optimism — "five cheers for 2021," to use his words — had turned into gloom and doom. And for good reason, given the unfolding of the full extent of the vaccination disaster.

The results of a recent survey are stark. In early March, around 40% of respondents in France, Germany and Italy thought the pandemic had weakened the "case for the EU." When asked whether the EU had helped their country to confront the pandemic, a third of respondents in France and Italy and more than half in Germany answered "no." At the same time, however, member states have not fared much better. In response to the question of whether their country was taking the right measures to combat COVID-19, almost 60% of French respondents, nearly half of Germans and more than 40% of Italians answered in the negative.

This is the crux of the matter. As time has passed and vaccines have started to be delivered, it has become increasingly difficult for individual countries to blame the European Union for their own failures and shortcomings in securing and delivering the vaccine to their populations — or for the reluctance of citizens to get vaccinated.

In late March, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control published a report on the vaccine rollout in the EU. By far, the most important challenge facing most member states was the limited supply of vaccines

and frequent changes in the timing of deliveries from suppliers, "which can be unpredictable and can significantly affect the planning and efficiency of the rollout." Other challenges included problems with logistics, limited personnel to administer the vaccines, shortage of equipment such as syringes and special needles, and issues related to communication such as information about the vaccine and scheduling appointments.

Is the EU Goal Realistic?

Under the circumstances, the EU's stated goal of having at least 70% of the population vaccinated by the summer appears to be an increasingly distant prospect. Or perhaps not: It depends on whether individual countries — particularly France, Germany, Italy and Spain — will get their act together and move to "warp speed."

Some countries appear to be prepared to do so. In Spain, health authorities expect a significant acceleration in the vaccination campaign over the coming weeks. There is growing confidence that the country will meet the 70% mark by the start of summer. Even in Germany, whose blundering performance during the past several weeks made international headlines, experts are optimistic that the country will reach the target.

More often than not, the problem is not necessarily the supply of vaccines, but difficulties in getting target groups vaccinated. This is, at least in part, a result of communication infrastructure, which in some cases are far behind the technological frontier.

Take the case of Switzerland, which is not a member of the EU. In late March, Geneva's *Le Temps* alerted its readers that when it comes to the digitalization of its health system, Switzerland was in the "Middle Ages." Instead of using the internet, Swiss health authorities sent faxes to communicate the number of new infections. When it comes to digitalization, the author noted, Switzerland, which prided itself as the world champion in innovation, was "full of fear" if not outright "recalcitrant" to adopt new technologies. The consequences were fatal not

only with regard to dealing with the pandemic, but also with respect to the country's international competitiveness.

The situation has not been any different in Germany. Earlier this year, when the vaccination campaign got going, public authorities sought to inform the most vulnerable groups — those older than 80 — that they could get vaccinated. Yet they had no way of finding out who was in that age group. So, they guessed based on first names. Katharina, yes; Angelique, no. This is German efficiency in 2021. Or, as a leading German business magazine put it, if “your name is Fritz or Adolf, you will (perhaps) be vaccinated.” And this in Western Europe's biggest economy.

Better Preparation for Crises

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only brutally exposed Europe's unpreparedness to confront a major crisis, but it has also shown the parochial state of mind of significant parts of the European population. Much has been written over the past year about American science skepticism and conspiracy theories, held partly responsible for the toll that COVID-19 has taken on the US population.

Yet Europeans are hardly any better. Not only have parts of the European population eagerly adopted even the craziest conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, but they have also shown high levels of skepticism with respect to COVID-19 vaccines, despite scientific assurances of their efficacy and safety.

Again, take the case of Switzerland. In December 2020, only around 56% of the population indicated they would get vaccinated. The rest expressed great reservation, despite the fact that the survey stated that the vaccine was deemed safe and effective. In the meantime, as the pandemic has continued with no end in sight, there are indications that the mood has changed. In Germany, only two-thirds of respondents indicated they would get vaccinated when asked in June 2020. By the end of March this year, that number had increased to over 70%. These developments are encouraging.

Not only have most European countries finally managed to live up to the challenge, but their populations appear to have realized that COVID-19 is worse than the flu, that the pandemic poses a fundamental threat to life as we know it, and that the only way to get back to “normality is to get vaccinated — not only for oneself, but also for everybody else. In the old days, this was called “civic culture.” With the rise of populism in advanced liberal democracies, civic culture more often than not has gone out the window, replaced by a culture centered upon “me, me, me.”

Yet the fact is that this pandemic is only the beginning. The next big challenge is confronting climate change. It is to be hoped that Europeans will be better prepared than they have while confronting the coronavirus.

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The Migrant Crisis on Poland-Belarus Border Is Lukashenko's Revenge

Malwina Talik
November 15, 2021

Migrants currently trapped on the Belarus-Poland border are being used by the “last dictator of Europe” for his personal vendetta against the EU.

Hundreds of people stand in front of a barbed wire; some try to force it. Behind them are troops encouraging them to break the fence. On the other side are border security guards, ready to push them back.

This is a scene from the border between Belarus and Poland, the EU's eastern frontier, on November 8. People who are trapped between

security forces pushing them back and forth had been flying from the Middle East to Belarus in the past weeks, unaware that they were being used by President Alexander Lukashenko for his personal vendetta against the European Union.

One Step Further

The current crisis has its roots in the aftermath of a highly contested election in August 2020 when Lukashenko was proclaimed president of Belarus for the sixth consecutive time since 1994. Neither the EU nor the US recognized the result because the vote, like almost all preceding ones, was assessed as neither free nor fair by the international observers. Electoral fraud triggered widespread demonstrations across the country that were brutally suppressed by the regime. By November, some 25,000 have been arrested, including 477 journalists, with widespread allegations of torture in detention.

In response, the EU imposed sanctions that include a travel ban and an asset freeze against those associated with the regime and which, as of June this year, extend to 166 individuals and 15 entities. Relations became further strained in May when Belarus used a false pretext to intercept a plane flying from Greece to Lithuania and arrested a dissident journalist who was onboard.

Consequently, sanctions were tightened, and an infuriated Lukashenko threatened with reprisal: “We were stopping drugs and migrants on our Western border. Now you will eat drugs and chase people. ... Because of your sanctions, we have no money to take care of this.”

Lukashenko had seen how the migration crisis of 2015 polarized EU member states, with Visegrad Group countries — Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland — opposing non-EU migration and refusing relocation of asylum seekers. From Turkey, the Belarusian president may have learned how to use refugees to put pressure on the EU. But Lukashenko, whose authoritarian rule earned him the moniker “the last dictator of Europe,” went one step further, intentionally flying in thousands of people to Belarus to use them in his game against the EU.

Already in June, Lithuanian border guards observed a sudden surge in illegal crossings by people from Africa and the Middle East. Until early July, 938 migrants tried to enter Lithuania’s territory illegally — 12 times as many as in the whole of 2020. Soon it became obvious that it was no coincidence: The number of flights from Middle Eastern countries to Minsk, the capital of Belarus, had intensified. Passengers were taken by buses and taxis to the border and assisted by Belarusian border guards; local travel agencies were also apparently involved.

It is estimated that at the moment, between 800 and 1,000 people from the Middle East land in Belarus every day, with German media reporting up to 40 flights a week from Istanbul, Damascus and Dubai planned by March next year.

Lukashenko’s regime targeted people from fragile countries and lured them with a prospect of easy and legal entry to the EU. This was a costly endeavor. Depending on the port of departure and destination, the price per person amounted from \$6,000 to \$15,000. Many migrants seem to have believed that Minsk was just a layover and that they would soon board a plane to Germany. They traveled with their entire families.

Hybrid Threat

As the number of attempts to cross the border illegally was increasing disproportionately fast, Lithuania declared a state of emergency on July 2. Lithuania and neighboring Latvia, with populations of 2.8 million and 1.9 million respectively, feared that they would not be able to cope with a sudden influx of migrants. In mid-July, Lithuania’s foreign minister asked the EU to take more decisive steps against Lukashenko, invoking a “hybrid threat” and suggesting refugees being used as a “political weapon.”

Latvia declared a state of emergency on August 10; Poland, with a population of 38 million, on September 2. All three states began building fences along their borders.

But all these measures did not halt the pace of illegal crossings. The statistics published by the Polish Border Guard Office show that in August, nearly 2,900 people tried to cross the border; between early August and November 4, the attempts numbered 30,000.

On November 8, as the situation at the Poland-Belarus border escalated, an estimated 3,000-4,000 people were in the vicinity of the border. A column of hundreds of people marched toward an official border crossing in Kuznica, but most were diverted by Belarusian forces to the nearby forest.

Polish forces used tear gas to stop some of the migrants from cutting the fence. As passing was impossible, hundreds set up makeshift camps along the border. Polish official sources estimated that there may currently be as many as 15,000 migrants in Belarus — the same as the number of Polish troops deployed to protect the border.

No Media, No Frontex

Although all affected countries implemented similar measures, Lithuania and Latvia allowed the media to enter emergency zones, under certain restrictions. Poland barred non-resident civilians, including journalists, from the zone and restricted access to public information, a move criticized by Reporters Without Borders and other press freedom organizations.

All information from the Polish state of emergency zone (SEZ) is provided by the authorities, local residents or, perhaps ironically, the Belarusian regime. Considering that journalists are almost always present in most active war zones and conflict areas, this is quite an unusual situation.

From the outset of the crisis, Poland has been carrying out pushbacks, a practice of forcing migrants to return to Belarus. According to UNHCR, pushbacks are a breach of international law, but the Polish parliament legalized them in October. Lithuania initially placed migrants in detention centers but soon then followed Poland's example. In mid-August, more than 4,000 people

were in Lithuanian detention centers, with 1,500 people were in detention in early October in Poland.

The affected countries differ in their cooperation with Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency headquartered in the Polish capital Warsaw, which controls borders in the Schengen Area. Frontex deployed its personnel to Lithuania and Latvia, but Poland repeatedly refused help because, as it claims, it had enough troops to protect the border. Polish officials emphasized that Frontex Director Fabrice Leggeri was “impressed by the means deployed to secure the border” in Poland.

But Frontex does more than protect borders. It has developed a special code of conduct to protect human rights and created the role of a fundamental rights officer, who monitors border guards to reduce the potential for violations of the rights of migrants.

In their attempt to reach Poland, migrants often have to cross swamps and forests, facing adversarial weather conditions; temperatures in November drop below 0° Celsius (32° Fahrenheit). Most of them wander for days or weeks, pushed back and forth repeatedly. They cannot expect assistance from humanitarian organizations, NGOs or doctors because they are barred from the SEZ. Local residents are also prohibited from helping, but many admit that they do so regardless.

In order to offer assistance to the migrants, 14 Polish NGOs formed Grupa Granica — Border Group — to monitor the situation close to the SEZ. They have documented many pushbacks, with one case in particular resonating with the public.

The incident involved a group of 20 migrants, among them eight children, who in late September managed to reach Michałowo, a small town outside of SEZ. They claimed that they wanted to seek asylum in Poland. Nevertheless, they were driven off to Belarus as the entire interaction was recorded by activists and journalists.

This led to protests in Warsaw and Michałowo, supported by three former Polish first ladies. The protesters chanted, “Where are the children?” and “The place for children is not in the forest.”

More Sanctions to Come

The EU unanimously condemned Belarus for “deliberately putting people’s lives and wellbeing in danger” and “gangster methods.” President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen declared that in response to the “hybrid conflict” sanctions on Belarus will be widened. However, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated that the EU should pay Belarus for stopping migrants.

Nevertheless, the EU is not open to such negotiation and relies on diplomatic international pressure and sanctions. Current attempts are directed at convincing the countries of origin to warn migrants against traveling to Belarus or to sanction the airlines who fly them. Turkish airlines already agreed to reduce flights to Belarus while Iraqi authorities offered to fly back people who agree to return.

Demands for harsher sanctions and complete closure of borders can also be heard. Such a move would paralyze international trade routes and have an impact on Russia and China — Belarus lies on China’s New Silk Road — that use Belarus for transit of its goods. But sanctions are a double-edged sword, having a detrimental impact on those who impose them.

Lukashenko seems to have fewer ways out of the crisis, and many point out that he will have to surrender as the cost of his political gambling is becoming too high. There are also concerns that, in desperation and given his unpredictability, the Belarusian president may start an armed border conflict.

If Lukashenko wanted to divert attention from Belarus’ domestic affairs, he succeeded. In the past weeks, reports on the crackdown against the opposition have disappeared from international debate. If sanctions are tightened and borders closed completely, not only the regime but also

civil society will pay the price as Belarus becomes even more isolated.

The situation at the Poland-Belarus border is very dynamic and, in some respects, resembles a proxy war. It is where the EU and NATO encounter Russia’s sphere of influence, with Polish politicians openly accusing Russia of orchestrating the crisis.

Whether legal or illegal, migrants should not be used as pawns or human shields in a geopolitical game. As desperate migrants look for other routes to enter the EU, the crisis may soon spill over into Ukraine, Belarus’ southern neighbor. Poland, Lithuania and Latvia have already joined Alexander Lukashenko as he plays with innocent lives. But while the often-ridiculed Lukashenko managed to unsettle the EU, he has not so far succeeded in further polarizing it. Despite the breach of international law at its border, the EU stands firmly together behind Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Time will tell if this unity remains as the crisis evolves.

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Making Sense of Vladimir Putin’s Long Game

Atul Singh & Glenn Carle
December 24, 2021

Channeling Russian resentment, Tsarist ideas and Orthodox identity, the Russian president challenges the US-led West to make Russia great again.

On November 21, Bloomberg reported that US intelligence had shared Russian plans for a potential invasion of Ukraine with its NATO allies. Estimates indicated about

100,000 soldiers in around 100 battalion tactical groups were deployed on the Ukrainian border. Since then, this troop buildup has continued with “tanks, artillery, armoured units, drones, [and] electronic warfare systems” poised on Ukraine’s border.

Reports indicate that Moscow has called up tens of thousands of reservists, the first time since the end of the Cold War over 40 years ago. They could secure territory that regular troops capture. Moscow already has a blueprint to follow. In 2014, Russian troops took over Crimea. This time, they could gobble up significant territory in Eastern Ukraine. As with the Crimea, Russia claims that Ukraine is historically and culturally an integral part of Russia

In response to this threat, US President Joe Biden has warned Russian President Vladimir Putin of “severe consequences.” for any aggression. Though Biden has ruled out putting American troops on the ground, the US president has promised Putin “economic consequences like [he has] never seen.” Almost simultaneously, the foreign ministers of the G-7 group of the world’s seven most powerful economies warned Russia of “massive consequences and severe cost” if Russia were to invade Ukraine.

Biden has continued to ratchet up his threats of severe countermeasures. On 19 December, influential columnist David Ignatius wrote that “a knowledgeable official” revealed US plans to arm future Ukrainian “insurgents” with advanced weaponry should Moscow invade. The official mentioned that “the CIA and other key agencies, [have] been studying how insurgencies were organized against the Soviets in Afghanistan and Russian-backed forces in Syria — and also against the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.” If Putin invades Ukraine, the Biden administration wants “to make it hurt.”

Even as Biden has been warning Putin, on the other side of the Eurasian landmass 7,500 kilometers to the east, Moscow and Beijing have been romancing one another, in a straightforward diplomatic counterbalance to the US and NATO. In October, China and Russia conducted a joint

naval exercise that set alarm bells ringing in many international capitals. A joint Russian-Chinese flotilla of 10 warships sailed through the Tsugaru Strait that separates the Japanese islands of Honshu and Hokkaido. This flotilla headed down Japan’s eastern coast and then back toward China through the Osumi Strait north of the southern Japanese island of Kyushu.

This joint naval exercise is significant. For the first time a Russian-Chinese flotilla passed through the strait, in what was likely a countermove to heightened naval activity by the rejuvenated “Quad” alliance that includes India, Japan, Australia and the US. The flotilla’s circumnavigation of Japan’s main island of Honshu was clearly intended to threaten Tokyo and send a signal to Washington.

What is going on?

Russian Resentment

Over the years, both authors have spoken to and interacted with numerous Russians in intelligence, defense and diplomatic circles. One theme repeatedly crops up: The US and the West treated Russia imperiously and dismissively after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Most of our Russian interlocutors have believed that the US has long sought to weaken, even destroy, Russia, and interpret almost every US action and statement as pieces of a long term, coherent plan to undermine Russia and the government of Vladimir Putin.

Dangerously, even seasoned diplomats and intelligence officers tend to ascribe a strategic coherence and hostility to rival states, when the rival states in fact almost always have competing and contradictory power centers, mutually incompatible objectives, and struggle to pursue a sustained and coherent policy. Accurate or not, the Russians have tended to view their American rival as strategically competent, and malevolent. As per this narrative, the US first cajoled the new Russia to commit *samoubiystvo* — suicide. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the US funded a project by Harvard economists to reform the Russian economy. In the memorable words of

Janine Fedel, neophyte reformers enabled “the Harvard boys [to] do Russia,” causing the misappropriation of Western aid and the plunder of Russian wealth. Till date, Boris Fyodorov, Anatoly Chubais and Yegor Gaidar remain hated names in Russia. Economist Jeffrey Sachs, then a high-flying 38-year-old who arrived in Moscow to transform the Russian economy, evokes similar sentiments.

With the zeal of a Cold War free market missionary, Sachs advocated that Russia implement “shock therapy.” Sachs took the view that shock therapy would work even in societies where there was “no collective memory of free markets or history of evenhanded rules of contract law and property rights.” In those heady days, Sachs was regarded as the slayer of hyperinflation, and the savior of the Bolivian and the Polish economies. He envisaged “an industrial comeback” in Russia “worthy of postwar Japan.” At that time, Russian industrial exports were around \$5 billion and Sachs predicted they would “reach \$50 billion by the turn of the century.”

Today, it is easy to conclude that Sachs suffered from hubris. Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has been damning in his critique of Sachs’s shock therapy. For Stiglitz, the key point is that privatizing an economy before establishing a functioning legal and juridical system inevitably leads to overwhelming corruption and concentration of wealth; in other words, to a thug’s kleptocracy.

Many US officials foresaw this danger at the time, and even as Sachs was pushing for total and immediate privatization of the entire Russian economy, the US government was trying to foster the establishment in post-Soviet Russia of the rule of law, the establishment of private property and the regulatory and legal regime required to avoid corruption, abuse, and excessive concentration of wealth. In particular, American officials were working to prevent the de facto theft of the state’s assets, capital and natural resources. One of the authors knows this first hand, having worked on this very issue.

Sachs, however, “succeeded,” and this now infamous privatization led to asset stripping, massive impoverishment and runaway inflation, averaging 204.91% in 1995. Even as price rises made it impossible to pay for goods, Russia’s annual per capita income cratered, dropping over 50% in nine years, from \$3,440 to \$1,710. The result of Sach’s policy was that the Russian economy foundered, poverty soared and life expectancy sank. Sachs’s recommendations brought, as Stiglitz stingingly put it, “Gucci bags, Mercedes, the fruits of capitalism to a few,” and misery and humiliation to 148 million Russians.

This economic catastrophe tore apart Russia’s social fabric and the legitimacy of Russia’s nascent post-Communist democracy. Contrary to a common Russian belief, the US did not seek to destroy Russia, but to help it succeed in its transformation into a successful, democratic market economy. However, the view among many Russian officials is that Sachs was implementing a longstanding strategic plan by the US to destroy Russia as a functioning power. Tragically, this American-induced calamity became Russia’s grim reality for a dismal decade.

One of the authors still remembers a protracted, boozy conversation with a former Russian psychological operations (PSYOP) officer. This gentleman had served in Chechnya and was convinced that Sachs plotted the destruction of the Russian economy. This former PSYOP officer’s thinking is most revealing. In his view, the US sent Sachs to ruin Russia’s economy. Then, at a time when Russia was weak, NATO gobbled up the nations of Eastern Europe that until 1991 were Soviet satellites and constituted Russia’s “near abroad” security cordon. The PSYOP officer also argued that the US never dealt with Russia in good faith. In 2001, Putin offered the US complete support after the attacks of September 11. In Russian eyes, the US responded to Russian loyalty with treachery. On December 13, then US President George W. Bush announced that the US would pull out of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, an act that still infuriates Moscow.

The other author, when serving as a US official, heard the same zero-sum game viewpoints from his Russian counterparts. How, they demanded, could NATO expansion be anything but an aggressive anti-Russian act? They took any of the author's counter-arguments as proof of America's disingenuous duplicity and as confirmation of their convictions.

Putin Distills Russian Resentment

Putin expresses Russian resentment and suspicion best. In a lengthy article published on July 12, he argues "that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole." He blames both Russian mistakes and outside forces for undermining that unity. In Putin's words, "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus." Language, economic ties and the Orthodox faith bind them together.

Unsurprisingly, Putin evokes a particularly Russo-centric version of history in making his claim. He refers to the 17th century war of liberation of the Russian Orthodox people from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, which he blames for "social and religious oppression" of Russians. The Russian president also blames outsiders like the Poles and the Austro-Hungarians for "the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians." In Putin's telling, this "idea" has no historical basis or much popular support.

When Vladimir Lenin forged the Soviet Union in 1922, he gave constituent republics the right to secede, which was incorporated into the 1924 constitution. Putin blames this for the "parade of sovereignties" that caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argues that "modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era." Putin further argues that Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine "in gross violation of legal norms that were in force at the time."

In his article, Putin takes the view that the borders between Soviet republics were never state borders. Communists ran a highly

centralized government from Moscow. With the sudden disintegration of the USSR, "people found themselves abroad overnight, taken away, this time indeed, from their historical motherland." Notably, Putin blames the West for using "the old groundwork of the Polish-Austrian ideologists to create an 'anti-Moscow Russia'." He accuses the new Ukrainian elites of hobnobbing with neo-Nazis, attacking the Russian language and unleashing an anti-Russia project.

Putin's aggrieved and self-justifying version of history, however, grossly misrepresents the past. A little perspective: It is true that many Ukrainians initially welcomed the Nazi invaders as liberators in 1941. They wanted relief from the oppressive and exploitative mass-murdering communist regime of Joseph Stalin, whom Putin has been rehabilitating as a Russian icon. Unfortunately for the Ukrainians, Adolf Hitler's Nazis proved to be as murderous and imperial as the Soviet Union. Longsuffering Ukrainians were quickly and hideously disabused of the notion that the Nazis themselves offered Untermenschen Slavs anything but enslavement and death. In the end, the Nazis massacred 3 million Ukrainians, a lower number than the 3.9 million killed by the Soviets. In his self-serving version of history, Putin omits such awkward facts.

Biden and his European allies are understandably worried by this amalgam of Soviet and pre-World War I pan-Slavic and imperial Russian historiography. On December 7, Biden and Putin spoke for about two hours to defuse rising tensions over Ukraine. Putin "demanded legal guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward toward Russia's borders or deploy offensive weapons systems in Ukraine." Biden "reiterated his support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and called for de-escalation and a return to diplomacy." Two days later, Putin used harsher language. He accused Ukraine of Russophobia and discriminating against Russian speakers in the country. He argued that Ukrainian action in the eastern Donbas region "certainly looks like

genocide.” On December 23, Putin articulated Russian resentments in a four-hour press conference even as US officials announced possibilities of talks in January.

On December 17, Moscow “demanded strict limits on the activities of the US-led NATO military alliance in countries in Eastern Europe.” Moscow wants no troop or weapon deployment in areas where they could be a threat to Russia. If Washington accepts this demand, NATO would no longer play a role in the three Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia or, for that matter, in highly vulnerable Poland. Russia also wants a guarantee that Ukraine and Georgia would never join NATO.

Putin has long called the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century” and argued that “the epidemic of collapse has spilled over to Russia itself.” He has repeatedly pointed out that 25 million Russians became foreigners in their own homes. From Lithuania to Tajikistan, Putin sees Russians as an oppressed minority instead of full citizens of a once mighty nation.

But nowhere is this more galling than Ukraine, home to the historic Kingdom of Rus. His consistent objective as Russian leader has been to restore Russia to its historic greatness and global power. In his mind, the best defense for Russia is now offence.

Ideas Animating Putin

It is important and instructive to remember that Putin was a KGB officer for years. He was inspired by Max Otto von Stierlitz, the Soviet James Bond who infiltrated the German high command in World War II. Like Stierlitz, Putin served in Germany too and was posted in Dresden in 1989. Thousands of Germans took to the streets, the Berlin Wall fell and “Moscow [was] silent.”

The collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union turned Putin’s life upside down. Recently, he mentioned moonlighting as a taxi driver during those days to make ends meet and, like many older Russians, is

haunted by those memories. The collapse of Soviet theology allowed Putin and all Russians to return to their history, culture, Slavic ethnicity, and Orthodox religion as the essence of the Russian nation and greatness. Over 70 years of Communist internationalist ideology dissipated in an instant, and has left virtually no trace on Russian culture.

Instantaneously, Putin and millions of Russians have reverted to Russian nationalism for identity and pride. At its core, this nationalism is Orthodox, Slavic and autocratic. The Russian Orthodox Church, persecuted during the Soviet era, has made a spectacular comeback. Putin has been filmed dipping into the freezing waters of a cross-shaped pool to observe an Orthodox Christian ritual that marks the feast of Epiphany on more than one occasion. Cossacks, the glamorized sword arm of Tsarist Russia, are also back in fashion.

Putin has brought back the idea of a collective Russian identity, in which Western individualism and cosmopolitanism are decadent Western infections. The strength and stability of the state takes precedence over human rights. In this “new” (old) Russia, respect for the ruler is sacrosanct and Putin is a father figure for a powerful strong nation that can once again project its power. After the humiliating years of a weak Mikhail Gorbachev and a drunk Boris Yeltsin, Russians see Putin as a leader who has restored dignity to a great nation and people.

A 2016 tour de force analysis by Charles Clover explains how the Russian leader has found inspiration in the ideas of the late historian Lev Gumilev. This son of Soviet dissidents Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova spent many years in the Siberian Gulag. Gumilev developed a fascination for “the irrational in history” as he watched his fellow prisoners “die of exhaustion and hypothermia.” Just as Italian Renaissance thinker Niccolò Machiavelli coined the idea of virtù, as a character of moral excellence devoted to the state, and Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun of *asabiyya*, the tribal solidarity of desert nomads, Gumilev came up

with the idea of *passionarnost*, a human capacity for suffering.

In his 2012 annual address to the Russian federal assembly, Putin noted that the world was becoming more unequal and competition for resources more intense. New economic, geopolitical and ethnic conflicts were likely. As per Putin, victory and defeat would “depend not only on the economic potential, but primarily on the will of each nation” and the inner energy that Gumilev termed *passionarity*.

Clover explains how Gumilev came up with the idea of Eurasianism, “the germ of a new Russian nationalism.” This idea seeks inspiration not from the westward-looking Peter the Great or Catherine the Great but from the nomads who swept out of the steppes to destroy everything before them. Gumilev took the view that European social theories like the Enlightenment and communism had led Russia to ruin. Instead, Russians were heirs to the Huns, the Turks and the Mongols, the conquering peoples who united the Eurasian steppes and the forests under “a single conquering imperial banner.” In Gumilev’s view, the Russians “were the latest incarnation of this timeless continental unity.” Putin seems to be deeply influenced by Gumilev’s ideas.

In this regard, one author recalls a memorable evening spent with a Russian counterpart nearly 30 years ago, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The discussion turned around what Russians believed in and the author asked in some frustration: Are you European or Asian? Implicit in the question was the assumption that the Russians must choose between the two, and would surely finally embrace the westernizing approach of Peter the Great. “Of course we are neither,” the Russian replied quite accurately, “and both.”

Putin also adheres to the views of Ivan Ilyin, an influential pan-Slavic Russian nationalist and fascist who exalted the Russian soul and who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1922. He took the view that the 1917 October Revolution was the worst catastrophe in Russian history. As an exile, Ilyin first lived in Germany and then in

Switzerland, where he died in 1954. His work strongly influenced mystical Russian nationalists like Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. Putin was personally involved in bringing back Ilyin’s remains to Russia and consecrated his grave in 2009. Noted historian Timothy Snyder has called Ilyin “Putin’s philosopher of Russian fascism” because he saw individuals as cells in the body of society, freedom as knowing one’s place in society, democracy as a ritual, the leader as a hero and facts as of no value whatsoever. Ilyin saw Russian nationalism as the only truth in the world and imagined “that his nation could redeem the world.”

Gumilev and Ilyin are the modern Russian muses, and Putin the renascent tsar of the Eurasianist “neither European nor Asian” Russian culture and nation. But Putin’s Russian Eurasianism is the Russian strain of a widespread phenomenon called Traditionalism. It is a reaction to and rejection of the cosmopolitan, international, modernizing forces of Western liberalism and capitalism. Ironically, Traditionalism’s believers consist of a heterodox melange of French Catholic royalists, Muslim intellectuals, left-wing anti-materialists, social conservatives and nationalists brought together by their profound malaise at the culturally destructive and personally alienating forces of the technological and material developments of the industrial and modern era and, in their view, of the nihilism and imperialism of cosmopolitan Western liberalism.

The philosophical roots of Traditionalism and Russia’s “Eurasianism” version reach back to one of the fathers of Fascism, an Italian philosopher named Baron Giulio Evola. Evola’s thought became the basis for Fascism in Italy, National Socialism in Germany, and — after World War II and the spread of democracy and the success of market economies — for the far-right across Europe, and the ascendancy of anti-Western Muslim extremism in Islamic societies.

One of the authors first encountered Traditionalism personally in the mid-1980s when he was assigned to follow and understand the

neo-fascistic movements in Western Europe then called the “euro-right.” The “nation,” the “people,” and “tradition” became the roots of personal meaning for the euro-right in the progressively mutable world of capitalism, materialism, individualism, and democracy. The very successes of the Western economic and political model were the basis of the Euro-right’s indictment of liberal democracy and the Western Alliance.

The author recalls sitting in a café in Paris and through the cigarette smoke listening in some astonishment and progressive alarm as the right-wing French political figure across the table confidently denounced American liberal decadence (that was no surprise), evoked the fascistic and conservatively Catholic ideas of the French politician Charles Maurras (again, no surprise)... and then spoke warmly of the concordance of the rejection of democracy, capitalism, and the West by Islam, Italian Fascism, and Russian Orthodoxy. The author has followed the Traditionalist movement in the 40 years since that cafe conversation and watched it wax in direct proportion to the speed and scale of social and political change caused by globalization and the end of the Cold War.

Evola’s movement and the French politician from the cafe morphed into today’s “Rassemblement national” (RN) party (formerly the National Front) in France and to the other ascendant far-right parties in Europe today. These new Traditionalists consistently identify with Putin’s Russia, because both exalt the “nation” and reject “rootless” materialism. The Russian “Eurasian” manifestation believes “liberal” democracy would lead to the ruin of Russian civilization and to Russia’s domination by a nihilistic West. Under Putin, Russia’s intelligence services have also insinuated Eurasianist, Traditionalist ideas into populist and right-wing parties throughout the West.

Putin clearly derives his worldview and policies from this coherent Traditionalist, Eurasian rejection of and hostility to the West. In his words, “The liberal idea [has] outlived its

purpose....[Western views on gender, culture and power] must not be allowed to overshadow the culture, traditions and traditional family values of millions of people making up the core population.” For Putin, Eurasianists, and far-rightists across Europe, the postwar globalized, capitalist, democratic liberal world order, and US-led Western alliances are wantonly destroying faith, culture and, for Putin, the Russian soul and nation.

While Evola, Gumilev and Ilyin might be patron saints of Traditionalism, Eurasianism and Russian nationalism, the strident nationalist Aleksandr Dugin is the evangelist of Putin’s new (old) Russia. In 1997, he published “Foundations of Geopolitics,” a work that has deeply influenced the thinking of Russia’s military, secret services and political leadership. Ferociously opposed to US hegemony, Dugin advocates Russian Eurasianism as a response to Anglo-Saxon Atlanticism. Dugin’s views derive directly from the Eurasian and Traditionalist focus on the supposedly inevitable geopolitical clash of cultures, pitting Orthodox and continental Russia against the atheistic and cosmopolitan West.

Instead of direct conflict, however, Dugin “advocates a sophisticated, asymmetric program of subversion, destabilization, and disinformation spearheaded by the Russian special services, supported by a tough, hard-headed use of Russia’s gas, oil, and natural resource riches to pressure and bully other countries into bending to Russia’s will.”

Putinism’s Strangely Unreal World

Even as others provide ideas, Vladislav Surkov, a brilliant Putin aide puts them into operation. On a spring day in 2013, Surkov claimed to be “the author, or one of the authors, of the new Russian system.” In the words of Peter Pomerantsev, “Surkov [consciously and explicitly] has directed Russian society like one great reality show.” Through puppet political parties, fake social media accounts and manipulation of truth, in the press, on television and on the internet, this

modern master of propaganda has blurred truth and falsehood, reasoning that, as the public becomes less able to discern the truth, the state can shape reality to discredit its opponents and to consolidate its power. Even as Russia maintains the illusion of democracy, political challengers find every path forward thwarted, by murder if need be, and one man rules.

For ordinary Russians, Surkov has conjured up the specter of a deadly enemy and authored a new chapter of Putinism in Russian history. Putin “is the president of ‘stability,’ the antithesis to the era of ‘confusion and twilight’ in the 1990s.” Anyone who opposes Putin, by definition, is disloyal to Russia.

Unlike Stalin’s iron-fisted oppression, Putinism “climbs inside all ideologies and movements, exploiting and rendering them absurd.” In Surkov’s Putinist Russia, “everything is PR” and only fools believe in anything. Putin, through Surkov’s cynical wizardry, reigns by turning Russia into a real-world combination of George Orwell’s 1984 and the Keanu Reeves starring *The Matrix*. It is the dystopian triumph of the nihilism and solipsism of jaded postmodernists, literally weaponized by the State: Truth no longer exists, but it does not matter, because one can feel good through delusional self-regard and meaningless pageantry. And Surkov, the Russian intelligence services and, above them both, Putin control the images, shape the public’s consciousness, and wield the real-world power.

Yet even Surkov seems to have some beliefs. In conversations with journalists, he reveals a “sharp nationalist edge.” Surkov claims that Putin did not abolish democracy. Instead, the Russian leader just “married it with the monarchical archetype of Russian governance.” Surkov claims, “this archetype is working. It is not going anywhere . . . It has enough freedom and enough order.”

If Surkov had confined his dark arts to Russia, he would not be one of the seminal figures of the 21st century. But he has deployed his skills to advance Russia’s national interests abroad,

specifically by interfering in elections in other countries. The most famous examples are the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election of 2016. There is strong evidence to suggest that Russia interfered not only in these two elections but in many others. There have been spin doctors galore in the past, from Edward Bernays who invented PR in the US to Dominic Cummings who coined “Take Back Control” for the pro-Brexit campaign. Yet Surkov has taken propaganda to another level. He has created what documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis has termed “Hypernormalization,” a strangely unreal world of total inauthenticity.

The Cold War Never Quite Ended

In the heady days after the end of the Cold War, the likes of Francis Fukuyama heralded the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.” In an iconic article, he called it the end of history and celebrated “the triumph of the West, of the Western idea.” Fukuyama’s celebrations were premature. For 15 years, from Gorbachev’s assumption of power in 1985 to the departure from office of Yeltsin on December 31, 1999, the Western-oriented views and aspirations of Peter the Great’s Russia dominated. But as one author’s Russian interlocutor from years ago pointed out, Russia is neither West nor East — it is both. And so after the catastrophe of shock therapy and the expansion of NATO, Russian resentment returned in the form of Eurasianist Putin.

The Russian president has always sought to restore Russia’s greatness and reestablish hegemony over its “near abroad” — states in Central and Eastern Europe that the Soviet Union once forced into the Warsaw Pact. Of course, while making Russia great again, Putin seeks to solidify and perennialize his power, and, along the way, to enrich himself. He has always rejected the normative unipolar international order created and dominated by the US that, in Putin’s eyes, institutionalized American imperialism and hegemony. In the past decade, the Russian president has modernized his

military, eliminated any potential rival at home, and embarked on a series of aggressive foreign moves that are changing the balance of power in Europe and the Middle East. Notably, he has constantly argued that “the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world.”

Putin realizes that, to prevail, Russia must leverage its strengths against the more powerful economies of the US and Europe, and he has been fortunate that many Western leaders have neither realized the scope of nor the power in the asymmetric warfare tactics of Dugin and Surkov. In contrast, Putin is very aware that the US GDP is 14 times larger than Russia’s, where oil and gas comprise close to 40% of the GDP. Hence, he engages in a different “battle space” and, in so doing, has restored much of the influence Russia lost when the Soviet Union imploded in 1991. Putin’s military and intelligence services have reasserted Russian predominance all along the “near abroad” states and former Soviet republics. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and the Baltics have all felt the sting of Russian operations, and have had to temper their pro-Western positions and accommodate Russian demands.

Bolstered by success, Russian confidence and aggression has been growing. In 2014, Russia invaded and (re)annexed Crimea. In 2015, Putin sent the Russian military into Syria. Since 2019, he has used “private sector” mercenaries, who act under the guidance of the Russian intelligence services, in Libya. By intervening in Syria and Libya, Putin has made Russia a key power broker in the Middle East for the first time since 1972. Russian mercenaries are also active in Mozambique, Sudan and the Central African Republic.

As if this was not enough, Putin has actively sought to destabilize his greatest rivals, the UK and the US. Russia has conducted a series of intelligence operations to influence the attitudes of the British and American public, with an overall goal of delegitimizing and paralyzing the UK and US governments.

Even as Putin has ratcheted up pressure on Ukraine, he has also ostentatiously deepened relations with China, the other bugbear of the West. Russia’s new China play is a classic example of the balance of power and “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” approach to geopolitics. The cruise of the Russo-Sino fleet around Japan’s main island is a clear signal by Moscow and Beijing that they will support each other against the West. Putin has also worked assiduously to bolster relations with India, a nascent global power that has reservations about recent US decisions such as pulling out of Afghanistan and entering into a nuclear submarine deal with Australia and the UK. As a former Soviet ally, India also has strong elements hostile to a strategic entente with the US.

Should Western powers implement tougher sanctions on Moscow, an allied China and neutral India are likely to stay close trading partners, attenuating Russia’s economic hardship. Relations with the two Asian giants also boost morale at home by demonstrating that a Putin-led Russia is a global power and Moscow will not bend to the imperial and arrogant US.

As a nimble judoka, Putin is also using gas diplomacy to pressure the West. On December 15, Putin and his new best-friend-forever, Chinese President Xi Jinping, had a highly-publicized conversation about the Power of Siberia-2 project, a mega pipeline through Mongolia that would deliver up to 50 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to China every year. Beijing has long feared that the US Navy could block the Straits of Malacca, choking China’s energy supplies. Power of Siberia-2 serves both Russian and Chinese interests, weakening future leverage for both Europe and the US.

To pressure Europe, Russia is planning to sell gas not only to China but also to other growing Asian economies, while always holding the implicit threat over Western Europe of restricting gas shipments, just as it has done before in its “gas wars” with Ukraine. Putin’s “gas pivot” is making Europe nervous because Russia remains Europe’s main gas supplier. On December 20,

The Moscow Times reported that Russia had cut gas supplies to Europe even as temperatures dropped, a clear example of “gas-politik.” Gas prices have surged as a result, leading to added inflationary pressures in European economies.

Russia is using gas diplomacy not only to cause economic pain to Europe but also to divide its opponents. For years, Russian companies have been building the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany, bypassing Ukraine to deprive the country of gas transit revenue and to leave Kyiv in no position to completely block Russian gas supplies to Europe. Berlin favored Nord Stream 2 because Germany is boosting natural gas imports to transition away from coal and nuclear energy, and the pipeline would double the supply of cheap natural gas from Russia.

However, Nord Stream 2 has caused a rift within NATO with allies like Poland and the US opposing Germany’s decision to go ahead with this pipeline project. Recently, the German economics minister has called the pipeline a “geopolitical mistake” and warned Russia that an invasion of Ukraine would lead to a suspension of this controversial project. Yet both Berlin and Moscow know that such a cancellation would depress the German and West European economies. The pipeline, even unfinished, gives Putin good sway over Germany and Europe.

Putin is also exploiting the refugee and migration crisis in Europe and the Middle East to pressure the West. Imitating Turkey’s use of Syrian refugees to pressure the EU, the Russian leader has massed thousands of migrants in Belarus, a country now firmly under Russia’s thumb. These migrants have been trying to enter Poland, a member of the EU.

Polish police have used tear gas and water cannons to deter migrants from crossing the Belarusian-Polish border, under the keenly watchful eyes of the media. Images of such police action have portrayed Europe as uncaring and inhuman, damaging its reputation, causing internal European divisions, and diverting attention from Russia and Belarus, and especially

from Russia’s threatening moves on Ukraine’s border.

What Will Putin Do Next?

Fundamentally, Putin is a cold and calculating practitioner of realpolitik. He wants to keep the pot boiling but not spilling over. He wants to avoid war if he can. So, Putin will keep seizing the initiative, creating strategic dilemmas for the US, NATO and the West on multiple fronts. He calculates that the West is decadent and unwilling to fight, despite the series of diplomatic and economic sanctions Western states have imposed in response to his actions, especially after his invasion of Crimea.

Now, Putin is focused on Ukraine, the “heart of Rus.” In his pan-Russian nationalist worldview, Ukraine is Russian land. Even so, the authors believe it unlikely, on balance, that Putin will invade. But he is likely to extract de facto changes to the status quo in Eastern Ukraine. He is also seeking to destabilize Ukraine’s government and to stop the West from bringing Ukraine within the western fold. He calculates, probably correctly, that the West does not view the Donbas or Luhansk regions of Ukraine, or the fates of ethnic Russians in Ukraine as worth a war between the world’s great powers. Biden did all but make this explicit in his announcement that the prospect of sending US troops to Ukraine was “not on the table.”

But Putin’s aggressive actions in Ukraine are merely parts of his larger worldview and strategy. He has consistently pursued a sphere-of-influence international order, in part to bring the US down a notch, but in line with deeply held beliefs concerning existential Russian security needs in Russia’s “near abroad.” His Eurasianist worldview is coherent, resonates with traditional Russian Orthodox pan-Slavic ideology, and makes it possible for Russians to see themselves as heroes in the drama of world history.

Whatever happens to Ukraine, Putin will always seek to reorder Europe and international relations to Russia’s advantage, to weaken his

decadent US and European rivals, and to oppose the cosmopolitan, liberal West.

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LATIN AMERICA & THE CARIBBEAN

What's Behind Chile's Vaccination Success?

Lenin Cavalcanti Guerra
March 5, 2021

With 20% of its population inoculated, Chile is in the top five globally and far ahead of its neighbors when it comes to vaccination rates.

The deadly impact of COVID-19 has been felt in every corner of the globe. On February 22, the United States reached a tragic landmark of 500,000 deaths. Across the Atlantic, nine of the top 10 nations in deaths per million are in Europe, with tiny enclaves of Gibraltar and San Marino topping the tables. The list of countries that have dealt with the pandemic relatively well is much shorter. Almost a year ago, I wrote about how leaders in Brazil and Mexico were slow in taking tougher action to prevent the spread of the virus. I falsely predicted that Latin America is unlikely to witness the death rates seen in Europe. Unfortunately, the effects of the pandemic were equally devastating in the region, if not worse.

Images of mass graves in the Amazonian town of Manaus and the dead bodies left in coffins in the streets of Guayaquil, Ecuador, have spread worldwide. More than 260,000 Brazilians and nearly 190,000 Mexicans died because of the

virus, placing the two countries second and third in absolute numbers of fatalities. Peru registered 1,421 deaths per million and Panama 1,352 on March 4 — numbers that show the devastation caused by the virus in the region so far. Chile has also experienced a significant death rate of 1,084 per million.

The big difference in Chile was that authorities mobilized in advance to secure vaccines, hedging bets on various suppliers in different stages of development. In September last year, President Sebastian Pinera announced the purchase of 10 million doses of Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine. Deliveries commenced on December 24, making Chile the first Latin American nation to start its vaccination program. The country has ordered some 90 million doses, more than enough to immunize its 19 million citizens. By March 4, more than 20% of its population received at least one shot, placing Chile fifth in the world when it comes to vaccination rates, just behind Israel, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Political Conflict

On December 29, Argentinians started to receive the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. The pace of immunization in Argentina has been much slower than expected, with several complaints of those not in priority groups receiving the jab before health workers and the elderly. The “VIP vaccination” scandal has caused the resignation of the health minister, drawing protesters onto the streets and generating criticism against President Alberto Fernandez. So far, Argentina has vaccinated only 2.61% of its 45 million citizens. The slower pace seems to be standard in the region, with most nations unable to vaccinate even 1% of their citizens. The cause is not only the shortage of vaccines but lack of planning and, more significantly, internal political conflict.

In Brazil, president Jair Bolsonaro has made several statements that undermined efforts to slow the pandemic. In a national broadcast on March 24, 2020, he criticized the restrictive

measures adopted by governors and mayors, urging people to return to work and referring to COVID-19 as a “little flu.” The president also highly publicized the unproven anti-malarian drug chloroquine as being effective against the virus, ordering the Ministry of Health to produce four million doses. His insistence on the use of the drug caused the loss of two health ministers, Dr. Henrique Mandetta, fired by Bolsonaro last April, and Dr. Nelson Teich, who resigned less than a month after taking over. Since then, the position has been filled by an army general specializing in logistics, with neither medical education nor experience.

Over the course of the pandemic, Bolsonaro has been exchanging public barbs with the state governments, such as over lockdown measures adopted by individual governors last month. On March 1, 16 of the country’s 26 governors, including three Bolsonaro allies, signed a letter criticizing the government and accusing the president of misleading the public about federal pandemic relief funds. Sao Paulo’s governor, Joao Doria, a former ally in the 2018 elections and a potential competitor in 2022, has been the president’s most vociferous antagonist over the handling of the pandemic.

At the center of the dispute is the Butantan Institute, one of the most prestigious health centers in Latin America, situated in the state of Sao Paulo. Back in June, Butantan signed a partnership with the Chinese laboratory Sinovac Biotech to produce the CoronaVac vaccine. Initially, Bolsonaro has signaled that Brazil would not purchase the Chinese vaccine, questioning its efficiency, but in January, the Ministry of Health added the vaccine to the national immunization plan following approval by the health regulator, Anvisa. Last month, Doria announced a deal for a further 20 million doses of CoronaVac to complement the 100 million already secured by Butantan.

Last August, Pfizer said it offered 70 million batches of its vaccine to Brazil, with a delivery scheduled for December. However, with Brazil dissatisfied with the terms of the contract, the

deal is still being negotiated. Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello hopes to secure 100 million doses from Pfizer and 38 million from a pharmaceutical subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, Janssen, to start deliveries in May and August respectively. Due to this lack of urgency and an absence of a unified policy between the federal and state governments, Brazil has so far vaccinated just 3,67% of its population.

Crisis Management

Chile has also faced political unrest. Since 2019, the country experienced several mass protests calling for education and pension reforms. In a televised address, President Pinera declared a state of emergency, granting powers to restrain freedom of movement and assembly. The measure resulted in violence that cost 18 lives in five days, leading the UN to examine possible human rights abuses. As a result, Pinera’s approval rating fell to just 7%. In 2020, amid the ongoing political crisis, COVID-19 hit the country hard, provoking the resignation of the health minister, Jaime Manalich.

However, Pinera managed to turn the situation around. With a degree in commercial engineering from the Catholic University of Chile and a PhD in economics from Harvard, the president is a billionaire businessman, with an estimated net worth of \$2,9 billion. He has already led the country once, between 2010 and 2014, earning crucial government nous. Pinera made several concessions to the protesters and supported the calls for a new constitution in an attempt to turn down the political temperature.

A referendum on October 25 saw 78% of the population approve a new constitution that will substitute the current one created in 1980 under General Augusto Pinochet. The new Magna Carta will be written by a 155-strong body also elected through a popular vote and with an equal number of men and women. The document will then be confirmed by a popular vote before being implemented.

To assuage popular discontent caused by the initial handling of the pandemic in combination

with other historical grievances relating to health care, education and pensions, Pinera focused his negotiation abilities to mediate the purchase of million doses of vaccine from different laboratories and suppliers. While most developing nations have been struggling with a lack of supplies, Chile is among the top three countries, along with Canada and the UK, when it comes to the number of doses ordered per capita. Back in September, just before the peak of protests, Pinera announced partnerships on the development and clinical trials between the Catholic University of Chile and Sinovac; the University of Chile, Janssen/Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca; as well as the University of Frontera and another Chinese laboratory, CanSino Biologics. More than that, purchases were agreed with Pfizer, Covax, Sinovac and AstraZeneca.

But despite perceived goodwill from an unpopular right-wing government, the president still faces an uphill climb when it comes to popularity. By March 1, 83% of the Chileans deemed the massive vaccination as good or very good, 58% assess the general management of the pandemic as positive, but Pinera's personal approval is still only at 24%.

The successful vaccination has already yielded positive outcomes. According to Chile's Health Ministry, the number of new COVID-19 cases has decreased in six of the country's 16 regions in the last seven days and in eight the last 14 days. Chile hopes to vaccinate at least 15 million people in the first semester, which would allow the country to immunize its entire population by the end of June. These numbers would put Chile way ahead in the vaccination game not only in Latin America but worldwide, suggesting that resolute leadership is as important for the nation's well-being as a robust medical system.

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Violence Against Women in Mexico Rises

Mat Youkee
March 9, 2021

Increasing numbers of women in Mexico are seeking help and refuge as domestic violence rises during lockdown and quarantine.

Home is not a safe space for many women around the world and coronavirus-era quarantines and lockdowns have increased the risk of gender-based violence. In Mexico, statistics reflect this reality and women additionally face the rising risk of becoming targets amid violent drug crime and the militarization of the state security forces.

According to the Secretariat of Citizen Security (SSPC) last year, 3,752 women were violently killed. Of these were 969 classified as femicides — defined as the violent death of a woman because of her gender — a slight increase on the previous year's figure.

According to data compiled by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Mexico has the second-highest total number of femicides in the region — after Brazil — whilst nearby El Salvador and Honduras have the highest rates per capita. The prevalence of violent crime, a culture of machismo and weak implementation of measures designed to protect women mean Latin America is home to 14 of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world.

The first months of the coronavirus pandemic were particularly dangerous for Mexican women, according to Maissa Hubert, the executive sub-director of Equis Justicia Para Las Mujeres, a Mexico City-based NGO. "During the first months of the pandemic, we saw a rise in various forms of gender-based violence," she says. "In total, 11 women killed each day, compared to 10 per day at the start of 2020."

In March 2020, the emergency call centers received 26,000 reports of violence against women, the highest ever in Mexico. The number of women leaving their homes to take shelter in the National Refuge Network quadrupled.

Outside the home, however, the continued growth of Mexico's transnational criminal organizations and the militarized response of state security forces have further increased risks to women. While crime dropped in the first months of the pandemic, the security vacuum has increased clashes between 198 active armed groups in the country's "hyper-fragmented criminal landscape," according to International Crisis Group.

Gangs and Militarized State Security

"Organized crime has aggravated the situation with regards to the murder of women," says Maria Salguero, a researcher who created the National Femicide Map. "The crime gangs use the dead bodies of women to send messages to their rivals. In states where there is a lot of organized crime, such as Juarez, Chihuahua, Guerrero and Naucalpan, we see high incidences of femicide, disappearances and rape."

The situation is exacerbated by the further militarization of state security. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index's (BTI) country report on Mexico notes that "the army has been called upon to perform internal security tasks and is receiving large amounts of resources in the context of the war against drug trafficking." It adds that the widening of the military's mandate to include civilian tasks could have worrisome implications for consensus building in the country.

As noted in the BTI report, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's government risks losing public support if it cannot solve the challenges of corruption and violence in the country. It points out that "the fact that the army, which has so far not signified a threat to democracy, is required to undertake ever more tasks may be a threat in the future." Such a breakdown in trust for institutions and the security forces could have knock-on effects for all violent crime.

On May 11, 2020, the Mexican armed forces and National Guard were given new authority to play a far greater role in policing violent crime in the country — giving them free rein to assume many of the police force's duties — without any effective audit mechanism.

The effect of this process on gender-based violence is only now coming to be understood. "The attitude of this government and its predecessors has been that a military response to the security situation will protect all of us and women in particular," says Hubert. "But the reality is that the increased circulation of firearms has had a tremendous impact on women."

Firearms were the weapon used in 60% of the total 1,844 murders committed against women in 2020. From 1998 to 2019, the number of women killed by firearms in Mexico rose by 375%. Over 2.5 million firearms have entered Mexico from the US over the last decade, and firearms accounted for the overwhelming majority of the total of 34,515 murders registered in Mexico in 2020, the highest number since 2015.

An Overlooked Issue

The continued emphasis on militarized security is sapping state funds at a time when resources for programs addressing violence against women in Mexico are being cut. In recent years, Mexican public policy has had a mixed record with respect to gender-based violence. It took until December last year for President Lopez Obrador to talk about gender-based violence, having previously avoided using the word femicide or acknowledge that women faced specific security concerns. In May 2020, he said that 90% of domestic violence-related 911 calls were false. His team failed to provide evidence to support this claim when requested to by NGOs.

Despite this intransigence at the executive level, in recent years, there has been greater recognition of the problem at the federal and ministerial level, according to Hubert, with many long-lasting public policies proposed by the National Institute of Women, founded in 2001. However, many of the preventative and reactive

policies introduced to tackle gender-based violence have been subject to cuts in government spending as a result of the pandemic.

“We analyzed the activity of the courts at the start of the pandemic, and we found gender-based violence was not being prioritized,” says Hubert. “Issues such as divorce and alimony are crucial for a woman looking to free herself from a violent situation, but they weren’t being attended to by the courts.”

For Saguro, the priority is to keep recording the names and identities of the victims of Mexico’s “shadow pandemic” of gender-based violence. “Only by making the victims visible can we really make the scale of the problem visible,” she says, “but we have a lot of work to do because the numbers remain high.”

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A Contentious Election Deepens Peru’s Crisis

Erik Geurts
July 16, 2021

A fragmented congress and a disputed presidential election have worsened a political crisis that began in 2016 and could unfold ugly scenarios for Peru’s future.

Peruvians went to the polls on June 6 to elect a new president. Pedro Castillo is leading Keiko Fujimori by 44,000 votes in an election in which 17.6 million cast their ballots. The result is yet to be confirmed by the election authorities.

A newly-edited book by one of the greatest Peruvian historians gives clues as to the future. Jorge Basadre’s intriguing “Risk in History and

Its Limits” was first published in 1971 and examines the role of chance in history. Basadre magisterially applies this theme to Peruvian independence. He was fully aware of the latest developments in game theory and anticipated the power of computers to apply this theory. This great thinker is honored today with his portrait on 100 soles banknotes.

Inspired by Basadre, there are five scenarios that could unfold once the election authorities proclaim the winner. Although scenario analysis and game theory are distinct concepts, scenarios allow for a simulation of the role of chance in history and in determining the future. The Peruvian case is an exciting starting point for such analysis because the country is deeply divided and each candidate appeals only to a small minority of the population.

The Two Candidates

Keiko Fujimori is the daughter of the former authoritarian president Alberto Fujimori. He is currently serving a 25-year prison sentence for human rights abuses committed during his tenure. The former president inherited a bloody insurgency led by two terrorist groups. The larger group, the Shining Path, espoused Maoist ideals similar to Cambodia’s infamous Khmer Rouge. The other group was the Marxist-Leninist Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Both groups were most active in the 1980s and early 1990s. Alberto Fujimori is credited with crushing them.

Keiko Fujimori still attracts public support because many Peruvians continue to be grateful to her father for navigating the country out of what seemed to be an intractable crisis. Along with the insurgency, Peru suffered chronic hyperinflation. The authoritarian elder Fujimori ended both insurgency and inflation. In the current election, his daughter won 13.41% of the vote in the first round, reaching the final round in the presidential election for the third time.

Keiko Fujimori lost the 2016 presidential election to a liberal candidate by a mere 41,000 votes even though her party won an absolute majority in the congressional election. Her deep

unpopularity among a large number of Peruvians probably explains why she lost while her party won. The divided mandate — with Fujimori's party dominant in congress and the presidency in her rival's hands — was a recipe for disaster.

Following the 2016 election, the country went into a political free fall. New congressional elections and constitutional changes followed. Within one presidential term, four presidents have come and gone. The constitutional changes backfired spectacularly. Members of congress are no longer allowed to stand for reelection. This was supposed to make them more honest. Instead, they treat their one term as the only chance to extract their pound of flesh. Almost invariably, Peruvian members of congress have furthered their own personal interests over the interests of society. Naturally, voters are tired of the current political situation with its unresolved tensions between regions and classes. This benefited Fujimori's unlikely political rival who could cast himself as an outsider.

Pedro Castillo is a rural school teacher and union leader. His parents were illiterate peasants; he is the third of their nine children. Castillo comes from one of the poorest regions of the country. As a relatively unknown presidential candidate, he remained under the radar of the mainstream press during the first round of elections. With 20 candidates competing to get into the second round, Castillo won a surprising 18.92% of the vote. His victory caught the Lima elites by surprise.

In Peru, political parties largely center around their founders. Castillo's party, Perú Libre, revolves around Wladimir Cerron, who used to be the governor of a region in the Andean part of the country. Cerron draws inspiration from Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro. He is believed to support surviving members of the Shining Path. Two former members of the Maoist terrorist organization will now take their seats in congress for Perú Libre.

Cerron shares legal troubles relating to corruption and campaign finance with the Fujimori family. Whereas Fujimori herself is still

awaiting trial, Cerron has already been sentenced to four years and eight months. He is currently out on parole.

A Mess That Keeps Getting Messier

Even though the vote was held over a month ago, the election authorities are yet to declare an official winner. Fujimori has challenged the election outcome. She claims irregularities in the voting districts in the Andean region where she is extremely unpopular. The independent election authorities have rejected most of the challenges, some on entirely technical grounds. According to law, challenges must be lodged within three days of the election. The polls closed at 8.00 pm on July 6. Fujimori filed some of her challenges after 8.00 pm but before midnight on July 9.

To her supporters, the extra four hours do not matter because July 9 was still the third day after the election. The election authorities are mindful of this perception and perhaps this contributes to why they have yet to proclaim a winner. However, we can safely assume that Castillo will be proclaimed president-elect before July 28. That day marks 200 years of Peru's independence and is the day the constitution provides for the swearing-in of a new president.

Even though Castillo is highly likely to take charge, wild speculation dominates both the news and social media. He has frequently made contradictory remarks about his future plans. His erratic comments and improvisational team-building have made many nervous. Tensions are rising while confidence in the economy is falling. Just three months after Castillo won the first round, Peru's foreign exchange reserves have dwindled by 11%. They have largely been spent to prop up the country's falling currency that has fallen by 8.4% against a weak dollar despite the measures.

Capital is also fleeing the country. Even before the second round of elections, the business elite was "looking to get money out of the country." Reportedly, \$13 billion in bank deposits have left Peruvian shores in the last few months. Castillo's plans to nationalize or heavily

tax major industries such as mining, oil and gas have caused tremors among investors and the business community. The Andean leader has continued to call for a constitutional convention despite a majority in congress or among voters who oppose such an elaborate and expensive exercise.

Castillo's call for a new constitution has fueled economic anxiety. There is a fear that the rules of the game could change and Peru might retreat from a market economy. This could create massive problems for the country. Previous administrations have signed trade agreements and international treaties that commit Peru to certain market-friendly policies. Castillo's incoming administration does not have as much leeway as it imagines, and ideological policies could have costly consequences for the economy.

Ironically, Peru's economy was recovering from the COVID-19 crisis faster than those of neighboring countries. Rising commodity prices would have given the new government more money to redistribute to the rural and Andean areas that historically lag behind Lima and other coastal cities. Instead, a close election in a fragmented society has exacerbated a protracted ongoing crisis. There are five scenarios that could play out at this point in time. Let us go through each of them.

Scenario 1: Cooperation

The government and the people they govern could come together to address the main problems affecting the country. These include ramping up the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, improving Peru's ailing health care and public education systems, creating employment for the millions who lost their jobs due to lockdowns, increasing prosperity in poor areas practicing subsistence agriculture, building more infrastructure and improving resilience against climate change.

Under this scenario, Castillo would successfully earn the confidence of the majority of congress. Instead of drafting a new

constitution, members of congress would agree on amendments to improve governance.

Although this would be an optimal scenario, it is unlikely to unfold. Peru's new congress of 130 deputies is splintered among 10 parties. Three of them, commanding 44 seats, represent the right and the far right. Of these, 24 belong to Fujimori's Fuerza Popular. Parties of the left hold 42 seats, with 37 from Peru Libre, the party of Castillo and Cerron.

The remaining 44 seats are held by centrist parties. It is difficult to predict whom they'll support. Some might back the government in exchange for favors for their regions or for themselves. Others might ally with the right-wing opposition, which is expected to ferociously oppose what they view as Castillo's socialist experiments.

Scenario 2: Military Coup

The military could take over. Some retired officers have already appealed to the army to act against a Castillo government. Some of the 44 right-wing congress members might support such a coup. This scenario is also unlikely for now. Peru's institutions are still strong enough to follow a constitutional process.

The military has not been in power since 1980. By then, the armed forces were divided between their own left-wing and right-wing camps. The left had seized power in 1968 in hope of doing many of the things now proposed by Cerron and Castillo. The right took over in 1975 in response to the macroeconomic consequences of leftist policies instituted from 1968.

Between 1990 and 2000, the military supported the elder Fujimori. The army liked his strong, authoritarian leadership at a time of hyperinflation and insurgency.

In the latter part of the 20th century, right-wing military coups typically took place when a country entered a political deadlock. Almost invariably, institutions failed, the government stopped functioning, the economy collapsed and violence increased, leading to a military takeover.

Peru has just had an election. A winner has emerged. A military coup — or even a civilian one supported by the military — would not fly. Only if Castillo and congress repeatedly fail to find a way to work together, govern the country and manage the economy, the military would risk an intervention.

Scenario 3: Hegemony Via a New Constitution

Cerrón and Castillo could circumvent congress, appeal directly to the people and change the constitution. Such a scenario would give them unbridled power. Peru would emulate the Ecuador of Rafael Correa, who managed to grab absolute power despite lacking a majority in congress by ushering in a new constitution.

Correa came to power in 2007 as part of the so-called Latin American pink tide, a term that refers to the election of left-wing governments in the region. He allied Ecuador with Hugo Chávez's Venezuela and hoped to install a 21st-century style of socialism. Correa boosted agricultural subsidies, increased minimum wage and sought to improve the standard of living by raising spending on social programs, especially health care and education.

Castillo is not as popular as Correa. Peru is highly fragmented. He got under 20% in the first round and has barely squeaked through in the second. A third of the voters want a new constitution, another third support some amendments to improve governance and the remaining third oppose any change. Therefore, the hegemony of the left is possible but improbable.

Scenario 4: Hegemony Through Weakening of Institutions

Cerrón and his hardcore comrades could make a grab for power with or without Castillo's support. First, they would appoint loyalists as employees of the state. Friendly prosecutors and judges as well as aligned teachers and generals would infiltrate different arms of the Peruvian state. With the help of loyalists in key positions, the left wing could circumvent congress and bend the

constitution. Bolivia, Nicaragua and El Salvador are already experiencing this phenomenon.

Peru has huge mineral reserves and access to some wealth. Left-wing countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia in need of financial support could bolster their ideological counterparts in Peru. Even the likes of Argentina and Surinam could turn to Peru for help. Peru could emerge as the new version of Chavez's Venezuela. As with the Chavismo experiment, such a scenario would eventually end badly. Peru's previous left-wing experiments have all failed.

Scenario 5: Impasse and Chaos

Castillo and the right-wing members of congress could clash bitterly. The latter are likely to oppose the new government with all the means at their disposal. Peru's right-wing media is likely to create a narrative of scandals.

Peru's present constitution has weaknesses pertaining to governance. It gives the president and congress ample opportunities to act against each other. The president could dissolve congress, which in turn could impeach the president. In fact, a supermajority could impeach the president in a single afternoon. Sadly, such bitter polarization is the most likely scenario. It could unleash chaos in Peru. Governance could fail and the country's long-standing problems would continue to fester.

It is important to note that four of the five scenarios are not in the interest of Peru. Yet such scenarios dominate because its democracy is immature. Voting is compulsory. Those who do not vote are penalized. Yet the country demonstrates that elections and voting by themselves do not lead to a functioning democracy.

Elected representatives have to learn to work together in the public interest. Putting private interest or ideological pursuits over public benefit invariably leads to disaster. Like voters in many other fraught democracies, Peruvians tend to opt for el mal menor, the lesser evil. It is increasingly unclear if such a choice even exists. A

fragmented country desperately needs its politicians to end a savage knife fight and work toward a better future.

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After Recent Protests, Cuba Will Not Be the Same

Leonardo Vivas
July 19, 2021

Cuba's symbolic capital accumulated in the aftermath of the revolution has been diminished by the recent wave of protests.

The wave of protests that engulfed Cuba on July 11 has become a milestone in the island's recent struggle for a free society. Limited at first, like so many protests across Latin America over the last few years, they soon spread out to most of the country, including small towns. It began in San Antonio de los Baños, a town about 16 miles south of Havana, as a reaction to the worsening living conditions, including shortages of food and other basic goods, power outages and a spike of COVID-19 that demonstrated the inability of the authorities to cope with the pandemic.

Soon, the protests acquired more political overtones as tens of thousands of protesters chanted for freedom and "Patria y Vida" — "Homeland and Life," as opposed to the old revolutionary slogan, "Homeland or Death" — a song by rapper Maykel Castillo that has become the mantra of Cuba's democratic movement. Other slogans were less civil. They focused directly on Miguel Diaz-Canel, Cuba's president appointed by Raul Castro in 2019, by haranguing "Díaz Canel y Raúl, singaos!" (bastards!).

Ramiro Valdes, part of the revolutionary old guard, was forced to abandon Palma Soriano as demonstrators chanted "Murderer!"

Freedom and Change

Most Cuba observers have concluded that these protests are quite unprecedented. Compared to the famous Maleconazo uprising that occurred in 1994 during the dark times of the so-called Periodo Especial after the fall of the USSR, the contrast is striking. At the time, when Cuba suffered economic collapse as a result of the abrupt termination of Soviet aid, the protests took place only in Havana, around the famous Malecon esplanade. Fidel Castro himself, accompanied by a rapid-response squad, went down to face off with the protesters.

The unrest was rapidly quelled, but later that year, travel restrictions were loosened, leading to a flood of emigrants sailing for Florida by any means possible. One important difference with the current protests is their orientation. Back in 1994, many Cubans wanted to leave the country — which they did when allowed. This time, protests are asking for freedom and internal change.

The current demonstrations began in San Antonio de los Baños, home to a famous film festival, but spread simultaneously to Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey and to around other 60 districts before reaching Havana. It culminated at the Capitol, the historical building and symbol of national power, and the Revolution Square, where Castro used to make his epic, nine-hour-long speeches. As reported by blogger and journalist Yoani Sanchez, the protests were far-reaching both in volume and intensity.

As was the case during the Arab Spring, in the absence of legally operating opposition parties, the demonstrations were possible thanks to the internet and to the myriad connections it allows. In fact, in the last few years, the landscape of organized dissent has changed partly through the use of YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter and other apps, paving the way for the emergence of several new groups, such as the San Isidro

Movement, that have enhanced the presence of a different discourse alongside the official dogma, especially among the youth.

The protests seemed to respond to a tipping point of the decay of Cuban society where many of the social gains of the revolution have withered away. It was not just about the dismal response to the pandemic. For instance, the regime rejected to join the global COVAX mechanism for vaccine development and distribution, giving preference (and resources) to developing local vaccines that haven't been duly tested according to international standards.

Cuba's public schools today compare to those in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Caracas or Medellin. The hospitals, the crown jewel of the revolution, are noticeably run down, understaffed and running a dramatic shortage of even the most common medications. The latest protests may have been overwhelmingly peaceful, but they were precipitated by the Cubans' growing loss of faith and hope in the country's future, especially among the younger generation.

On Shaky Ground

Compared to most Latin American countries, Cuba is a rather stable society. It is the only fully authoritarian state in the region, under an extreme socialist regime that has managed to survive by curbing the abilities of its citizens to overcome poverty and by exercising totalitarian control over political life. Different from Venezuela, where the attempt to create a hardcore socialist state has brought institutional, political and economic chaos, Cuba has been able to build solid institutions as well as extended and dense mechanisms of political control.

But the structural economic shortcomings of the revolution have brought about political instability yet again. The July 11 protests mark the end of a period and the beginning of a new phase. Despite their intensity and extension, and their impact on the core of Cuba's power, it is unlikely that they will bring about deep political change. The repressive muscle orchestrated for more than 60 years by the Cuban regime is highly

sophisticated and has been exported to other countries.

Different from the Maleconazo, when only the special forces were brought in, during the recent protests, the Diaz-Canel government has used all the gamut of police and militia organizations to crush dissent. By Monday, the number of arrests was estimated to be in the hundreds. By Wednesday, July 14, despite the opacity of Cuba's official statistics, independent sources related to human rights organizations, both internal and external, counted them to be in the thousands.

The use of force has been so brutal that the vice minister of the interior, Brigadier General Jesus Manuel Buron Tabit, resigned in protest — an unprecedented move. Other regime insiders have also rejected the suppression of protests. Carlos Alejandro Rodriguez Halley, the nephew of General Luis Alberto Rodriguez Lopez-Calleja, called for the armed forces to put down their arms and for a transition for democracy.

General Lopez Calleja is not only Raul Castro's former son-in-law but also a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and a prominent leader of the Grupo de Administracion Empresarial, S. A. (GAESA), a powerhouse in Cuba's economy. It is seemingly the first time that dissent emerges at the core of Cuba's leadership. From exile, Rodriguez Halley directed his pledge to his uncle and to other members of the ruling elite.

As a first response to the protests, the Cuban government has eased most importing restrictions for food and medicines, in an attempt to cater to the most basic needs of the population. But it is unlikely that the authorities will work to reverse either the crude reality Cubans live in today or the issues at the root of the crisis.

Structural Problems

The demonstrations are not merely circumstantial but connected to more structural problems. On the two occasions where important protests have shaken the country, protests have been associated with grave social shortcomings resulting from

economic collapse. In turn, those economic troubles have derived from the abrupt reduction of foreign aid.

To a large extent, Cuba's post-revolution economy has been essentially parasitic, benefitting first from Soviet economic support until its collapse in 1991, and later from Venezuela's largesse. Today, 70% of Cuba's food is imported, and due to the paralysis of the tourist industry and the reduction of remittances, the government is under a currency crunch. Many of the attempted reforms to step up local production, like dollarization or more flexibility to create enterprises, have been far too timid or have stalled.

Since around 2016, the gravest impact on Cuba has been that of Venezuela's own economic collapse, especially the steep decline in oil production. This has led to great restrictions in the amount of oil and gasoline contributions to the island, apart from Caracas' diminishing capacity to pay for Cuba's services, consisting mainly of 25,000 medical doctors nearly 80% of whose income goes to the government in Havana. If from around 2004 and until 2017-18 Venezuela filled the Soviet Union's shoes, it is no longer able to do so.

In the early years of the 21st century, Venezuela and Cuba launched a large-scale offensive in Latin America to tilt the balance drastically away from US influence. In the last five to seven years, those attempts have dwindled, not only due to the absence of both firebrand leaders, Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, but because of the dramatic economic downturn of Venezuela. This astonishing and rapid decline has pushed the country into a chronic humanitarian crisis, the migration of nearly 6 million people and acute international isolation. More recently, the embattled regime of Nicolas Maduro has become the target of investigations by several international human rights organizations for crimes against humanity.

Quite apart from the loss of the regional influence both countries enjoyed during the first 15 years of the century, and despite continuous

claims about reciprocal solidarity between them, it is not difficult to argue that, in Cuba's eyes, Venezuela has become more of a liability. Given the destruction of Venezuela's oil industry, it is unlikely that it will recover production, currently as low as it was in the late 1940s. Alliance with Venezuela has pushed Cuba back to Cold War times as a result of Caracas' confrontation with the US.

The appeasement efforts made during the Obama years, which brought about the lessening of sanctions, an increase in remittances from exiles in the US, and more flights between the two countries, evaporated during Donald Trump's administration, thanks in good measure to the stark polarization the alliance with Venezuela involved.

Diminished Capital

One of Cuba's great assets in Latin America, lasting, though rather diminished, until today is the symbolic capital it accumulated in the aftermath of the revolution, somewhat reinforced by the soft power of exporting medical personnel and other services. But this aura of revolutionary respectability was also related to political stability, which operated as a magnet by offering its allies in the region a solid presence, a reliable strategic stance and vast accumulated experience in dealing with the US powerhouse. This edifice is at risk today as the protests have fractured the image of a small but solid nation.

The instability brought about by the protests and the changing regional political environment of the last five years has left Cuba in uncharted territory, with no clear signs of how it will overcome the loss of Venezuela's aid, how to redraw a lasting economic strategy or how to profit more from its international connections. Cuba does not have many options. One possibility would be to maintain the current course, with mild variations and betting that no new waves of protests occur.

The current leadership may also decide that risking a closer relationship with one of the world powers competing with the US, like Russia or

China, is Havana's best option. That would allow Cuba to cushion itself from direct or indirect blows from its northern neighbor. But if that were the case, and just as the famous realtor mantra goes, it can only offer location, location, location. Both Russia and China, given their own geopolitical vulnerabilities, could consider making a move involving military considerations. This would significantly raise the geopolitical stakes.

A third option is to negotiate a settlement with Washington by propitiating an internal transformation à la Vietnam that would involve dramatic reforms to move to a market economy. So far, the Cuban leadership has starkly avoided this latter course, essentially because it could weaken the economic power of the military-civilian elite running the country or because they risk losing control of the process. Whichever scenario the government decides to adopt, after July 11, Cuba is no longer the same.

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Will Brazil See Justice for the Mismanagement of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Helder Ferreira do Vale
November 4, 2021

Last month, a senate committee indicted President Jair Bolsonaro for crimes against humanity for his handling of Brazil's COVID-19 pandemic.

On October 26, Brazil's senate approved the final report of its investigation into President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing malign

policies and widespread corruption. The main conclusion of the six-month-long probe conducted by the COVID-19 Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) is clear: The actions and failures of the Bolsonaro administration contributed to more than 600,000 COVID-19-related deaths across Brazil to date, the second-highest total in the world behind the United States. On average, 1 out of 347 Brazilians has died from the coronavirus.

The commission heard more than 100 witnesses during 66 sessions and examined some 20 million gigabytes of digital information to trace the causes and consequences of Bolsonaro's decisions, such as his lax COVID-19 policies derived from the disastrous attempt to let the virus run its course in order to reach herd immunity. Last year, Bolsonaro downplayed the coronavirus as "a little flu," promoted the use of hydroxychloroquine and other unproven medications as a cure, opposed the use of masks and, most critically, failed to secure adequate stocks of the COVID-19 vaccine for the federal program.

COVID-19 Crimes

The PCI was created in April, a month after the pandemic peaked at over 89,000 infections and almost 4,000 deaths a day. The commission's final report is weighty, providing nearly 1,300 pages of robust evidence to indict Jair Bolsonaro on nine criminal charges, including crimes against public health and crimes against humanity. In addition to the president, 77 individuals, including three of his sons, two former and one current minister, as well as several close allies who are occupying key positions in public institutions, are on the indictment list.

The final report has been submitted to the general prosecutor's office for further consideration. If Bolsonaro is formally charged, he might face between 21 and 79 years in prison.

The report will also be presented to the lower house of Brazil's national congress. This could lead to an impeachment process for misconduct.

Approval of the report by the lower house is unlikely, however, given it is controlled by Bolsonaro supporters. Formal criminal charges would have to be issued by Brazil's attorney general, Augusto Aras, who is the president's political appointee. The senators who led the commission have raised the possibility of taking the case to the International Criminal Court in The Hague in the likely scenario that the Brazilian justice system fails to prosecute Bolsonaro.

The turning point of the investigation was the uncovering of a corruption scheme inside the Ministry of Health to spend \$300 million on 20 million doses of overpriced COVID-19 vaccines produced by the Indian company Bharat Biotech. The investigation revealed that the Ministry of Health reserved approximately \$45 million to buy Covaxin, which has not undergone proper clinical trials and hasn't been approved by any of the world's health regulatory agencies.

The payment was to be deposited in an offshore account of an opaque Brazilian company, Precisa Medicamentos, which was brokering the deal and is facing several judicial probes into irregularities of public procurement contracts. A deputy in the lower house of congress and former minister of health who is a close political ally of Bolsonaro led the negotiations for the acquisition of the vaccine. Allegations from witness testimony indicate that the president was aware of the scheme. The attempt of the Bolsonaro administration to buy Covaxin is perplexing given that last year, it refused to buy the Pfizer vaccine even at a discounted rate.

Political and Social Consequences

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a lack of leadership across the country, turning a public health emergency into an economic and sociopolitical crisis. While there already were undisputed signs of a fast-approaching recession, with the rapid spread of the virus, the economic scenario deteriorated further. In 2020, Brazil's economy was the second-most affected by the

pandemic, after Spain. Last year, Brazil presented a negative GDP growth of 4.1%.

Economic projections for 2021 suggest that the Brazilian economy will show only a modest expansion considering last year's economic debacle, with estimated GDP growth of 3.7%. This comes in a context of worsening macroeconomic indications such as increasing inflation rates, devaluation of the currency and rising interest rates.

The pandemic has also deepened political tensions in Brazil, with Bolsonaro more isolated than ever. The pandemic made crystal clear the president's ineptitude to lead, coordinate and articulate meaningful solutions to the crisis. It brought to the fore Bolsonaro's belligerent personality and put him at odds with close aides. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Brazil had rotated four ministers of health, two of whom have left the government due to sharp disagreements with the administration's policies.

Bolsonaro has also tried to shirk federal public health responsibilities to state and local authorities. This has intensified the political conflict with state governors, which has greatly contributed to the disarticulation of coordinated pandemic response. Despite Bolsonaro's obstructionist policies, state governments carried out their own vaccination programs. The state of São Paulo began a large-scale vaccination drive after an agreement was signed with the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech to locally produce the Coronavac vaccine. As of last week, the state had a vaccination rate of 87% for those over the age of 18, compared to 53% for the rest of the country.

Electoral Prospects

Initially, Bolsonaro interpreted the pandemic as an opportunity to advance his narrow political interests, such as his controversial agenda of easing arms control, relaxing implementation of environmental legislation and combating anti-corruption laws and actions. Furthermore, the president used the pandemic as an opportunity to distribute financial assistance to the poor, a move

that allowed him to enjoy high popular approval ratings during several months of the pandemic, from February to October 2020.

The indictment will have far-reaching consequences for Bolsonaro's ambitions in next year's presidential election. Based on an opinion poll from October, if the election were held today, former President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva would win with 56% against Bolsonaro's 31% in the second round.

Lula, who is on the opposite side of the political spectrum from Bolsonaro, was imprisoned in 2018 on corruption charges, until the supreme court annulled his conviction in April this year. Thus, despite current projections that give Lula a clear lead, Brazil's 2022 presidential election will be a highly polarized affair with unpredictable results.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, since the launch of the senate inquiry, Bolsonaro's popularity has dropped significantly. Between January and October this year, the number of those who describe Bolsonaro's governance as "bad" increased from 40% to 53%, while "good" or "excellent" ratings have fallen from 32% to just 22%, the lowest point since he took office in 2019. This is bad news for Bolsonaro, who will lose his presidential immunity from prosecution if he fails to win reelection.

In response, on October 20 — the same day the results of the investigation were first made public — the president announced that he would increase financial support to a major social assistance program, the "Bolsa Família," designed to alleviate poverty. This populist welfare policy, which was announced for the sole purpose of bolstering the president's reelection prospects, had a negative effect on the Brazilian financial markets.

The government's overspending is creating a record deficit, with the International Monetary Fund projecting public debt to reach 96% of the country's GDP. Under this fiscal deterioration, investors are concerned about Brazil's capacity to further control its debt, leading to a sharp

devaluation of the currency; since January 2020, the real lost almost 40% of its value.

Jair Bolsonaro thought the COVID-19 pandemic would help disguise his incompetence. Instead, the crisis has shown how lack of leadership kills — at a shocking scale. The more than 607,000 Brazilian lives lost during the pandemic serve as a constant and grim reminder there is no place in Brazil for weak leadership.

While bringing those protected by immunity to justice will be an uphill struggle, the parliamentary inquiry has demonstrated that Brazil has strong democratic institutions that can not only effectively resist the autocratic push by the executive but also hold the president accountable for fomenting what may be the worst public health crisis in Brazil's history.

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MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

Tunisia: The Pending Goals of the Revolution

Anouar Jamaoui
February 4, 2021

A decade on since the Tunisian Revolution, economic performance remains modest, and many of the rebels' demands are still pending.

A decade after the Arab Spring, Tunisians have made significant progress in the field of democratization with respect to the constitution and the guarantee of public and private freedoms. However, economic performance remains modest, and many of the

demands of the Tunisian Revolution are still pending.

Tunisia commemorated the 10th anniversary of the revolution with violent youth protests alongside peaceful demonstrations in major cities like Tunis, Sousse and Nabeul, and inland cities of Siliana, Kasserine and Kairouan. The protesters demanded employment and comprehensive development. They expressed their discontent with high prices, monopolies and the deterioration of the purchasing power of citizens. There was also consternation about the increasing number of COVID-19 victims and the mishandling of the pandemic.

The reality is that the demands for employment are stagnating, ending the isolation of marginalized areas is still a distant dream, and achieving transitional justice is at a stalemate. While the population of Tunisia suffers, many members of the former regime who opposed the revolutionary struggle are still there at the forefront of the media, clinging to impunity.

The Youth Unemployment Problem

Tunisia has not yet succeeded in developing effective solutions to the unemployment problem that first sparked protests in December 2010. According to the National Institute of Statistics, the unemployment rate in the country during the third quarter of 2020 was 16.2% of the total active population, translating to approximately 6,766,000 people. This figure includes no fewer than 225,000 university graduates, with the rate rising to between 30% and 40% in several inland governorates.

The youth population in Tunisia is the most vulnerable to joblessness. The latest field survey on employment by the National Institute of Statistics showed that around 70% of all those unemployed are below 30 years of age. Unemployment is effectively marginalizing youth in Tunisia and is among the main reasons behind both the 2010 revolution and the current protests. The continuing absence of employment opportunities for young people, the spread of favoritism among government and business

elites, the rampant administrative and financial corruption and nepotism resulted in a perception of injustice that fueled discontent among many of those who have been unemployed for a long time.

While some impacted by the unemployment crisis attend sit-ins or demonstrate, others risk death on the high seas in search of work that guarantees dignity. In 2020, nearly 10,000 Tunisians arrived in Europe illegally. According to Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesman for the Tunisian Economic and Social Rights Forum, between 150 and 200 families have left Tunisia to Europe clandestinely over the last year, evading the Tunisian coast guard.

A report by the forum found that “most of the illegal immigrants, aged between 18 and 30, share a fundamental characteristic as they lived the ‘school failure experience’ through early drop-out. They refer such drop-out to several reasons ranging from economic difficulties, and reluctance to continue to study, because the school, in their view, is no longer useful in light of the high unemployment of high-ranking people.” In addition, many who give up hope either take the path of organized crime or get involved with international terrorist networks.

There is an urgent need to develop inclusive strategies aimed at empowering youth in the labor market. This is possible through the development of educational programs, vocational services and training courses to enhance the social investment role of the state by creating new productive projects directed at the domestic or foreign consumer market that would create jobs for the young.

Marginalized Regions Remain Isolated

A decade after the revolution, the inland and remote governorates have not yet gotten their share of comprehensive development. Rather, they are still suffering from marginalization, the ravages of high rates of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and school dropouts. They lack basic facilities such as infrastructure, health services and educational institutions even though the new constitution stipulates the necessity of

implementing a policy of positive discrimination concerning these underprivileged areas. It is not known where the financial allocations and in-kind assistance that the successive governments, the European Union and the Gulf states have allocated to those governorates have gone.

It is worth noting that, according to the European Commission, “Since 2011, EU assistance to Tunisia has amounted to almost €3 billion (over €2 billion in grants and €800 million in macro-financial assistance).” With an average of €300 million (\$360 million) per year between 2017 and 2020, these funds go toward the “Promoting good governance and the rule of law,” “stimulating a sustainable economic growth generating employment” and “Reinforcing social cohesion between generations and regions.” It is likely that these marginalized areas suffer locally from financial corruption and administrative misbehavior and are dominated by bureaucratic lobbies. Such underprivileged areas are often exploited politically by party and trade union elements to serve as a reservoir of popular protest against government policies.

Likewise, ruling parties only pay attention to these marginalized regions during election campaigns. This has made the residents suffer the brunt of inequality and injustice. It leaves them with a difficult choice: to continue staying in neglected regions despite dire conditions or to leave their lands for major cities or to board migration boats to Europe. There is a definite need to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of these regions, to provide them with resources for a decent living, to encourage greater investment in these regions and to revive the spirit of citizenship that will help regain confidence in the state.

No Truth or Dignity

In another context, the demand for justice for the victims of tyranny that the revolutionaries called for back in 2010 has not yet been fulfilled in an atmosphere where the transitional justice process is still stumbling. This includes the many obstacles that the Truth and Dignity Commission,

which carries the mandate of investigating human rights abuses by the state, has faced — a lack of cooperation from state agencies and executive institutions being one of them. Observers have noticed that the perpetrators of violations did not attend the hearings and did not respond to lawsuits by judicial departments.

This failure reinforces the culture of impunity and intensifies the suffering of the victims of the dictatorial regimes of President Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987) and his successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). The state must make use of its authority to bring to justice the perpetrators, apologize to the victims and authorize reparations for their material and mental suffering so that they can resume their lives as part of the Second Republic.

It is true that the revolution has, to some extent, removed the fear of the government and led to a decline in repression and the power of the president, the censors and the police. Critics were also released, the culture of protest spread, politics became a public affair and governance an ordinary exercise in which competing parties maintained an atmosphere of peace and democracy, with no single party having a monopoly.

However, it is evident that some of the revolution’s goals have not been implemented. What is required is to make those goals not just promises and slogans, but a reality. The need of the hour for Tunisia is to further reform the judicial and government systems, ensure decentralization and comprehensive development to win citizens’ trust in the state, the revolution and the project of democratization.

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The Battle Lines of Yemen's Endgame

Munir Saeed
March 10, 2021

With time and patience running out, failure to meet peace expectations can become ever more dangerous for Yemen.

An endgame, traditionally, brings both bad and good news. An endgame is always tense because those involved know things are coming to a head. We can see this in the battle theaters in Yemen over the past weeks. What we don't see is the reality of how those battles are actually progressing and who will be the last man standing: Ansar Allah, aka Houthis, or the Hadi faction, aka Yemen's legitimate government. Although from the experience of past battles and the progressive loss of ground President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi had suffered, we can make a good guess.

The battlegrounds are the oil-rich Mareb, the 3,000-year-old capital city of the queen of Sheba, with its famous Mareb Dam, and the north-south large buffer city, Taiz, whose 2.5 million people suffered heavily over the past six years. These are the two regions where Hadi has some but not full control, and where tribal and political loyalties are as clear as the sun on a very foggy, snowy day. These two battlegrounds will not only determine the future of Hadi and his circle, who for the past six years served as the Saudi coalition's pretext for its destructive military intervention, but also the future make-up of postwar Yemen and, most probably, the region's new alliances.

Ansar Allah's efforts are centered around eliminating the Hadi faction permanently from the equation by driving its forces from its last two strategic positions. The meeting last month in Muscat, Oman, between the US and Ansar Allah might have a lot to do with wrapping up the

fighting and discussing postwar scenarios. The battles cannot be allowed to continue for long, especially with other pressing regional issues demanding resolution. That is why, compared to all their battles so far, the Hadi faction is determined to continue fighting. Its survival depends on these two key positions, as does Ansar Allah's ultimate prize — to retain its hard-won title as the driving force in Yemen's political future, possibly as king, or at least as kingmaker.

The Southern Transitional Council (STC), which had already dealt its own decisive blow to Hadi, now relishes its turn to watch the events unfold, clearly hoping for an Ansar Allah victory. This would help to terminate the president's influence completely from the STC's own stronghold, Aden, where the Hadi group exists ceremoniously as a government only with the STC's permission.

First Scenario

There are three possible scenarios for an endgame in this conflict. First is a total defeat and subsequent elimination of the Hadi faction from Yemen's political future. That entails the elimination of the General People's Congress (GPC), the ruling party founded by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Islah, Yemen's brand of Muslim Brotherhood also created by Saleh as a religious party opposing the south's Yemen Socialist Party (YSP). Ironically, Islah evolved into a strong opposition to Saleh's own rule and allied with a weak YSP.

The GPC and Islah, once the stalwarts of Yemen's post-union political landscape, have now become spent forces. The GPC managed in totalitarian fashion by its founder virtually died with him, as is always the case with one-man shows. Islah, defeated, then banished from Yemen by its ideological and political arch-rival Ansar Allah now exists largely in Saudi Arabia, where it is at once viewed as a terrorist organization and an ally by the Saudi regime. The UAE also rejects Islah, like it does the rest of the Muslim Brothers. These two spent forces are the bulwarks of the Hadi bloc.

Eliminating the two political parties in every way but in name will not be unprecedented in Yemen. Following the two-month war in 1994 to defeat southern secessionist attempts led by the YSP, the GPC-Islah alliance completely destroyed the socialists, once a powerful dictatorship that ruled the pre-union People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south. It then remained an insignificant player that managed to find a small voice on the bandwagon of Yemen's Arab Spring revolution in 2011. Currently, in the midst of this war, the YSP is unheard of. Ironically, its fate now awaits its nemeses, the GPC and Islah, once ruling allies, then ruling opponents, now on the same side of a banished government led by Hadi, who, despite his international recognition as president, is unable to set foot in the country he claims to preside over.

This scenario leaves Ansar Allah in control of the northern part of Yemen, with the STC controlling the south. This should be the logical platform for a north-south federation that can save the union. In the face of opposition to a preferred larger multistate federation, such a scenario was envisaged years back when the idea of a centralized state was completely rejected due to its absolute totalitarianism as well as political and financial corruption. But this scenario is now the most viable to bring a stable and peaceful solution.

Second Scenario

However, the danger for Yemen as a whole is the second scenario, in which the STC, without seeking a referendum, uses the fiat of its de facto power supported by the UAE to push for secession. Such a move will provoke others and become destructive in a postwar landscape. The move will also be dangerous for its proponents, the STC and the southerners who support it, and also the south's backers in Abu Dhabi.

Since independence in 1967, the south has not been politically cohesive. The fighting between the Hadi government — whose members, including Hadi himself, are largely southerners

— and the STC, which is identifiably a southern secessionist movement is reminiscent of pre-union southern civil wars. Other secessionist voices in the south have become more prominent since the war of 1994. The large, oil-rich Hadhramout region has the economic and geographic viability to survive as a state on its own.

Together with neighboring Shabwah, another large oil region, the two can be united as a nation. This is a prospect the Saudis have been seeking for many years, hoping to integrate the two regions into greater Saudi Arabia with a direct outlet to the Arabian Sea, away from the unstable Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. Neighboring Mahra, bordering Oman, with whom it has historical and ethnic ties, can find some accommodating formula with Muscat.

Such a scenario will leave the STC with Aden and its surrounding regions of Lahaj, Abyan, Yafei and Dhalee, all of which can only be economically viable as part of a nation, never on their own. This is the dangerous scenario that the STC and the UAE must be very cautious about. It spells dangers for both by creating a total dependence of STC-ruled areas on Abu Dhabi. While this might look appealing for the UAE in the short term, enabling it to obtain geographical concessions from the STC — especially to Socotora, the Arab world's biggest island coveted by Abu Dhabi — in the long term it will backfire because Yemenis have always reacted violently to attempts by external forces to dominate them territorially.

Besides, this scenario also enables the Saudis to become more powerful vis-à-vis the Gulf Cooperation Council, a prospect that others, especially the UAE and Oman, will find unnerving. There are much better ways of achieving regional partnerships that are peaceful, inexpensive and offer stable long-term benefits to all involved. On the other hand, there are intertwined economic and social bonds between north and south Yemen. Not only are these ties necessary and beneficial to maintain, but they are also difficult to break.

The gas exported through the Balhaf terminal in the south originates from the fields in Mareb in the north of the country. The southern Yemeni oil that originates from fields in Masila and eastern Shabwah is piped across the northern Yemeni desert to Ras Essa in the Red Sea, part of north Yemen.

This type of profitable integration exists in other economic lifelines of the nation. Families on both sides have strong social relations that are evident through intermarriage, food, dress, culture and social habits, forming a diverse nation of strong similarities.

Why all this must be allowed to be lost at the risk of returning to the pre-union border wars is a serious question that anyone seeking to break the union will have to address. Secession demands have been largely led by emotions and a revolt against the excesses, mismanagement and corruption of the Saleh regime, which wreaked havoc on all Yemen and especially the south.

But that regime is gone, never to return. Yemenis must now ask themselves if they still want to break up the country — with all the dangers, weaknesses and instability this fracture will bring to Yemen and the entire region — or whether they should mend Yemen in the broken places and build a viable nation that can be a strong regional and international partner?

Such a Yemen will become a powerful lynchpin to the region's security arrangement, especially as a southern security gate to the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen has the only regional coastline that connects both the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, extending for more than 2,500 kilometers.

Going forward, regional political decisions affecting Yemen's fate can either turn a very frustrated and angry Yemeni population, which has suffered six years of relentless airstrikes, blockade, starvation and military intervention, into a force for chaos or stability in this very important waterway. Clearly, seeing the support retaliatory strikes against Saudi Arabia are getting amongst Yemenis, those currently working toward peace have their work cut out for

them. They better hurry. With time and patience running out, failure to meet peace expectations can become ever more dangerous.

Ideal Scenario

The ideal scenario given the current situation will be a new formula for a union that creates a federal government, with strong local governments to support it. That is the type of multistate federation envisaged before the military intervention brought Yemeni peace talks to a sudden halt on the eve of a breakthrough. It is still viable within a two-state federation.

The third scenario is a stalemate in the current battles with no decisive victories. It is very doubtful that this would lead to a negotiated settlement. It has failed in the past six years because of external players funding and arming opposing sides. No solution in Yemen is possible without turning around the roles played by external forces. A stalemate at the present time is the worst possible scenario that must be avoided at all costs. Yemenis cannot afford it and should not be required to suffer it again.

Strange as this might sound, it is, in fact, the UAE that can drive a solution, provided it is willing to terminate its destructive role in the Yemen war and follow the US example by announcing it is disengaging from the Saudi coalition. Despite saber-rattling, the UAE, among all Arab countries, has excellent relations with Iran, as demonstrated by substantial business ties, the large Iranian community in the UAE and the number of flights between the two countries.

The UAE, despite the war, has good coordinating relations with Ansar Allah, and, of course, it is also the sponsor and benefactor of the STC without which the council would not survive. Despite the raging proxy battles between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the south of Yemen, Abu Dhabi still retains working relations with Riyadh. Unlike the Saudis, the UAE also has good relations with the Biden administration.

Working closely with Oman, which maintains unique relations with Yemenis across the divide, and Iran, which has excellent relations with

Ansar Allah and is cordial with the STC, Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Tehran could together play a pivotal role in ending the war in Yemen, isolating those unwilling or unable to come to the table.

However, the challenge in this approach is that, unlike some of its neighbors who might be of help, Yemen is a republic with a strong tradition of a free press and multiparty political process.

The attempts to rule Yemen centrally through a totalitarian system failed because of these two characteristics. Its tribal tradition does not accept the full authority of a state. On the flip side, it is this strong tribal independence that strengthens Yemeni resolve to resist authoritarian rule. Should the process of bringing peace to Yemen threaten this rebellious characteristic, the dangers to the process can be insurmountable.

Whether we will see this type of regional alliance brought to fruition depends on whether regional leaders are visionaries and strategists or are still confined to simple-minded tactical mentalities to achieve short-term gains.

There is an opportunity in President Joe Biden announcing US disengagement from the conflict in Yemen and seeking its end. Others can do the same and ally themselves with this US direction. The blood and treasure that has been lost in Yemen, the social fabric that has been destroyed in the region, the hatred that replaced popular harmony due to bad decisions taken by regional leaders have all compounded the world's worst man-made catastrophe.

Yemenis Pay the Price

The heaviest price has been paid by Yemenis, once also known to ancient Romans and Greeks as Arabia Felix. As the Quran eloquently describes it, using Yemen's ancient name, "There was among the people of Sheba, in their homes the proof (of God), two gardens on the right and the left. Eat from the bounties of your Lord and be thankful. A good land and forgiving God."

More than ever in the past, Yemen and the whole of the Middle East now have a unique opportunity to come together, bringing peace and

stability to a region uniquely endowed with the potential for prosperity.

***Munir Saeed** is the former president of TAWQ, a Yemeni nonpartisan pro-democracy movement.

Rebalancing the Power Asymmetry Between Israel and Palestine

Zeinab Fayad
May 28, 2021

There is an urgent need to rebalance the equation to protect Palestinian rights and lives.

Shortly after the International Criminal Court announced its decision to investigate Israel for war crimes committed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Tel Aviv continued its annexation of East Jerusalem through forced expulsions in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. The residents protesting their eviction were met with excessive force from the Israeli military, including the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam, in the midst of the holy month of Ramadan, and attacking peaceful worshippers. Hamas, a Palestinian faction that controls Gaza, reacted by launching thousands of rockets into Israel, approximately 90% of which were intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome defense system.

In retaliation, Israel launched hundreds of airstrikes on Gaza, killing over 200 Palestinians, including 65 children. On May 14, an airstrike leveled a Gaza tower block housing media organizations, among them Al-Jazeera and Associated Press. This attack on press freedom caused an uproar around the world, including in the United States. A week later, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire brokered by Egypt.

Meanwhile, the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories continues.

The Power Imbalance

This series of events demonstrates the power imbalance between Israel and Palestine. This asymmetry is a result of decades of British and US support — political, economic and military — for the Zionist settler-colonial project. Over the decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, in essence, consisted of Israel carrying out ethnic cleansing against Palestinians and being met with resistance. The latest bout of fighting emphasizes Washington's tendency to justify Israel's behavior while perpetuating the false narrative that Palestinian violence is terrorism. As such, there is an urgent need to rebalance the equation to protect Palestinian rights and lives through changing the narrative, supporting Israeli civil society and ending US weapons sales to Israel.

US leaders typically bring up the legitimacy of armed violence only when violence is being perpetrated by Palestinians. For instance, instead of condemning Israel's bombing of civilian areas, President Joe Biden, like all of his predecessors, claimed that Israel has a right to self-defense. Although he did call for a ceasefire, Biden's words fall flat. First, the US has repeatedly blocked UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire. Second, on May 5, Biden went on to approve a whopping \$735-million sale of precision-guided weapons to Israel. Third, the ceasefire brokered by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Egypt does not address the core issues of Palestinian statehood and Israeli occupation. Rather, it manages armed violence in the short term, promising to rebuild the same Gaza that was destroyed by US weapons.

Emboldened by Israel's actions and the context of impunity, some Israeli settlers in the occupied territories have formed mobs to sporadically attack Palestinians in the streets. With ethnic clashes engulfing the country, the Israeli settlers will get to have their day in a civil court while Palestinians are subject to Israeli military courts. In fact, Israel has arrested over

1,550 demonstrators since May 9, many of whom are children. Among those detained, over 70% are Arab citizens of Israel. This disproportionality exemplifies the impunity of Jewish Israeli citizens vis-à-vis Palestinians and highlights the power imbalance inherent in Israel's judicial system.

Palestinians, often armed only with rocks, are commonly condemned as terrorists by Israel. Yet a nuclear Israel, backed by the most powerful country in the world, is always justified in its self-defense. Hamas is a security threat to Israel, but the damage it inflicts is usually contained to the few rockets that manage to get through the Iron Dome. Furthermore, conflating Palestinians, especially Gazans, with Hamas is a dangerous assumption that has a direct cost for Palestinian lives.

As part of this power asymmetry between Israel and Palestine, Tel Aviv has long controlled the narrative around the conflict, resulting in a paradigm in which any criticism of Israel is perceived as anti-Semitism. This makes legitimate dialogue and policy reevaluation challenging. However, the narrative is slowly changing thanks to long-standing Palestinian activism.

Peace Beyond Borders

How can the power imbalance be offset and peace achieved? A simple answer would be ending the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories, restoring the 1967 borders and respecting the rights of Palestinians. Short of this, there are three additional steps that can go a long way in improving the facts on the ground for Palestinians.

First, human rights activists, and especially journalists, have a moral responsibility to counter the narrative that opposing Israeli apartheid is anti-Semitic, that Tel Aviv's actions are justified in the name of self-defense, and that Palestinian resistance is terrorism. Thanks to social media, Palestinian activists have slowly shifted this narrative, with many leaders and protesters

around the world denouncing Israel's actions and advocating for Palestinian rights.

Second, Israeli citizens themselves must recognize the atrocities upon which their state was built. Human rights groups within Israel, such as B'Tselem, voice concern and attempt to raise awareness, but it is up to ordinary citizens to decide if ethnically cleansing Palestinians is the right way to build a nation. Israelis committed to a democracy built around values of liberty, equality and reciprocity have a responsibility to oppose their government's policy, including the targeting of NGOs that promote Palestinian rights.

Third, the US must halt weapons sales to Israel and push for the protection of Palestinian rights. Currently, Israel receives \$3.8 billion in military aid from the US annually and is equipped with high-technology defense systems such as the Iron Dome.

In a marked shift of mood, US congress members are standing up for Palestinian rights. For instance, Rashida Tlaib (herself a Palestinian-American), Ilhan Omar, Cori Bush and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have condemned Israel's use of armed force against civilians, as well as its annexation policy. On April 15, these representatives co-sponsored Betty McCollum's bill defending the human rights of Palestinian children and families living under occupation. Senator Bernie Sanders also introduced a bill to block a weapons sale recently approved by President Biden.

These are positive steps toward rebalancing the power dynamic between Israel and Palestine, but without a comprehensive shift of the narrative to more accurately reflect the complex reality on the ground, correcting decades of asymmetry will be hard to achieve.

***Zeinab Fayad** is the 2021 Middle East fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy.

Biggest Threat to Democracy in Israel Comes From Within

Emma Davies
June 1, 2021

When will we learn that violence won't end this war?

Dear Mr. Netanyahu, What's the end goal? Many in the Jewish diaspora feel we should never publicly criticize Israeli state actions regarding the country's defense. I disagree. I'm writing this to call for a change of heart before it's too late. My fear is that anti-Semitic attacks in the diaspora will continue to rise while one of the biggest long-term threats to the democratic state of Israel grows from within.

I grew up in London, in an Ashkenazi Jewish family where the horrors of persecution lived on through the generations. My bubbeh (grandma), like your zayde (grandad), was born in Poland. She ran from the pogroms and was agoraphobic until the day she died. Mum didn't know what happened to our family living in Berlin in the 1930s. From a young age, I was taught the horrors of anti-Semitism, including the Holocaust. For many years, it was drummed into me that you stay in your group because, when push comes to shove, no one but Jews helps Jews.

Defensive Violence

As a child in the 1970s, I joined Habonim-Dror, a Zionist youth organization that encouraged Jewish kids in 20 countries to live on a kibbutz in adulthood. I was taught to love the idea of the socialist community where the means of production and property were shared equally among members. I was sold a colonial dream of the muscular sun-tanned Sabra working the land to turn desert into lush agricultural land.

My group leaders framed Israeli violence as purely defensive. War training games in the dark, at camp, were exciting. We were woken in the middle of the night to “attack” the other group in a thrilling game of chase in which no one got hurt. The endgame as kids was hot chocolate by the campfire.

It was fun as an idealistic teenager to design utopian communities on a Sunday afternoon, to learn about the children’s houses on kibbutzim, depicted like an Enid Blyton novel with midnight feasts and limited interference from parents. We spent hours creating songs and improvising skits that a couple of my youth leaders turned into the successful television show, “Whose Line Is It Anyway?”

I spent a year in Israel at 18, following the path that my Zionist youth movement had encouraged me to take since I was nine years old. Though I loved meeting loads of people from around the world, the parochial realities of living on a kibbutz didn’t match the hype.

It was 1982. Israel invaded Lebanon in the misguided belief that it would enhance the security of Israeli citizens. My boyfriend on the kibbutz was called up to fight. We stood amidst a million Israeli citizens in Tel Aviv, protesting. I can still picture standing in a huge demonstration among Israelis’ placards with Hitler on one side and Sharon on the other. At 6 a.m. the following morning, my boyfriend left to participate in a war he didn’t believe in. This unedifying war killed thousands of innocent civilians. It seeded the birth of Hezbollah.

Don’t get me wrong, Mr. Netanyahu, I also fear Hamas and Hezbollah firing rockets on my family across Israel. They’ve made their anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic goals clear. The following excerpt from Hamas’s charter is worth repeating: “The Islamic Resistance Movement aspires to the realization of Allah’s promise, no matter how long that should take. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said: ‘The day of judgment will not come until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jews will hide behind stones and trees. The

stones and trees will say ‘O Muslims, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.’”

While this stance may make negotiation feel like a futile tool today, political compromise between Palestinian and Israeli leaders is the only route to peace. What’s your strategy to prevent the ongoing substantive conflict over land from continuing to escalate as an intractable holy war? Israel’s actions fuel recruitment to this ideology. Support for Hamas is increasing, even from those who are usually adamantly against what they stand for.

Screaming at Each Other

I watch in horror as Palestinian gangs attack Jews as Jewish gangs attack Arabs, both marching in the streets with placards screaming death to the other. The Zionist dream sold to me didn’t mention endless evictions of Palestinian families from their homes or police trampling over prayer mats during Ramadan.

I was taught that Israel’s control of Jerusalem was in the interests of religious tolerance. But you know that’s not what many hard-line Jewish settlers want. One of the biggest threats to human rights and democratic, Western values of Israel might come from within.

Successive Israeli prime ministers have tolerated the extremes of Jewish fundamentalism. You, Mr. Netanyahu, were even prepared to go into coalition with an openly racist Jewish party to hold on to political power. In essence, Jewish racism is no different from anti-Semitism. As the chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance stated recently, “We strongly condemn the antisemitic violence and hate speech that has taken place in response to the recent escalation of violence in the Middle East. While freedoms of speech and protest are essential pillars of all democracies, nothing can justify hate speech.” That’s right: Nothing justifies hate speech in Israel either.

Mr. Netanyahu, you were quick to urge French Jews to come to Israel after the deadly anti-Semitic attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris. Do you bear any responsibility for the rise

of violent antisemitic attacks in the diaspora now?

In Israel's version of proportional representation, a political party only needs to secure 3.25% of the vote to achieve representation in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. The consequence of this in a highly fractured society is a politic where the tail too often wags the dog in political decision-making. Disinterested in the state of Israel in its inception, Jewish religious fundamentalists have grown and organized politically.

Only 13% of Israel's Haredi ultra-orthodox boys take school exams that guide university entrance, rendering their belief systems devoid of secular education. Their political representatives are guiding government policy that drives settlements on occupied land, thereby preventing a two-state solution that many of them don't want. Israel's Haredi community grows at three times the rate of the rest of the Israeli Jewish population and twice the rate of the entire population. Forming a stable government has been impossible, with four elections in two years, and a fifth looming. Could the incoming Israeli prime minister use his political capital to take an honest look at Israel's political system toward further electoral reform?

I hope that the next Israeli government will hear the Arab and Jewish voices in the Knesset seeking peace. Approximately 21% of the Israeli population are Arab or Druze, the majority of whom identify as Sunni Muslims. Perhaps there's something to learn from New Zealand. Indigenous Māori comprise about 17% of the population; seats in Parliament are reserved exclusively for Māori in proportion to the percentage of the population.

Dehumanizing the Other

For now, we have a ceasefire. It worries me that you may have ramped up the violence in your own political and personal interests. There was a range of political and military response options to Hamas firing rockets into Israel, given the effectiveness of the Iron Dome as a protective

shield. One could forgive the cynic for wondering whether part of your strategy is images of blown-up buildings underpinning the next election campaign to harness the fear and anger of Israeli citizens.

Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas appears to have little influence or control in the West Bank, and Hamas has successfully exploited the horror in Gaza to win the hearts and minds of the world. They are willing to sacrifice the lives of civilians in Gaza because they think that the ends justify the means. From where I sit, the Israeli state did a great job of helping them by the extreme nature of your retaliation, not to mention your settlement policies and conditions in Gaza.

The world watched the Israeli army destroy the building that housed the Associated Press and other media organizations. Even if some of the current Hamas leadership were killed and the infrastructure for attack on Israel destroyed, the Israeli state also demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice other people's children as collateral damage. Surely our history has taught us the importance of not dehumanizing the "other." Increasing the numbers of traumatized extremists eager to take the place of the leaders killed today looks like a disastrous strategy long term. When will we learn that violence won't end this war?

In Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's words, "Military cemeteries in every corner of the world are silent testimony to the failure of national leaders to sanctify human life." You know that Rabin, a warrior turned peacemaker, was assassinated by an individual Jewish extremist in Tel Aviv in 1995 in opposition to the Oslo Peace Accords. The extremist ultranationalist views of the perpetrator are far more visible under your watch than Rabin's legacy and search for peace.

Emboldened by President Donald Trump, your government has tried to remove resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from the domestic political agenda. Palestinian leadership remains divided and weak. Jewish fundamentalism has flourished in its bubble of righteousness. You have ignored peaceful protests while Palestinians

are evicted from their homes. You have condoned expansion of illegal settlements on occupied land, and you've invested much more in Jewish communities than Arab ones, within the legal bounds of the state. What options do Palestinians have? Yitzhak Rabin's words again resonate today: "No Arab ruler will consider the peace process seriously so long as he is able to toy with the idea of achieving more by the way of violence."

The vacuum of visible wise leadership on all sides is dispiriting. The China-Iran Strategic Partnership is likely to secure Tehran's funding of Hezbollah for years to come.

The challenge is for moderate Israeli and Palestinian leaders to build the political capital to compromise over legitimate needs and conflicting rights to land and resources. Perhaps some young Mizrahi Jews (descended from North Africa, Central and West Asia) and Israeli Arabs and Druze serving in the Knesset will help to bridge the gaps.

The Peace Movement

Perhaps Israelis and Palestinians will reinvigorate the peace movement as they circle the wall of the Old City of Jerusalem in the peace chain. Perhaps more peacemakers will also emerge in the Palestinian and Jewish diasporas. They'll need wisdom and charisma, skilled international facilitation and ongoing economic development.

Options to establish a Palestinian state are already on the table. Both sides have tried to compromise before. But as you well know, ramped-up fear and anger are powerful. Cynicism and hopelessness among moderate Israelis and Palestinians, alongside the determination and political power of Jewish and Islamist fundamentalists, is alarming.

We're all relieved to see a ceasefire. Nevertheless, your decisions have not only killed innocent civilians, but also traumatized the next generation so that they are more likely to find refuge in ultra-nationalism and religious fundamentalism. Neither will solve this conflict.

Thoughtful people, religious and secular together, hopefully will.

***Emma Davies** is a senior lecturer in forensic psychology at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Lebanon's Future as an Inclusive Democracy in Doubt

Jean AbiNader
October 18, 2021

The latest violence in Lebanon, coming shortly before the anniversary of protests that brought down the government, does not bode well for economic and political reforms.

In Lebanon, October 17 marked the anniversary of the 2019 demonstrations against the government due to its mismanagement of the economy and widespread corruption. After two years, despite the fall of the government led by Prime Minister Hassan Diab, there has been no investigation into the charges of corruption or capital flight that occurred, accelerating the implosion of the local currency and the subsequent tanking of the banking sector.

The interlocking political and banking elites who control the government based on sectarian power-sharing have so far ignored the pain of those affected and the need to have a national strategy of reconciliation and economic recovery. The economic erosion was furthered by the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020. That incident destroyed much of the business area of the downtown. It also further set back the country economically and politically as the current government, headed by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, has been unable to remove impediments to an independent investigation.

The people of Lebanon are suffering. The statistics on poverty, loss of education and quality of life, hyperinflation of essential goods, cost of living and health care, and emigration of skilled Lebanese are well known. The security and stability of the country are eroding as the families of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) share the depressing costs of a barely functioning economy.

The Governing Troika

The latest threats and violence demonstrate the fragility of the civil order as the Shia Amal-Hezbollah alliance, along with their Christian enablers in President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement — now headed by his son-in-law and presidential aspirant, Gebran Bassil — feel free to ignore demands for change. The march on October 14, 2021, demanding the removal of Judge Tarek Bitar, who was calling current and former officials to testify about their roles in the Beirut Port blast, was the latest opportunity to demonstrate their dominance. This was too much of a provocation for those opposed to the governing troika, which led to bloodshed and a spike in instability. Despite the current calm, that chapter has not been concluded.

More damaging is the challenge that inaction poses on two fronts: to the new government and to the security services. Prime Minister Mikati supports an independent judiciary and an independent investigation into the blast. This could lead to the dissolution of his government, which depends on an agreement with the troika to survive. Hezbollah and company have not shown any concern for the integrity of the state up until now, so there are no assurances that they will tolerate an investigation that might expose some of their own friends.

The LAF and ISF are already struggling to hold together their forces, who have experienced a 90% drop in their salaries while facing hyperinflation in food, medicines and fuel. Desertion rates are increasing as soldiers look for other employment opportunities. With budgets

decreased by 90% due to the currency devaluation, the LAF and ISF have to increasingly rely on external assistance from the United States and others to retain their operational readiness.

Time for Action

All the while, the people are on the sidelines, not able to promote changes that will improve their lives and save their country. At the core is the concern that Lebanon for the Lebanese may become an aspiration more than a reality. To avoid the demise of what was once the educational and intellectual center of the region, it is time for remedial action.

It is time to begin the process of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and move toward a single exchange rate by reducing subsidies and public spending. Work must be done to ensure increased stable power supplies throughout Lebanon. The people's trust needs to be earned through transparent and credible policies to restore a functioning government.

The international community is clear in its position: Clean elections, implementation of basic reforms, and a robust and sustainable social safety net are central to opening the country to outside support. Only then can Lebanon begin the process of reconstruction and recovery. Now, as the people remember the October 17 demonstrations, it is time to recommit to a process of reform and reconciliation that will provide a basis for Lebanon's reconstruction.

***Jean AbiNader** is a Middle East analyst and writer who lives in the Washington, DC area. He has been involved in US-Arab advocacy for more than 40 years, having been the first Arab American to lobby on US policies in the Middle East.

Will American Democracy Perish Like Rome's?

Atul Singh
January 28, 2021

Disparity, dysfunction and discord have destroyed democracies in the past and endanger American democracy today.

A recent The Economist cover pictured the 46th US President Joe Biden in front of the White House with a cleaning mop. The lead, "Morning after in America," projects that "The outlook for America looks grim, but that could quickly change." The venerable publication proclaimed from its powerful pulpit that Biden "should stick to his folksy brand of dogged centrism which is so well suited to the moment." That gives him the "best chance of success."

The Economist sees good reasons for Biden to succeed. With interest rates so low, the government can virtually borrow for free. This means the Biden administration could roll out a \$1.9-trillion stimulus. This could fund a polio-style vaccination program, extend unemployment insurance and expand child tax benefits. An infrastructure bill and investment in clean energy to combat climate change could create new jobs for the 21st century.

The Economist's ebullient optimism might come from the fact that it has been on the winning side of history since its inception in 1843. For more than 178 years of its existence, it stood for Pax Britannica. For the last few decades, this blue-blooded British publication has pivoted to be a trumpeter of Pax Americana. This has led to errors in judgment such as its infamous support for the 2003 Iraq War.

In January this year, The Economist may be making a similar misjudgment. It is prematurely

heralding America's journey to what Winston Churchill memorably termed "broad, sunlit uplands" by using shoddy facts and specious reasoning just as it did in 2003. Its assertion that the US banking system looks sound is not backed by evidence. Its claim that "the economic pain is not widespread" is ridiculously untrue.

On Capitol Hill

On Wednesday, January 6, I read about a mob besieging Capitol Hill as I sat at my desk less than four miles away. Against the advice of my American friends, I left to see firsthand what was going on. They told me the white supremacist mob would beat me to a pulp. I ignored their advice because I was curious. I got off at the Archives metro stop and mingled with Donald Trump's supporters. Some were heading to the Capitol, while others were walking away from it. Prima facie, the people walking around were not much different than at other Trump demonstrations.

Although I lost count after 23, I am sure that I spoke to more than 50 people. They were all friendly, sociable and deeply distressed. They told me repeatedly that I was the first journalist who had cared to speak with them. They said that mainstream media was filming them but did not want to listen to them. They asked me whether elections were rigged in India. When I responded that India solved the problem of rigging by creating an independent election commission, some piped in that the US should have one too. That is certainly not what I expected to hear.

To be sure, I met the saner members of the crowd, a mix of what Douglas Murray has called "the strange, the sincere, the silly and the sinister." I stayed on Capitol Hill grounds talking to one person after another. At some point, tear gas bombs started going off on the terrace and the curfew hour started drawing nigh. I finally beat a retreat and started walking down to the L'Enfant Plaza metro station. Someone stopped me, exchanged words and offered me food. I took a sandwich, granola bars and water while declining the chips. Instead of getting beaten, I had been

welcomed and even fed. Even as I sat in the metro and later worked at home, the images and the words of the day stayed with me. Needless to say, I did not sleep well. In fact, I was so troubled that I hit writer's block and was unable to put down my thoughts on paper coherently for days.

Even though I have long been a critic of Donald Trump, I have been cognizant of the power of his appeal. While explaining Trump's victory in 2016, I gave facts and figures about increasing income and wealth inequality in America. I also pointed out how social mobility has been falling. For most Americans, life is tough, and prospects for their children increasingly bleak. In 2017, CNN reported that 6 in 10 Americans had savings of less than \$500. The great American dream has become a terrible American nightmare for far too many families.

Every Trump supporter I met on January 6 spoke about being left behind. One supporter claimed to be a Catholic bishop from Kentucky. He proudly posed for a photo at my request and blessed me when we parted. The bishop had done missionary work in India and had been to my ancestral hometown of Varanasi. He waxed lyrical about how the political system was broken. The man in holy robes said those on Capitol Hill have long stopped caring about the American people. Instead, they now represent special interests with money.

The Pain

When I think about what the bishop said, I find it hard to disagree. As per CNBC, the 2020 election spending was nearly \$14 billion, more than double the 2016 sum. It is an open secret that members of Congress spend more time raising money than legislating. There are numerous studies about declining congressional oversight and surging presidential power. Such has been the divide in Congress that it has been impossible to pass meaningful legislation for a while. Too often, legislation is bloated, poorly drafted and caters to those who can lobby hardest for their interests. Like many other democracies, the US has turned disastrously dysfunctional.

Although most people I met were white and working class, I ran into members of minority communities as well. A preacher of South African origin was singing paeans to Jesus and to America. I ran into two ladies who had immigrated from Vietnam and the Philippines. They believed that Trump was the only leader who could stand up to China and bring back law and order. When I asked if I could photograph them, the Vietnamese lady bolted, taking her friend along.

Later that evening, my friends were referring to the crowd as a "bunch of pigs." They were appalled by the scenes they had seen on television and what they had read on their smartphones. In their eyes, those in the crowd were not protesters. They were rioters, seditionists, insurrectionists, terrorists and perpetrators of a coup. They were guilty of breaking down democratic institutions, if not treason. They deserved arrest, trial and punishment. Given that the day's attack on the Capitol was the first in the nation's history — bar the British invasion of 1814 — their indignation at this assault on their democracy was understandable.

But they were not on Capitol Hill that day. What I saw is that President Trump, his son, Donald Jr., and his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, played pied pipers. They riled up the crowd that turned into a mob and overwhelmed Capitol Police. Most people in the mob were misguided instead of malevolent. When I spoke to them, it was clear they had no plan of action unlike those who actually plan a coup. As historian Timothy Snyder observed in his tour de force for The New York Times, "The American Abyss": "It is hard to think of a comparable insurrectionary moment, when a building of great significance was seized, that involved so much milling around." At the end of the evening, the mob inevitably melted away. I met families on their way back to Alabama, truck drivers returning to Texas, old ladies headed back to Georgia and even plumbers returning to Democrat-run New York. They had come to Washington, DC, to be heard, stormed

what they saw as a modern-day Bastille and were going back to their daily lives.

What struck me most was that everyone I spoke to was convinced that they did not matter to the system and their votes did not count. Since that fateful day, a question has played repeatedly in my mind: When people genuinely believe their votes do not count, what stops them from taking up arms?

A Strange New World

After January 6, I have followed my father's advice and gone back to the past to peer into the future. A 1987 edition of *The Republic* with crinkling yellow pages and my brother's fading notes has made me think. In the words of the late classicist Sir Desmond Lee, Plato was living in "an age which had abandoned its traditional moral code but found it impossibly difficult to create a new one." Athenian democracy had forced his tutor Socrates to drink hemlock. It had degenerated into chaos and dissension. Needless to say, it did not survive.

A few centuries later, the Roman Republic perished too. At some point, oligarchs took charge. They controlled almost all the land. Form triumphed over substance, and democratic institutions decayed. Populists emerge to lead the mob. One of the better known was Tiberius Gracchus, who attempted agrarian reform, assembled a mob on the Capitol but was clubbed to death in the Senate.

Unlike that long-forgotten Roman revolutionary, Trump did not bring in any radical reform for the people but, like the ancient populist, he has overreached. After years of profiting from Trump's mass following, Twitter not only silenced him but terminated his account. A political leader who had just got over 74 million votes was obliterated from his favorite public platform by a private company in a jiffy. For all its faults, *The New York Times* is considered the "newspaper of record." Its support for the CIA-led 1953 coup in Iran or the case the newspaper made for the 2003 Iraq War is in the public domain. By deleting Trump's profile,

Twitter has demonstrated that a corporation now arbitrates over what constitutes the public domain.

It is not only the question of what constitutes the public domain but also the issue of freedom of speech that is problematic. America's fabled First Amendment "protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." For years, internet giants have claimed to be platforms with no editorial responsibility. The First Amendment has been their first defense against allegations that they were letting falsehood, hate and toxic propaganda run amok. Unlike traditional newspapers, these social media platforms did not restrict what people could say. Suddenly, they have changed tack.

After Trump evaporated from Twitter, more was to follow. Amazon Web Services abruptly kicked out conservative social media platform Parler from its servers. Google and Apple also banned the app. They argued Parler incited violence, breaching their terms and conditions. Like Trump, Parler was effectively shut down in minutes. The companies might have had good reasons to do so. However, the action raises uncomfortable questions. Who decides what is free speech? Is it the legislature, the executive, the judiciary or a billionaire-controlled Silicon Valley company?

The First Amendment "guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely." Nothing restricts companies from curbing freedom of expression. When the constitution was drafted, big companies did not exist. Today, the situation is dramatically different, and no equivalent of the First Amendment protects Americans from censorship by big companies.

It is now transparent that the balance of power in the US lies with the big corporations. Its CEOs wield far greater power than governors, members of congress, senators and, at times, presidents. In 2008, Barack Obama won a historic election by getting nearly 69.5 million votes. In American

history, only Joe Biden, with more than 81 million votes, has gained greater support in absolute numbers than Trump. Still, Twitter has summarily deleted his profile. Not only Trump supporters but also many of his opponents are uneasy with this decision.

The Left-Behind

Despite his crass, erratic and boorish behavior, Trump improved his voting numbers in 2020. He won 36% of the Latino vote, an increase of 4% compared to 2016. Despite Biden's Catholic faith, Trump won 50% of the Catholic vote, with 57% of the white Catholics casting their ballots for him. The easy explanation is Trump's appointment of Amy Coney Barrett, the anti-abortion Catholic who studied at Notre Dame, to the US Supreme Court. However, something more might be going on. Trump increased his support among other minorities such as black men and Asians as well.

Why did so many Americans vote for Trump? I got the best answer from some militia members in West Virginia. In an article in November 2020, I mentioned how they conceded that Trump was an unsavory character who lies incessantly, but they credited him for telling one big truth: Things had turned much too ugly for far too many people like them. Far too many Americans have been suffering for much too long, and politicians from both parties have been pretending things are hunky-dory, denying grim realities.

When Trump speaks about making America great again, he is appealing to nostalgia by using one of Ronald Reagan's lines. He is also acknowledging that things are not so great for many Americans. He is feeding off the anger many Americans feel for what his recently pardoned adviser Steve Bannon has called "the permanent political class." Bannon is an Irish Catholic from a working-class family who voted Democrat. This Navy veteran graduated from Harvard Business School and worked at Goldman Sachs. Then he went rogue.

Bannon is the ideologue who threw his lot with Trump to smash the status quo. He entered

politics by launching the right-wing news site Breitbart. Instead of targeting Obama and the Democrats, he went after the Republican establishment because he saw them as traitors to the American working class. Bannon masterminded Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party, something Bernie Sanders tried but failed to achieve with the Democrats.

Bannon consistently makes the case that trade and immigration are two sides of the same coin. Both suppress workers' wages. Companies can move factories from Michigan to Mexico for cheaper labor to improve their profits and share prices. When foreigners flood in, whether it is Latinos who mow lawns or Indians who write software on H-1B visas, companies do not have to hire Americans for the same jobs. They can and do pay foreigners less than their American counterparts. Companies do well and so do their shareholders. Executives do better: CEO compensation has soared 940% since 1978. American workers do not. Like Native Americans and African slaves in times past, they are now the left-behind.

Many economists and politicians ridicule this argument. They stress that immigrants bring in skills that are in short supply. They point to the likes of me who turn entrepreneurs, raise capital, create jobs and boost the American economy. It is true that immigrants give the nation a unique strength. Like Rome, America can draw in the best and brightest of foreigners to give it an edge. Yet not all immigrants are necessarily terribly talented. Many of them are cheap cannon fodder for the unremitting American economic system, where people's health care is tied to their job, holidays are rare, and 13 million work more than one job. These immigrants increase labor supply and decrease the wages of ordinary Americans.

To add insult to injury, it is these beleaguered workers who have bailed out banks after the financial crash of 2007-08. Both Republicans and Democrats sang from the same hymn book to prevent a recession from turning into a depression but did nothing to curtail or curb the financial class from behaving badly. Only one top

banker went to jail. More importantly, taxpayer money ended up as bonus payments for some of the executives who had caused the crash. It was a classic example of capitalism on the upside and socialism on the downside. As a hedge fund manager told me off the record, the bailout was, Heads I win, tails you lose — with “you” being the American taxpayer.

Both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements opposed these bailouts. They had different philosophies and belonged to two ends of the political spectrum, but they opposed what was a fundamentally unjust government policy. The bailouts were accompanied by quantitative easing, which in simple terms means the central banks cutting interest rates to virtually zero and then flooding the economy with money by buying bonds on the market. The rich have gotten richer. The poor find themselves priced out of the market. Many on both the right and the left have lost faith in the system.

A Very Modern Feudalism

During the COVID-19 pandemic, things have gotten worse. The central bank may be printing money, but it is only ending up in the hands of big boys. After the 2007-08 financial crisis, banks prefer to lend to large businesses or those with guaranteed incomes to reduce credit risk and avoid another meltdown. This means that cash flows into a few big rivers instead of many small streams. Even as small businesses are closing down, the stock market is touching the stratosphere. As William Shakespeare memorably penned in “Hamlet,” “The time is out of joint.”

Such is the state of affairs that even the Financial Times, a paper of choice for the financial elite, is sounding the alarm. On January 3, its Washington correspondent Edward Luce argued that easy money and fiscal gridlock were leading to populism. Today, the top 10% of Americans own 84% of all shares in the US, with the top 1% owning half. About 50% of Americans own almost no stocks at all. As pointed out earlier, they do not have \$500 in

savings. It is many of these Americans who form the support base of Trump and Sanders.

America today is in a similar situation as Rome during the era of Tiberius Gracchus. The rich were grabbing land from poor farmers and using slaves from Carthage to work their estates. The republic where all Romans were citizens with a say in the affairs of the state was fraying. Rome was creating an imperial economy where the elite grew richer through plunder of conquered territories like Spain and Carthage as well as cheap labor from newly enslaved populations. This made the Roman farmer and worker largely redundant. The Roman plebeian was so exploited and powerless, that he slipped to subsistence or below-subsistence levels of income. On the other hand, the elite grew wealthier and wealthier.

Tiberius Gracchus and his brother Gaius Gracchus attempted reforms, but both were murdered. The Populares rose up to champion their reforms to redistribute a bit of land, ameliorate the plight of the urban poor and reform the political system. The Optimates emerged to fight for the status quo, which preserved the supremacy of the Senate over the popular assemblies and the tribunes of the plebeians. This bitter discord was similar to the Athenian republic Plato found himself in. Roman divisions eventually led to the rise of Julius Caesar.

This ambitious general believed the dysfunctional system to be leading to ruin. Taking sides with the Populares, he sought to reform the system and redistribute wealth to the plebeians. The Optimates did not budge, a civil war resulted, and the collapse of the Roman Republic ensued.

Both in Athens and Rome, rising inequality and deepening discord obliterated the common bonds that made democracy possible. In America, inequality has reached feudal dimensions. Technology is destroying thousands of working-class jobs while creating far fewer highly paid ones. The “frightful five” — Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Alphabet, the parent

company of Google — control the internet and large swathes of the economy. They are strangling the small and medium-sized businesses.

Furthermore, Big Tech's algorithms, filter bubbles and echo chambers have led to a post-truth world of fake news, conspiracy theories and more. People cannot even agree on basic facts. The constant deluge of data has put their minds in Brownian motion, and they have lost the ability to focus or sift fact from fiction. The irony of the current situation is that the leaders of these companies are self-proclaimed liberals, avowed philanthropists and cheerleaders for progress. Yet they have unleashed Frankensteinian monsters that have wrecked journalism, destroyed discourse and damaged democracy.

What Lies Next?

On Monday, January 18, I ventured into the city once again, again against the advice of my friends. I got off at L'Enfant Plaza metro station yet again to walk north and found the streets deserted and the National Mall sealed. I walked for an hour from one checkpoint to another. Eventually, a police officer told me that instructions were changing all the time and I was better off taking the metro. When I did take the metro, it stopped far away from the heart of town. Clearly, 25,000 troops and all the police were not enough to guarantee security in the capital. Authorities took the view that shutting down access to the heart of town was necessary too. The security arrangements seemed a bit of an overreaction but understandable given the events of January 6.

On January 20, I watched the inauguration with some American friends. Some were delighted to see the back of Trump and were celebrating with mimosas already in the morning. With Trump gone, many hoped that the populist genie could be put back in its bottle. I wish I had the same sense of American optimism. I simply cannot forget that despite a raging pandemic and thousands of deaths, over 74 million Americans voted for Trump. They are not going away.

As ancient republics demonstrate, populism flourishes when inequality increases. In tough times, people are also more likely to turn against those they see as threats or competition. In 1873, the US suffered its deepest depression to date. Cotton prices crashed and unemployment rose. A disputed election of 1876 led to the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction and the reintroduction of racial segregation through Jim Crow laws. A campaign of intimidation and violence kept black voters away from the polls for decades to come. Only in the 1960s did the historic civil rights movement end segregation, but black people remain poorer and die earlier than their white counterparts.

In addition to black people, another group suffered after 1873. The 1860s had been the time of the California Gold Rush and the First Continental Railroad. The Irish alone were unable to supply enough labor. Therefore, the 1868 Burlingame-Seward Treaty “ensured a steady flow of low-cost Chinese immigrant labor,” toiling primarily in goldmines and on railroads. The emerging trade unions saw Chinese workers as competitors who lowered everyone's wages, and so opposed immigration. The Chinese worked for less money and worked harder. They also worked in areas where whites refused to work. White society at that time did not want people of color around. The labor movement was able to crystallize that latent racism.

The media played its part. William Randolph Hearst's papers popularized the phrase “yellow peril,” and the US Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, prohibiting all immigration of Chinese laborers. This was the first legislation in American history to place broad restrictions on immigration. And this was the Gilded Age. Rapid economic growth led to millions of European immigrants streaming onto American shores. This lowered the price of labor, and workers suffered. At the same time, the concentration of wealth continued apace, with robber barons and speculators making fabulous fortunes.

The Gilded Age also led to the emergence of a left-wing agrarian movement called the People's Party. They came to be known as the Populists, a word that has stuck with us to this day. Despite doing well in the 1896 election, the party eventually disbanded, but some elements of its program were adopted by the likes of Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. It is important to note that this party drew support from white Protestant farmers who were losing out to industrialization, urbanization and mass immigration.

While they advocated many measures of public welfare, the Populists were anti-Semitic, conspiracy-minded and racist. They offer a good insight into what America's near future might look like. As the predominantly white working-class suffers, some of its members are more likely to wave Confederate flags, blame blacks for sponging off welfare and oppose immigration from Mexico, India or elsewhere. This enrages many urban liberals who argue that the white working class is not the real oppressed. It is Latinos, blacks and Native Americans who have suffered much more. Instead of complaining, members of the white working class could just mow lawns, clean homes or serve coffee. Also, these liberals are furious that many members of the working class pick on poor Mexican immigrants, not rich Wall Street bankers.

This urban elite misses an important point. Many Trump supporters are acting in the same ways as Populists in the 1870s who focused as much on the Chinese as on the robber barons. Part of the reason is simple. Like the robber baron in the 19th century, the banker is not a tangible part of most American lives. He is a character from movies such as "Wall Street" and "The Wolf of Wall Street." The aggressive banker and the ruthless entrepreneur are archetypes that American culture apotheosizes. They represent the Nietzschean Übermensch, who deserves devotion, not just admiration, in a cult of success that is deep-rooted in America. That cult explains why Harvard has a school of

government, not of politics. Success is non-negotiable, a Socrates-style failure unacceptable.

In contrast to the Übermensch who controls the commanding heights of the economy but is rarely seen in the flesh, Mexicans are ubiquitous. They work longer for lesser pay. Every office or apartment building I have visited across the country has had Mexicans or other immigrants from Central America doing the cleaning or taking out the rubbish. They look different, smell different and speak a different language. They excite insecurity. That insecurity rises when increasing numbers compete for fewer jobs.

American elites like immigration for both emotional and practical reasons. After all, America is a land of immigrants. They provide America with cheap labor, technological talent and entrepreneurial energy. Those with capital enjoy having access to all three. It boosts returns on capital. In contrast, the left-behind want less competition and higher wages.

Biden has his task cut out for him as president. An increasingly unequal America with declining social mobility is seething with rage. The rich have turned rentiers, profiting off quantitative easing and rising asset prices. Those without capital or connections can no longer move up in society. The stock market is a bubble waiting to burst. America cannot ignore the last four years, and a significant proportion of the 74 million who voted for Trump have lost faith in the system. Many of them have guns. This is no time for dogged centrism. It is time for bold political and economic reform that decreases inequality and increases social mobility. If Biden fails, a modern-day Julius Caesar will inevitably emerge to bury yet another dysfunctional democracy.

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Is America Ready to Raise the Minimum Wage?

Timothy Rich, Bridget Beavin, Ian Milden & Olivia Blackmon
August 5, 2021

The minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour has not changed since 2009, the longest without an increase since it was introduced in 1938.

Since the federal minimum wage was introduced in the United States in 1938, it has provided a level of security for workers to be able to afford a minimal living standard. However, the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour has not changed since 2009, the longest timespan without an increase in its history. Critics argue that \$7.25 is not a livable wage, which by 2018 was worth 14.8% less after adjusting for inflation. For nearly a decade, discussions about raising the wage have continued, with the minimum wage in 30 states now above the federal level.

Yet according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2021 report, a full-time minimum wage worker, whether at the \$7.25 federal wage or higher state minimum wages, could afford a one-bedroom rental at market rate in only 7% of US counties. The report estimates that workers will need to make \$20 an hour to earn a one-bedroom housing wage.

With debates around the issue ongoing, how sensitive is the American public to a minimum wage increase? President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats' proposal for a \$15 minimum wage may be popular among workers, but fear of the consequences complicate its passage.

To Raise or Not to Raise?

Businesses with razor-thin margins face a threat of closure if wages increase. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that a \$15

minimum wage would result in a likely loss of 1.4 million jobs. Likewise, the national deficit was also predicted to increase by \$54 billion over the next decade if the wage were raised. Opponents argue that a new minimum wage will create more problems than it solves, fail to alleviate poverty and transfer the extra \$333-billion cost to firms on to consumers in the form of higher prices. In contrast, Republican senators have floated increasing the minimum wage to \$10 an hour in exchange for policy concessions on immigration.

Proponents of the \$15 minimum wage assert that it will bring earnings closer to the rising cost of living expenses. A report by the Economic Policy Institute states that essential and frontline workers constitute 60% of those who would benefit from the higher wage. A National Low Income Housing Coalition report states that with a \$15 minimum wage, some inland states would approach full-time wages that support modest rent at 30% of one's income. The CBO report estimates that 900,000 Americans would be brought out of poverty with a \$15 minimum wage. The raise would also decrease racial income inequality.

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center showed that 62% of Americans supported an increase of the federal minimum wage to \$15, with only 10% opposed to any level of increase, with clear partisan differences: 72% of Republicans expressed opposition to a \$15 minimum wage while 87% of Democrats were in favor.

In 2013, a Gallup poll showed that small business owners were divided on increasing the minimum wage to \$9.50, juxtaposed to 76% of the public supporting an increase to \$9. In 2014, analysis by CBS News found that people were less supportive of raising the minimum wage if they thought it would lead to job losses. The issue of how raising the minimum wage will affect small businesses is a crucial component of how willing people are to support an increase.

We conducted a national web survey using quota sampling and recruited 625 American

respondents via Qualtrics on June 22-24. Rather than just ask about support for the minimum wage in the abstract, we randomly assigned respondents to one of four questions to evaluate on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Targeted formulation of the statements allowed us to directly test whether support differs between \$15 as the Democrats have proposed versus the \$10 endorsed by some Republican senators. The methodology would also show whether support declines if primed to think about the potential negative impacts to small businesses.

With no mention of businesses closing, increasing the minimum wage to \$10 was more popular than the \$15 option (64.31% vs. 57.21%), reflecting that opponents of a \$15 minimum wage favor a more modest increase as found by previous survey work. When primed to consider that some small businesses may close due to increased employment costs, support for both a \$10 and \$15 wage declined (53.13% vs. 55.77%). Regression analysis finds statistically significant drops in support for increasing the minimum wage when the increase was listed as \$15 instead of \$10 and when businesses closing was mentioned. The pattern endures when controlling for demographic factors.

Political Divide

Surprisingly, a majority of Republicans agreed with raising the minimum wage to either \$10 or \$15 when we did not reference small businesses. This deviates from past survey work showing strong Republican opposition to increases in the minimum wage, signaling that conservatives may be more open to increasing the minimum wage than they have been in recent years. Additionally, non-white Republicans were more willing to support an increase than white Republicans, consistent with trends among racial minorities being more willing to support an increase than white Americans.

Unsurprisingly, a majority of Democrats supported raising the minimum wage to \$15 both when businesses closing was mentioned or not.

However, the inclusion of small businesses closing had a larger effect on declining support than specifying a \$15 wage versus a \$10 wage. This indicates that Democrats are not immune to concerns about small businesses failing from an increased minimum wage but have largely accepted a \$15 over a \$10 minimum wage as the path forward. Providing protections for small businesses such as a gradual increase of the minimum wage or government financial support for businesses could garner more support for the wage hike among Democrats, making the proposed increase more feasible.

To help move the issue forward, reporting on how raising the minimum wage could help small businesses would be a meaningful way to combat concerns. The Center for American Progress argues that higher wages will increase demand for goods, increase worker productivity and ultimately benefit small businesses in the long run with the correct support from the government. Politicians and media outlets supportive of increases could use this framing to solidify support for Democrats and perhaps strengthen support from Republicans as well.

Proponents argue that increases are necessary to make the federal minimum wage a livable one, as the inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage peaked in 1968. An increase to \$15 would only partially address the impact of inflation and the rise in housing costs, the latter that has increased by nearly 30% since the last minimum wage hike. However, if small businesses close due to higher payouts, workers may not be any better off. Our survey findings suggest public sensitivity to broader impacts of a minimum wage increase, suggesting that gradual policies of raising the minimum wage or policies that can minimize the burden on small businesses could expand bipartisan support.

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Do Americans Still Trust Their Public Health Agencies?

Jennifer Wider
August 13, 2021

With pandemic guidelines constantly changing, are people losing trust in public health agencies?

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently issued another guideline for vaccinated people to wear masks, walking back a previous decision to allow vaccinated people to rip off their face coverings and breathe a collective sigh of relief. If there is one thing that people can rely on during this pandemic, it's that all recommendations are likely to change.

So, where does that leave public confidence in our health agencies? Not in a good place. According to a recent poll conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 48% of those polled reported little to no trust in the CDC and even less for state and local health departments.

Dire Consequences

These low numbers have dire consequences. Public health recommendations that include mask-wearing, proof of vaccination status and compliance are necessary for the United States to effectively combat the COVID-19 Delta variant

and minimize morbidity and mortality. If the general public is skeptical and doesn't have faith in these recommendations, containing the spread of new variants becomes nearly impossible.

It is not hard to understand the reasons behind eroding trust in the United States. From the start, the COVID-19 pandemic has been highly politicized. "There are deep divisions in this country affecting how people look at public health institutions tied to political views and philosophy," explains Dr. Robert Blendon, professor emeritus of health policy and political analysis at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and co-director of the recent poll.

The CDC was once viewed as a neutral agency. Back in 2009, during the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic, all of the messaging came directly out of the CDC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. The messaging was not politically charged. "The minute you start doing discussions out of the White House," says Blendon, the message gets lost. "It's no longer the CDC's goals — it becomes the president's goals." In order to lower the political climate in this country, the White House should not be placed at the center of discussions.

In addition to the political climate, there has been mixed messaging from the scientific community. "Data has changed, data moves," explains Dr. Arthur Caplan, professor and founding head of the Division of Medical Ethics at the NYU School of Medicine. "The public doesn't fully understand or accept that." There was a great deal of uncertainty with COVID-19, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. There was a wide expectation among many people that the scientific community would have immediate and definitive answers. It didn't, and that bred feelings of anxiety, fear and distrust.

Getting Vaccinated

Convincing people to get the vaccine is critical at this point in the pandemic. But the tactics need to evolve. "We discovered in the data polling from the variety of unvaccinated people that they are not worried about the disease," says Blendon. "If

you look at other diseases from the past, parents first got worried about polio when they saw pictures of children disabled for their whole lives.” Pictures, personal stories that relay the importance of vaccination and what is at stake will work better than statistics.

“There was a critical care physician from Alabama who had two patients near dying, they wanted the vaccine but it was too late,” explains Blendon. According to both Blendon and the results from the poll that he oversaw, this is very powerful and this is what it will take to move the needle: “We need to convince people through iron lung pictures, not statistics.”

In addition, Blendon thinks that the public seems to trust their own health care provider: “We need to emphasize local physicians — those voices in Tennessee, Mississippi, Missouri, Alabama will move people over time.” The pandemic is being fought on the ground and has nothing to do with politicians and the presidential administration.

Mistakes Made

Looking back on the past year, it’s become clear that the US could have handled the flow of information better. Had there been more transparency at the beginning of the pandemic, with public health officials explaining that they are learning about the disease in real time and that the recommendations may change, the public may have had more tolerance for an evolving situation.

We were isolated from each other, connected largely online, with social media serving as the ultimate connector. Everyone became an expert, and every account became a megaphone. Ethical issues emerged from diminishing trust in science. “As science erodes, it opens the door wide for cooks, nuts and bigots,” says Caplan. “If science doesn’t have control over the message, anybody and everybody can pile in,” he points out. There is a large platform of misinformation and, in some egregious cases, so-called experts profiting over the fallacies they espouse.

American public health agencies have a tough job ahead of them of fixing the distrust among the people who used to rely heavily upon them for guidance and information. But they also need to streamline their messaging and strategize effective recommendations to become a central voice in the fight against this virus so that we can soon look at this pandemic in the rearview mirror.

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9/11 and the American Collective Unconscious

Peter Isackson
September 10, 2021

On the 20th anniversary of a moment of horror, the families of 9/11 victims want the full truth.

A little more than a month ago, the most newsworthy controversy surrounding the imminent and highly symbolic 20th anniversary of 9/11 concerned the message by families of the victims that Joe Biden would not be welcome at the planned commemoration. They reproached the US president for failing to make good on last year’s campaign promise to declassify the documents they believe will reveal Saudi Arabia’s implication in the attacks.

That was the story that grabbed headlines at the beginning of August. Hardly a week later, everything had changed. Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban and soon the 20-year war would be declared over.

Though few paid attention to the phenomenon, this also meant that the significance of a commemoration of the attacks, would be radically different. For 19 years, the

commemoration served to reinforce the will and resolution of the nation to overcome the humiliation of the fallen twin towers and a damaged wing of the Pentagon.

The Meaning of the Historical Trauma

In the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, politicians quickly learned to exploit the date as a painful reminder of a tragedy that had unified an otherwise chaotically disputatious nation in shared horror and mourning. Ever since that fatal day, politicians have invoked it to reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism.

The nation is so exceptional in generously providing its people with what President George W. Bush called “our freedoms” — and which he identified as the target of the terrorists — that it was logical to suppose that evil people who didn’t possess those freedoms or were prevented from emigrating to the land of the free would do everything in their power to destroy those freedoms. To the degree that Americans are deeply thankful for possessing such an exceptional status, other ill-intentioned people will take exception to that exceptionality and in their unjustified jealousy will threaten to destroy it.

On a less philosophical and far more pragmatic note, the remembrance of the 9/11 attacks has conveniently and consistently served to justify an ever-expanding military budget that no patriotic American, interested in preserving through the force of arms the nation’s exceptional status, should ever oppose. It went without saying, through the three previous presidencies, that the annual commemoration provided an obvious explanation of why the forever war in Afghanistan was lasting forever.

The fall of Kabul on August 15, followed by the panicked retreat of all remaining Americans, caught everyone by surprise. It unexpectedly brought an official end to the war whose unforgettable beginning is traced back to that bright September day in 2001. Though no one has yet had the time to put it all in perspective, the debate in the media has shifted away from

glossing the issues surrounding an ongoing war on terror to assessing the blame for its ignominious end. Some may have privately begun to wonder whether the theme being commemorated on this September 11 now concerns the martyrdom of its victims or the humiliation of the most powerful nation in the history of the world. The pace of events since mid-August has meant that the media have been largely silent on this quandary.

So, What About Saudi Arabia?

With the American retreat, the controversy around Biden’s unkept campaign promise concerning Saudi Arabia’s implication in 9/11 provisionally took a backseat to a much more consequent quarrel, one that will have an impact on next year’s midterm elections. Nearly every commentator has been eager to join the fray focusing on the assessment of the wisdom or folly of both Biden’s decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and his seemingly improvised management of the final chaotic phase.

The human tragedy visible in the nightly news as throngs of people at Kabul airport desperately sought to flee the country easily eclipsed the genteel but politically significant showdown between a group of American citizens demanding the truth and a government committed to protecting the reputations of friends and allies, especially ones from oil-rich nations.

The official excuse turns around the criterion that has become a magic formula: national security. But the relatives of victims are justified in wondering which nation’s security is being prioritized. They have a sneaking suspicion that some people in Washington have confused their own nation’s security with Saudi Arabia’s. Just as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt not long ago revealed that plenty of people within the Beltway continue to confuse US foreign policy with Israel’s, the families may be justified in suspecting that Saudi Arabia’s interest in hiding the truth trumps American citizens’ right to know the truth.

To appease the families of 9/11 victims and permit his unimpeded participation in the commemorations, Biden offered to release some of the classified documents. It was a clever move, since the new, less-redacted version will only become available well after the commemoration. This gesture seems to have accomplished its goal of preventing an embarrassing showdown at the commemoration ceremonies. But it certainly will not be enough to satisfy the demands of the families, who apparently remain focused on obtaining that staple of the US criminal justice system: “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, may have shown the way concerning the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Like MBS, the White House prefers finding a way to release some of the truth rather than the whole truth — just the amount that doesn’t violate national security or tarnish the reputations of any key people. Those two goals have increasingly become synonymous. If the people knew what actual political personalities were doing, the nation’s security might be endangered, as the people might begin to lose faith in a government that insists on retaining the essential power of deciding how the truth should be told.

Here is how the White House officially formulates the legal principle behind its commitment to unveiling a little more truth than is currently available. “Although the indiscriminate release of classified information could jeopardize the national security — including the United States Government’s efforts to protect against future acts of terrorism — information should not remain classified when the public interest in disclosure outweighs any damage to the national security that might reasonably be expected from disclosure.”

The White House has thus formulated an innovative legal principle brilliantly designed to justify concealing enough of the naked truth to avoid offending public morals by revealing its stark nakedness. Legal scholars of the future may

refer to it as the “indiscriminate release” principle. Its logical content is worth exploring. It plays on the auxiliary verbs “could” and “should.” “Could” is invoked in such a way as to suggest that, though it is possible, no reasonable person would take the risk of an “indiscriminate release of classified information.” Later in the same sentence, the auxiliary verb “should” serves to speculatively establish the moral character of the principle. It tells us what “should” be the case — that is, what is morally ideal — even if inevitably the final result will be quite different. This allows the White House to display its good intentions while preparing for an outcome that will surely disappoint.

To justify its merely partial exposure of the truth, the White House offers another original moral concept when it promises the maximization of transparency. The full sentence reads: “It is therefore critical to ensure that the United States Government maximizes transparency.”

There is of course an easy way to maximize transparency if that is truly the government’s intention. It can be done simply by revealing everything and hiding nothing within the limits of its physical capability. No one doubts that the government is physically capable of removing all the redactions. But the public should know by now that the value cited as overriding all others — national security — implicitly requires hiding a determined amount of the truth. In other words, it is framed as a trade-off between maximum transparency and minimum concealment. Biden has consistently compared himself to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Perhaps that trade-off between transparency and concealment is what historians will call Biden’s New Deal.

But the White House’s reasoning is not yet complete. The document offers yet another guiding principle to explain why not everything will become visible. “Thus, information collected and generated in the United States Government’s investigation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks should now be disclosed,” it affirms, “except when the strongest possible reasons counsel otherwise.” Those reasons, the document tells us, will be

defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation during its “declassification reviews.” This invocation of the “strongest possible reasons” appears to empower the FBI to define or at least apply not only what is “strongest,” but also what is “possible.” That constitutes a pretty broad power.

The document states very clearly what the government sees as the ultimate criterion for declassification: “Information may remain classified only if it still requires protection in the interest of the national security and disclosure of the information reasonably could be expected to result in damage to the national security. Information shall not remain classified if there is significant doubt about the need to maintain its classified status.” The families of the victims can simply hope that there will not be too much “significant doubt.” They might be forgiven for doubting that that will be the case.

One September Morning

Twenty years ago, a spectacular crime occurred on the East Coast of the United States that set off two decades of crimes, blunders and judgment errors that, now compounded by COVID-19 and aggravated climate change, have brought the world to a crisis point unique in human history.

The Bush administration, in office for less than eight months at the time of the event, with no certain knowledge of who the perpetrator might have been, chose to classify the attack not as a crime, but as an act of war. When the facts eventually did become clearer after a moment of hesitation in which the administration attempted even to implicate Iraq, the crime became unambiguously attributable, not to a nation but to a politically motivated criminal organization: Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda that back then was operating out of Afghanistan, which was ruled by the Taliban.

The administration’s choice of treating the attack as an act of war not only stands as a crime in itself, but, as history has shown, as the trigger for a series of even more shameless and far more destructive — if not quite as spectacular —

crimes that would roll out for the next two decades and even gain momentum over time. Had the 9/11 attacks been treated as crimes rather than acts of war, the question of national security would have had less importance in the investigation. By going to war with Afghanistan, the Bush administration made it more difficult to investigate all the possible complicities. Could this partially explain its precipitation to start a war?

Bin Laden, a Saudi, did not act alone. But he did not act in the name of a state either, which is the fundamental criterion for identifying an act of war. He acted within a state, in the territory of Afghanistan. Though his motive was political and the chosen targets were evocatively symbolic of political power, the act itself was in no way political. No more so, in any case, than the January 6 insurrection this year on Capitol Hill.

Though the facts are still being obscured and the text describing them remains redacted in the report of the 9/11 Commission, reading between the redacted lines reveals that bin Laden did have significant support from powerful personalities in Saudi Arabia, many of them with a direct connection to the government. This foreknowledge would seem to indicate complicity at some level of the state.

On this 20th anniversary of a moment of horror, the families of the victims quite logically continue to suspect that if a state was involved that might eventually justify a declaration of war by Congress (as required by the US Constitution), the name of that state should not have been Afghanistan, but Saudi Arabia. It is equally clear that the Afghan government at the time was in no way directly complicit.

When the new version of the 9/11 Commission’s report appears with its “maximum transparency,” meaning a bare minimum of redaction, the objections of the victims’ families will no longer be news, and the truth about the deeper complicities around 9/11 will most probably remain obscured. Other dramas, concerning the state of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasingly obvious consequences of climate

change and an upcoming midterm election will probably mean that next year's 21st commemoration will be low-keyed and possibly considered unworthy of significant mention in the news.

In 2021, the world has become a decidedly different place than it has been over the past two decades. The end of a forever war simply promises a host of new forever problems to emerge for increasingly unstable democracies to deal with.

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America's Afghanistan Fiasco: The Buck Stops With Biden

Christopher Schell
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If its original objective was to maintain stability, then why did Washington abandon the progress made in Afghanistan?

On August 31, President Joe Biden formally drew to a close the war in Afghanistan, touting “the extraordinary success” of the withdrawal of US troops after 20 years of fighting. Despite the incorrect “assumption — that the Afghan government would be able to hold on for a period of time beyond military drawdown,” Biden noted he had “instructed our national security team to prepare for every eventuality — even that one.”

Yes, that's right: The chaos we witnessed in the scramble to leave Kabul was all part of a plan.

In the speech, there was, of course, the now-customary blame spread between the Afghan government and former President Donald Trump,

but Biden did say that he “takes responsibility for the decision” to evacuate 100,000 Afghans, thereby implicitly distancing himself from the messy withdrawal itself.

Apparently deciding to withdraw all US troops is one thing, the consequences of that decision, another. Americans were assured that ties with our international partners were strengthening. Biden even spoke of the United Nations Security Council passing a resolution carrying a “clear message” that laid out international expectations for the Taliban.

But by the time he did so, the president had already relinquished any leverage the US might employ to make those prospects real. No doubt the Taliban sat upright when they heard a threat as empty as those Washington had made to the Houthis in Yemen, who have paid them rapt attention.

Appearing a little defensive, President Biden underlined: “Let me be clear: Leaving August the 31st is not due to an arbitrary deadline; it was designed to save American lives.” This implies that the original withdrawal date of September 11 was decidedly non-arbitrary— before the withdrawal descended into bedlam.

Biden, who campaigned on his foreign policy experience and the global relationships he had cultivated over his long career, now finds himself saddled with a fiasco that has been compared to the US withdrawal from Vietnam and will be remembered for bodies in free fall, eerily reminiscent of 9/11.

While President Biden and his supporters say this was inevitable and the decision to withdraw forces was made out of necessity, the broader view suggests that misjudgment, mishandling and a lack of foresight were the culprits of the botched evacuation.

A Series of Missteps

When the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced by then-President Trump, NATO partners felt blindsided. At the time of Biden's withdrawal announcement, 35 other NATO member states, led by Germany, Italy and the

United Kingdom, collectively had approximately 7,000 personnel in Afghanistan, according to official figures. They were understandably angry at not being consulted.

After Biden became president, a review by his administration reaffirmed the withdrawal, also without consulting with allies. While assurances of regional US support force were proffered, few doubted assets outside Afghanistan would be substantially less effective than America's in-country posture. Where could the naysayers have developed such an idea? Perhaps they were listening to what our own military was saying at the time.

On April 20, Marine Corps General Kenneth McKenzie Jr. addressed the difficulties of an "over-the-horizon" approach when he said at a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee that "It's difficult to [strike a target] at range — but it's not impossible to do that at range." General McKenzie also said of post-withdrawal peacekeeping and power-projection capabilities: "I don't want to make light of it. I don't want to put on rose-colored glasses and say it's going to be easy to do."

Leading up to the hearing, on April 9, the director of National Intelligence released a report that contained "the collective insights of the Intelligence Community," stating that "prospects for a peace deal will remain low during the next year" because "the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory." In bold lettering, the report made clear that "the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support."

Two months later, in mid-June, an assessment prepared at the request of General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Kabul could fall six months after the US military left.

Almost from the moment the withdrawal encountered problems, the president alluded to inaccurate intelligence estimates, but weaknesses in the withdrawal plans became evident early on. Indeed, signs emerged in classified assessments sent over the summer that things were not going well.

The most damning of these was a State Department dissent cable, signed by 23 embassy officials and sent on July 13, that described the Taliban's movement and the impending collapse of the Afghan government. Although the cable was immediately reviewed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, it was largely ignored.

In addressing the dissent cable, President Biden concluded this assessment was outside the broader consensus, but even the rosier estimates maintained the Afghan government would fall in 18 to 24 months — just long enough for a September 11 commemoration and the mid-term elections.

The most optimistic estimate tacitly acknowledged that the Taliban would capture remaining US weapons and supplies, and that forfeiture of materiel to the enemy was inevitable. In effect, the decision to pull out consciously contemplated the inadvertent arming of the Taliban within no more than two years.

Between Nation Building and Giving Up

Oft stated, though, it is that the speed of Taliban advance was unanticipated, that intelligence agencies were equally caught off guard by the departure on July 12 of the top US commander, General Scott Miller. Perhaps most shocking to the intelligence community and US allies was the withdrawal from the Bagram Air Base on July 2, in the dead of night and without notifying its new Afghan commander.

This had enormously destabilizing consequences, especially on Afghan military capabilities and morale. Intelligence agencies were put in the position of having to guess not only what the Taliban and the Afghan government would do, but also what decisions President Biden would make.

Abandoning Bagram, which had two runways as opposed to Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport's one, was shocking to many. To reduce the number of US soldiers required to defend the embassy and the airlift, operations were limited to the HKIA. This consolidation was later seen as an error, but the

military preference for keeping Bagram with its larger, more defensible perimeter became infeasible because of troop constraints placed by Washington.

Blindly optimistic despite signs of looming problems, Biden maintained on July 8 that “The Taliban is not ... the North Vietnamese army. They’re not — they’re not remotely comparable in terms of capability. There’s going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy ... of the United States from Afghanistan. It is not at all comparable.”

Biden’s statement was buttressed by a false choice: either walk away from Afghanistan or stay in a situation that would, as the president described it, add casualties and put “American men and women back in the middle of a civil war,” meaning that the US “would have run the risk of having to send more troops back into Afghanistan to defend our remaining troops.”

As Congressman Dan Crenshaw pointed out, “There are a lot of foreign policy options between nation building and giving up. We found the proper balance in recent years — maintaining a small force that propped up the Afghan government while also giving us the capability to strike at Taliban and other terrorist networks as needed.”

Vulnerabilities grew as contractors withdrew, removing air support that had been the lifeblood of the Afghan military. With the Afghan army unable to resupply and pay forces, particularly those at the edge of the Taliban’s advances, morale imploded. On August 13, John F. Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, stated that the Afghan military still held advantages against the Taliban, notably, “a capable air force.”

But by early July, reports had already come in that Taliban fighters were executing pilots, and the Pentagon still had not formulated a plan to keep Afghan aviators flying after US withdrawal. Recognizing the air-power advantage was all for naught once the planes stopped flying, a mere three weeks before he fled Kabul, then-President Ashraf Ghani pled with Biden for air support — to no avail.

Dwindling food and munitions, a lack of reserve support and tardy soldier pay all contributed to reduced capabilities and a weakened willingness to fight. In some cases, the Taliban would offer government fighters safe passage and the equivalent of a month’s salary to lay down their arms. Whatever plan was in place, it is now clear that the issue was not one of “a perception around the world and in parts of Afghanistan ... that things aren’t going well,” as Biden suggested to Ghani. Once the Afghan military lost air support, it was lights out.

Political Choices

Joe Biden has repeatedly claimed he had no choice but to comply with Trump’s deal signed with the Taliban in Doha last year, but it wasn’t at all obvious he was committed to that course of action when he ordered a review of the withdrawal. His own secretary of defense, Lloyd Austin, visited Afghanistan in mid-March, saying he was there “to listen and learn,” promising that “It’ll inform my participation in the review that we’re undergoing with the president.”

Biden has reversed Trump’s policies in many other areas, making changes that have led to a surge of immigration at the southern border, setting a two-decade record. He has rejoined the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, and is seeking to negotiate a deal with Iran similar to the discarded Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

If, as this administration maintains, the US left Afghanistan because the Taliban have been weakened over decades of war and it was a time to seek an exit, why is Washington negotiating with Iranians who chant “death to America” at every turn and are more capable than ever?

Prior to the August 26 explosion at Kabul’s airport that killed over 170 civilians and 13 American service members, there had been no US combat fatalities in Afghanistan since February 2, 2020. That, alongside the choice of an emotionally significant withdrawal date of September 11, suggests that the decision was a largely symbolic political statement and the plans

for how to execute this mission were engineered backward with devastating consequences.

A US force amounting to 2,500 — or 3,500, as per European and Afghan officials — was a small footprint, yet it held valuable assets such as the Bagram airfield, strategically located between eastern Iran and western Pakistan. Giving up those assets, in conjunction with the collapse of the Afghan government, led to a substantial reduction in US intelligence capabilities by early July, a trend that has only accelerated to the point that the US has now lost 90% of its intelligence collection capabilities.

In a mountainous, disparate place like Afghanistan, where the tribal loyalties are fierce, the human component is everything. Over-the-horizon strikes seldom work, particularly if you don't know who the target is — or should be.

The likelihood of creating a terrorist safe haven seems to grow by the day. Weighted against damage to US credibility and prestige, not to mention the threat to the homeland, it is hard to imagine how a nominal support force could not be justified, considering the much greater deployment of US troops in places like Germany and South Korea.

If the objective is to withdraw from “forever wars,” then why pull so few soldiers from an unstable part of the world where the Taliban and al-Qaeda (who the US Department of Defense say keep a cozy relationship) plot against the West only to leave tens of thousands of troops stationed residually from World War II and the Korean War? If the objective is to maintain stability, as it appears to be in South Korea, then why abandon the progress made in Afghanistan?

Inconsistent Principles

Some have praised President Biden for the consistency — others would say obstinacy — of his decision, but the principle of withdrawal and the manner in which it was conducted has been inconsistently applied. In the primary debate in October 2020, then-candidate Biden had this to say about the Trump administration's decision to

pull out troops from Syria that undermined the position of America's Kurdish allies:

“I would not have withdrawn the troops and I would not have withdrawn the additional thousand troops who are in Iraq...

“It has been the most shameful thing that any president has done in modern history — excuse me, in terms of foreign policy. And the fact of the matter is, I've never seen a time — and I've spent thousands of hours in the Situation Room, I've spent many hours on the ground in those very places, in Syria and in Iraq, and guess what? Our commanders across the board, former and present, are ashamed of what's happening here.”

In a speech in Iowa the same month, Biden blasted Trump for creating a humanitarian crisis and undermining national security. “The events of this past week ... have had devastating clarity on just how dangerous he is to our national security, to our leadership around the world and to the lives of the brave women and men serving in uniform.” Trump, he said, “sold out” the Kurds and gave the Islamic State (IS) “a new lease on life.”

“Donald Trump, I believe — it's not comfortable to say this about a president — but he is a complete failure as a commander in chief,” Biden said. “He's the most reckless and incompetent commander in chief we've ever had.”

The White House appears to be reeling from the uniformly negative coverage, but more than a few must be thinking, “Et tu, Biden?” While the president rejects criticism of his Afghanistan departure and shows no signs of altering his position, America's weakened posture in the world is being exploited by its enemies.

Already the Chinese, the Russians and the Iranians are asking countries to question US reliability. Moscow has objected to setting up US military bases outside Afghanistan that might have effected a less chaotic withdrawal. Meanwhile, China, no doubt giddy at seeing US forces vacate Bagram just across their border and likely eager to control it themselves, seized a

propitious moment to threaten Taiwan, suggesting resistance to reunification is futile.

If the withdrawal from Afghanistan is to “focus on shoring up America’s core strengths to meet the strategic competition with China and other nations,” then the US should seize upon the opportunity to reassure Taiwan and reiterate our constancy. Thus far, we have only heard posturing as Biden’s climate envoy, John Kerry, seeks nods for his cause against China’s intractable “two lists and three bottom lines” that would have Washington abandon its allies in democratic Taiwan.

All We Left Behind

When met with concerns about partners questioning America’s credibility on the world stage, Biden deflected by saying: “The fact of the matter is I have not seen that. Matter of fact, the exact opposite ... we’re acting with dispatch ... committing to what we said we would do.” The president appears not to be watching much TV or reading the news. According to numerous reports, America’s NATO allies are furious, and snubbing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson isn’t winning him any more friends in the “mother of parliaments.”

Meanwhile, Europe, Pakistan, India and others are worried about terrorists entering the regional vacuum, not to mention fleeing Afghan refugees looking for a haven at a time when the absorption of Syrian refugees has strained government resources. Many of these countries are anticipating another massive influx of refugees. As for those the US has evacuated, conditions were reportedly squalid and, according to an email from supervisory special agent Colin Sullivan, “are of our own doing.”

Although conventional thought by the administration held a swift withdrawal would prevent greater destabilization to the government of Afghanistan, it was fanciful to maintain we could get everyone out in such haste. A now-common complaint by president Biden’s defenders is that the US didn’t start evacuating Afghan allies when Trump ordered the

withdrawal. Yet that is wholly inconsistent with what Biden did.

While Biden announced the withdrawal on April 14, the airlift did not begin until July 30, and the withdrawal deadline was moved from September 11 to a more politically palatable but hastier August 31. Since then, cable news and any number of articles have focused on those the US left behind, including an Afghan who served as an interpreter and rescued Biden when his helicopter was stranded during a snowstorm in 2008.

The administration prefers to focus on the hundreds of US citizens who still remain in Afghanistan, but how many special immigrant visa (SIV) holders or those who “earned them” through their bravery and assistance have been left behind? By some estimates, a quarter of a million Afghans helped the US during the war, and rumors now circulate that the Russians are collecting the data of all calls going to the US that is being handed over to the Taliban.

The Taliban is not known for paying friendly courtesy calls. Secretary Blinken recently said that we have “now learned from hard experience that the SIV process was not designed to be done in an evacuation emergency.” But how to square that with repeated complaints from the administration about the SIV backlog and the 14 steps required to gain one or the delay between announcing withdrawal and airlifting people out? All of this seems to make US departure appear at once precipitous and callous.

A Common Excuse

A common excuse made by the Biden administration is that many people do not want to leave. This was echoed time and again, but it conflicts with the thousands of people who have assisted with private efforts to extract America’s friends. Whatever the reasons for the poorly executed withdrawal, for those who did make it out, thanks may be given not necessarily to the US government but to the informal band of wealthy donors, veterans and CIA analysts who formed groups such as the Commercial Task

Force in the Peacock Lounge of the Willard Hotel.

In that one instance, about 5,000 people were evacuated. Other groups have sprung up to guide refugees to safety or give them passwords to write on posters that would help them gain entry to the airport. Biden acknowledged the “network of volunteers,” and although many do not like hearing it, these groups have in many ways been more effective with fewer resources than the federal efforts.

For all of the president’s attempts to claim that “we planned for every contingency” and that “the buck stops with me,” the private efforts were no less necessary in the face of a self-reinforcing view that an ill-conceived, poorly-executed plan during the fighting season is proof of its necessity. When Biden said on August 16 that “the developments of the past week reinforced that ending U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision,” it was a justification as inversely logical as the withdrawal.

While there were no helicopters on the roof of our embassy, officials there were nevertheless evacuated in situ. Originally, the Pentagon maintained that the embassy evacuation was “a very narrowly focused, temporary mission to facilitate the safe and orderly departure of additional civilian personnel from the State Department. ... Once this mission is over ... we anticipate having less than 1,000 U.S. troops on the ground to support the diplomatic presence in Kabul, which we all agree we still want to be able to have.”

We now know the embassy, one of America’s largest, is shuttered, with Taliban graffiti scrawled on it, and policy is run out of Qatar. While Biden is unlikely to have any “mission accomplished” signs up, US efforts have been reduced to “a new diplomatic mission” that will apparently work in concert with the Taliban.

As it stands now, the Taliban head the government in Kabul, Islamic State Khorasan is making moves, US “collaborators” are being hunted down and the Haqqani Network is

ascendent. It is striking to hear the same people who cite the \$2-trillion cost of the war in Afghanistan are also those who push for the abandonment of US labors, willfully or otherwise ignoring the promise of a renewed terrorist safe haven.

It does not take much imagination to picture the Biden administration in the same position that President Barack Obama found himself in when he pulled out of Iraq. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz reminds us: “Mr. Biden should have known to expect this because something similar happened 10 years ago when we withdrew our forces from Iraq. Lacking U.S. air support and advisory capabilities on which the Iraqi army had grown to depend, it collapsed under an assault by Islamic State. Three years after the withdrawal, President Obama had to rush 1,500 troops back to Iraq to assist in the fight to drive out ISIS. By 2016 that number had grown to 5,000.”

A Question of Competence

Criticism assails President Biden from all quarters, with a few observing that he had planned a 10-day vacation to Camp David as the withdrawal was reaching a crescendo. Top Obama adviser, David Axelrod, has said: “you cannot defend the execution here. This has been a disaster. ... It is heartbreaking, it is depressing, and it’s a failure. And he needs to own that failure.”

Nor is Biden finding many friends among former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, and Princeton’s Robert George, both of whom have some unflattering opinions that echo that of Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Secretary Gates wrote that Biden is someone who has “been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades.”

Trust in America and in Joe Biden’s judgment is at a low ebb, and it is difficult to understand how the president developed a reputation for competence. On July 8, he said that “The mission

was accomplished in that we ... got Osama bin Laden, and terrorism is not emanating from that part of the world.” This elides the fact that it was Biden who dissented in planning the operation that would kill bin Laden.

While Biden was not right about bin Laden, bin Laden might have been correct about Biden. When deciding not to target Biden when he was vice president, bin Laden described him as “totally unprepared for that post [of president], which will lead the US into a crisis.” Contrary to the president’s belief, it also seems that terrorism may soon be “emanating from that part of the world” again.

That’s not to say there isn’t plenty of blame to go around. A commander in the Afghan army, General Sami Sadat, has kind words for neither Biden nor Trump, nor did former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster pull any punches when he said in mid-August that “This collapse goes back to the capitulation agreement of 2020. The Taliban didn’t defeat us. We defeated ourselves.”

Indeed, President Trump’s former defense secretary, Mark Esper, called the Doha agreement with the Taliban “conditions-based” and said Trump “undermined” his own plan when the drawdown continued despite a lack of progress by the Taliban on the agreement’s provisions. The Biden administration would have been well within its right to renegotiate the drawdown in light of the Taliban’s unwillingness to honor its end of the bargain.

What Biden had hoped would be an orderly, triumphant return of the US military — a hope still maintained by the Department of Defense as late as July 6 — turned into the posturing fecklessness of a nakedly political stunt.

Biden has repeatedly telegraphed his punch with, however awkwardly denied, artificial deadlines that were tethered to very little outside of political opportunism. This was never more obvious than when September 11 was set as the withdrawal deadline. In choosing that date, his hand was tipped, and a plan to end the 20-year war in Afghanistan was revealed as a political

stunt, an unnecessary capitulation masquerading as destiny, vainglory turned tragedy.

An Ignominious Retreat

The Economist writes of the US withdrawal: “If the propagandists of the Taliban had scripted the collapse of America’s 20-year mission to reshape Afghanistan, they could not have come up with more harrowing images” — a withdrawal where “Mr. Biden failed to show even a modicum of care for the welfare of ordinary Afghans.” In the wake of this irresponsible and costly withdrawal, there is a now burning conviction by America’s enemies that if God wills it, their adversaries will be vanquished.

That is a devastatingly effective emotional tool and recruiting argument that all but assures we will see this enemy again in closer quarters. When President Biden paid his respects on September 11, it was against a backdrop of triumphant marches elsewhere for the jihadist cause.

While some may sigh with resignation at the “inevitable” calamity unfolding, they ignore a great number of facts and forget the indiscriminate brutality the US attempted to excise when it entered Afghanistan. They shrug at the lost lives of brave US and Afghan soldiers (2,500 and 66,000 respectively) who fought for that cause. To claim all of this was preordained is to foreclose a possible, if uneasy, calm and greet with resignation — a decidedly un-American trait — the reversion to greater violence and the tribalism that all but precluded loyalty to a central government in Kabul.

Forgotten Sacrifices

To declare the withdrawal just with rhetorical genuflections toward those who died is to forget the sacrifices of the dead, which in many cases were made for causes beyond themselves or even their country. It invites feuding terrorist groups to reconstitute and gain strength.

Accusing the Afghan government of not defending the gains of the past 20 years is at once to blame the victim and to banish the memory of

what was there before the US entered and what will surely reappear in its absence. It is to debase women's lives by accepting as banal the butchery Bibi Aisha survived, whose June 2010 Time magazine cover shocked the world and hung above my desk for years as a reminder of the inhumanity we were fighting.

It is to indict exiled President Ashraf Ghani in the face of impossible odds for remembering history and the fate of another ousted president, Mohammad Najibullah — the last Afghan leader to see the Taliban roll into Kabul in 1996. Najibullah was captured by the Taliban, castrated and, according to Robert Parry, had his severed genitals stuffed in his mouth before being strung up from a lamppost.

Although it may be said by the current administration that withdrawal was necessary and an earlier, better coordinated drawdown would have destabilized the Afghan government and the country, we have to ask what is more destabilizing: rolling up the carpet or yanking the rug from underneath a mission that brought stability so costly in blood and treasure?

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BUSINESS

GameStop: Putting Skin Back in the Game

Zachary Propert
February 2, 2021

The GameStop event should be the first manifestation of a new form of financial activism.

Unless you live completely off the grid, you have most likely heard something about the GameStop boom last week. For those unaware, a hedge fund, Melvin Capital, held very large short positions against GameStop, a brick-and-mortar gaming store whose stock has been falling steadily over the past decade due to the rise of e-commerce. An otherwise reasonable bet made a turn for the worst for Melvin as online investors, fueled largely by a sub-Reddit, led to a buying frenzy, leading GameStop's stock to rise from \$76.79/share on Monday, January, to \$347/share on the 27.

As a result, in the course of two days, Melvin faced bankruptcy and needed a larger hedge fund, Citadel, to bail it out. A major trading platform, Robinhood, restricted purchasing GameStop shares, in addition to a few others fueled by activity on Reddit, allowing traders only to sell their stocks — an effort that has led many to conclude that they were trying to push down the stock value. The stock did fall that day from \$347 to \$193/share; it is currently at \$135.

Such an action, however, is potentially illegal, as the stock exchange can only legally restrict the trading of particular stocks under very specific situations of fraud and material evidence. Of course, many people on the Robinhood platform have since filed a class-action lawsuit, and the results are forthcoming. Even more interesting is that Citadel also serves as Robinhood's main shareholder. Regardless of whether or not what

happened on Reddit is (il)legal and should be regulated, we witnessed an extreme event that has profound implications for the financial industry.

Of Swans and Turkeys

Many people are already referring to the GameStop situation as a black swan event. But can we really be surprised that people on social media were able to unite online in a manner that allowed them to manipulate the market, no matter how unexpected or monumental the move was? Shouldn't Melvin have considered certain classes of events that would threaten its positions and created a means of protecting itself should such a rare event occur? It had to have known the potential risks to its investments but didn't care enough to secure it in a classic turkey problem.

Regardless of whether or not this event qualifies as a black swan, Melvin clearly had an extremely fragile investment strategy unprepared to handle random, unexpected turns, as last week's events clearly demonstrated. Many who have taken the side of Melvin and Citadel have been calling for regulation to prevent amateur investors from acting in such a manner, even though many of them are the very same people who have been fighting the regulation of the financial sector since the 1970s — and largely succeeding.

So, what exactly does this entire episode teach us? Although the situation is still unfolding, we've already observed a decades-old pattern: The very people who manufacture fragility into the systems they oversee will be bailed out, forgiven and permitted to continue what they were doing all along. The people at Melvin were willing to make risky bets but did not want to have to face the consequences of their plan going awry — they did not want their skin in the game.

Instead, Melvin's savior intervened and seemingly had Robinhood halt trading to drive down the stock price and save their short bets. Is that really how a free market works? Wouldn't it be best in a free market environment to let those people who gambled so recklessly on certain

positions that they bankrupted their entire company to go out of business?

These people are what Nassim Taleb would call “fragilistas” — those who manufacture fragility and never have to face the consequences if their decisions end up being disastrous, instead transferring the negative externalities onto the victims. We have witnessed this with the war on terror in general and in Iraq more specifically, with the 2007-08 financial crisis, and now the economic and public health crises emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic, not to mention the looming threat of climate catastrophe. The Melvin/GameStop situation is just the latest iteration.

Taking on the Fragilistas

None of these monumental mistakes would have happened on the scale they did if the perpetrators had skin in the game. In the case of Melvin, its skin was in the game without the hedge fund even realizing it — or if it did, without seeming to care.

Average investors now have a rather fascinating means of holding Wall Street accountable and redistributing wealth, albeit very modestly. They can and should find companies that have recklessly large short positions and unite to drive up those stocks in an effort to bring the money from the haves to the have nots like a real Robin Hood.

Big business, protected by every US administration since the 1970s, has been able to effectuate an enormous transfer of wealth from the American middle class and the poor to wealthy Americans and poor laborers abroad. The workers never had a say in matters of losing their jobs to automation and outsourcing. Average people also had no recourse during the financial crisis of 2007-08, and they have no recourse now with the multifaceted COVID-19 crisis all while they watch billionaires multiply their net worth.

It's high time those who have been abandoned by society find a way to fight back and put powerful people's skin in the game. We shouldn't

see the GameStop situation as just a fluke. It should be the first manifestation of a form of financial activism. Let's get out there and short squeeze a few more fragilistas.

***Zachary Propert** is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania.

Making Journalism Dependent on Facebook Is Not the Answer

Mark Andrejevic
February 22, 2021

Proposed amendments to Australia's news media code carry a potential poison pill for public service broadcasting.

The battle of media titans over their profits — and our data — triggered by Australia's attempt to make Google and Facebook pay for the news they use has little to do with the public interest. If we are worried about the quality of news and information, there's not much to choose between the Murdoch press, which backs the news bargaining code proposed by the Australian government, and Facebook's disinformation mills. The two often work hand in glove, as demonstrated by the way Rupert Murdoch's flagship paper, *The Australian*, published false narratives about the devastating bushfires last year, many of them poached from the online conspiracy theory fever swamp. In particular, as *The New York Times* has noted, *The Australian* echoed debunked claims that arsonists were to blame for the catastrophic fire season — even as online trolls and bot farms circulated the same false information online.

The affinity between *The Australian* and the social media trolls should come as no surprise. Both increasingly rely on the strategy for cutting through the online clutter by catering to the

algorithms that favor sensationalism and controversy over reality. Providing News Corp and similar commercial media outlets with extra funding and, as the Australian proposal envisions, greater access to audience data, will only cement a business model beholden to the priorities of engagement over an informed populace.

The important omission in much of the media brouhaha following Facebook's dramatic decision to pull all local and international news content from the feeds of its Australian users is that the proposal supported by the Murdoch press and its allies in Canberra will very likely help undermine the public service media model that has been in place in Australia for almost a century. The Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) became the nation's great information unifier by providing news and entertainment programming to remote rural areas where commercial broadcasters were too costly to support. The Murdoch press has long complained about the unfair competition posed by publicly subsidized media outlets, and the political right — as is so often the case — has complained that its reality-based coverage is not friendly enough.

So it is perhaps not surprising that the media bargaining code carries a potential poison pill for public service broadcasting. The prospect that the ABC might also get a cut of revenues resulting from the code would make it reliant on the commercial priorities of online platforms like Google and Facebook. These platforms are not neutral: They select the content that garners the most attention online, regardless of veracity or accuracy. Forcing the ABC to rely on the commercial platforms for revenues would create competition on the terms set by the algorithms: controversy, sensationalism, fear and anger.

The real danger of the bargaining code is not that it might fail, but that it might succeed in subjecting all media outlets to the economic whims of a small group of unaccountable media corporations in Silicon Valley. This is a self-destructive move for a democratic society. Social media platforms do not see themselves as content

creators or publishers and have none of the public service motivations that even many commercial news outlets managed to preserve over the course of the 20th century. They have over and over again proven reluctant to take responsibility for the content they select and pump into people's news feeds, downplaying the damage they have done to the news and information environment, to the process of democratic deliberation and to the public interest of the countries where they reap their profits.

The solution to their decimation of the commercial model that supported the Murdoch press and others is not to cement the dominance of a Murdoch-Facebook commercial partnership but to provide an alternative to it. Suggestively, public service media work well with the model of the open internet. Because their content is already publicly bought and paid for, they can treat the free online circulation of their content as an unalloyed public benefit, not as a lost revenue opportunity. Because their content is bought and paid for, they do not need to subject themselves to the commercial priorities of the platforms.

The challenge to focus on, as the commercial players maneuver, is how to bolster the public service model. The answer is relatively close to hand. The major tech platforms notoriously dodge taxes and work their way through the tax loopholes. The six major tech companies have managed to get out of paying some \$10 billion a year in corporate taxes between 2010 and 2019. In Australia alone, Google paid only about 2% tax on \$4.3 billion worth of revenues. At a corporate tax rate of 30%, Google alone would generate tax revenue greater than the entire annual budget of the ABC. Not only are the tech giants making huge profits by torpedoing the existing media business model, but they are finding ways to dodge the tax obligations that might help nations address the devastation of local news and investigative reporting the platforms leave in their wake.

We don't need to create new taxes for the tech companies — we just need to counter the strategies they use to get around paying their fair

share. Australia's news bargaining code seeks to subject all news outlets to the priorities of the platforms. If recent events have taught us anything at all, it is that democracy demands an alternative to them.

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Will We Wake Up to the Big Tech Distraction Crisis?

Robert Wigley
May 7, 2021

Big Tech needs to find a better balance between profit and societal good if it is to retain its license to dominate our lives.

Big Tech and the devices and apps it produces consume the world's collective attention in pursuit of profit. Tech giants need to find a better purpose if they are going to retain society's permission to dominate our lives in the way they currently do. Society is distracted, our attention neurologically hijacked by a tsunami of weapons of mass distraction that focus our attention not on what we want but on what Big Tech wants us to want. For generations Z and Alpha, in particular, this is profoundly life-shaping.

Most parents are worried about their children spending too much time on screens. But it isn't about screen time — it is what they are doing on screen that matters. All screen time is not equal: Education and entertainment time may be better than gaming and scrolling through social media. All users are not equal, particularly the young and vulnerable: Over the decade that technology has become ubiquitous in our lives, rates of adolescent sleep loss, loneliness, unhappiness,

anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide have increased by a factor.

Glued to Screens

Causality is not proven, but can the conflation of the two be a coincidence? Other societal factors have a significant influence for sure, such as the differing ways youngsters meet and the types of encounters — not relationships — they have, the decline of the nuclear family, religion, marriage, communal eating, the changing nature of the workplace all have some impacts.

But with babies and toddlers now regularly watching screens, nearly half of under-eights having their own tablet and most kids having a smartphone in their early teens, with all the access to age-inappropriate content this brings, the erosion of childhood and innocence happens earlier and earlier in a child's personality development.

According to therapists, addiction to porn and gaming is at worrying levels. As technology seeks to turn children into professional multitaskers, grazing like digital bees on multiple informational honeypots, the march of the robots and artificial intelligence proceeds apace. Are we teaching the future generations the inability to deep-read, deep-attend, deep-watch and focus just at the moment when the only work left for them will require precisely these skills?

Parents have looked the other way, enjoying the freedom from having to parent as their children have taken to electronic devices like ducks to water. They have missed the predator in the home as their children have done something infinitely more dangerous than leaving the house to play without a friend, foraging onto the internet from the apparent safety of their bedrooms. Educators have missed the opportunity to teach children to be digital citizens through responsible internet use, partly because they don't understand the dangers or know how to.

Software designers have missed an opportunity to build in safety in their quest to satisfy the surveillance-as-a-service mandate of those who commission their products. Big Tech

itself, caught in the quarterly earnings race, coffers and market caps bolstered by even higher demand during COVID-19, has gone further into denial about the need to reform its business models. Government has failed to protect the people, with techs giants growing ever bigger without the anti-trust interventions and content moderation that traditional media experienced in their equivalent growth period.

Generation Z

Society is delivering its youth not only a digital overload, but a hand of cards that includes parents still suffering from the overhang of the global financial crisis, a continuing global war on terror, a damaged planet and now enormous COVID-19 debt. The good news is that Gen Z is growing up with a strong sense of social purpose, believing corporations should serve society, not just their shareholders, and may yet reset the relationship between technology and society.

Late last year, US attorney general sent a draft law to Congress that would strike at the heart of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the shield tech companies currently have against potential liability for user-generated content, whether it be fake, damaging to youngsters or simply vile beyond a socially acceptable level.

The Biden administration has a unique opportunity to put power back into the people's hands and take it away from a few individuals running a small number of enormous corporations and the opaque algorithms running through the core of their systems. History will judge whether society woke up to this distraction crisis in time before the Internet of Things hammered the final nail in the coffin.

***Robert Wigley** backs young entrepreneurs in cutting-edge technology businesses and chairs UK Finance. He spent a career in finance, rising to be EMEA chairman of Merrill Lynch.

Regional Clouds Could Be the Answer

Mark Cummings & Katarzyna Wac
October 27, 2021

The problems created by the convergence of cloud, telco, data domiciling, technology sovereignty and local cultural concerns may be solved by creating regionally organized clouds.

Regionally organized clouds (ROCs) can be the answer to a series of problems public policy is currently struggling with. Global cloud companies, including Google, Amazon and Microsoft, provide valuable services. But societal concerns are being raised about the control of data and the concentration of power.

Ultimately, the balance of power in the cloud world is a quality-of-life issue. ROCs could help balance the situation. To do so, they need a broadly accepted regional vision and a process for achieving it. The best way to do this is for each region to focus a funded study group on how to implement and sustain an ROC.

Challenge

What is at stake is control of data and of basic cyber functionality. Data and control of the infrastructure to use data is where all modern value is. The emergence of ransomware, a reliance on the virtual world during the COVID-19 pandemic and new laws in some countries about where data is domiciled highlight this. These cyber resources play a significant role in our day-to-day ability to achieve our quality-of-life goals.

In the past, control of data and functionality was decentralized — in the hands of many. This was implemented in a variety of technologies and served organizations and individuals with a variety of objectives. Today, the evolution of

technology and associated economics are driving all data and functionality into the cloud.

As cloud companies have developed, telecommunication companies (telcos) have stood out in contrast. Telcos are supported by fees for their services and do not use or sell customer information. Their role as local strategic resources is baked-in to their regulated structure. As a result, they have traditionally been diligent about protecting customer data. Of course, telcos have seen the great financial success of cloud companies and protection of data has eroded, but data protection is still in their DNA.

Now, technology has evolved in such a way that cloud technology is positioned to take over 80% of telco infrastructure. If this happens, the result would be an order of magnitude increase in the centralization of data and power.

Currently, three global cloud companies control the overwhelming portion of the industry. They provide many good and valuable services, so why should we be concerned? Some concerns are purely regional and involve social, cultural, religious and local political matters. But there appear to be common threads that run through all regions: local resilience, control and use of personal data, and economic centralization.

When a single cloud network serves the whole world, a failure in one portion can bring down services for everyone. It has gotten to the point where large corporations and government departments stop functioning when access to data is denied. Water systems do not work, gas pipelines stop delivering gas, hospitals shut down and groceries are not delivered. So far, we have seen global cloud company infrastructures fail, but they have come back online within a day. No global cloud has yet had its entire system shut down by a prolonged ransomware attack.

Centralized ownership and control of personal data have led to another concern: undue influence on political and cultural systems. To finance the positive contributions that cloud companies have created, these firms have collected valuable personal data. That data is valuable because it can be used to change people's behavior. The first

focus of behavior change was getting people to buy products. This was very successful and has resulted in significant financial success for cloud companies. Then, people started to use the same technology to change how individuals interact in the political space. Now, the control and ownership of data are beginning to infer the control of political and cultural systems.

The centralization of clouds has led to the centralization of cloud innovation ecosystems. That is, the innovation ecosystem around the development and operation of clouds. This has created a few small centers of economic power and brainpower. This centralization has made it difficult for broader parts of our global society to participate in the economic benefits of cloud innovation.

Efforts are underway in different parts of the world to use existing laws to address these concerns. The problem is that these efforts will either sacrifice many of the benefits the global clouds have brought or not really address the concerns. Examples include anti-trust laws, fair trade laws and so on.

Some have argued for using these laws or new ones like them to break up cloud companies. It is unlikely that these historically effective mechanisms will produce the desired result in today's technology environment.

Regionally Organized Clouds as a Solution

ROCs can respond to these concerns while preserving the benefits that global clouds provide. Innovation, particularly information technology (IT), has driven waves of improvement in the quality of life over the last 70 years. Public policy is at its best when it acts like a flywheel on these waves of innovation by maximizing the benefits and minimizing the downsides. In the current wave of cloud innovation, it would be best if public policy again played its flywheel role. But how can public policy initiatives help to create the range of ROCs we need?

Some have been thinking about national clouds, but an ROC offers three key advantages:

insulation from national political change, larger talent pools to draw from and greater economies of scale than a national system.

We are seeing a rapid increase in national political volatility, with individual countries making big swings in unexpected directions. These swings could result in constant changes in direction for a nationally organized cloud. Such constant change could make it difficult for a national cloud to succeed.

By tying an ROC to a region, the deleterious effects of big political swings can be somewhat dampened. If correctly constructed, an ROC will develop an innovation ecosystem around itself. But initially, it needs to draw on innovators in existing organizations — those that have not already been captured by global cloud companies. Having multiple nations to draw talent from will be very helpful with this. ROCs will also have an economies-of-scale advantage that, in some parts of the world, will be very important.

ROCs are not a business threat to global cloud companies because there is room and roles for both. Analysts estimate that only 15% of existing organizational IT has been moved to the cloud. This leaves 85% of IT yet to be moved to the cloud.

International enterprises may find global cloud companies better suited to their needs. Additionally, global cloud companies will compete for business with regional clouds. This competition will result in lower pricing from ROCs and better services well suited to regional needs from the global cloud firms. Some users may combine both. So, there is plenty of room for all and everyone benefits from the other.

Thus, one can see how in each region, separate corporations with federated connections to regional telcos and governments could provide a way to preserve the benefits of global cloud companies while fostering regional resilience, backed by regional innovation ecosystems and supporting vibrant regional cultural and political environments.

A Basic ROC Model

A common thread in each region's solution will be an ROC that serves the region's government and telco needs. A good way to achieve this is with a federated structure between governments and telcos in the region. Each would contribute innovators from their organization to create a talent pool and each would participate in shared ownership. In addition, the federation process would involve commitments by governments and telcos to use their ROC. Early government and telco commitment will create an economic basis for launch and early operation.

The federation approach allows regional telcos and government organizations to pool the truly innovative people they have. This pooling of innovative talent has been shown in the past to overcome the difficulties that have prevented success in similar efforts by governments and telcos. It may also be prudent to bring in a few people from outside the region with specialized expertise.

Traditional data protection by telcos would be preserved while providing regional and local government control of government data. Sensitive personal data about people living in the region could also be kept on the ROC.

Regional resilience would improve. If done right, it is far less likely for a regional cloud to stop operating because of a failure in a global system. These federated corporations can create the needed cultural environment for regional innovation economies.

Multiple telcos in the region can engage in what has come to be called "coopetition." That is cooperation on the basic cloud they use in common, while competing on services, quality and coverage.

Each region needs to quickly convene a study group to create a clear vision for their ROC and its associated innovation ecosystem. Because key players are already taking crisis actions now, these study groups need to be formed quickly and deliver results in months. Results have to be available in a few months. This means that organizing the study groups as part of university

research programs will be difficult. Either the use of nonprofit institutes or direct government charter may be best.

Current ROC Efforts in Europe

Europeans are trying to explore these cloud issues in public industry groups or standards organizations. Unfortunately, large global companies with vested interests in the status quo can afford to throw a lot of effort — participation, lobbying, etc. — into influencing decisions in these groups. This hampers industry organizations and standards groups from developing a clear vision of the public interest in each region and is slowing things down.

At the same time, there is an argument going on inside each of the three largest European telcos. There are two camps in each, seeking to respond to the cloudification crisis. All sides realize that cloudification is inevitable. One side is advocating for their telco to build their own clouds. The other is saying that every attempt any telco has made to do something like that has failed. Therefore, the telco should give up and seek deals with one of the global cloud companies. Neither side is winning this argument.

Meanwhile, out of a sense of crisis, organizations are acting. Orange (France Telecom) announced in May that it plans to set up a new company called "Bleu," which would "work with Microsoft, to create a French cloud service provider to meet sovereignty requirements of the French State, public administrations and critical infrastructure companies with unique privacy, security and resiliency needs as determined by the French State." This highlights the need for speedy action in the public policy arena — before these kinds of crisis actions make it more difficult to implement ROCs.

North America

In the United States, the Department of Defense (DoD) created a request for proposal (RFP) for public cloud services. The RFP was sent to only

three of the US-headquartered global cloud companies. It resulted in a multibillion-dollar contract with one of these. One of these authors was told by a government staff member leading the effort that, for security reasons, although operated by the cloud company, it is on segregated resources. That is, it is essentially a private cloud dedicated to the DoD operated by a global cloud company.

Another effort to create a national cloud is underway in the US focused on supporting research and technology development in artificial intelligence (AI). This is driven by a concern about a potential “arms race” between the US and China around AI.

The US-headquartered AT&T and Verizon have been divesting themselves of the web properties they acquired. This mirrors the argument going on inside European telcos —that it is also a response to perceived failures by telcos to achieve success in the cloud.

AT&T has entered into an agreement with Microsoft to outsource its 5G core to Microsoft. This is another example of crisis action that underlines the need for speedy development of focused ROC public policy.

Other Regions

Other regions share some of these same concerns while adding some that are unique to their particular situations. For example, everyone is worried about cybersecurity, but some parts of the world such as Australia have a particular sensitivity in this area. Parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South America have particular concerns about cost and access, particularly access in underserved areas. Religiously-defined regions — from North Africa to Southeast Asia — have particular cultural/legal concerns.

From a global perspective, diversity is important. Having many groups working on solving problems from many different directions provides the world with the greatest probability of finding optimal solutions to critical things we face.

ROCs can be the answer to the series of problems public policy is currently struggling with. How ROCs are structured may be different for different regions. Each region needs to develop a clear vision of how its ROC should be organized to meet that region’s public interest. The best way for each region to do this is to quickly convene and fund a group in their region to study the challenges and opportunities, and then deliver a report that lays out a regional vision and process for achieving it. Because of crisis actions by some players, speedy action is critical in this important public policy area.

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Looking for a Safe Place in Facebook’s Digital Universe

Jennifer Wider
November 12, 2021

If Facebook has full knowledge of the harm and risk it poses to people who use its platforms, it has an ethical and moral obligation to make its products safer.

In her recent testimony in front of a Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, “Protecting Kids Online: Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower,” former data scientist at Facebook Frances Haugen revealed that her former employer is knowingly harmful to children, promotes divisiveness among users and amplifies misinformation in pursuit of growth and what she calls “astronomical profits.”

Instagram, a photo-sharing app that is owned by Facebook, Inc., is popular among school-aged children and teenagers worldwide. Studies have shown that young people spend up to nine hours on social media and digital technology, posting pictures, streaming videos, listening to music and engaging socially.

The Wall Street Journal investigation into the leaked internal Facebook documents confirmed that studies commissioned by the social media giant found that its subsidiary, Instagram, has negatively impacted the mental health of its users, particularly teenage girls. In addition, the company failed to act to remedy the potential harm that it is directly and knowingly causing.

Leaked documents reveal that more than 30% of teenage girls using Instagram feel worse about their bodies after accessing the app. Another document outlined how Instagram can contribute to and exacerbate anxiety and depression in users.

This isn't the first time a study has linked teenage depression, anxiety and other stress-related conditions to social media use. Studies conducted across the globe have sought to establish the notion of "digital age vulnerability" to mental health conditions in users.

The research has been conclusive. A 2018 British study published in *The Lancet* tied social media use to decreased, disrupted and delayed sleep, which is associated with depression, memory loss and poor academic performance. Another study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* concluded that depression and eating disorders are higher in young people who use social media outlets on a regular basis.

It is the first time, however, that leaked documents have shown the company's acknowledgment of the harms it may be causing and subsequently failing to act. Facebook places a lot of importance on Instagram in capturing a younger audience. Adolescents and teens across the United States spend much more time on Instagram than on Facebook, and with ever-evolving features, Instagram competes with other teen favorites like TikTok and Snapchat.

Brooke T., a 17-year-old girl from New York, spends roughly six to seven hours per day on Instagram and other social media platforms. She was recently diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder characterized by very low body weight, a fear of gaining weight and a skewed perception of weight in general. "Every time I would go on Instagram, all I saw were pictures of perfect bodies everywhere," she told me. "It made me feel pretty bad about myself." When asked directly if her time on Instagram contributed to her recent diagnosis, she answered: "Definitely."

Alarm bells have sounded before and organizations across the United States have conducted research that reflects this upsetting trend. Between 2010 and 2018, depression rates have doubled among teenage girls, according to data from the Department of Health and Human Services. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that suicide rates among girls in the same period of time have nearly doubled as well.

Back in December 2017, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder, chairman and CEO of Facebook, was pressed in an interview to comment on the data linking an increased risk of mental health conditions tied directly to Facebook, he insisted that "protecting our community is more important than maximizing our profits." Unfortunately, the leaked documents tell another story.

If Facebook has full knowledge of the harm and risk it poses to people who use its platforms, the company has an ethical and moral obligation to acknowledge it publicly and work to make its products safer for children, teens and adults. This is particularly true in light of Facebook's recent announcement of the plan to develop a metaverse platform, that will subsume consumers even more deeply into its digital world. Simply rebranding won't effect the necessary change.

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the mental health of men and women, boys and girls around the world. Social media has helped connect so many people when social distancing has kept them apart. But if the

platforms are knowingly harming the mental health and well-being of its users, companies like Facebook need to be held accountable and measures must be taken to ensure the health and safety of users.

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ECONOMICS

Peter Thiel's Bitcoin Paranoia

Peter Isackson
April 13, 2021

A firm believer in the disruptive cryptocurrency, Peter Thiel sees one reason to doubt.

Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel finds himself in a confusing moral quandary as he struggles to weigh the merits of his nerdish belief in cryptocurrency against his patriotic paranoia focused on China's economic rivalry with the United States.

Participating in "a virtual event held for members of the Richard Nixon Foundation," Thiel, while reaffirming his position as a "pro-Bitcoin maximalist," felt compelled to call his faith into doubt due to his concern that China may use bitcoin to challenge US financial supremacy.

According to Yahoo's Tim O'Donnell, Thiel "thinks Beijing may view Bitcoin as a tool that could chip away at the dollar's might." He directly quotes Thiel who wonders whether "Bitcoin should also be thought [of] in part as a Chinese financial weapon against the U.S."

Today's Daily Devil's Dictionary definition:

Financial weapon:

The role any significant amount of money in any one person's, company's or nation's hand is expected to play to assert power and obtain undue advantages in today's competitive capitalism

Contextual Note

Thiel may be stating the obvious. Money is power and concentrations of money amount to concentrated power. The point of power is to influence, intimidate or conquer, depending on how concentrated the power may be. It is ironically appropriate that the event at which Thiel spoke was organized by the Nixon Foundation. Richard Nixon was known for putting the quest for power above any other consideration. He was also known for opening the relationship with China, which many Republicans today believe led to a pattern of behavior that allowed China to eventually emerge as a threat far more menacing than the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Nixon was also the president who destroyed the Bretton Woods system that set the financial rules ensuring stable international relations in the wake of World War II.

Thiel's thoughts are both transparently imperialistic. They follow Donald Trump's "America First" logic, while at the same time revealing Thiel's uncertainty about how to frame it in the context of Bitcoin. His version of "America First" has less to do with the Trumpian idea that America should worry first about its own internal matters and later deal with the world than with the idea of the neocon conviction that the US must impose itself as the unique hegemon in the global economy. In Thiel's mind, this sits uncomfortably alongside his made-in-Silicon Valley belief that cryptocurrencies represent the trend toward something that might be called "financial democracy."

According to O'Donnell, Thiel "explained that China isn't fond of the fact that the U.S. dollar is the world's major reserve currency because it gives the U.S. global economic 'leverage,' and he thinks Beijing may view Bitcoin as a tool that

could chip away at the dollar's might." O'Donnell is guilty of somewhat hypocritical understatement when he claims that it is all about China not being "fond of" the dollar's status as the world's major reserve currency. Who besides the US would be "fond of" such a thing? Those are O'Donnell's words, not Thiel's. As for the idea that Bitcoin might chip away at the dollar's might, Thiel avoids making that specific point and prefers a more vaguely paranoid reading of events as he suggests a kind of plot in which China may be using Bitcoin to undermine US hegemony.

Thiel's phrasing places him clearly in the realm of what might be called diplomatic paranoia. He begins with a statement of speculative uncertainty as he expresses his concern with China's turning Bitcoin into a financial weapon.

Here are his exact words: "I do wonder whether at this point Bitcoin should also be thought in part of as a Chinese financial weapon against the US where it threatens fiat money but it especially threatens the US dollar and China wants to do things to weaken it."

"I do wonder whether at this point Bitcoin should also be thought ... of" expresses a deviously framed insinuation of evil intentions by a Fu Manchu version of the Chinese government. This is a popular trope among Republicans and even Democrats today, who vie with each other to designate China as an enemy rather than a rival. But Thiel's admission that it's really about "wondering" tells us that we are closer to Alice's Wonderland than to the CIA book of facts.

Thiel then adds the temporal detail of "at this point," which introduces a surreal notion of time that has more to do with a fictional dramatic structure than the reality of contemporary history. It is tantamount to saying: This is where the plot thickens. And his suggestion of how it "should be thought of," besides being manipulative, indicates that we are invited into accepting the plot of a paranoid fantasy made up of thought rather than reality.

He then explains what he means by "a Chinese financial weapon against the US." Though he claims to be a believer in the unfettered freedom of cryptocurrency, he accuses it of violating what might be called "the rule of law" insofar as "it threatens fiat money," which is the privilege of every nation on earth. But that worry has little merit compared to the fact it "especially threatens the US dollar," which — it goes without saying — China wants to weaken.

Thiel knows where the money is. It lies in the primacy of the US dollar. That is why the US has 800 military bases across the globe.

Historical Note

Since the dismantling in 1971 of the Bretton Woods system by US President Richard Nixon — in whose name the Richard Nixon Foundation was created — the dollar has functioned as the ultimate and most devastating financial weapon in history wielded by a single government. The Bretton Woods agreement, signed in 1944 by 44 countries, allowed the dollar to play a controlled role as the world's reserve currency thanks to its convertibility with gold. When the growing instability of the dollar, due in part to the Vietnam War, threatened the order established by Bretton Woods, Nixon unilaterally broke the link with gold. Instantaneously, the US was free to weaponize the dollar for any purpose it judged to be in its interest.

Nixon produced one of the greatest feats accomplished in history. As with many successful unnoticed revolutions, Nixon's administration presented the uncoupling of the dollar and gold as a temporary measure, the response to a momentary crisis. It took two years for the world to notice that Bretton Woods had definitely collapsed.

The era of floating currencies began. Money could finally be seen for what it is: a shared imaginary repository of value that could eventually become the focus of what Yuval Noah Harari has called the religion of capitalism in his book, "Money."

For many people, Bitcoin has become a kind of alternative religion, or rather a vociferous radical sect on the fringes of the global religion of neoliberal capitalism. Bitcoin as a concept highlights the lesson brought home by the collapse of Bretton Woods: that the value of money people exchange, despite Milton Friedman's objections, is literally based on nothing and therefore meaningless.

That also means — though the faithful are not ready to admit it — that its value is infinitely manipulable. It appears to derive from economic reality but is anchored in little more than what a small group of people with excess cash may think of it on a given day. Elon Musk ostentatiously manipulated its value when he announced that Tesla had purchased \$1.5 billion worth of bitcoin.

For anyone with billions to throw around, it's an easy game to play. The manipulation by Musk, Peter Thiel's former associate as co-founder of PayPal, doesn't worry Thiel. Wondering about whether China might, in some imaginary scenario, use Bitcoin for nefarious purposes does trouble him.

Thiel represents our civilization's new ruling elite. It consists of individuals who sit between two hyperreal worlds, one dominated by the mystique that surrounds means of payment (cash) and the control of financial flows, complemented by another that seeks political control and the hegemony required to enforce the now imaginary "civilized" rules governing financial flow.

Since the demise of Bretton Woods, those rules have lost all meaning. That means the rules themselves can be weaponized. It's a monopoly that Thiel, his fellow members of the Nixon Foundation and most people in Washington insist on reserving for the US.

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The Pacific Alliance at 10: A Global Future Beckons

Craig Dempsey
May 14, 2021

A decade after being founded, what has the Pacific Alliance accomplished, and what can be expected from it in the future?

On April 28, 2011, an economic integration initiative involving Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru was announced following a forum held in Lima to discuss deeper regional integration. The Declaration of Lima saw the four countries commit themselves to deepening ties, with particular emphasis on improving engagement with the Asian Pacific region. But a decade on, what has the Pacific Alliance accomplished, and what can be expected from it in the future?

The Pacific Alliance was born out of the 11-nation Latin American Pacific Arc Forum, which included the above four nations alongside Pacific Alliance observers, Costa Rica and Panama, as well as Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Established in 2007, the forum's purpose was to improve its participants' engagement with the Asia-Pacific region. All apart from Nicaragua are today among the 59 observer states the Pacific Alliance has across five continents. The organization also admitted four nations as associate members in 2017, made up of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Singapore.

Underpinning the Pacific Alliance is a commitment to use integration to promote greater growth, development, competitiveness and business formation among its members, with Article 3 of the association's Framework Agreement committing members to the progressive promotion of free movement of goods, services, capital and people. Meanwhile, Article 8 of the agreement precludes member

states from modifying or replacing existing economic and trade deals involving any alliance members, highlighting the fact that the bloc is intended as a mechanism through which great value can be drawn from those agreements rather than as a move intended to replace them.

During 15 summits since being founded, the last of which was held in December 2020 in Chile's capital Santiago, the Pacific Alliance has acted as a tool for promoting integration among its members as well as being a vehicle for connecting them with the outside world. The alliance lists 23 areas of work, including tourism, education, finance, intellectual property and digital development, in which it aims to build industry standards and collaborate on best practices. The organization has also engaged in free trade and cooperation negotiations with a wide range of countries globally, including the four associate members.

Australia has been engaged in such negotiations since June 2019, with the government in Canberra heavily promoting the benefits of deepening ties with the four fast-growing Latin American economies. In the case of Canada, agreements have been reached on areas of cooperation and deeper integration, complementing the free trade agreements (FTAs) Canada already has in place with each of the alliance members.

New Zealand, meanwhile, remains engaged in FTA negotiations, while in December 2020, Singapore announced that it had substantially concluded negotiations for a Pacific Alliance – Singapore Free Trade Agreement (PASFTA). Just two months earlier, marking the reach into Asia that the alliance has now achieved, South Korea formally requested membership. All of this increases the diplomatic clout of Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, and makes the alliance a more enticing prospect for future members, which the organization appears intent on recruiting.

The future of the Pacific Alliance appears to be broad, with numerous countries slated as potential members. Those not only include the

four associate members, whose participation would provide the alliance with a truly global reach, but also the likes of Panama and Costa Rica. Meanwhile, Ecuador's recent election of new business-friendly President Guillermo Lasso means the Andean nation's potential entry into the alliance will now get a boost.

The expansion of the alliance could also see a deepening of integration in South America, with the bloc developing closer ties with the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), a rival economic integration comprised of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, and to which Bolivia is awaiting acceptance as a full member.

FTAs between members of each association are already in place, with ongoing free trade talks between Chile and Paraguay, representing Asuncion's first foray into bilateral FTAs and the final agreement Santiago needs to cover the entire MERCOSUR membership. With plenty of negotiations among many nations yet to go, it is impossible to say with certainty what the future holds for the Pacific Alliance.

However, based on the ambitions it has shown and the countries mooted as possible members, the alliance promises to become a powerful bloc on a global scale. It already counts four of the five best countries for doing business in Latin America among its members, according to the World Bank. If New Zealand, Singapore and South Korea were to join, it would have three of the best five in the world.

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India Is Slowly Evolving Into a Market Economy

Sunil Asnani & Kshitij Bhatia
May 26, 2021

After years of piecemeal reforms, India is introducing bold changes and opening up state-controlled sectors to market competition, promising higher growth prospects in the future.

India has come a long way since its independence from colonial rule in 1947. It started as a mixed economy where elements of both capitalism and socialism coexisted uneasily. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was a self-declared Fabian socialist who admired the Soviet Union. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, amended the constitution in 1976 and declared India to be a socialist country. She nationalized banks, insurance companies, mines and more.

Gandhi tied Indian industry in chains. She imposed capacity constraints, price controls, foreign exchange control and red tape. India's colonial-era bureaucracy now ran the commanding heights of the economy. Such measures stifled the Indian economy, created a black market and increased bureaucratic corruption. The Soviet-inspired Bureau of Industrial Costs and Prices remains infamous to this day.

India also adopted the Soviet five-year plans. A centralized economy emerged with the state controlling the media and telecom, financial, infrastructure and energy sectors. Even in seemingly private sectors such as consumer and industrial, the state handled too many aspects of investment, production and resource allocation.

Opening Up the Economy

In the 1980s, India took gentle strides toward a market economy and opened many sectors to

private competition. In 1991, the Gulf War led to a spike in oil prices, causing a balance-of-payments crisis. In response, India rolled back the state and liberalized its economy. The collapse of the Soviet Union that year pushed India toward a more market-oriented economy.

Over the years, state-run monopolies have been decimated by private companies in industries such as aviation and telecoms. However, India still retains a strong legacy of socialism. The government remains a major participant in sectors such as energy and financial services.

After years of piecemeal reforms, the Indian government is again unleashing bolder measures. These involve the opening up of several state monopolies to private competition. They are diluting state ownership of public sector units. In some cases, they are selling these units to domestic or foreign buyers. In due course, professionals, not bureaucrats, will be running this sector.

The government's bold move to privatization is because of two reasons. First, India's public sector has proved notoriously inefficient and been a burden on the taxpayer. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the economy shrink and caused a shortfall in tax revenue. Privatization is a way for the government to balance its books.

As Shweta Punj, Anil S. Mahajan and M.G. Arun rightly point out in *India Today*, the country "will have to rethink how it sells" its public sector units for privatization to be a success. India's track record is poor. The banana peels of political opposition, bureaucratic incompetence and judicial proceedings lie in waiting.

Potential Benefits of Privatization

Yet privatization, if managed well, could lead to several benefits. It will lead to more efficiently managed businesses and a more vibrant economy. Once a state-controlled firm is privatized, it could either be turned around by its new owner or perish. In case the company fails, it would create space for better players.

Importantly, privatization could strengthen the government's fiscal position, giving it greater freedom to invest in sectors like health care and education where the Indian government has historically underinvested. Furthermore, privatization could increase investable opportunities in both public and private markets.

Given India's fractious nature and labyrinthine institutions, privatization is likely to lead to mixed results and uneven progress. One thing is certain, though. Privatization is inevitable and cannot be rolled back. Sectors in which market forces reign supreme and shareholder interests are aligned are likely to do well. State-controlled companies that prioritize policy goals over shareholder value are unlikely to do so. Similarly, sectors that have experienced frequent policy changes are unlikely to thrive.

There is a reason why savvy investors are constructing portfolios weighted toward consumer and technology sectors. So far, companies in these sectors have operated largely free of state intervention. They have had the liberty to grow and function autonomously. Unsurprisingly, they have delivered good returns.

The state-dominated financial services sector also offers promise. Well-managed private companies have a long runway to speed up on. Among large economies, India's financial services sector offers unique promise. In the capitalist US, the state has limited presence and private players dominate. This mature market offers few prospects of high growth. In communist China, state-controlled firms dominate financial services, leaving little space for the private sector. With the Indian government planning to reduce its stake in a state-controlled life insurance company, as well as sell two state-owned banks and one general insurance company, the financial services sector arguably offers a uniquely important opportunity for investors.

Just as India did well after its 1991 balance-of-payments crisis, the country may bounce back after the COVID-19 pandemic. The taxpayer may no longer need to subsidize underperforming

state-owned companies holding the country back. Instead, market competition may attract investment, create jobs and increase growth.

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Austerity for the Poor and Prosperity for the Rich

Ahmed Aref
August 1, 2021

With fragile social protection systems in the Arab world, people have constructed their own resilience mechanisms for survival.

There has been a growing interest in social protection policies in the Arab region dating back to the 1990s. Yet the impact of such measures has not been empirically and independently assessed. Evidence shows that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the poor have been getting poorer and the number of vulnerable groups and people living below the poverty line is increasing.

Poverty rates have risen throughout a decade of turmoil. This started with the Arab Spring in 2010-11 and intensified when the pandemic began in 2020. The situation is worse in Arab countries where there is ongoing conflict, economic hardship or political crises. These indicators of rising poverty mean the effectiveness of the social protection policies in the region must be placed under critical examination.

The Arab Mashreq is a case in point. This region, which consists of Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and, in some definitions, Egypt, has been marred by prolonged conflict, economic turmoil and political upheaval. In

response to the crises, there has been an added focus on people's resilience mechanisms to cope with the socioeconomic uncertainty.

From Economic Reforms to the COVID Crisis

Since 2015, many Arab governments have introduced financial and economic reform policies, supported by the International Monetary Fund. However, in the absence of effective social protection policies, these changes led to a sharp increase in inflation. This exacerbated the hardship of the poor, caused negative repercussions for people's living conditions and led to further structural social stratification. The negative impact on the poor was accompanied by a political narrative of austerity for a better future. Simultaneously, generous policies were introduced for the upper class.

The policy response in Mashreq countries to the pandemic was not an exception from this inequality paradigm. The poor have been excluded in the design of policy responses. The fragile health sectors and the coverage gap of medical insurance generated an association between appropriate recovery and the upper class.

Accordingly, access to quality care was exclusively for the rich. On the other hand, the poor had to rely on public health, which is often underfunded, understaffed and lacks sufficient resources.

In addition, government support in the form of loans and financial subsidies to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic was directed exclusively at big businesses. This led to the shutdown of many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and caused unemployment to rise in all Mashreq countries.

Moreover, refugees and internally displaced people were left behind in the policy response. Instead of prioritizing their needs as vulnerable people, they faced restrictions on moving out from overcrowded camps due to the lockdown measures, which exacerbated their plight. In particular, they suffered from a lack of access to health services and malnutrition.

Resilience Mechanisms

In the Mashreq, people have used different coping and resilience mechanisms throughout the pandemic. Yet defining what appears to be the relatively simple concept of resilience is complex. Resilience is a term that has been applied to research and practice in nearly every possible area of life and academia — from science to sociology, psychology, nursing and medicine to business and ecology. The theoretical definition of resilience is “one's ability to bounce back or recover from adversity.” Research on coping with poverty emphasizes the importance of resilience mechanisms to be considered in the design, development and implementation of social protection policies for the prevention of risks associated with irrational resilience mechanisms.

Some resilience mechanisms in Arab Mashreq countries are constructive. For instance, there has been a rise in transnational family support, including remittances, and a revival in the agricultural sector due to food shortages. Dual-earner households have also increased as more women are joining the labor force. Yet the majority of reported resilience mechanisms are destructive. Seven areas are particularly important.

Key Areas

First, reports show increasing numbers of children who have abstained from going to school or dropped out altogether, often due to rampant poverty. In recent years, economic reform policies have included a sharp reduction of fuel, electricity and water subsidies. This has led to higher living costs. In response, children have been forced to work to earn money and contribute to the family income. The pandemic has made the situation even bleaker with the new educational setup, as not everyone has access to computers or the internet. The lack of technological infrastructure has meant the poor are excluded from the online classes introduced by lockdowns.

Second, even before the pandemic, leftover or used food markets emerged in countries such as Jordan and Egypt. At these places, the poor can buy food at reduced prices. These markets, which sell scraps of food, have become increasingly common in areas with people on low incomes. Often, the remains of meals from restaurants and hotels are offered to families at a discounted rate, with many food items unpackaged and no information as to where or when they were made. Some customers have said that no matter the quality, they are in need of the low prices as they cannot afford to buy other food products.

Third, the cut in subsidies and rising food prices have not only affected the poor. Many middle-class people cannot afford quality food due to the increase in prices and their depleted family savings. This has been exacerbated by economic hardship and the pandemic. This is particularly the case in Lebanon, where the lira (or pound) has lost most of its value, leading to higher costs of living. Lebanese people are reportedly cutting out meat from their diets or skipping meals. In Iraq, throughout the COVID-19 crisis, people have been forced to sell their furniture and personal items, just for the sake of buying food. Many Iraqis have lost jobs and the country lacks social protection measures.

Fourth, in response to the rising prices of medicine in the region, people have turned to traditional medicine and herbal remedies instead. For instance, due to the loss of more than 90% of the Lebanese pound's value, there has been a shortage of essential medicines. The catalyst behind this was the ongoing national economic crisis in Lebanon and the state measures on lifting subsidies on medicine. Pharmacies often lack basic medications for blood pressure and even painkillers and antibiotics.

Fifth, to cope with poverty, mothers are joining the informal sector in order to have dual-earner families. Daughters have also joined the workforce. But the problem is that this sector is not covered by any social protection schemes, which means that families struggled during the

height of lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Sixth, the unprecedented rise in food prices has led some of the poor to buy their daily needs of food products via the postpaid system, or the so-called popular "note." This system, known as shokok, is based on mutual trust between grocery store owners and residents in poor areas. As part of shokok, a shop owner archives either daily or weekly the merchant records of customer withdrawals on a note before collecting the cash at the end of each month.

Seventh, the United Nations and several media outlets have reported increased rates of crimes, drug abuse, robberies and rising cases of suicide as some people struggle to cope with poverty and hardship.

In light of these resilience mechanisms, social protection systems have to be rethought in Arab Mashreq countries. When left behind, most vulnerable people generate their own forms of resilience, which might be destructive. To a major extent, the policy response is designed for the poor to fund the rich. However, the unmet needs of the poor are not only affecting their wellbeing negatively, but it will also impact the state in the long term.

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Infrastructure: The Key to the China Challenge

Peter Rodgers
September 1, 2021

To address the China challenge, the US must prioritize public investments in education, infrastructure and basic research rather than demonizing rivals and increasing military spending.

China has been recognized by Washington as the major rival to the United States in nearly every field. However, this isn't the first time an Asian country has posed a threat to America's economic dominance.

In the mid-1980s, Japan built up a massive trade surplus with the United States, igniting a fierce backlash from both Republicans and Democrats over how it acquired US technology — often by theft, according to US officials — and how Tokyo used the government's deep influence to push its companies into a dominant global position.

But there was no nefarious scheme. In reality, Japan had made significant investments in its own education and infrastructure, allowing it to produce high-quality goods that American customers desired. In the case of China, American businesses and investors are covertly profiting by operating low-wage factories and selling technologies to their “partners” in China. American banks and venture capitalists are also active in China, funding agreements. Furthermore, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's infrastructure investment extends far beyond its own borders.

The BRI is Chinese President Xi Jinping's hallmark foreign policy initiative and the world's largest-ever global infrastructure project, funding and developing roads, power plants, ports, railroads, 5G networks and fiber-optic cables all over the world. The BRI was created with the

goal of connecting China's modern coastal cities with the country's undeveloped heartland and to its Asian neighbors, firmly establishing China's place at the center of an interlinked globe.

The program has already surpassed its initial regional corridors and spread across every continent. The expansion of the BRI is worrying because it may make countries more vulnerable to Chinese political coercion while also allowing China to extend its authority more widely.

Infrastructure Wars

US President Joe Biden and other G7 leaders launched a worldwide infrastructure plan, Build Back Better World (B3W), to counterweight China's BRI during the G7 summit in Cornwall in June. The plan, according to a White House statement, aims to narrow infrastructure need in low and middle-income countries around the world through investment by the private sector, the G7 and its financial partners. The Biden administration also aims to use the plan to complement its domestic infrastructure investment and create more jobs at home to demonstrate US competitiveness abroad.

The US government deserves credit for prioritizing a response to the BRI and collaborating with the G7 nations to provide an open, responsible and sustainable alternative. However, it seems unlikely that this new attempt would be sufficient to emulate the BRI and rebuild America's own aging infrastructure, which, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, “is both dangerously overstretched and lagging behind that of its economic competitors, particularly China.”

On the one hand, it's unknown if B3W will be equipped with the necessary instruments to compete. The Biden administration has acknowledged that “status quo funding and financing approaches are inadequate,” hinting at a new financial structure but without providing specific details. It remains to be seen if B3W will assist development finance firms to stimulate adequate new private infrastructure investments

as well as whether Congress will authorize much-needed extra funding.

Even with more funding, B3W may not be sufficiently ambitious. While the World Bank predicts that an \$18-trillion global infrastructure deficit exists, the project will be unable to make real progress until extra resources are allocated to it.

Also, the United States still lacks an affirmative Asia-Pacific trade policy. To compete with the BRI, the US will need to reach new trade and investment agreements while also bolstering core competitiveness in vital technologies such as 5G. It will also need to devote greater resources to leading the worldwide standards-setting process, as well as training, recruiting and maintaining elite personnel.

On the other hand, China is often the only country willing to invest in vital infrastructure projects in underdeveloped and developing countries, and, in some cases, China is more competitive than the US as it can move quickly from design to construction.

Desire to Invest

Furthermore, China's desire to invest is unaffected by a country's political system, as seen by the fact that it has signed memorandums of understanding with 140 nations, including 18 EU members and several other US allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Even the United Kingdom, as a member of the G7, had a 5G expansion deal with Huawei that was canceled owing to security and geopolitical concerns. Nonetheless, the termination procedure will take about two years, during which time the Chinese tech behemoth will continue to run and upgrade the UK's telecoms infrastructure.

As a result, the BRI has fueled a rising belief in low and middle-income nations that China is on the rise and the US and its allies are on the decline. The policy consequence for these countries is that their future economic growth is dependent on strong political ties with China.

Unlike the US and European governments, which only make up for part of the exporters'

losses, Beijing guarantees the initial capital and repays the profits to the investing companies and banks. In addition, since there is no transfer of power and government in China, there will be virtually no major policy changes, meaning that investors will feel more secure. So far, about 60% of the BRI projects have been funded by the Chinese government and 26% by the private sector.

For far too long, the US reaction to the BRI has been to emphasize its flaws and caution countries against accepting Chinese finance or technology without providing an alternative. Until now, this haphazard reaction has failed to protect American interests. The United States is now presenting a comprehensive, positive agenda for the first time. Transparency, economic, environmental and social sustainability, good governance and high standards are all emphasized in Build Back Better World.

While providing a credible US-led alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative is desirable, the US must commit adequate financial and leadership resources to the effort. This is a good first step, but Washington must be careful not to create a new paranoia by demonizing economic and geopolitical rivals such as China and Japan to the point where it distorts priorities and leads to increased military spending rather than public investments in education, infrastructure and basic research, all of which are critical to America's future prosperity and security.

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Will the US and Iran Meet Jaw to Jaw?

Gary Grappo
February 8, 2021

Joe Biden must contend with many parties and conflicting interests as he ponders his next moves in restarting negotiations with Iran on the nuclear accord.

On February 4, US President Joe Biden visited the US State Department, located down the street from the White House. He went to deliver a foreign policy message much needed by the men and women of that department and the nation. His audience was a receptive one, not surprising given that nearly all of the hundreds in attendance were career diplomats and civil service employees. He delivered exactly what they wanted to hear, affirming that, “You are the center of all that I intend to do ... the heart of it.” That message dovetailed with his plans for an expansive reassertion of American diplomacy. It was necessary because American diplomacy had been absent for the last four years under the Trump administration.

The foreign policy agenda outlined by Biden variously referred to: fortifying ties with America’s key allies and partners in Europe and Asia; serving notice to Russian President Vladimir Putin that Biden will challenge, “in a manner very different from my predecessor,” Moscow’s cyber threats and authoritarian moves against neighbors; challenging America’s new nemesis, China, on human rights, intellectual property and global governance but also offering cooperation when it serves US interests; calling out Saudi Arabia on Yemen and Myanmar on the recent coup; and recommitting the US to

defending democracy and human rights and to upping immigration numbers into the US.

The one major foreign policy challenge staring President Biden directly in the face but not mentioned was Iran. During his election campaign, he had promised to re-enter the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear accord with Iran from which then-President Donald Trump had withdrawn the US in May 2018.

So Many Voices

Not mentioning the subject in this — Biden’s first major foreign policy address of his brief presidency — may have been a wise course of action. First, his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, and national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, have promised that the US will consult with America’s P5-plus-1 partners — Britain, France and Germany — as well as regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia before making decisions or taking any action.

Moreover, at this stage, speaking too critically or harshly so soon would only trigger further stubbornness and resistance from an already recalcitrant Iran. And speaking too hopefully would ignite strong pushback from members of Congress resistant to almost anything short of Tehran’s capitulation.

Rejoining the JCPOA is replete with challenges that Biden’s former boss, Barack Obama, also faced but badly mishandled. Both Blinken and Sullivan have indicated that simply re-entering the nuclear agreement cannot be this administration’s sole objective. Any agreement with Iran that lasts into and through the next Republican administration must also address Iran’s growing missile arsenal and its meddling behavior in the Middle East, including in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and elsewhere.

Just getting these issues on the agenda with Tehran would be an achievement, given the Islamic Republic’s oft-stated opposition to such discussions. Nevertheless, Biden knows that to reach a genuinely enduring agreement that survives his presidency, these issues must be on

the table. Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, should also understand that for any agreement to offer his country predictability and stability in its international endeavors into the future, these issues are inescapable.

Iran isn't the only party with whom the Biden administration will have to negotiate.

First, there are America's allies who are part of the accord and who, for the last four years, have battled to keep the JCPOA on life support. It will be Britain, France and Germany who will run the initial interference for the US before it can meet face to face with the Iranians. Furthermore, the US will have to have their firm support before it can reach out to the other P5-plus-1 members, China and Russia. So, winning their support will be vital to the administration's success.

Second, there are America's regional allies, most especially Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, who have a genuine — they might say existential — interest in the outcome of any future talks. There was considerable dissension among these countries in the run-up to the 2015 accord and in its aftermath. Some, most especially Israel, made their objections known publicly and undiplomatically. Nevertheless, their concerns were valid, and President Biden and his team will have to find a way to ensure that these governments' concerns, fears and interests are taken into account.

Moreover, any dialog addressing the regional issues — whether on Iran's malign activity in the Middle East or perhaps even the presence of US forces in the region — will likely have to include these countries. (How that might happen is a mystery, given that states like Saudi Arabia and Iran don't yet officially recognize Israel.)

What is essential for the Americans, however, is that these governments are somehow a part of the negotiations and that whatever results from the next round of negotiations is acceptable to the nations of the region most impacted. Blinken and Sullivan, chastened by the experience of 2015 and what came after, undoubtedly understand this.

The Invisible Partner at the Negotiating Table

Then, there is the final and likely most challenging party to future talks. That is the US Congress. Securing congressional approval for a follow-on agreement(s) and ensuring it endures beyond the Biden presidency will depend on winning that body's approval. While Biden probably will not submit any new agreement to the Senate for approval, as the Constitution requires for formal treaties, he will nevertheless need to have at least its implicit support.

Biden cannot afford to make the mistake of Woodrow Wilson in 1918 with the League of Nations and President Obama in 2015 with the JCPOA. He must find a way to bring in key members from both the House and Senate, even if only indirectly, in order to ensure that whatever results reflects their concerns. If Biden and his team can satisfy the concerns of the other two major groups — America's P5-plus-1 partners and regional allies — then they will likely have addressed many of Congress' concerns. But he cannot afford either to take their support for granted or to neglect Congress. They will have to be engaged throughout the process.

Iran and All the Issues

Of course, there is also the heart of the issue: the longstanding distrust and animus between the US and Iran. The imperfect deal brokered by Obama and the withdrawal from it by Trump served to exacerbate these feelings among Americans and Iranians, respectively. So, the sides may be starting from a more difficult position than they did in 2012, when they initially began their dialog that culminated with the JCPOA. Hardliners on both sides have further hardened their positions, Republicans (and some Democrats, too) in the US and the all-powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its leadership in Iran. They're not just polar opposites — they live at opposite ends of the galaxy.

Furthermore, the issues have been brought into stark relief as a result of the American exit and subsequent imposition of crushing sanctions

on Iran, its leadership, banking institutions and the IRGC. The country's economy is reeling, though it has managed to finally stabilize. But any notion or hope of significant growth that reaches rank-and-file Iranians and businesses is non-existent under US sanctions. In 2021 and beyond, a nation of some 84 million people must be a part of the international community and most especially the global economy. That can't happen as long as US sanctions hang over Iran's head. The choice is stark, albeit hard, for Iran's leadership: continue on the path to nuclear capability or join the rest of the international community.

Despite Iran's early declarations, an immediate US return to the JCPOA and suspension of sanctions prior to some of the aforementioned talks are a chimera. The Biden administration hasn't taken the bait and shouldn't. With sanctions in place, Biden has an advantage, no matter how much he may have opposed them in 2018.

The administration should use this advantage. So, at the very least, before rejoining the JCPOA, it should insist on Tehran's acceptance of follow-on negotiations on: the various time horizons on Iran's nuclear development with weapons implications; the range and numbers of missiles; more comprehensive inspections, including of military sites; and its involvement in countries of the region and support for various militias and groups almost universally viewed as terrorists. Iran's hardliners see some of these issues — like missiles and support for militia groups in the Middle East — as necessary and even existential, but there may be no avoiding talking about them.

Iran doubtlessly has its chronic issues with the Americans, from threats of regime change to menacing military presence throughout the region, including US Navy aircraft carriers off its coast to American Air Force heavy bomber flights near its borders. It will also want some guarantees that whatever is agreed this time has some assurance of continuing. Then there are America's non-nuclear-related sanctions on Iran, e.g., those relating to terrorism, terrorism

financing, human rights, religious persecution, etc. These also are likely to become issues in any future talks.

The Main Thing

Hanging over all of this is the justifiably feared nuclearization of the Middle East. There can be no doubt that a nuclear-armed or -capable Iran would inevitably trigger similar strategic moves by Saudi Arabia and perhaps the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Such a development in the world's most volatile region is nightmarish.

Resolving these supremely difficult issues will come down to some hard diplomacy and earnest, patient dialog. There is no military solution. Nuclear weapons can never be one either. And, as the previous administration's "maximum pressure" approach demonstrated, Iran cannot be sanctioned into capitulating.

In the words of Winston Churchill, "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war." It's time for both sides to set their jaws to work.

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EU Concern Over Ukraine Is Not Enough

Sebastian Schäffer
April 13, 2021

The European Union needs to send a strong and unified message regarding tensions over Ukraine.

Hostilities between Ukraine and Russia reached an alarming level last week when further Russian troops were deployed on the Ukrainian border. Despite a statement from the Kremlin describing the act as “not threatening,” Kyiv accused Moscow of moving thousands of soldiers to its northern and eastern borders and on the Russian-annexed Crimean Peninsula to create an intimidating atmosphere in violation of the Minsk agreements and the ceasefire in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine.

The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed it is Kyiv and NATO countries that are increasing their armed forces in Ukraine and the Black Sea close to Russia’s borders.

Nevertheless, the Russian Federation is following its usual scheme and is ready to seize any opportunity that arises. There may be three possible reasons behind these new developments: 1) Moscow wants to send a message to the US administration after recent statements regarding President Vladimir Putin; 2) the Russians are seeking a pretext to install their “peacekeepers” in Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine; or 3) the Kremlin wants to use the water crisis in Crimea to intervene and build a corridor through the Donbass region.

There might be other drivers, such as the ongoing power struggle inside the Russian administration, despite the fact that Putin signed a law that would allow him to stay in office until 2036. A manufactured external threat to Russian citizens — Russian passports have been issued to

many Ukrainians living in the two self-declared people’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk — would help deflect attention from internal economic problems, which have only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky shut down three television channels linked to Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, which may have contributed to the latest tension. Not only does Medvedchuk have personal ties to Putin, but the stations have also broadcast pro-Russian propaganda to the Ukrainian people.

In the end, the cause can be left to Kremlinologists to decipher. Yet what is clear is that Putin has proved to be ready to act whenever there is a chance, and he has plenty of opportunities to create an event to trigger action. Ultimately, it does not matter why. What matters is that other regional actors are now using peaceful means to prevent a further escalation between Russia and Ukraine.

Is Dialogue Enough?

The US and the European Union have declared their support for Kyiv. Josep Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief and vice-president of the European Commission, expressed concern over the latest developments. The European Parliament also released a statement in which it reiterates that Moscow must reduce tensions by ending its military buildup in and close to Ukrainian territory. This is certainly not enough, but what are the options?

Engaging in dialogue is fine, but it seems the meaning of it has been forgotten — that is, to listen to each other and try to understand. When there is an argument between parties, there should be a general assumption that the other person could be right. It is not sufficient to only listen in order to respond and get one’s own points across. It should also not be disregarded that there is a civil society in Russia. When there is a dispute with the Kremlin, it does not entail the whole population.

What is important is that language matters, words become actions, and actions have

consequences — and this could lead to a dangerous downward spiral. Nevertheless, there must also be some clear lines established. This tit-for-tat blame game that has dominated the discourse for decades has to stop. This is not a reasonable discussion. The demands by Zelensky to accelerate Ukraine's membership in NATO are not helpful, but nor is a meeting between Russia, Germany and France on the situation in Ukraine without including representatives from Kyiv.

Diplomatic relations among regional actors have been strained for years but deteriorated further over recent months. In February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated in an interview about relations between Russia and the European Union that “if you want peace, be prepared for war.”

In the current political climate, this sounds far more threatening than it might have a few months ago. At that time, the German Foreign Ministry rightly called the comments “disconcerting and incomprehensible,” though Lavrov is known for his controversial statements.

Nevertheless, this has marked a new low in the EU–Russia relations, and it seems that things could get worse. Expelling diplomats of EU member states while Borrell, the top European diplomat, was in Moscow is just power play. Despite Lavrov being in office for 17 years, the European Union has never found a way to reach a consensus on how to respond to his actions. In 2004, Central and Eastern European countries had just joined the EU, which was and still is a big success, but the necessary reforms in the institutional setup to be able to handle Lavrov have still not been implemented.

What is even worse, the lack of capabilities to anticipate consequences has forever been a weak point in Brussels. Negotiations for an association agreement between the EU and Ukraine effectively led to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Politics is much more complicated and one action does not necessarily lead to a specific outcome, but there is certainly a possibility of a butterfly effect.

Better Preparation

In order to be better prepared, member states need to pool resources together and ultimately transfer sovereignty to the EU when it comes to foreign policy. Otherwise, the divide-and-conquer approach by Russia will continue. After a rather humiliating meeting with Lavrov in February, Borrell said, “As ever, it will be for member states to decide the next steps, and yes, these could include sanctions.” This is not a language that the Kremlin understands.

The German government, for instance, has been reluctant when it comes to imposing sanctions. On the one hand, this is due to Berlin's history with the Russian Federation, but to a lesser extent, it is because of the Nord Stream 2, a gas pipeline linking Russia and Germany via the Baltic Sea. Nevertheless, this would be an opportunity to act as the pipeline also threatens Ukraine's energy supply and might open another opportunity to act for the Kremlin. Yet there is a very good argument against sanctions: They would hurt the general population in Russia, which would further alienate the people who, in turn, would rally around the flag.

Nevertheless, there are other ways to respond, ideally targeting the circles close to the Kremlin. Suspending Russia from the SWIFT global financial network could also be an option; calls to do so first emerged in 2014 after Russia's actions in Ukraine. Yet this might lead to a fragmentation of the international financial system; Russian authorities have already backed international use of its alternative payment network.

The biggest danger for the Putin regime would be if the majority of Russians understood that it is possible to live in a liberal democracy. This is why a closer relationship between Ukraine and the EU is so dangerous for the Kremlin. The current escalation is not about the expansion of Russia's borders or preserving traditional values, as often spun by Russian media and Moscow. This is a facade that masks the fact that if people were given the possibility of improving their lives without the strongman in the Kremlin, the Putin system would become irrelevant.

Sanctions on Russia will most likely not lead to this outcome. There will not be a democratic revolution on the streets — this can only be through a gradual process. The question is: Will Western democracy survive long enough to see that change coming in order to still be a model?

Therefore, the EU has to send a clear and unified message to prevent further escalation and not only react or be taken by surprise, as was the case in 2014. Ideally, this would also strengthen transatlantic relations by finding a common approach to the evolving situation. After the EU's top representatives suffered political embarrassment in Moscow and Ankara, it would be even more necessary to send a strong signal to Russia.

Being concerned is not enough — neither by institutions in Brussels, nor by EU member states. There is a need to be better prepared for certain scenarios. Repeating the same mistakes will be unforgivable for the region and the future of the European Union itself.

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The US, NATO and the Question of Russia

Emir Hadzikadunic
May 31, 2021

Are the US and its allies misguided in their apprehension of Russia's power projection in Europe?

If the question of a rising China and its possible collision with the United States is a central issue in world affairs today, then the rivalry between Russia and the US is the most

pressing security challenge in the European theater. From the second half of the Obama administration, through Donald Trump's first term and now President Joe Biden's initial mandate, the US has ramped up pressure on Russia. Washington has imposed sanctions, expelled Russian diplomats, strengthened the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), rotated troops through Poland and the Baltic states and conducted military drills next to the Russian border. Defender Europe 2021, "One of the largest US-Army led military exercises in decades," will run until June, with 28,000 total troops from 27 nations taking part.

If we are to believe the prevalent narrative that Beijing is Washington's most dangerous rival, then the US and its allies who fear Russia and are hell-bent on defending Europe from supposed Kremlin interference are misguided — or are they?

Security Dilemma

Much like the tensions around the status of Taiwan, for instance, Ukraine is a hotspot for the complex power struggle between East and West on the European continent. Ukraine as a sovereign state and Taiwan as a self-governing entity share common features: Both are located in dangerous geopolitical regions on the periphery of the US-led order, and both are increasing their military spending. Furthermore, the US provides no explicit security guarantees for either. In somewhat different ways, both Beijing and Moscow do not think that Taiwan (in case of China) and Ukraine (in case of Russia) have a right to self-determination, especially in the domain of foreign policy.

However, there is a major difference between the two. When it comes to Ukraine, events have probably passed a point of no return, especially with regards to Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014 in what some argue was a preemptive effort to prevent the peninsula from becoming a potential NATO naval base in the future.

Supposedly defensive moves by Russia to increase its own security in areas along its

periphery are perceived by the US and NATO member states as offensive, compelling countervailing actions. These include increased US military presence in the Baltics and elsewhere along NATO's eastern borders and further expansion into southeastern Europe. The measures, in turn, provoked retaliatory steps from Moscow, such as nuclear military modernization, taking aggressive positions toward neighboring states or fanning the flames of internal crisis in Montenegro in 2015-16 and the Republic of Northern Macedonia in 2017-18. This month, Russia and Serbia launched joint military exercises to coincide with the Defender Europe drills being held in neighboring Balkan states.

The US-Russia dyad in Europe is not only about a security dilemma. Moscow keeps its adversaries in check with ambiguity as well. For example, Russian President Vladimir Putin has openly warned the West of undeclared red lines. He amassed and then begun the withdrawal of more than 100,000 troops from Ukraine's border to demonstrate Russia's capacity to both escalate and de-escalate the conflict in eastern Ukraine but without revealing Moscow's strategic plans.

Moscow is on a mission to correct "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," as President Putin once described the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia is seriously interested in replacing the existing US-led liberal order, primarily the one extended beyond the Iron Curtain, with favorable and less democratic European regimes that fit Russia's mold. These ideas were widely propagated by Russia's neo-Eurasian movement since the 1990s. Igor Panarin, professor at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, advocated in favor of a Eurasian Union with four capitals, for example, including one in Belgrade.

More recently, Anton Shekhovtsov, the director of the Centre for Democratic Integrity, has highlighted a critically important tendency: the growing links between Russian actors and Western far-right politicians to gain leverage over European politics and undermine the Western liberal order. In so doing, as David Shlapak

writes for RAND, "Russia would seek to divide the [NATO] alliance to the point of dissolving it, break the transatlantic security link, and re-establish itself as the dominant power in Eastern and Central Europe."

Power Projection

Some may argue that Russia's goals are tangential. What really matters is Moscow's capability to project hard power across the European continent. In this regard, skeptics largely question Russia's ability to challenge the European nations in a scenario where the US stops extending protection to its European allies. Their typical point of reference is that Russia is but a "giant gas station" or that its annual GDP is "smaller than Italy's."

However, what is usually overlooked here is Russia's nuclear capability "to destroy the United States — and, not incidentally, its European allies — as a functioning society." While it is highly unlikely that Moscow will ever resort to such an extreme, the fact that it does have the nuclear option should serve as a reminder of its power potential.

Russia's sheer size, vast natural resources and an impressive cyberweapons arsenal have also enabled the Kremlin to punch above its weight and pursue not just defensive policies, as we have seen in Georgia in 2008, and in eastern Ukraine and Crimea in 2014. Russia has sent troops into Syria and mercenaries into Libya, and provided support to Venezuela's embattled president, Nicolas Maduro. Then there was the alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential election and the more recent SolarWinds cyberattack attributed to Russian hackers. Moreover, according to Rand Corporation analysis, Russia could inflict a decisive defeat on NATO forces in the Baltic region and reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga within 60 hours.

If the US decided to diminish its presence in the European theater, much like it has done in the Middle East under Donald Trump, Russia would face little pushback to the expansion of its sphere of influence in eastern Europe. The European

continent would no longer be unified and free in accordance with collective security and liberal principles. Populist and nationalist governments in central and southeastern Europe would be tempted to seek other security solutions. One can only imagine a European subsystem in Russia's image, divided between European poles trying to balance against each other.

Skirmishes over new borders in the Balkans, for example, recently discussed in a "disputed non-paper," could potentially spin out of control and into new regional wars. America's allies in western Europe would not only be disappointed but fearful for their own future. Finally, other US allies around the world, especially members of the balancing coalition in Asia Pacific, such as Australia, would also know that they could no longer count on Washington.

The Danger

So far, no US administration has shown any intention to leave Europe as a vital area of America's global footprint in which it had invested a vast amount of blood and treasure over the past century. Russia also wants what every nation wants: security and the absence of competition along its borders.

This brings us to what the historian Michael Howard once called "the most dangerous of all moods," in which the US would not accept relegation to the second rank in the European subsystem. Russia would also never tolerate a similar outcome for itself in its own neighborhood.

Thus, Ukraine, which the US is not treaty-bound to defend, will remain a hotspot. The most exposed states — Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — to which the US does have an obligation under NATO's Article 5, will remain vulnerable largely for reasons of their geography. Other central and eastern European countries, such as Poland, Romania or Bulgaria, will continue to harbor fears of Russian geopolitical ambitions.

The only question is how long this strategic rivalry may mitigate the most dangerous outcome

and evade a spiral toward a wider European disorder.

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Afghanistan: A Final Nail in the Coffin of American Foreign Policy

Bilal Rahmani
August 27, 2021

The valuable lesson Joe Biden is teaching future allies by allowing Afghans to fall from the wings of departing jets is that the US will not defend them.

When the United States began Operation Enduring Freedom, leading its forces into Afghanistan to empower local resistance to oust the Taliban, Afghans around the world cheered in sheer jubilation. The unipolar hero that is the United States of America had come to save the day and defeat the wicked Taliban, presided over by the one-eyed tyrant Mullah Mohammad Omar. But now, after 20 years of "missteps," "miscalculations" and "misunderstandings," we Afghans now wonder whether we were grossly mistaken.

The DC foreign policy community, nevertheless, has come up with predictably uncreative rebuttals to accusations of failure. We trained the Afghans wrong, the story went, ignoring the fact that Afghan soldiers have held their own for the entirety of the war. Leadership was weak, they said, ignoring the fact the US endorsed the power-sharing deal that kept those leaders in power. The Afghans couldn't build an economy, we were told, ignoring the fact John F. Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, had been consistently

putting out reports for over a decade pointing out that the US strategy needed dramatic reimagining. There was no local support and Afghans had no will to fight, they surmised, ignoring the fact that Afghan special forces continue to defend their homeland.

No Surprise

These excuses and reflections come as little surprise to those the United States has already abandoned: the South Vietnamese to the northern Viet Cong, the Iraqis to Iran and the Islamic State, the Kurds to the Turks, and, most notably, the American troops who had fought and sacrificed their lives in these “forever wars” to history. All were left to perish at the hands of an evil so vile that the US had no other option but to first invade, only to later leave, suggesting that maybe the evil was not so bad after all.

Vietnam, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan: seven different administrations, Democrat and Republican. Kabul is simply the latest victim learning the valuable lesson President Joe Biden is teaching future allies by allowing Afghans to fall from the wings of departing American jets: The US will not defend you.

All an adversary needs to do is be consistent and not give up. Time after time we have been shown that if the resistance is stubborn enough, the US will inevitably turn its back, exclaim, “What can we say, the locals just can’t be helped!” while waiting for a politically opportune time — just long enough before any election so that constituents forget — and then buck and run.

China’s state-run media has already begun to propagate this message to Taiwan: The US will abandon you, maybe not in five years, maybe not in 10 or even 20, but it will abandon you eventually — and we will be here. For once, China’s propaganda departments are perhaps not wrong. The US can’t rely on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, given its non-interference principle. Japan’s self-defense forces aren’t equipped to assist. South Korea has its hands full with the north. The US Navy is not built for combat with China’s modern and

flexible fleet, and there are no ideal places to base and supply consistent military engagement in Taiwan.

Likewise, politics will always play a role in US military engagements, but would its domestic population ever stomach a hot conflict with China over an island it shares no language, culture or customs with outside of it being a democracy?

China, on the other hand, holds the good cards. It has more ships than the US Navy. Taiwan is just 100 miles away, and the Chinese people are fanatical about reunification. And, just like the Taliban, Beijing isn’t going anywhere.

Miscalculations

US Vice-President Kamala Harris has proclaimed that the US will not tolerate China’s unlawful actions in the South China Sea, recently reaffirming Washington’s commitment to its allies. But will the vice president 20 years into a “forever war” with China think the same?

It’s likely that future White House administrations will have new considerations, ones that might make a trillion-dollar war with China far less palatable to the US voter base than trillion-dollar climate change legislation to end America’s fossil fuel dependency.

Then all the US foreign policy community has to do is look back and state that the failure was a result of “missteps,” “miscalculations” and “misunderstandings,” entirely forgetting that the last time these blunders were made, they vowed to learn from their mistakes, and they vowed to stand by their allies.

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What Is the Ruckus Over AUKUS?

Gary Grappo
September 27, 2021

Political sensibilities aside, is AUKUS the right undertaking?

Earlier this month, the US, UK and Australia announced an unprecedented agreement to provide nuclear-powered submarines to the Australian Navy. The move provoked outrage from France, which had been negotiating the sale of conventionally-powered submarines to the Australians.

French ire led to the withdrawal of its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra. This was particularly surprising given France's strong political and security ties — not to mention historical, as America's oldest ally — to both nations. Inexplicably, President Emmanuel Macron did not recall his ambassador to London, prompting some to posit that after Britain's withdrawal from the EU, it didn't matter as much.

It's also very likely that Macron, who has been Europe's strongest advocate on behalf of a stand-alone European defense capability — i.e., less dependence on the US — did not want to alienate Britain in his efforts.

Prenez un Grip!

Leave it to Britain's blunt-speaking prime minister, Boris Johnson, to succinctly lend some reality to the blow-up among allies. Speaking in Washington, DC, Johnson suggested it was “time for some of our dearest friends around the world to prenez un grip about all this and donnez moi un break” — to get a grip and give him a break. A “stab in the back” was how the French publicly described the situation following the announcement of the agreement.

Johnson has it right. This was not a betrayal of the North Atlantic alliance, nor France's

especially close ties with Britain or America, or its strong relationship with Australia. While there are unquestionably important strategic elements of this deal, it is a commercial one. Australia wanted to boost its naval defense capabilities in the increasingly competitive and dynamic Western Pacific.

France's conventionally-powered subs would not have been state of the art, requiring periodic surfacing for refueling, and wouldn't be available until 2035. Moreover, Canberra and Australian politicians had already begun to express reservations over these deficiencies and the exorbitant cost.

Enter the Americans, who apparently invited the British to join. In the world of diplomacy and international affairs, all issues are understood to be open for discussion and negotiation. Business is something else, however. Allies and adversaries regularly compete for business and commercial deals. Governments back their businesses and even add sweeteners from time to time to clinch the deal. It's understood; everyone does it. It's business — not personal and not political.

The surprise here is that Paris seemed to be caught unaware of the American-British offer. The French should have suspected others might be talking to the Australians, especially as their own deal was beginning to sour. Their embassies in Washington, London and Canberra, doubtlessly staffed with some of their top diplomats and intelligence and military personnel, should have picked up on it. That is what embassies are for, among other things.

What Is It Good For?

Political sensibilities aside, is this the right undertaking for the three countries? A somewhat qualified answer would be yes. US President Joe Biden has repeatedly made clear America will compete with China in the Western Pacific and around the world. To date, America has shouldered the lion's share of the security responsibilities in that region, though Japan,

South Korea, Australia, Britain and even France also play roles.

Providing the Australians with nuclear-powered subs greatly enhances their own defense capabilities and augments what the US and others are doing to shore up security in the Western Pacific.

It is a genuine security enhancement for the West, giving pause to the Chinese, who themselves possess about a dozen nuclear-powered subs, most dedicated to their ballistic missile submarine fleet. (It is important to note that the AUKUS deal will not provide Australia with nuclear weapons of any kind.)

So, Australian nuclear-powered submarines provide an excellent complement to both American and British nuclear-powered subs as well as those French nuclear submarines deployed to the region. Moreover, while the others deploy their submarines around the world, Australia will likely be confined to the Western Pacific, giving the Western allies a greater presence.

Other Asia-Pacific nations either hailed the deal or remained silent, the latter owing to sensitive trade and other economic arrangements with China they do not wish to jeopardize. After all, they saw what may have provoked all of this, namely China's unusually harsh response to Australia's call for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19, including the still unproven lab leak theory.

Canberra was blasted with a torrent of shockingly virulent verbal attacks from Beijing, which then accused Australia of "dumping" its wines on China and imposed daunting tariffs on future imports. The result was a precipitous decline in Australian wine exports to China, down as much as 96% in the final quarter of 2020.

The response shocked the Australians, who have maintained strong and important trade ties with Beijing and had sought to remain out of the US-China wrangling. But that all changed after Beijing's tough-guy actions. Anti-China sentiment is now at a peak in Australia's

Parliament and among the population. More importantly, the overreaction drove Canberra right back into the waiting arms of its long-time ally, the US. Beijing's so-called wolf-warrior actions against Australia were uncalled for and most definitely counterproductive.

A Win for Biden and the US

France's ruffled feathers notwithstanding, the AUKUS deal leverages one of America's strongest assets in the competition with China, namely its ability to forge alliances and partnerships with nations around the world, based not only on shared interests but very often on shared values. China has no such alliance network — Pakistan, North Korea, Iran and a handful of others hardly amount to what the US has managed in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.

It is perfectly consistent with Biden's repeated assertion that he will forge stronger ties with our allies and work to strengthen alliance networks. No one should be surprised with this natural evolution, a win-win for all involved.

One Asian nation whose response and views will be critical to US interests is India. India is a member of a new, American-initiated group known as the Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan and the US. New Delhi has distanced the AUKUS deal from the Quad but otherwise remained neutral in its response, though commentary ranges from strong endorsement to equally strong criticism and warnings of an Indo-Pacific arms race.

The latter may be a bit exaggerated. Australia already has submarines, and soon these will be nuclear-powered, allowing them to remain submerged much longer or even indefinitely, depending on whether their fuel is high or low-enriched uranium. The latter would require surfacing about every 10 years or so to refuel.

But that still leaves the question of France. One might have and, indeed, should have expected some heads up to the French in advance of the announcement. France is a core indispensable member of NATO and one of America's most important allies.

The countries have already begun to patch up their tiff. Biden and Macron spoke last week and will meet next month when Biden attends the G-20 summit. The US president endorsed his French counterpart's call for greater European defense autonomy, "consistent with NATO" objectives and obligations. Macron returned his ambassador to Washington.

Nevertheless, Washington would be wise to find some way to include Paris in this deal. If its underlying basis is security and strengthening alliances, then why not include this vital ally? France already possesses significant blue-water naval capabilities as well as genuine interests in the Pacific, with territories in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna.

Moreover, the French could be brought in to supply or develop the nuclear-power trains for the Australian submarines using low-enriched uranium, which fuel France's nuclear subs. (Britain and the US use high-enriched uranium.) The use of low-enriched uranium would also help keep AUKUS from potentially running afoul of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is better to have France on board the AUKUS fleet than not. The most awkward bit: What to do with the added "F"?

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CULTURE

How Appropriate Is Kendall Jenner's Cultural Appropriation?

Peter Isackson
February 22, 2021

The great controversy ensues as yet another celebrity launches a tequila brand.

Humanity can be divided into two groups: those who know about and understand an influential American family known as the Kardashian-Jenner clan and those who may have heard their names mentioned but have no idea why. The author of this column belongs to the second group.

Of the five female names at the core of the clan three are Kardashians: Kim, Khloe, Kourtney. The two Jenners are called Kylie and Kendall. The clan appears to obey a tribal law requiring that the first names of all females begin with the letter "K." Rather than looking for a significant cultural link with, say, Franz Kafka, who gave the name "K" to the hero of his dystopian novel "The Castle," the ladies' common initial is best explained by the narcissism of their father, celebrity lawyer Robert Kardashian. He achieved fame as a member of O.J. Simpson's defense team in the most famous US trial of the 20th century, far more famous than, say, the Scopes "monkey trial," the Sacco and Vanzetti murder trial or the Rosenberg trial, all three of which had a real impact on contemporary history and the evolution of American ideology and politics. Simpson was, after all, a star football player and Hollywood actor.

The five K sisters and half-sisters share an inherited hyperreal talent for finding ways to get their names into the popular news cycle. The latest exploit has caused something of a stir. Kendall Jenner announced her new business

venture, thanks to the highly original idea of launching her personal brand of tequila. Little did it matter that George Clooney, Michael Jordan, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and other celebrities had already done it. Jenner’s bold move attracted the attention of numerous adepts of Twitter, who lambasted the young lady for crossing a cultural line in the standard game of exploiting one’s celebrity for cash.

One Twitterati, @YaraB, posted: “Tired of the celebrity tequila craze! WTF does @KendallJenner know about tequila my family’s been doing back breaking work in the fields for their entire lives in Jalisco just for ppl to come dip their toes Face with rolling eyes stay in your lane.”

Today’s Daily Devil’s Dictionary definition:

Celebrity tequila:

Any of the numerous brands of an iconic Mexican spirit promoted by US media celebrities with the specific purpose of persuading celebrity-obsessed Americans that by consuming their brand, they partake in the aura of good taste, talent, beauty and wealth associated with the famous, whose impeccable taste has led to the creation of an ideal product

Contextual Note

The media pounced on this story to turn it into a modern cautionary tale. Jenner’s critics wasted no time expressing their indignation at her crime of “cultural appropriation,” a term created by America’s “identity culture.” It designates the moral failing that consists of laying claim to the attributes of a culture other than one’s own. A white person wearing blackface is clearly the most egregious and best-policed example. A white American donning a Mexican sombrero at a Halloween party is equally suspect. A less trivial example is the story that recently occupied headlines concerning Alec Baldwin’s wife, Hillary Baldwin. Born and educated in the US, for years, “Hilaria” attempted to create a brand

for herself in the media by pretending to be Spanish.

Why is Jenner’s act of appropriation more blameworthy than Clooney’s or Jordan’s? There is one solid reason. Her hyperreal, narcissistic, over-privileged, superficial, bling-bling personal style is light years away from Mexico’s gustatory and artisanal traditions. At best, Jenner’s initiative evokes the colonialist mindset at which the British excelled when they adopted curry and other exotic traditions reflecting the local color of the colonies they ruthlessly exploited. In contrast, Jenner’s venture falls into the same category as Trump Steaks and Trump Vodka. It’s simply a greedy attempt to make money out of nothing other than celebrity name recognition. Jenner is certainly aware that George Clooney sold his tequila brand for \$1 billion. Greed is a major force that drives hyperreality.

Some commentators, without dismissing the complaint of cultural appropriation, stepped in to mobilize the other major theme proposed by identity culture: misogyny. They pointed out that men like Clooney, Jordan and others were never taken to task for committing the same crime. The young woman had stepped into exclusive male territory.

The author of a book about tequila, Marie Sarita Gaytán, remarked: “When women step ‘out of bounds,’ whether it’s in politics, business, or in this case, culture and entrepreneurship, it touches a nerve. That, for me, is a far more interesting story.” Gaytán doesn’t deny Jenner’s shameless cultural appropriation. She simply highlights the second feature of American identity culture at play in this largely trivial but seriously revealing story about cultural hyperreality.

Historical Note

Tequila has a history in US popular culture, especially in the movies. It carries with it the exotic, romantic and heavily masculine cachet of a mythology that draws on the imaginary past of a more rugged version of North American civilization — the Wild West. It accompanied but

also predated the Anglo-Saxon conquest of the continent north of the Rio Grande.

Tequila is an ancestral, artisanal, authentically North American product that the white Anglo European civilization could not have invented. The Scots in the Appalachian Mountains diligently applied their ancestral science of distilling to invent an ersatz of Scotch whisky. It evolved into a product called American whiskey (with the added “e”). Though made with different ingredients, in a countryside deprived of peat, US whiskeys were born from a quest to resemble the original model from the British Isles.

Tequila and Mezcal are purely Mexican. They owe nothing to the Spanish. They are made from blue agave, which cannot be grown elsewhere. They are produced by a breed of farmer that only exists in Mexico, the jimadores. There is no way the jimador’s farming skills can be duplicated by an industrial process. Nevertheless, the distilleries with global brands have found ways of tweaking the rules and cheating with the ingredients to produce something they can still call tequila and market globally.

US capitalism’s genius for marketing has successfully exploited tequila’s cultural cachet to create a huge global demand for the spirit. It isn’t the taste of the product that attracts consumers but the symbolism. Confused by the myriad brands that exist, possessing no culture of consumption of an exotic product, Americans need an identifiable celebrity to guide them toward satisfying a taste they cannot create on their own. Celebrities can simply step up to make money out of the trust their fans have in their idols’ more refined culture.

This real significance of this episode has little to do with either cultural appropriation or misogyny. It isn’t even about tequila. The controversy around Jenner’s tequila reveals something more essential about the nature of the hyperreal society we not so much live in but find ourselves contained within. The hyperreality has been spawned by the convergence of three phenomena: late-stage capitalism as an economic system increasingly focused on illusion rather

than on response to real economic needs, consumer culture as a psychologically programmed social system that generates and maintains the illusion, and celebrity culture as the reference for defining society’s shared notions of success and the goal of everyone’s personal ambition.

Jenner, Clooney and other US celebrities who market their own tequila are not just non-Mexicans trying to make a living. The jimadores who actually make the tequila — like the vast majority of Mexicans themselves — spend their lives struggling for survival. The celebrities who brand and sell their tequila obviously don’t need either more money or more prestige. They have more money than they could ever spend and more success than they could ever narcissistically celebrate in several lifetimes. They are driven by the “logic” of exploiting their notoriety, simply because it exists and provides a permanent, easily exploitable pretext for gain.

In their hyperreal moral system, not exploiting it would, in Christian terms, be wasting their talents. Exploiting it also means exploiting Mexicans. But that’s okay. After all, they will be paid for their work, so, as Leibniz would say, all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

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Why Fame Can Be a Nightmare

Ellis Cashmore
April 16, 2021

Frankie Lymon and Britney Spears led different lives, but they were both based on hijacked adolescence.

Self-annihilation is a constituent part of many celebrity careers. While some actors or singers slide smoothly from one success to another, hardly pausing for the occasional misadventure, others are ruined, occasionally by others but much more usually by their own devices.

Frankie Lymon's Tragedy

The archetype is not in today's celebrity culture, nor anywhere near it actually. Frankie Lymon was an astounding talent from Harlem who, in 1956, surged into the public consciousness courtesy of the then-new medium of television. Lymon was 13 when he and his band, The Teenagers, announced themselves with the single, "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," which was released within weeks of Elvis' "Heartbreak Hotel." Lymon sang and co-wrote the single, which was a sensational hit in North America, Britain and practically all over Western Europe despite nine competing cover versions (and several more in later years).

Lymon was as near-ubiquitous as it was possible to be in the late 1950s. He and his band toured Europe as well as the US. At the same age, Michael Jackson was, in 1971, launching his solo career with his first single, "Got To Be There," and comparisons are justified. Like Jackson, Lymon was young, black and gifted with a voice that had the fragility of youth but the depth that typically accompanies maturity. He also moved like a pro dancer and radiated confidence onstage. His timing was perfect: He arrived at the stage in history when rock'n'roll was forcing

music's equivalent of a paradigm shift, creating an entirely new grammar and syntax for a postwar generation with disposable income and time to spare.

The media hastened his downfall as well as his rise. When he danced with a white girl on a TV show, the show was canned amid a national furor. America's practice of separating blacks and whites, known as Jim Crow laws, had been violated. But there was a more chilling and premonitory determinant in his decline. Lymon was using heroin at 15. He was dead by 25.

Lymon's decay and death went relatively unnoticed. By 1968, his records were no longer selling and, in the mid-20th century, neither audiences nor the media were ready to share vicariously in the kind of degradation they now find fascinating. But Lymon was one of those child stars who unraveled in a way that revealed a moral. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but there seems to be too much meaning in his story to neglect. As with so many talented young people who rise and enjoy precocious success, their dream can suddenly turn into a nightmare of disillusionment.

Britney Spears' Bad Dream

Britney Spears' nightmarish ordeal has become a story told and retold by countless magazines, newspapers and broadcast media. Once a dominant and ascending force in pop culture, Spears, who was born in Louisiana, was 8 years old when she was turned down for Disney's "The All New Mickey Mouse Club" because she was too young. She returned three years later and landed a permanent spot, along with Christina Aguilera and Justin Timberlake, both of whom went on to have adult careers in music and movies. The show was canceled in 1991, leaving Spears to pursue a singing career.

At 15, she got a record deal, and in 1998, she released "...Baby One More Time." It was her first single and made her an international phenomenon. In the accompanying video, Spears appeared dressed as a teenage schoolgirl, replete in uniform, but with provocative dance moves.

The sight probably made audiences smile nervously. Her second album, “Oops!... I Did It Again,” came out in 2000, turning Spears into a legitimate rival to Madonna as the world’s leading diva.

She seemed to hold all the cards too. Spears was 20 when she signed a huge endorsement deal with Pepsi in 2001. Madonna was then in her early 40s. Two more multimillion-selling albums put Spears in position to conquer the world. In 2002, *Forbes* magazine called her “the world’s most powerful celebrity” with earnings of about \$40 million a year. But then her story arc began to warp.

After huge success with “Toxic” in 2003, record sales began to slip and she seemed to recede from public view. The next time she made big news was in 2007 when pictures of her shaving her head with a hair clipper surfaced. “Meltdown,” caterwauled the headlines as describing an accident in a nuclear reactor. In fact, Spears had been denied access to her two children by her ex-husband, Kevin Federline, shortly after a spell in rehab — for what is not clear. Spears denied she had a drinking problem, though some said she had been drinking and taking pills since she was 13.

Spears grew increasingly impatient with paparazzi. In 2008, Spears’ erratic behavior reached the courts and her affairs were placed under a court-ordered conservatorship (i.e., guardianship), meaning her father should manage her affairs during her incapacitation. Whether or not she was incapacitated is a matter of conjecture. Clearly her fans thought not: They started an online campaign to #FreeBritney.

Earlier this year, a TV documentary, “Framing Britney Spears,” reduced the singer, who is 40 in December, to tears. *Forbes* currently reports her net worth to be \$60 million.

When We Stop Clapping

Frankie Lymon and Britney Spears: different ages, different audiences and different kinds of tragedies. But they were both based on hijacked adolescence. We can add more doomed child

stars: Lindsay Lohan, Macaulay Culkin, Corey Feldman, Gary Coleman. There’s almost a sacrificial element to a childhood in showbusiness. Some, like actors Kristen Stewart, Daniel Radcliffe and Natalie Portman, have navigated a smooth passage into adulthood and triumphed handsomely. But most child stars seem to be candidates for a dysfunctional adulthood.

Why? The “lost childhood” argument is too crass to be useful. Michael Jackson’s perplexing middle age is sometimes explained in these terms. There is certainly an intellect-lite plausibility to the idea that children need to develop emotionally and psychologically through various stages and fame interrupts their progress. Jackson was 8 when his father added him to the lineup of the Jackson 5 and encouraged him to reach for the skies rather than settle for an ordinary earthbound life. He spent the rest of his life reaching. Or perhaps just clinging to the rope ladder to the stars left him by his monstrously pushy dad.

We, the audience, decide whether it’s sweet dreams or nightmares for child stars. When you think about it, the relationship we have with abundantly talented kids is much like visitors to a circus who delight in watching seals perform tricks and elephants stand on their hind legs (I doubt if they are allowed to feature this nowadays). We are not tempted to inquire too deeply into how the objects of our fascination are trained or coaxed into performing. And, when the act is finished, we do not try to wring any meaning from the drama — we just clap. We eventually stop clapping; when we do, it is not the end of the world for us, though it may be for the animals and the aggrandized humans.

Most kids do not expect adulation and the kind of applause child stars thrive on. They seek mundane rewards like the approval of friends, casual sex, the means to buy alcohol and enough money for fashionable clothes or a down payment on a car. Customary rites of passage typically involve getting laid, wasted and arrested. All three and you are a grownup.

The passage to adulthood for child stars is different. They typically have more money than they can spend, all the clothes, cars and anything else they want, and they have adult friends. Peers are almost inevitably replaced by fellow professionals. Unlike most other adolescents who are indifferent to what the world thinks about them, child stars depend on the admiration and acceptance of an audience. When both of those disappear, it must seem like a termination of life rather than a showbiz career.

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The Cultural Power of Anitta in Bolsonaro's Brazil

Franthiesco Ballerini
June 25, 2021

In "Girl From Rio," Anitta changes bossa nova's soft power. The video shows provocative clips that are different from the conservative image Bolsonaro wants to promote.

Anitta is turning her back on Brazil — and for a good reason. One of the most successful Brazilian singers of the 21st century, she alone gathered over 370,000 people in just one carnival block in Rio early last year. But now she wants millions more, and from all over the world.

In late April, Anitta released her most expensive video for her new song, "Girl From Rio." She had one goal in mind: conquer the ears of the world. Her method was by reshaping a

notorious Brazilian cultural soft power known as bossa nova.

The music video begins with clips of the singer dressed like a Hollywood star in 1950s Rio de Janeiro. Surrounded by thin, mostly white men, Anitta sings an English adaptation of the internationally famous "Girl From Ipanema," which was released in 1962 by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes. The video then shows viewers the real Rio de Janeiro. A trap beat drops and our eyes shift to black people dancing in Piscinão de Ramos (Ramos' Pool), an artificial beach created by the government in 2000 in the suburbs of Rio.

Bolsonaro's Conservative Brazil?

For two years, Anitta was heavily criticized by fans and artists for not taking a public stance over Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's far-right president. During the 2018 election campaign, she was questioned about her absence in the #EleNao (#NotHim) movement against Bolsonaro. At the time, she argued that she was only 25 years old and had zero political knowledge.

Bolsonaro's nationalist policies aim to bring back the beauty and glory of Brazil's past. But the truth is that he is more known for his sexist, homophobic and racist declarations from his time in the Chamber of Deputies. Last year, one of his most trusted colleagues, Damara Alves, the minister of human rights, family and women, acted to stop a legal abortion on a 10-year-old girl, who became pregnant after being raped by her own uncle.

With Bolsonaro in power, Brazilians are currently living under a conservative administration. This is particularly reflected in the federal government's cultural decisions. Bolsonaro's government monitors exhibitions, music, films and TV shows and assesses if they align with the state's view of family and religious values.

Anitta has finally posted statements on social media criticizing Bolsonaro's administration. Yet none of her tweets are as powerful as the message her new video carries.

A Different Rio

“Hot girls, where I’m from, we don’t look like models,” she sings, with scantily clad women dancing on an artificial beach. The song puts an emphasis on women without silicone breasts showing off their bodies with cellulite. The video also shows black men putting cream on women to bleach their body hair, while others barbecue meat on the beach. Some couples even look like they’re almost having sex in the sea. This is a completely different Brazil from the country Bolsonaro wants to portray to the world.

Anitta’s video presents clips of the Rio suburb’s poverty, but in a funny and sexy way. The video focuses on the nostalgic past of a white Rio de Janeiro that never really existed, but whose image was created with the help of the most popular Brazilian rhythm of all time, bossa nova. Translated as “new wave,” this genre is a mix of jazz, African beats and samba.

In 1962, the historical debut at Carnegie Hall by Antonio Carlos Jobim and Joao Gilberto helped bring bossa nova to the world stage. In the same year, Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes released “Garota de Ipanema” (Girl From Ipanema), one of the most famous Brazilian songs of all time. The muse to inspire the composers was Helo Pinheiro, a 17-year-old girl with blonde hair and blue eyes who walked every day on the beach.

As a successful singer whose fortune is estimated at \$100 million at the age of 28, Anitta’s cultural power overseas is being built song by song. In the past four years, 24 of her 32 singles were dedicated to international markets. Giovanni Bianco, a Brazilian creative director, produced the “Girl From Rio” video. He has worked several times with Madonna, who released the song “Faz Gostoso” with Anitta in 2019.

Changing Bossa Nova

With bossa nova becoming more popular worldwide, the “Girl From Rio” video cost at least \$200,000. Anitta has already collaborated with international stars like Maluma, Major

Lazer, Cardi B. and J. Balvin. The official launch party of the song took place at Strawberry Moon, a bar at The GoodTime Hotel in Miami whose partner is Pharrell Williams, an American singer and producer.

In May, “Girl from Rio” was the 58th most-listened song on Spotify after its release, with 1 million plays in Brazil and 400,000 in other countries. Although Anitta featured on popular US shows with NBC and also on “Jimmy Kimmel Live,” the song soon fell out of the top 100. With 54 million followers on Instagram, the singer’s fans accused Warner Music — the label Anitta is associated with — of not promoting the song worldwide.

In the video, the white images of the 1950s, carried by bossa nova’s soft pace and soft power, give way to the colorful scenes in “Girl From Rio.” With its trap beat and variation of funk, this is the most popular Brazilian genre in the world today. With the help of her record label or not, Anitta wants to conquer the world with a Rio de Janeiro that is far from the one shown on postcards or holiday brochures — and certainly not the one Bolsonaro wants to promote.

Anitta wants to focus on empowering black people, women and those with standard bodies, not with abs, breasts and butts like models. She definitely knows what she’s doing.

***Fanthiesco Ballerini** is a Brazilian writer, journalist and filmmaker. His book, “Soft Power” — an investigation of the world’s most important cultural influences like Hollywood, tango, anime and Bossa Nova — was a finalist at the 60th Jabuti Awards. His fifth book, “History of World Cinema,” looks at the way different cultures, languages, aesthetics, techniques and industries of the world are portrayed in film. He is currently pursuing a PhD in media communications.

Why Headscarves Matter So Much to Turkey

Nathaniel Handy
July 30, 2021

Turkish culture wars around headscarves are not as simple as a fight between the people and the mullahs — they're a product of a tortured history.

Many news outlets carried stories in mid-July of the Turkish government's condemnation of a ruling by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) upholding a ban on headscarves in certain circumstances, in which an employer wishes to convey a "neutral image." In doing so, it is weighing into the culture wars over religious symbolism that Europeans will all be well aware of. Many European countries, in particular France, have seen high-profile clashes over the issue of religious symbols in state institutions.

Many readers would see Turkey's condemnation as a simple case of an Islamist regime railing against Western suppression of Islam. Indeed, the government's statement was full of accusations of Islamophobia in Europe. Yet such statements, coming out of Turkey, are not as simple as that.

Those same readers might be surprised to discover that Turkey itself had banned headscarves in state institutions until very recently. This might make a governmental condemnation of a ban in Europe seem nonsensical. The reality helps to give context to the Turkish reaction.

Wear Western Hats

Condemnations of headscarf bans might ordinarily be expected to emanate from regimes such as the Iranian theocracy or the Saudi conservative monarchy. Coming out of the secular republic of Turkey, they might appear

more curious, if it wasn't for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's global image as a religious conservative.

His government's sensitivity to headscarf bans is very personal indeed. In 2006, his own and other politicians' wives were not invited to an official event by the then-Turkish president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, due to their wearing of headscarves. In 2007, there was an attempt by the military — a traditional guardian of Turkey's ruling secular elite — to deny the presidency to Abdullah Gul of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) because his wife wore a headscarf.

Such attitudes, which might appear highly intolerant in countries such as the United Kingdom, make more sense in places like France where the separation of church and state is a foundation of the republic. When modern Turkey was created in 1920, France became the model for how to build a modern state. A key element in the imitation of the French was the desire of Turkey's first military rulers to suppress Islam.

The Ottoman Empire, of which Turkey was the successor state, was an Islamic empire. Indeed, it was ruled by a caliph, the Islamic equivalent of the pope in Rome. The caliph was the leader of the Muslim world. Turning Turkey into a modern secular republic was akin to removing the pope from the Vatican and banning the wearing of the Christian cross in Catholic Europe. Needless to say, it has created cultural fault lines in Turkey that persist to this day.

To drive home his cultural revolution in the 1920s and 1930s, modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, instituted a ban on the fez — that most famously Turkish of hats — and the turban. He insisted on men wearing the Western brimmed hat, traditionally rejected since it doesn't allow the wearer to bow their head to the floor in Muslim prayer whilst wearing it.

The veil and headscarf were also discouraged, though the state's ability to enforce changes in female clothing was slower to be realized than with men's. The persistence of female cultural

clothing as opposed to male could be the subject of an entire essay of its own.

Alongside many other measures, such as the banning of the Sufi Muslim brotherhoods, the closure of mosques, a ban on the call to prayer in Arabic and the removal of the Arabic script, the Turkish authorities attempted to forcibly Westernize Turks.

The Illiberal 1980s

Yet it was not until the military coup d'état of 1980 that Turkey finally outlawed the headscarf officially. It was then that it was banned across all state institutions, including schools, universities, the judiciary, the police and the military. In effect, this meant that girls from religious backgrounds had to choose either to remove their headscarves or not get an education. Only with the rise of the AKP to power in the 2000s did official attitudes begin to shift.

In 2010, Turkish universities finally admitted women who wore headscarves. This was followed a few years later by state bureaucratic institutions, except the judiciary, military and police. In 2016, policewomen were allowed to wear headscarves beneath their caps, and finally in 2017, the military was the last institution to lift the ban.

This is the backdrop against which the Turkish government condemns a headscarf ban — in certain circumstances — decreed by the ECJ. It is a backdrop in which the religiously conservative in Turkey read a narrative of European coercion running back to the founding of the modern state and even earlier.

The ideas that inspired the military officers who won the Turkish War of Independence — the war with Allied powers that followed the conclusion of the First World War — were imported from Western Europe. Having carved out an almost entirely religiously homogenous Muslim state, they set out to utterly secularize it.

The banning of the headscarf is therefore seen by religiously conservative Turks as an idea imported from Europe and, in some sense, an idea dictated to Muslims by secularized Christian

nations. Given the last century of experience in Turkey, it is clear how this view is generated.

Ultimately, the question is one of whether people who like the use of headscarves should tolerate those who don't wear them, and whether those who dislike the use of headscarves should tolerate those who do wear them. Examples of intolerance abound on either side. A lack of understanding will bring no peace to Turkey or to countries across Europe and the world.

***Nathaniel Handy** is a writer and academic with over 10 years of experience in international print and broadcast media.

Will the Azeem Rafiq Case Purge Britain of Racism?

Ellis Cashmore
November 19, 2021

Britain appears to have embraced Black Lives Matter more enthusiastically than the movement's native United States.

Britain is in purgatory. Its latest racial crisis is as grave, urgent and compelling as the upheaval that followed the urban riots of the 1980s and the soul-searching over the report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1999. But the latest scandal that has engulfed one of Britain's favorite sports and one of its best sports clubs comes only 18 months after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, in the US, that has reverberated around the world, giving impetus to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Being caught in purgatory suggests the current crisis has the ability to cleanse or purify. The case of Azeem Rafiq has the potential to do exactly this.

Rafiq is the former professional cricketer who recently revealed that, during his employment at

Yorkshire County Cricket Club, between 2008 and 2014 (he also played for the club in 2016 and 2018), he was habitually subjected to racial abuse, was obliged to listen to offensive language, including the epithet “paki,” and experienced “bullying.” His initial complaints of institutional racism were reviewed by the club which, in October 2020, confirmed that an inquiry was underway and instructed a legal team to investigate. The findings were anodyne and, while the club apologized to Rafiq, it cited “insufficient evidence” in relation to several claims.

Rafiq escalated the matter, making an additional legal claim against the club for “direct discrimination and harassment.” He had his testimony heard by an employment tribunal and, more recently, a government select committee. Key officials at the club were embarrassed into resigning, and sponsors, including Emerald Books, Yorkshire Tea and Nike, dissociated themselves, relieving the club of a valuable source of income.

Rise of the Political Athlete

Imagine if Rafiq had voiced his concerns two years ago. An individual athlete making largely uncorroborated but momentous claims, many contested by whites, from years before would have been unlikely to be taken seriously. He would have probably been dismissed as oversensitive, thin-skinned or even paranoid.

The default escape route of “banter” — that catch-all word habitually used to dismiss offense and harassment — would probably have been used to elude culpability or deny malice or aggression. A lack of hard, unequivocal evidence or confessions would not have helped his argument, and it’s unlikely most people would ever have heard of Azeem Rafiq today.

Black Lives Matter has changed all that. Since the movement, which has existed since 2013, turned its focus on the Floyd murder, the world has taken notice. Its effects in Britain have been truly transformative. Statues of historical figures associated with slavery have been pulled down,

entertainers from film and television have been reprimanded, shunned or canceled for characterizations that have racist connotations, every program or film is now accurately representative of Britain’s culturally diverse population and practically every TV show has a disclaimer about language and scenes that may offend.

Britain already has equal opportunities legislation, but employers are probably scrutinizing how obediently they follow the letter of the law nowadays. It’s doubtful whether any other country has reacted as positively to Black Lives Matter as Britain. Rafiq’s case appears at a propitious time in history and now promises to batter whatever remnants of racism are left.

There is also providence in Rafiq’s position. At no time in history have athletes been taken so seriously. The old stereotype about dimwitted or politically ignorant jocks has been destroyed by a generation of spirited and culturally aware athletes, who are determined to use their sports as platforms. Five years ago, this would have been unthinkable. In 2016, NFL player Colin Kaepernick, then a quarterback with the San Francisco 49ers, decided to fashion his own protest against police violence against African Americans by dropping to his knee while others stood proudly before the American flag as the national anthem played.

It was a near-seditious act at the time that barred him from the field ever since. Now, sports teams all over the world spend a few moments kneeling to signify a commitment to the fight against racism.

Athletes like Rafiq are now taken seriously. Their views and proposals on such human rights matters as child poverty, migrant workers and the National Health Service are not only listened to but, as in the case of Manchester United player Marcus Rashford’s campaign for free school meals, acted upon. A blunt repudiation of Rafiq’s claims from ex-colleagues impresses no one. The so-called white privilege that afforded whites credibility when denying racist behavior is fast disappearing.

Revelations that Rafiq posted anti-Semitic messages on social media several years ago do not invalidate his present claims. No one seriously believes victims of bigotry — of whatever kind — are always innocents themselves. There is also no reason to think, as Marie van der Zyl, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews suggests, that Rafiq's apology was not "heartfelt" or "completely sincere."

Day of Reckoning for Institutional Racism?

The weakness in Rafiq's argument may turn on institutional racism, which is denied by Yorkshire Cricket, but which is, according to many, pervasive in many aspects of British society. The term came into popular use after the 1999 Macpherson Report on the killing of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager from east London. The police service as a whole was affected, concluded the report.

Institutional racism is a property of an organization, such as a firm, an educational authority or a government department. It is notoriously hard to detect, hence why it usually goes unnoticed. Let's say, for example, a government department awards lucrative contracts for the provision of services or commodities, such as personal protective equipment, to a number of firms, all of which are owned by whites. No company owned by ethnic minorities is awarded a contract, yet no one bothers to check, and the practice continues.

There may be no intention to discriminate, nor any individual may deliberately intend to disadvantage ethnic minorities. But the disparate impact is felt all the same. This is how institutional racism operates — surreptitiously.

There have been suggestions that Yorkshire County Cricket Club operates an analogous policy in hiring a disproportionately high number of white players. It is conceivable, though unlikely. While cricket is a popular recreational sport with British Asians, it offers a limited long-term career. The chances of securing a professional contract are negligible, anyway. So,

while the glamour of a life in professional sport is attractive, maybe many young Asians are rational enough to make a cost-benefit calculation and arrive at the decision that their best interests will be served in accountancy, law, medicine or another profession. We at least need to consider this possibility before assuming the presence of racism.

Whether or not one agrees with the above, it is hard to miss the fact that there has been no comparable reckoning across the Atlantic. The nearest may be the case involving the Phoenix Suns owner, Robert Sarver, who allegedly used racist terms in a heated locker-room exchange. Interestingly, the incident has not been swept to prominence by Black Lives Matter. Britain, I venture, has embraced the movement more enthusiastically than the United States.

The root and branch introspections promised in the 1980s and in the 1990s yielded change for sure. But racism was never expunged and, every so often, research would remind us that African Caribbean children underachieve at school and are overrepresented in courts and prisons, and British Asians are subject to racial profiling by the police and often fall victim to hate crimes. The visibility of racism has diminished over the decades, and its consequences are undeniably less severe. Yet it remains. But for how much longer?

The case of Azeem Rafiq is like one of those traffic signs that warns of something ahead, such as a hazard or a fork in the road. In this case, it is the day of reckoning, a time when past misdeeds are acknowledged and put right. The cricketer has already won his case, at least in a moral sense. Over the next several years, every individual, corporation and public institution will self-investigate to ensure they are faultless in their practices and that no semblance of racist behavior exists.

What of Yorkshire County Cricket Club? It will never be restored to its hallowed position in the sports pantheon and may yet become a symbol, albeit a reluctant one, of a Britain of the past, a vestige of a time when offenses could be caused without consequence, racial slurs

communicated with impunity and complainants dismissed with a shrug. No longer.

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ENVIRONMENT

There's No Such Thing as Plenty of Fish in the Sea

Leah Garden
August 3, 2021

Overfishing poses a threat not just to our diets, but to our ocean's ecosystems and productivity as a whole.

I have a Friday night tradition with my family. After slogging home from work, we each order our favorite handroll from our local sushi restaurant. Accompanied by steamed veggie dumplings and a delicious avocado salad, this tradition has long served as a nice reward to a hard-worked week. Salmon rolls and shrimp tempura just always seem to hit the spot. But what if there were no salmon to sashimi? No shrimp to deep fry and roll between avocado, rice and seaweed?

The so-called tragedy of the commons dilemma unfortunately applies to this situation: When humans over-exploit a public area due to greed, the sector eventually deteriorates past the point of productivity and we lose our once-cherished commodities. Overfishing poses a real-life threat, not just to our stomachs, but to our ocean's ecosystem and productivity as a whole.

In 2020 alone, one-third of all global fish stocks were overfished. How did we get to these dire numbers? With oceans comprising 71% of the world's surface, isn't there plenty of fish in the seas?

Domino Effect

There used to be. Today, the average person eats 42 pounds of fish per year, which is double the weight per person consumed 50 years ago. That's a lot of spicy tuna rolls. Overfishing, a slowly devastating response to an astronomical increase in demand from consumers, is essentially exterminating the wild fisheries. Ninety percent of large predatory fish such as tuna, sharks and marlin are already extinct. Our lack of readily available sushi aside, this has scary implications for the state of our oceans. Ecologically, eliminating the predators at the top of the food chain will catalyze an impact felt down to the microbial level, culminating in a loss of important marine life such as turtles and corals, driving further domino effects that lead to extinction.

Economically, fish is one of the most traded commodities on the planet, with a \$362-billion global industry. Ceasing to consume fish en masse would be economically devastating for most littoral countries, putting thousands of fishermen and fleets out of business. Instead, governments are attempting to regulate international waters in order to reduce overfishing and protect remaining fish stocks.

Before a ship even leaves the dock, a combination of international laws and regulations set by regional fishery management offices (RFMOs) dictate precisely how much fish may be caught, who may catch it, how it is caught, and when they are allowed to fish at all. RFMOs are international bodies made up of multiple governments with a common interest in managing and preserving fish stock in the oceans. However, RFMOs are failing. They were established during an era in which fish stocks were perceived as virtually limitless, and this vast oversight resulted in an inherently ineffective

governing structure. Despite the existence of these regulatory bodies, overfishing continues to occur at alarming rates.

The United States is a leading member of nine RFMOs, such as the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO), as well as multiple bilateral and regional treaties like the Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries between the United States and 16 Pacific Island parties. But the management of these regional treaties and alliances has long been stranded at sea, hindered by deficient or unavailable data and inadequate systems of administration. Additionally, RFMOs consistently struggle to adequately and effectively enforce conservation efforts, rendering their data unactionable, surplus information.

Mindful Consumption

Another issue is government interference through state subsidies. The logical action of allowing a fish population to replenish is skipped when countries subsidize their fishing industries, incentivizing fleets to stay out at sea longer, contrary to international agreements. RFMOs cannot properly function if state governments are actively working against treaties. The first step to managing fish stocks and conserving critical species is ending the fishing subsidies, a step the World Trade Organization is attempting to initiate. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the first slate of meetings, stalling negotiations and pausing necessary action for another year.

Eliminating fish from your diet won't end the overfishing problem — subsidies will keep legal and illegal fishing fleets out in the waters. We, as consumers, don't have as much power in this particular transaction as we would like to believe. But we can pressure our governments to do better. Spreading the message of government-funded overfishing can help hold elected and appointed leaders accountable in the court of public opinion.

Additionally, consumers and vendors can be mindful of the fish we consume. Utilizing helpful resources like the Monterey Bay Seafood Watch

app informs the everyday consumer what fish they should buy. Canadian-based conservation group SeaChoice takes this one step further, investigating seafood traceability and lobbying Canada's local and federal governments to require traceability as a common aspect of the seafood industry.

I'm not ready to forgo my Friday night sushi ritual. But I don't want to negatively impact the planet exclusively for my benefit. The global fishing industry can be influenced and reformed to improve fish stocks and maintain the economic productivity of the industry itself. Active and aggressive international compromise, as well as an informed public, provides us with a great opportunity for a productive path forward.

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Fiji's Women Are Living the Reality of Climate Change

Menka Goundan
November 11, 2021

The discussions at COP26 are far removed from the climate realities faced by Fijian women.

On November 6, Brianna Fruean and other Pacific Islands representatives marched in Glasgow as all eyes are on the United Kingdom for the COP26 climate change summit happening this month. The chilly streets of Scotland and its winter are so far removed from

the reality of the Pacific that we, in the Southern Hemisphere, can neither fathom nor imagine the cold. Unfortunately, the discussions at COP26 are similarly removed from the climate realities faced by Fijian women.

The impacts of climate change are no longer just an environmental or political issue but also a complex social problem with immense repercussions for the well-being of women, girls and marginalized groups who already face injustices due to gendered power dynamics and a lack of control over the use of resources. Studies have found that women and girls are 14 times more likely to die or be injured than men due to a natural disaster. They are subject to a number of secondary impacts, including gender-based violence, loss of economic opportunities and increased workloads.

Knowledge and Understanding

Not only are women more affected by climate change than men, but they also play a crucial role in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Women have the knowledge and understanding of what is needed to adapt to changing environmental conditions and to come up with practical solutions.

But their knowledge and expertise are still largely untapped resources. Restricted land rights, lack of access to financial resources, training and technology, as well as limited access to political decision-making, often prevent them from playing a full role in building resilience in the face of climate change and other environmental challenges.

Wealthier nations, which have often used colonialism, territorialism and capitalism as means of defining progress, have caused irreversible damage to the environment, largely contributing to the deterioration of climate worldwide. Today, the Pacific Islands may be a group of nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, with some facing possible obliteration.

In 2021, as the fear and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be the biggest

immediate threat facing the global community, the Pacific region was not spared from catastrophic climatic events. The year began with tropical cyclone Zazu affecting American Samoa, Samoa, Niue and Tonga, and tropical cyclone Yasa landing in Fiji and Vanuatu within the span of a week.

The Pacific is most definitely experiencing more frequent and intense cyclones than ever recorded. For example, Yasa became the most powerful tropical cyclone of 2020, beating Goni with a minimum barometric pressure of 899 mb (26.55 inHg) and a maximum wind speed of 250 km per hour (155 mph). It was also the fourth most intense South Pacific tropical cyclone after Winston (2016), Zoe (2003) and Pam (2015), while Zazu dissipated into an extratropical cyclone.

With this trend of disaster in the region, the need for resource allocation is great. In 2018, Global Humanitarian Overview shows that \$23.17 billion in funding was received in worldwide appeals. According to the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map, \$132.11 million was committed to the Pacific in humanitarian aid that year, a mere fraction of the global effort. The Pacific's biggest bilateral partners continue to be Australia and New Zealand.

The United Kingdom's pledge of £290 million (\$391 million) to help countries prepare for climate change is welcome. However, past pledges by wealthier industrialized regions have failed us. For example, the commitment to raise \$1 billion in climate funding has not happened and continues to be discussed at COP26. These resources are crucial for the countries and people most vulnerable to climate change.

Lived Realities

The lived realities of women in the communities are often silenced given the limited representation women have in decision-making. The stories we do not hear are of those most impacted by climate change, stories that affect the livelihood and well-being of communities. At the Women's Fund Fiji, our goal is to shift the power imbalances that

prevent the full participation of women, girls and marginalized groups by providing equitable and flexible access to resources that will help women's and feminist groups, networks and organizations better respond and adapt to the climate crisis.

The women in the rural remote communities of Fiji are among the most vulnerable groups of people battling climate change in the world. Women in Namuaimada Village in Rakiraki specialize in harvesting nama (*Caulerpa racemosa*) — an edible seaweed, also known as sea grapes, which is found in shallow waters near the reef. The harvesting of nama is done mainly by women, who go out in fishing boats to the reefs during low tide and spend about four hours harvesting the seaweed.

According to the Women in Fisheries Network report funded by Oxfam and the Women's Fund, women are expert fishers in the coastal zone and the dominant sellers of seaweed, crustaceans and mollusks, with many fishing for household needs and selling the surplus contributing to the income and livelihoods of their families. With rising ocean temperatures, the production of these onshore and coastal marine resources will continue to decline, eventually causing loss of income and increased food insecurity for the fisherwomen.

The assumption that only the livelihoods of coastal women are affected is debunked as we investigate the plight of the fund's grantee partner, Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group, who are already experiencing the onset of climate change and exacerbated natural disasters creating both short-term and long-term hurdles to their work. The group of 31 women dairy farmers located in the interior of Fiji's main island of Viti Levu run family-owned dairy farmsteads and are shifting social norms like patriarchy and contributing to decision-making epicenters in a male-dominated industry.

Floods and tropical cyclones have continually disrupted their farm infrastructure and their ability to supply milk to the Fiji Dairy Cooperatives Limited, the nation's main dairy

organization that purchases their milk on a contractual basis. With temperatures expected to continue to rise, their cattle will face greater heat stress. In hotter conditions, lactating cows feed less, leading to a fall in milk production. If climate change continues along the current trajectory, these women will be faced with income reduction and may not be able to support their families or maintain their current independence.

This is the unfortunate reality faced by women of Fiji specifically and women of the Pacific at large. Under the guise of the technical and scientific study of climate change and climate-induced disasters, the voices of women in all their diversity are often not heard. Our experiences of the many challenges we face as a group of the population that is most vulnerable are not necessarily accounted for when decisions relating to climate change are made.

This year, leaders of just three of the 14 Pacific Island states made it to the discussions to Glasgow due to COVID-19 restrictions, making it "the thinnest representation of Pacific islands at a COP ever," according to Satyendra Prasad, Fiji's ambassador to the United Nations. Given that international negotiations are still, in the words of Britain's former Energy Minister Claire O'Neill, very much a "blokes' space," women's groups are left to bear the brunt of shrinking spaces and resources when it comes to mitigating the challenges of the climate crisis in the Pacific.

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When It Comes to Climate Change, Promises Matter

Arek Sinanian
November 18, 2021

COP26, more than previous summits, has heightened the awareness of participating countries of the severity of climate change and its impact.

In life, we generally believe that words matter and that they are important. We also think promises and pledges expressed in words and made in public are really important. They show our intentions and commitment to people who matter to us. And that actions speak louder than words.

When leaders of almost 200 countries get together regularly under the Conference of the Parties (COP) banner, bringing their diverse set of social, financial and environmental challenges to solve the climate change diabolical problem, words do matter. But then those words need to be followed by action. Urgent action!

And if the previous 25 COP summits have taught us anything, it is that the promises and pledges have missed the mark, and actions have left the global problem of climate change wanting — and wanting a lot more than it has received so far. By that, I mean the promises and subsequent actions have fallen short of ensuring with a level of certainty that global warming remains below 1.5°C by 2100.

Nevertheless, the more optimistic observers believe that the 1.5°C target is still alive. But in the words of Alok Sharma, president of the recent COP26 summit in Glasgow, “its pulse is weak, and it will only survive if we keep our promises. If we translate commitments into rapid action.”

The Bad News

So, what has COP26 promised future generations? Or how long is a piece of elastic

band? I don’t mean that to be a cynical question, because setting targets, making long-term promises in a rapidly changing world is indeed a very difficult task for any world leader. Ultimately, will the collective promises, even if implemented, be enough to keep global warming below 1.5°C?

Clearly, we won’t know what the resulting carbon abatement outcomes will be. And therein lies one of the problems of all COP26 outcomes: great uncertainty. That’s because there are many moving parts, many variables and unknowns, many players.

Depending on who one listens to, the likely outcome of COP26 could be anywhere between limiting global warming to within 2°C and 3.6°C. The analysis suggests widespread agreement between a number of assessments and that current policies will lead to a best estimate of around 2.6°C to 2.7°C warming by 2100 (with an uncertainty range of 2°C to 3.6°C).

If countries meet both conditional and unconditional Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for the near-term target of 2030, projected warming by 2100 falls to 2.4°C (with an uncertainty range of 1.8°C to 3.3°C). If countries meet their long-term net-zero emissions promises, global warming would be reduced to around 1.8°C (1.4°C to 2.6°C) by 2100, though temperatures would likely peak at around 1.9°C in the middle of the century before declining. But that’s if all the “ifs” do actually take place.

And what happened to the 2015 Paris Agreement of limiting warming to 1.5°C? The reality is that to meet the Paris accord, coal must be phased out of the power sector in member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) by 2030 and globally by 2040. As there’s a lot of coal “in the pipeline” in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Australia, there’s little chance of that happening. And the best COP26 was able to deliver was a “phasing down” (not out) of fossil fuels.

The other main problem with COP agreements and pledges generally is that countries develop

and express their own promises in isolation, which in aggregate are supposed to achieve the slowing of global warming. As such promises — expressed through NDCs — are not legally binding, the best pressure that can now be applied is a new cost (the penalty for exceedance). To date, only diplomatic pressure has been used, a name-and-shame form of influence on the international stage.

Was There Any Good News?

Not that there isn't any good news — there is. The three main pillars of attention (adaptation, mitigation and finance) have been strengthened. And there's evidence that emissions are being reduced. Let's not forget that just seven years ago, it seemed quite plausible that the world was heading toward 4°C warming by 2100, and a number of factors have resulted in the warming curve being significantly flattened.

COP meetings involve numerous sessions, side events, different agendas and groups that explore, present and discuss the many aspects of climate change. So, what the general public receives is a summary and highlights of the parties' promises and pledges, and the main decisions and outcomes. So, we don't always hear about the minor achievements.

For example, a significant achievement was that more than 100 countries promised to end and reverse deforestation, which has in the recent past led to a significant reduction in much-needed carbon sinks.

The Paris Rulebook, the guidelines for how the Paris Agreement is to be delivered, was also completed, after six years of discussions. This will allow for the full delivery of the landmark accord, after agreement on a transparency process that will hold countries to account as they deliver on their targets. This includes a robust framework for countries to exchange carbon credits through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

To promote approaches that will assist governments in implementing their NDCs through voluntary international cooperation, the

framework now allows a price on carbon, which countries exceeding their NDCs would bear.

As before, and necessarily, there has also been much emphasis put on adaptation programs and financial support from developed countries for developing countries already affected by the impacts of climate change.

Then there are other minor changes that will be taking place. The International Sustainability Standards Board will produce the new global standard next year to replace a confusing mixture of disclosure practices that some companies now use to assess the impact of climate change. The new standard will see companies provide a more complete view of enterprise value creation — showing the inter-connectivity between sustainability-related information and financial information. This should make the data on which investment decisions are made more reliable and comparable.

What Now?

So, what happens next? Leaders have been “encouraged” to go back to their desks and strengthen their emissions reductions and align their national climate action pledges with the Paris Agreement.

COP26, more than all previous COPs, has heightened the participating countries' awareness of the severity of climate change and its impacts, particularly on developing countries. It has led to a much higher level of awareness of the urgency of actions required. There's also now no doubt of the enormous tasks ahead to avert the anticipated global impacts.

Watch this space, while the universe looks on.

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Saving the World's Rarest Bear

Rejeanne Lacroix
November 24, 2021

Resembling a scruffy, shy teddy bear, can the Gobi ursus capture the attention needed to save it from extinction?

Usually, the first images that spring to mind when at the mention of endangered ursine species are either of the formidable polar bear traversing the Arctic regions or the endearing panda clumsily munching on bamboo. With just around 40 remaining in the world, the Gobi bear is, in fact, rarer than these two conservation superstars but is rarely mentioned in discussions of animals at risk of extinction. Resembling a scruffy teddy bear with a shy demeanor and a penchant for wild rhubarb and onion, can the Gobi bear capture our hearts and garner the attention needed to ensure its survival?

A Unique Ursus

In scientific nomenclature, the Gobi bear is a subspecies of the brown bear known as *Ursus arctos gobiensis* that inhabits the rough, rocky terrain of its namesake desert in Mongolia. The mazaalai, as it is known in Mongolian, is unique, being more diminutive than its grizzly cousins, with an average weight of 90-100 kilograms. Its claws are another distinguishing feature, blunted from crisscrossing its desert homeland as well as scratching at plant roots as opposed to the sharp nails other bear species use to slice open their prey.

Living in the Great Gobi Strictly Protected Area Zone A means that the bears have adapted to a mountainous environment, which affects their ranges. While a typical forest bear wanders an average of 12-15 square kilometers in search of food, the mazaalai requires a habitat of 650-1,200 square kilometers. On top of this, weather

in the Central Asian steppes is harsh. Bears must endure a temperature range from +46°C in the summer and -40°C during their winter hibernation period.

Indeed, hibernation is a difficult endeavor for the Gobi bear. The mazaalai is already a lean species due to environmental conditions and diet, meaning that the hyperphagia exhibited in late summer and autumn is especially important for the accumulation of the caloric intake needed to sustain life and to birth cubs over the winter. Gobi bears consume mostly a plant-based diet, including the rhizomes of wild rhubarb, berries, grass shoots, wild onion and the odd number of lizards, insects and small rodents. Bears must find mountain caves to hibernate from November to early spring.

An important point that differentiates the mazaalai from other bears, especially fellow endangered species, is that none are kept in captivity. As a result, controlled scientific knowledge about the genus and specialized breeding programs to ensure population increases are lacking. The few bears in the wild in the Great Gobi are the only representatives of their species left for ursinologists and conservationists to study.

Man vs. Bear

Those involved in conservation projects focused on the mazaalai, such as Gobi Bear Project and Save the Gobi Bear Foundation, hope that the situation can be turned around for the rarest bear in the world. Mongolia has taken action within its limited state budget to help the creatures, such as marking 2013 as the “Year of the Gobi Bear” and creating feeding sites. Young scholars at the National University of Mongolia even named the country’s first satellite after the bear.

The mazaalai is listed as an Appendix I species — critically threatened with extinction — by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The World Wildlife Fund for Nature even included the bears on its Great Gobi 6 Initiative to pivot international attention

to the plight of threatened species in the Central Asian desert.

Numerous factors contribute to the Gobi bear's critical position. First and foremost, climate change is negatively affecting outcomes for any real population growth. As temperatures rise, the hunt for limited water resources becomes even more competitive, especially around the oases in the bear's habitat.

Local farmers take their herds to the same watering spots that are expected to become even less abundant over time. Bears travel long distances to drink. Their shy character and human intervention, such as the firing of shots to scare off or fatally injure the animals, compel them to seek out other sources, risking fatal dehydration.

The Gobi Desert has always been a fragile ecosystem, and ever-greater human interaction with the land is making existence more difficult for its native species.

Many families rely on the desert environment to feed their livestock, and overgrazing has become a serious problem. Sheep, goats and cattle consume vegetation that the mazaalai relies on for nutrition. Conflict over limited resources places bears vis-à-vis humans, with the former a likely loser.

Mining is yet another threat impacting the Gobi bear. Mongolia is rich in coal, copper and gold, which means that the extractive industry benefits the national economy and will continue to do so as the state expands its engagement with international markets. However, large-scale mining impacts wildlife habitats, and this fact should be at the forefront of all policy decisions when corporations lobby Mongolian leadership for access to deposits in the Great Gobi Protective Area.

Illegal mining is also a significant problem. The presence of unauthorized mining activity in the area is another avenue for competition over limited water resources between bears and humans. As in their interaction with farmers, the mazaalai are often shooed away or fired at by miners.

Saving the Mazaalai

Saving the mazaalai is a challenging venture that can be achieved through appropriate resources, partnerships and leadership. The issue needs to be tackled on the technical level by ursinologists and scientific researchers, by conservation organizations and civil society organizations more broadly, as well as on the political level by the Mongolian authorities. A strategy that combines international influence, as well as domestic Mongolian expertise, will undoubtedly benefit the survival of the Gobi bear.

Mongolia has demonstrated the political will to aid the mazaalai. However, Ulaanbaatar struggles to allocate adequate funds for bear conservation because infrastructure and social spending are more pressing issues in the state budget. As a consequence, feeding programs are highly reliant on fluctuating domestic funding and the availability of foodstuffs suitable for the bears. It is also a matter of balance. Conservationists don't want the animals to become reliant on the feeding stations as that will weaken their survival skills and ability to source a natural diet. The old adage, "a fed bear is a dead bear," has a deeper meaning in this context.

In the same vein, the Great Gobi Protection Area requires better physical security of its peripheries. Those who infringe on the territory to engage in practices such as illegal mining are becoming more ingenious, and the only solution is to better securitize the conservation area. Rangers require equipment that allows them to better patrol the vast territory and accrue evidence of illicit activities that can be shared with the appropriate legal authorities.

This is a matter that needs to be addressed politically. A steadfast policy that keeps out invasive industries should be at the forefront of decision-making, with the interests of the mazaalai and other Gobi species at its core.

Greater attention from international research specialists is a key component for the survival of the Gobi bear. Scientific knowledge is lacking about the species, and it is imperative that those with specialist skills in ursine or large mammal

conservation shift some of their attention to the Mongolian steppe. For instance, approximately 20 bears have GPS tracking collars on them, and they have provided valuable data on their behavior and movements.

Curious minds could bring supplementary knowledge and funding that would benefit the research on this rare species. An international coalition of respected voices calling for the preservation of the species and dedicated to understanding it better would have consequential benefits for the mazaalai.

Civil society organizations in Mongolia and beyond have a vital role to play by cooperating with the locals to create a better understanding for their ursine neighbors and foster coexistence in a time of resource competition. Encouraging positive relationships with the people who share the habitat with the endangered species is beneficial to scientific observation as well. As villagers encounter Gobi bears or traverse their territory, they can share their first-hand knowledge about sightings and any other important data points. Funding can go a long way in education and training initiatives.

International organizations stimulate an even broader global awareness — which is what the Mongolian authorities attempted to achieve with the “Year of the Gobi Bear” and repeatedly state is a requirement for a successful conservation campaign. A wider audience means that the plight of the mazaalai can receive additional support through crowdfunding for organizations that need it, attract innovative solutions to subsistence problems, and inspire scholars to pursue relevant research. Awareness is the first step to any positive outcomes.

The Gobi bear does not have the luxury of panda diplomacy. However, a recent upturn in interest in Mongolian culture, such as heavy metal and esoteric folk music, the ancient sport of “knucklebone” or the traditional nomadic homes — the yurt, or ger in Mongolian — could serve as a conduit for greater awareness about the country’s endangered flora and fauna.

The image of a shaggy desert bear wandering the Gobi is enough to invoke a romanticized notion of the Central Asian steppe and its exceptional creatures. But this remoteness and the few remaining individuals have resulted in an out-of-sight, out-of-mind attitude to the Gobi bear in the global consciousness. There is room for another bear to share the conservation pantheon. A collective focus on this critically endangered species may not increase its fragile numbers in the short term, but a robust strategy involving multiple local and international stakeholders can ensure it has a future on this planet.

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Water World: Is Climate Change Driving Our Future Out to Sea?

Anna Pivovarchuk
November 29, 2021

As sea levels rise, hundreds of millions of people may be at risk around the world.

There is no question about it: Our planet is warming faster than ever before. Having plateaued around 280 parts per million for thousands of years, global CO2 emissions have shot past 400 ppm at the end of the last decade, an atmospheric rise set in motion by the 18th-century Industrial Revolution. Human activity in its myriad modes of creative destruction has led to a global average temperature rise between 1.1°C and 1.2°C above pre-industrial levels. It brought with it nature’s wrath in the form of an ever-increasing number of extreme weather events — wildfires and floods, one-in-a-lifetime storms and heatwaves, droughts and rising seas.

Climate change, as the skeptics like to remind us, does occur naturally. Analysis by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that temperatures during the last interglacial period, which began 130,000 years ago and lasted somewhere between 13,000 and 15,000 years, were 0.5°C and 1°C warmer than in pre-industrial times and up to 2°C or even 4°C warmer during the mid-Pliocene Warm Period, around 3 million years ago. But while there are natural processes in place, the pace of climate change over the past century has demonstrated the devastating effect of anthropogenic activity on the delicate balance of life on Earth.

The Seas Are Rising

What is significant about the IPCC assessment is that during the last interglacial period, sea levels were likely between 6 meters and 9 meters higher, possibly reaching 25 meters during the mid-Pliocene. That may sound farfetched, but modeling suggests a 2.3-meter rise per 1°C of warming. Globally, the average sea level has already increased by 0.2 meters since the late 19th century, starting at a rate of 1.4 millimeters a year from 1901 to 1990 and accelerating to 3.6 millimeters a year between 2006 and 2015.

This spells disaster for the coastal areas. A study published in *Environmental Research Letters* earlier this year suggests that, even with no net global emissions after 2020, “the carbon already in the atmosphere could sustain enough warming for global mean sea level to rise 1.9 (0–3.8) meters over the coming centuries,” meaning that currently, anywhere between 120 million and 650 million people — or a mean of 5.3% of the world’s population — live on land below the new tide lines.

Even if warming is kept under the upper limit of the Paris Agreement of 2°C above pre-industrial levels, multi-century sea level rise can reach 4.7 meters, threatening the livelihoods of double the number of people, the authors assess. In 2019, the IPCC estimated that this number could reach 1 billion by 2050. The panel predicts a rise of anywhere between 0.29 meters and 1.1

meters by 2100 relative to 1985–2005, depending on emission rates. A paper published in *Nature* concluded that if we stay on the current emissions course heading for 3°C warming, we will reach a tipping point by 2060, with the Antarctic ice sheet alone adding 0.5 centimeters to global sea levels each year.

According to the authors of a 2019 study on sea-level rise and migration, rising waters are predicted to be the “most expensive and irreversible future consequences of global climate change, costing up to 4.5% of global gross domestic product.” A 2018 projection by C40, a network of mayors of nearly 100 global cities, estimated that a 2°C rise could affect 800 million people in 570 urban centers by mid-century. As the authors of a 2021 study summarize, “Although there is large variability in future sea level projections, due, for instance, to the uncertainty in anthropogenic emissions, there is consensus on the potentially catastrophic worldwide impact of SLR.”

A 2°C rise puts land that houses over half the population of Vietnam and Bangladesh and over 80% of those living in the island nations like Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Bahamas and the Marshall Islands below the tide line. The Maldives, with 80% of its 1,200 atolls not even reaching 1 meter above sea level — the world’s lowest terrain, with its highest elevation point of just 2.4 meters — is particularly at risk; there is literally nowhere to hide. In May, the minister for the environment, climate change and technology, Aminath Shauna, told CNBC that if current trends continue, the island nation “will not be here” by 2100. “We will not survive. ... There’s no higher ground for us ... it’s just us, it’s just our islands and the sea.”

Water, Water Everywhere

It is clear that Alisi Rabukawaqa, project liaison officer at the International Union for Conservation of Nature, she has given this a lot of thought. When I ask her about the reality of climate change in what many would consider to be a tropical paradise — her native Fiji — she doesn’t stop talking for nearly 10 minutes. She

remembers a time when devastating cyclones were “lifetimes apart.” Now, category 5 storms are a regular, looming threat.

“And if it’s not cyclones, it’s the drought. And if it’s not the drought, it’s the saltwater intrusion that’s impacting where people plant; and if it’s not that, it’s seeping into drinking sources and boreholes from outer islands,” she tells me from a Fiji so hot, everyone is bracing for another cyclone.

While for most communities affected by sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion relocation is still “further down the line,” traditional land ownership laws mean that you can’t just pack up and move anywhere you like, even if, unlike in the Maldives, there is higher ground. In 2017, the government’s National Development Plan identified over 830 vulnerable communities, 48 of which were in urgent need of resettlement. The plan was developed a year after Tropical Cyclone Winston, which hit Fiji in February 2016, significantly affected around 350,000 people. That is a high number by any standard; here, it’s more than a third of the population.

“Fiji is a small place relatively, so all those things combined, it’s made us more vulnerable,” Rabukawaqa says. “In the past, it was just the issue of development, thinking of proper development, like, How do we do this right? How do you ensure it’s sustainable? Reforestation. Those seem like simpler times.”

Saltwater intrusion is what is having a major impact on the coastal community of Barishal in Bangladesh, home to Kathak Biswas Joy, district coordinator with Youth Net for Climate Justice, member of the advisory team with Child Rights Connect and the founder of the non-profit Aranyak. It was his work on children’s rights that made him realize that “in Bangladesh, everything is related to climate change.” As it exacerbates existing inequalities, driving migration from the countryside — where salinity and flooding are destroying farmland — to the coastal cities, child labor and child marriage become ever more commonplace.

So does disease. Increased salinity has been linked to numerous problems during pregnancy and child mortality, hair loss and skin diseases, dysentery, hypertension, risk of miscarriage and changes in menstrual cycles as well as difficulty with maintaining hygiene. The deadly dengue fever, already the “fastest growing vector-borne viral disease in the world” as a result of a warmer, wetter climate, has ravaged Bangladesh alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. In a country where water is everywhere, it seems to bring as little relief as it did to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ancient mariner.

Rabukawaqa echoes this sentiment. In a nation that depends almost entirely on the ocean, the traditional and cultural relationship with it is turning from “a beautiful, loving, caring one ... into one where the ocean is suddenly becoming our enemy. And we don’t want it to be that way.”

On Your Doorstep

If you think that Alisi Rabukawaqa’s and Kathak Biswas Joy’s problems are far from your world, think again. While nine out of 10 top large countries at risk from sea-level rise are located in Asia, no place is safe. Many of the world’s most vibrant cities already face a considerable threat from flooding by as early as 2030 — less than a decade from now. Climate Central, a nonprofit, has used data from “peer-reviewed science in leading journals” to map areas most at risk over the coming century. While the creators warn that the mapping is bound to include errors, its scope of doom is frightening.

If global warming is not halted, cities as diverse as Bangkok, New Orleans, Lagos, Rio de Janeiro, Hamburg, Yangon, Antwerp, Basra, Dhaka, New York and Dubai may see entire neighborhoods submerged. On average, coastal residents experience a sea-level rise of around 8 millimeters to 10 millimeters a year for every 3-millimeter rise in sea levels due to subsidence — the slow sinking of land that occurs in river deltas that can be exacerbated by the extraction of resources like groundwater and oil.

Tokyo, for example, sank by 4 meters over the course of last century, Shanghai, Bangkok and New Orleans by 2 meters. The Thai capital, built on what is known as “Bangkok clay,” saw the water-logged areas it sits on drained to accommodate for agriculture and urban expansion, making flooding a recurring problem, exacerbated by a six-month-long rainy season.

In Shanghai alone, China’s financial hub that sits in the Yangtze River estuary surrounded by lakes, nearly \$1 trillion of assets are at risk as a result of rising waters, according to analysis by the Financial Times. The Pearl River Delta Economic Zone, which generates 20% of China’s GDP and 3.8% of global wealth, is one of the areas most at risk of sea-level rise. In May, China’s Ministry of Ecology and Environment estimated that its coastal waters were 73 millimeters above “normal” average for the period between 1993 and 2011, with temperatures 0.7°C above the 1981-2010 range.

In Venice, the aqua alta, or “high water,” usually occurs between autumn and spring caused a combination of tide peaks, sirocco winds and the lunar cycle. The city that encompasses some 100 lagoon islands has been threatened by water for centuries, but according to city data, Venice had experienced as many inundations over 1.1-meters aqua alta levels in the last two decades alone as over the whole of the previous century. The 2019 flood that submerged 80% of the city, killing two and causing devastating damage to historical landmarks and \$1 billion of losses, saw the second-highest water level in its history.

Mozambique, with one of the longest coastlines in Africa that spans 2,470 kilometers and is home to 60% of the population, is in danger of losing an estimated 4,850 square kilometers of land surface by 2040, according to an assessment by USAID. With 45% already living below the poverty line, 70% currently depend on climate-sensitive living conditions. According to a 2021 study published in the *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering*, 20% of the population relies on fishing as the main

income, contributing some 10% of the country’s GDP, alongside 5% brought in by tourism.

Coastal erosion and increasing extreme weather events like Cyclone Idai, the deadliest storm in the history of southern Africa, and Cyclone Kenneth, that hit Mozambique in 2019, threaten all of this — as well as the country’s fragile ecosystems like coral reefs. Idai and Kenneth caused \$3.2 billion worth of damage; at around 22% of the country’s GDP, that’s about half the annual budget.

If the current projections are correct, 12 of India’s coastal cities may be under 1 meter of water by the end of the century. Mumbai, the country’s economic capital, and Kolkata, India’s third-largest city built in the lower Ganges Delta, rely on drainage systems dating back to colonial times. Consequently, Mumbai experiences floods every year these days. According to IPCC assessment, Kolkata warmed more than any other studied city between 1950 and 2018, by 2.6°C — ahead of Tehran’s 2.3°C and Moscow’s 1°C — and may see its one-day maximum rainfall rise by 50% by 2100.

While the United Kingdom is not exactly known for sunny climes, the Albion has been experiencing record-breaking rainfall, more frequent storms and flooding, at a cost of £1.4 billion a year in damages, or around £800 million per flood, according to government figures. With the temperature already a degree warmer than a century and a half ago, storms like Desmond, which caused £1.6 billion worth of devastation in 2015, may become 59% as likely.

In the Thames floodplain, London’s iconic locations like Tower Bridge, Hampton Court and the London Eye are at risk by 2050. Earlier this year, flooding in central London influenced Queen guitarist Brian May’s decision to pack up and leave, one of the more high-profile climate refugees escaping the rising seas.

In its latest report published in September, the World Bank suggested that as many as 200 million people could be displaced as a result of climate change, an upgrade from its 2018 figure of 148 million. The Institute for Economics and

Peace put the number of climate refugees at 1.2 billion. While it is difficult to predict how people will respond to the new circumstances over the coming decades, analysis by Brookings suggests that of the 68.5 million displaced in 2017, approximately one-third was on the move due to “‘sudden onset’ weather events — flooding, forest fires after droughts, and intensified storms.”

Conflicting studies on migration flows demonstrate just how difficult it is to model human behavior in the face of crisis. But we are highly adaptable and can move relatively freely (in the absence of border restrictions). In the animal kingdom faced with loss of vital habitats and fragile ecosystems, up to a third of all the world’s species can go extinct as a result of climate change by 2070, or more than half under a less optimistic emissions scenario. It is a tragedy the scope of which merits its own elegy.

A Drop in the Ocean

To quite literally stem the tide, many countries are adopting new technology in the hope to secure their future. China launched its “sponge city” initiative in 2015, with the aim to absorb and reuse 70% of rainwater by 2030; some 30 cities are taking part in the scheme, including Shanghai. Egypt’s historical city of Alexandria, where landmarks like Cleopatra’s palace and the famed lighthouse are in danger of submersion, has opted for widening its canals and rehousing people living alongside them.

The Netherlands, a third of which already lies below sea level, has been building flood defenses for millennia, and now prides itself on one of the most advanced systems in the world, including the giant sea gate of Maeslantkering that protects the harbor of Rotterdam. Last year, Venice managed to hold back the waters for the first time in 1,200 years with the help of the €7-billion flood barriers that have been under construction for nearly two decades.

Farmers in Bangladesh are turning to the centuries-old practice of floating farms, while Mumbai has been working to conserve its

mangroves that can help absorb the impacts of cyclones and dissipate flooding.

The Maldives is planning to start the construction of the Dutch-designed Floating City in 2022, a first of its kind, to complement the artificial island of Hulhumale and its City of Hope, a reclamation project that is currently home to around 100,000 people. Miami is set to spend at least \$3.8 billion over the next four decades to fund storm pumps and 6-foot-tall sea walls to protect against a once-in-five-years storm surge.

The Thames Estuary 2100 Plan has been developed to “protect 1.4 million people, £320 billion worth of property and critical infrastructure from increasing tidal flood risk” as well as “enhance and restore ecosystems and maximise benefits of natural floods” and enhance “the social, economic and commercial benefits the river provides.”

This is all good and well, but if we don’t halt the warming of the planet, all this effort will be but a mere drop in the ocean in the long run.

I ask Rabukawaqa how she feels about all these high-tech, high-cost efforts to keep back the waters. As a scientist, she thinks technology has a place, but says that in this instance, it’s not enough: “If we are going to look for and promote new technology that only results in us mining and extracting more from our lands and, in our case, most likely our oceans through deep-sea mining, it makes absolutely zero sense.” Across Fiji, there is widespread extraction of materials like sand and gravel, as well as copper and bauxite ore, which is only compounding the existing problems. “Maybe it’s not profitable, the way we are living and moving on this planet,” she says. “We need to move slower in this world.”

The Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow — home to the Industrial Revolution — was hailed as the “‘last, best chance’ to keep 1.5°C alive.” With much fanfare and squabbling over minutiae, the summit closed with its president, Alok Sharma, reduced to tears by India’s last-minute watering down of commitments on phasing out fossil fuels. On the

same day, India's capital New Delhi experienced levels of pollution that forced it into lockdown. While it is already one of the world's most polluted cities, the symbolism of the timing is hard to dismiss.

Just as it is most at risk to sea-level rise, Asia — including Australia — is the world's biggest consumer and producer of coal, accounting for three-quarters of the global total. With India setting its net-zero commitment to 2070, China to 2060 and the US announcing that it is unlikely to bolster its COP26 pledges to reach net-zero by 2050 in the coming year, it feels like a losing battle for low-emitters like Fiji and Bangladesh. Biswas Joy is disappointed that world leaders ended up blaming each other instead of coming up with a concrete plan for climate financing for developing nations. "It is not a relief — it is our needs," he says. "We are not begging."

"We deserve to continue to exist. But our existence really depends on everyone in the world coming to agree," echoes Rabukawaqa. Both feel that their futures have been traded for profit margins. With just three Pacific Island leaders present in Glasgow vis-à-vis over 500 fossil fuel industry representatives, it is an unsurprising sentiment.

According to Climate Action Tracker (CAT), the Glasgow agreement has left a major credibility gap, with the planet still on course to produce twice as many emissions by 2030 as are necessary to keep the temperature rise below 1.5°C. Without long-term target amendments, CAT calculates that we are on course for a 2.4°C increase by the end of the century based on pledges alone. Projected warming under current policies is 2.7°C. The most optimistic scenario, if all pledges are implemented, still has us on course for 1.8°C by 2100.

Does all this mean that our future is out at sea? Both Biswas Joy and Rabukawaqa are hopeful. There were good things that came out of COP26, like the deforestation pledge and the fact that decades of activism by small island nations — or large ocean states, as they like to call themselves, Rabukawaqa jokes — have finally

moved the needle on fossil fuels. Biswas Joy plans to continue his activism — and vote, when he is finally old enough. "Tomorrow, we come in, we try again," says Rabukawaqa. "It's big work." But for her, "Optimism is not a choice. We have to do this." She laughs, contagiously.

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SCIENCE

Pandemic Family Life: The Struggles Behind Closed Doors

Anis Ben Brik
May 14, 2021

The world's most vulnerable families do not have the personal resources to manage the multi-layered pandemic crisis.

With an estimated 255 million full-time jobs lost in 2020, the global economy shrank by 4.4%, pushing ever more people into poverty. Right now, 34 million are on the brink of starvation, and 235 million will require humanitarian assistance and protection in 2021 — an increase of 40% from last year.

Limited social and economic mobility has deeply altered family life with alarming speed and magnitude. For families, the fundamental building blocks of our society, the pandemic is a public and yet a very personal crisis. As the raging socioeconomic inequalities we have allowed to multiply are exposed, their severe

strain continues to be experienced differently among families.

COVID-19 has exacerbated many of the injustices that face vulnerable families, women and children in every country, but especially in those nations undergoing political and economic turmoil, from inadequate internet access to housing instability, tacit unschooling and food insecurity. Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, the World Health Organization's regional director for Europe, recently noted that "the cards have been stacked against them in terms of jobs, housing, community, social support and health care." In turn, new and different types of inequality, such as the mental health and wellbeing gap or digital and gender inequalities, are exacerbated. Each is a threat to the human dimension of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Facing the Crisis

There is empirical evidence that families, women and children are experiencing mental health stress in the face of the unfolding crisis. The cross-sectional COVID-19 Family Life Study initiated at the College of Public Policy, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, carried out online surveys among 123,845 parents of children under 18 spanning every continent between March and October 2020. The results show the worrying incidence of parents' and children's mental health, wellbeing, behavioral and emotional difficulties.

During the pandemic, anxiety was the most pervasive symptom among parents, followed by depression, then stress. The prevalence differed significantly according to gender, education and employment status. Symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress were found in mothers, parents with primary and intermediate educational levels, as well as retired and unemployed parents.

Parents reported elevated levels of anxiety in their children across high-income, upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income countries, as defined by the World Bank. In countries facing political instability or conflict, such as Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Venezuela, Iraq and

Syria, however, the pandemic has had a severe impact on children's levels of anxiety. Palestine had the highest percentage of children experiencing elevated and severe levels of anxiety compared to countries with high incomes such as Greece, Norway, Poland, Italy and Australia, which had the lowest.

In Asia, children in early adolescence living in single-parent households experienced higher levels of anxiety. In the Gulf region, over 30% of parents reported their children experiencing an elevated level of anxiety and over 20% reported severe difficulties in their child's emotional, behavioral and attentional abilities. The study also shows that teens are struggling under the oppressive weight of anxiety and depression, many of whom live in low and middle-income countries.

Children's activity, eating and sleep routines have been disrupted globally, which may have detrimental effects on their health and overall development. More than half of parents surveyed in the UAE, Lebanon, Indonesia, the United States, the Netherlands, China, Pakistan, Singapore, the Philippines, South Africa, Sudan and Peru reported an increase in their children's sleep problems. Over 50% of parents in Qatar, Bahrain, Italy, the US, Oman, Kuwait, Germany, China, Chile, Venezuela, Malaysia, Nigeria, India and Iraq reported an increase in their children's reading difficulties. In Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Sweden, Oman, the UAE, Singapore, France, the US, Norway, Brazil, Jordan, Nigeria, Tunisia, Kenya, Algeria, Angola, Ecuador and Chile, more than half reported an increase in their screen time.

The results reflect humanitarian crises that predate the pandemic. Many already vulnerable refugees have been plunged into even greater precariousness, for example. The data shows an increasing inequality between countries, with children in high-income countries experiencing fewer mental health problems than those in the global south. While the challenges of the pandemic are overwhelming for all of us, the more pronounced psychological symptoms

among children and teenagers may also be a reflection of the inequities inside their homes and in some cases the utter lack of protection offered by national systems. It is also in these countries where mental health counseling is too often unavailable for those who need it most.

The disruptions to children's physical activities, sleeping and eating routines, reading and screen time will have a long-lasting effect on their physical and mental health. These must be addressed if we are to guard children's wellbeing and prevent the onset of more severe behavioral and emotional problems.

Facing the Future

Parents are facing serious challenges and need support if they are to continue fulfilling their foundational role in providing secure, stable and healthy home environments for their children. The most vulnerable families, those who are plagued by poverty, those mired down by gender inequality, and those living in conflict zones, must receive the support they need and deserve.

These more vulnerable families do not have the personal resources to manage the multi-layered pandemic crisis. Their vulnerabilities are too easily exploited, whether within the labor or the housing market, with the most vulnerable often willing to accept abusive conditions to stave off complete destitution. Negative coping strategies may include behavioral disengagement, self-blame, denial and substance abuse, leading to further social exclusion.

On the International Day of Families, we must be mindful that the global SDGs will be difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill unless strategies to achieve them focus on the family. Our policy choices today will determine how quickly countries can overcome the pandemic's impact. Otherwise, we risk aggravating the already deep inequalities both within and between countries.

Technology and digital tools can help in many respects, offering mental health support or giving parents access to essential public health information and tips on how to recognize and cope with the symptoms of anxiety in their

children and teens. But for that to work, the widening digital gap must be addressed. The challenges ahead include the need to develop global, regional and national intervention programs to offset the effects of the pandemic. Evidence-based policy interventions can do much to ensure a fair global order that recognizes the inherent dignity of all persons and all families.

Far beyond the span of current COVID-19 stimulus packages, there is an urgent need for investment and support by governments to protect families, as evidenced by the study. Over 90% of parents surveyed reported an urgent need for financial support for families and the elderly, work-family balance arrangements, mental health programs for parents, children and adolescents, and parenting and relationship education programs. The pandemic has illuminated positive opportunities for shaping family and childcare policies, and family policies must be the foundation of post-pandemic recovery.

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Can Dyslexia Be an Asset?

John Manzella
June 4, 2021

The advantages of dyslexia are extensive, but they often are not seized if the dyslexic student does not have access to quality special educational services.

I'm a nationally syndicated columnist, author of several books and a speaker on global business, labor and economic trends. I'm also a beneficiary, not a victim, of dyslexia, a learning

disability characterized by reading, writing and decoding difficulties. Why do I say beneficiary? Read on.

As a child, I experienced the difficulties of dyslexia firsthand. Growing up, I often felt dumb, lacked confidence and had low self-esteem. I couldn't read until much later than my classmates, albeit slowly, and continue to have difficulties with math. When paying bills, for example, I still say each number out loud, highlight each digit and review it several times before I hit send on my laptop.

To this day, I still have stomach aches weekday mornings Monday through Friday, but not Saturday or Sunday. This was caused by the anxiety I felt waiting for the school bus and knowing that when I arrived at school, I would not be able to complete tasks, somehow embarrass myself and feel stupid.

Before the Christmas vacation in first grade, I recall being very excited hearing bells ringing in the hallway. Our teacher told us it was Santa's elves putting candy in our boots. We all darted out of the classroom into the hallway. I was shocked to find sticks in my boots. Was I a bad kid? My teacher, not being familiar with dyslexia, probably thought I was lazy.

Needless to say, I failed first grade. However, I was fortunate to repeat it at a nearby school that had an excellent special education teacher. Her instruction, along with support from my family and friends, helped me cope, build much-needed confidence and self-esteem. My father repeatedly told me that I could achieve anything I wanted if I was willing to work hard. He also told me that if it took me twice as long as other students to complete my homework or study for tests, that's what I had to do.

For Others

Other dyslexics are not as fortunate as I was and don't have the educational assistance, emotional support or encouragement I received as a child. Consequently, it's estimated — and is no surprise — that dyslexics include over 30% of high school dropouts, 50% of all adolescents involved in drug

and alcohol rehabilitation and nearly half of all those incarcerated in the United States.

The brains of dyslexics are wired differently. On the upside, dyslexics think outside the box in a non-linear way, in pictures, not words. Research indicates dyslexics are highly creative, insightful and intuitive, and are able to identify complex patterns much more easily than the average person. I credit this characteristic, which I identify as big-picture thinking, for my ability to connect the dots in seemingly unrelated economic trends and other factors.

In the United States, it's estimated that dyslexics, who may represent as much as 10% to 20% of the population, comprise approximately 35% of entrepreneurs, 40% of all self-made millionaires, and 50% of rocket scientists at NASA. Dyslexia is so common at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it's called "the MIT disease." Interestingly, years ago, the American Astronomical Society noted that astrophysicists with dyslexia at times outperformed their non-dyslexic colleagues in identifying the distinctive characteristics of black holes.

Famous Folks

Many of the world's most famous and successful people are dyslexics. This reportedly includes Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Leonardo DaVinci, Bill Gates, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson, Walt Disney, Henry Ford, Steven Spielberg, Steve Jobs, Richard Branson, and Charles Schwab. Their genius didn't occur in spite of dyslexia but, more likely, because of it.

In addition to its advantages, dyslexics also often learn to cope with difficulties and deal with failure, which is part of any successful process. I suspect many of my early achievements were motivated by my need to prove I wasn't a failure.

The advantages of dyslexia are extensive, but they often remain untapped if dyslexic students don't have access to quality special education services. Although mandated by US federal law, students don't always get an adequate

individualized education plan or the help they need.

According to Annual Performance Reports from the US Department of Education, the cost of schooling a child receiving a special education can be more than twice the average. Since poorer school districts are not as well financed as wealthier ones, and teachers are not always sufficiently trained, many children with dyslexia fall through the cracks, as the numbers above make obvious. This needs to change.

Just as important, the advantages of dyslexia will not be obtained if the child has a negative attitude or a poor opinion of themselves. I'm reminded of the wise words from Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can, or think you can't ... you're right."

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Why Do So Many Athletes Have Mental Health Issues?

Ellis Cashmore
June 16, 2021

What were once seen as vulnerabilities or deficiencies are now regarded in a similar way to an anterior cruciate ligament injury: fixable.

“That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche didn't have the afflictions of athletes in mind when he wrote this, though many athletes who have surfaced from depression actually appear to be fortified by the ordeal. Others suffer, often in silence, and never fully recover.

We don't know how Naomi Osaka, the world number 2, will react to “the long bouts of depression” she has experienced since 2018. The Japanese tennis player was a 20-year-old when they started. She is now 23 and faces something of a crossroads, having withdrawn from both the French Open and, more recently, the WTA German Open. She now has to decide whether to enter Wimbledon, which starts on June 28.

Osaka may storm back powerfully, bursting with confidence and fresh resolve, as Nietzsche would have predicted. She could also recede into obscurity, like another young tennis player, Andrea Jaeger, who was ranked number 2 at the age of 16 and looked set for superstardom, but retired at 19 in 1986, a victim of what was then called “burnout.” Now, we have a more sophisticated understanding of why some professional athletes, particularly young ones, suffer inwardly: anxiety, stress and depression that affect the rest of the population may be more prevalent in sports.

Athletes operate in a risk-riven, competitive environment that deliberately cultivates aims, targets and achievable goals. Reaching goals is rewarding, but falling short can be devastating. Even a single defeat can be ruinous. There is also a ceaseless series of expectations. Literally everyone, from the people who serve in the canteen to journalists who report to the media, harbors expectations. In themselves, expectations have no potency, but the manner in which competitors assimilate and respond to them is crucial. Some athletes thrive, while others wither. Responding to the expectations of others is the mainspring of depression. Yet, sometimes, the condition seems unrelated to athletic performance and is barely intelligible.

Robert Enke

The case that alerted the world to the problem of mental illness in sport was that of 32-year-old Robert Enke, one of Germany's leading football stars. Widely tipped to be the number-1 goalkeeper in the national squad for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, Enke walked onto the tracks in

front of an oncoming train in 2009. The football world was stunned: why? After all, he was an affluent, young sports celebrity with a chance of winning one of the most coveted prizes in sport.

Enke's wife, Teresa, revealed that he had been tormented with depression for years. He tried to hide his mental condition, fearful it might damage his professional career. Worse, he thought it might cause authorities to take away his 8-month-old daughter, whom he and his wife had adopted earlier in 2009. The couple lost their 2-year-old daughter through a rare heart condition in 2006.

As a youth, the precociously proficient Enke was often required to play in teams with older players and his father, Dirk, told how his son grew anxious. "There were always crises back then because he was scared that he would not be able to keep up with the older ones ... He did not have faith in himself," Dirk said in 2009. Of course, most top athletes do have faith in themselves. They are usually self-confident and often ebullient. Or at least they appear to be. Enke probably did too. Like other athletes, he learned to conceal his apprehension.

Medicalizing Mental Illness

Athletes are coached to do this: If they can't hide their emotions, they won't last long in sports. This should make us wonder not why there is so much mental illness in sports, but why there is so little. In the 20th century, mental illness carried a stigma, especially in sports. But we've now transmuted what was once seen as a weakness into an illness, much like physical ailments. The process is known as medicalization: We treat mental illness as we would diseases. Whether or not the reader accepts that depression and associated mental disorders are, in fact, illnesses or just cognate — that is, related in certain respects — to illnesses, the reality is that this is how they are diagnosed and treated.

Today, issues and problems that have origins in social, cultural or environmental conditions are viewed and treated as medical ailments. One of the beneficial consequences is that much of the

disgrace has been removed, leaving athletes who have suffered to open up about their experiences. They share a common matrix: a culture that inhibits, yet promotes illness. The ethos of mastery, striving and bearing pain mitigates against admitting a susceptibility to attacks that can neither be seen nor beaten with sheer persistence or the kind of hard work urged by coaches. The same ethos fosters ambition and an achievement orientation satisfied only by levels of attainment reached by the elite few.

Most sports careers involve unexpected reverses brought about by defeats or injuries. Mental health problems are regarded in a similar way to an anterior cruciate ligament injury: fixable. Tyson Fury first won the world heavyweight title in 2015. He then sunk into depression and binge drinking, but resumed his boxing career with renewed vigor. Kelly Holmes self-harmed with scissors for two months in 2003. A year later, she won two gold medals in the 800 meters and 1,500 meters at the Olympics. Five-time Olympic swimming gold medalist Ian Thorpe lost motivation completely, retired in 2006 but later returned, yet without ever finding his best form.

Some never quite recover. Michael Yardy interrupted his tour of India with the England cricket team, suffering from depression in 2011. He didn't play for the national team again. Other athletes, such as rugby's Jonny Wilkinson and cricket's Marcus Trescothick, simply lived with mental health conditions from childhood and learned to tolerate the symptoms to a greater or lesser extent.

Who Wants to Be a Sports Star?

Of the myriad causes of mental illnesses, Naomi Osaka's is unusual: She says finds the media demands unbearable. Major sports are now part of the entertainment industry and their stars are warrantable celebrities. Audiences want access to all parts of their lives, public and private. Osaka has made her commitment to Black Lives Matter clear. She may feel that, as a black woman, she is inordinately questioned about her loyalties,

though she hasn't said as much and appears comfortable making her convictions known.

But she won't expect any special considerations from tennis authorities, who broker lucrative broadcasting and sponsorship deals on the understanding that players will cooperate. Osaka is presumably bright enough to realize that much of the \$37 million she earned last year was made possible by her media presence. Actually playing sports is just part of the Faustian pact.

All of which prompts an obvious question: Who would want to be a top sports star in an environment so competitive that mental disorders go with the territory? There are obvious benefits: money, fame and a job that pays for doing something you would have probably carried on doing for fun even if you weren't getting paid. But the point about pursuing something for fun is that you don't get paid for doing it. Once you do, it becomes a job of work. Many, perhaps most, athletes don't enjoy competing. Andre Agassi famously hated tennis. Other athletes, including Barcelona's Lionel Messi, are physically sick before competitions.

In May, Olympic bronze medal-winning hammer thrower Sophie Hitchon announced her retirement, aged 29. "I have never really done it for the love of the sport or the enjoyment," she explained. "I do it because I was good at it, and was succeeding at it." Hitchon's approach may not be representative, though I suspect it is.

No rational person willingly wants to train repetitiously every day, risking physical injury, sometimes resulting in death and always facing the possibility of mental indispositions — unless they are succeeding and, presumably, making a good living from it. The recent life-threatening cardiac arrest suffered by Denmark's Christian Eriksen at the UEFA European Championship reminds us that being fit, well-dieted and regularly tested is no defense against the intensity of constant competition. Polish footballer Robert Lewandowski recently issued the reminder, "we're humans, we're not machines."

So, Osaka's options are either to overcome her anxieties with the media or cease playing, at least till such time when she is able to cope. This sounds like a pitiless pair of options, but there seems little latitude. Her premature retirement would be an awful loss to tennis. But is money and success worth it, if the price is her mental health?

It's not a rhetorical question: Many athletes and entertainers persist with their careers despite depression. They include Katy Perry, Bruce Springsteen and Gwyneth Paltrow. All three have found relief, sometimes through medication or therapy. Lady Gaga has integrated her experiences with mental illness into her work. At 35, she is the youngest of the group. It's an age when most athletes have either retired or are contemplating it, and perhaps the relative brevity of a competitive career increases the mental duress. I don't know whether these entertainers would endorse Nietzsche's apothegm, but all of them have had long, garlanded careers. Mental illness didn't become a salient influence on any of their lives.

Mental health is a corner of the sports landscape that was ignored for many decades. While a fuller understanding of the causes of depression involves analysis beyond the physical, the newfound confidence of athletes like Naomi Osaka to disclose their mental problems is due in large part to a medicalized understanding of its status and public acceptance that it is treatable.

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The Elusive Importance of Sleep

Jennifer Wider
July 16, 2021

Deficient sleep is linked to a wide range of negative outcomes that affect our physical and mental well-being.

Sleep insufficiency is a universal problem, affecting millions of people each year in every corner of the globe. It is prevalent across all ages, genders, socio-economic groups and ethnicities. Many organizations consider it to be a public health epidemic with weighty economic costs.

The significance of the problem is often overlooked by the general public, with attitudes ranging from indifference to the glorification of sleep deprivation. It isn't uncommon for a medical resident or a new mother to brush off concerns of not getting a good night's rest, as it is equally common for pop culture to glamorize all-nighters. As a result, sleep hygiene is not regularly discussed and often goes under-reported by patients.

Health Consequences

But the health consequences are real and should not be ignored. Deficient sleep is inextricably linked with a wide range of negative outcomes that affect a person's physical and mental well-being and performance. In fact, the National Center for Health Statistics has shown that decreased sleep duration has been associated with seven out of the 15 top causes of mortality across the US. These include cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, accidents, diabetes, hypertension and septicemia. Clearly, the impact of insufficient sleep has sweeping effects across global societies and constitutes a major public health concern.

The duration of sleep varies among people based on age. According to a state-based study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(CDC), fewer than 65% of adults reported the necessary number of hours per night. The survey revealed that over 80 million American adults were sleeping under the recommended seven hours each day.

The same pattern is pervasive among adolescents and young adults, and the consequences can be devastating. These years are especially formative, with the brain and body undergoing remarkable development. Although sleep is essential, research reveals that many teens and young adults get far less of it than their bodies require. As a result, mental health issues, a decline in academic performance, accidents and injuries, poor judgment, risk-taking and obesity are rampant among this demographic.

It's no coincidence that long-term sleep deprivation has been historically used as a form of torture, resulting in both negative physical and mental side effects. While chronic sleep insufficiency does not equate with institutionalized torture, it does result in a significant burden to public health, the labor force and academic performance.

Making Change

This begs the question: What are we doing as a global society to address this widespread and pervasive public health epidemic? How can changes in individual behavior, actions by employers and public policy measures be implemented in a meaningful way to make long-term, substantial change?

In the workplace, lack of sleep can put employees and other people at risk, especially if, for example, the duties include patient care, transportation or law enforcement. Sleep hygiene needs to be an integral part of every workplace program. Employers can utilize the CDC's Workplace Health Resource Center, which contains education, training and assessment tools, in addition to strategies to modify the workplace to increase alertness, incorporate dedicated breaks and spot warning signs of fatigue and exhaustion.

According to statistics from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, up to two-thirds of patients have not discussed their issues around sleep with their doctors, while a significant percentage of health care providers fail to ask. Sleep habits should be routinely discussed at yearly physicals and histories, and patients should be given ample tools to manage sleep difficulties. These must include more than just a prescription.

Colleges and universities should take measures to curtail the unnecessary glamorization of sleep deprivation. Students largely ignore sleep requirements as academic, social and extra-curricular pressures get in the way. Students of all ages are spending an inordinate amount of time on social media, and a study from the National Sleep Foundation revealed that nighttime social media use negatively correlates with a good night's sleep.

Schools and universities alike need to address these concerns that are so pervasive on school grounds across the globe. The inclusion of sleep education in health classes should be universal, as should education materials that include guidelines as to when to turn off electronic devices before bed.

The last 16 months have resulted in global upheaval, leaving policymakers struggling to catch their breath. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing quarantine forced many of us to work from home. In doing so, it inadvertently helped many to reestablish a work-life balance that was off-kilter for a very long time. As we reexamine our world and our lives, a better balance for our collective health must include the prioritization of sleep.

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Health Care in America Is the Best in the World

Khaled Dajani
November 3, 2021

Often used as a whipping boy for its high administrative burden and cost of care, the United States is best in class for pay, research, innovation and certain high-profile clinical outcomes.

There is an aphorism that all budding entrepreneurs and grizzled veterans alike come to intimately understand: the market never lies.

Americans have among the lowest life expectancy of high-income countries — 77.3 years versus Switzerland, for example, at 83.2 years. The adult chronic disease burden stands at 24.6% of the population, compared to an average of 18% across these same countries. Obesity defined as a BMI of 30 or more is at a staggering 40% in the United States, compared to an average of 21% in the group.

Yet over a million people travel to the US every year for their medical care, including heads of state, the wealthy and elite, who presumably could have received care in their home country or anywhere else in the world.

The numbers cited above do not even include the millions who are cared for by the international satellite campuses of the Mayo Clinic, Cornell, Harvard and Johns Hopkins systems, to name just a few, that have been established to bring American health care to the rest of the world.

Around 100,000 Canadians, whose nationalized health system is rated above the United States, are likely to cross the border each year for medical care. These medical tourists recognize that, on the whole, health care in the US is the best in the world.

Leading the Way

The United States leads the world as a juggernaut of medical research and innovation. More Americans have received the Nobel Prize in medicine than Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia combined, which together have double the aggregate population of the US. Half of the top 10 diagnostic or therapeutic innovations in the past 50 years have come in whole or in part from the US, along with 75% of the top 30.

When it comes to pharmaceuticals, half of the top 30 blockbusters have come from the United States alone. The advanced medical milieu that Americans enjoy has led to the world's best cancer survival rates, a life expectancy for those over 80 that is actually greater than anywhere else, and lower mortality rates for heart attacks and strokes than in comparable countries.

There are many reasons that have been put forth to explain this dominance, but the most basic and powerful is very likely money. The free-market health care economy of the US, along with lower regulatory and tax burdens, strongly incentivizes corporations to focus their business in America.

At a fundamental level, greater financial compensation also provides individuals and their families the potential for a better quality of life, while greater autonomy spurs innovation. This is why the United States is routinely listed as one of the best countries in the world to practice medicine. One-quarter of all doctors in America are foreign-trained. Licensure is a daunting process that nearly always requires "starting over" for the immigrant physician. These physicians are often fully licensed and practicing in their home country, but must now sit for the US Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and spend years redoing all of residency and fellowship.

Despite this challenge, estimates suggest that over \$2 billion is lost annually from physicians leaving sub-Saharan Africa alone to set up shop in the US. This so-called brain drain is rampant in India, Mexico and Central America and is not limited to physicians. In 2014, about 14,000

nurses left the Philippines, while only 5,000 graduated nursing school. The United States represents 5% of the world's population, accounts for around 5% of the world's disease burden, but employs 20% of the global health workforce.

The UK and Canada

Contrast this environment with the nationalized health systems of the United Kingdom and Canada, which each year rank higher than the US. When resources are controlled by a single-payer system, the waiting time for care invariably lengthens.

In 2019, the National Health Service (NHS) in England reported that one-quarter of all cancer patients did not start treatment on time despite an urgent referral from their physician. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, wait times for medically necessary treatments in Canada averaged three months, which the treating physicians documented as one month longer than clinically reasonable.

Universal health care also leads to an increased tax burden. The tax-to-GDP ratio in the United States is 26%, which is among the lowest of 34 advanced nations. In Canada, that number sits at 32%, in the UK at 34% and in France at 45%. Some estimate that a single-payer conversion in America would potentially increase taxes by up to 20%.

For those with the means to pay, there is a booming secondary private insurance industry in most socialized health care economies, which has essentially created a two-tier system of "haves" and everyone else. Self-pay for health care in the UK rises annually by 10%, leading to a 50% increase over the last half decade, and this excludes cosmetics or costs paid by the NHS. One result is that nearly all general practices are private now in the UK, contracting their services out to the government while providing direct-pay services for the affluent.

Another outcome is that 43% of all physicians in the country are part time, which usually coincides with the switch to private practice. In

Canada, one-third of all health care funding is private despite multiple legal challenges to forbid a two-tier system and resultant line-jumping.

The US Is Not Flawless

All of this is not to say that the US health care system is flawless, or that lessons cannot be learned from countries with nationalized care. Between 1975 and 2010, the number of physicians grew by 150%, while the number of administrators exploded by 3,200%; there are now 10 administrators for every physician in the United States. Administrative costs account for 25% of total hospital expenditures in the US, while the average among other affluent countries is closer to 10%.

America is also a very litigious society, at great cost to the system. The amount equals 2.5% of total health care spending or \$60 billion a year, \$45 billion of which is “defensive medicine” to avoid lawsuits. One-third of all American physicians have been sued in their lifetime, while that number is 1% for Canadian doctors. The average malpractice lawsuit in Canada settles for \$95,000, compared with close to \$400,000 in the United States. While the adjusted number of uninsured Americans is not the oft-quoted 10% — adjusted meaning those who were not eligible for any aid/coverage, and not offered insurance by any entity — but closer to 1% or around 3 million, this still should be unacceptable as health care is a basic human right.

For generations, the United States has been a shining beacon of health care hope, paving the way to healthier, longer living and whose entrepreneurial milieu has led to innovations enjoyed worldwide. While greater scrutiny over the past few decades have highlighted areas for improvement, the market never lies and recognizes that America is still the best place in the world for health care.

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GLOBAL CHANGE

Will the Pandemic Revitalize Ideas of the Global Common Good?

Andreas Rechkemmer, Deborah Brosnan &
James Bohland
January 5, 2021

Faced with unprecedented crises, humanity will have to find a way to come together and develop novel and innovative concepts of governance.

Two decades into the 21st century, humanity is faced with a plethora of unprecedented global crises. After SARS-1, multiple novel avian influenza strains, and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the current COVID-19 pandemic is by far the most severe and widespread public health crisis in at least a century.

Global climate change is finally being recognized as the single most severe threat to humanity and the planet. This century is also on track to become the era of natural disasters, unique in the history of humanity, with tropical storms, floods, droughts, heatwaves and wildfires rising exponentially in number. Pandemics, global warming and natural disasters are but three of the many large-scale crises at play, posing problems that are particularly challenging for policymaking at various levels.

The 21st century is expected to produce even more and ever greater challenges for the global community. Biodiversity loss, water scarcity and desertification, food insecurity, refugee crises, failing states and more will affect many societies in intricate, complex ways. Termed “Grand Challenges” by the United Nations and various other institutions in an effort to generate data, knowledge and advice to decision-makers, the pressing problem centers around how we go about solving them.

Complexity, Uncertainty, Ambiguity

Phenomena like climate change, pandemics or the creeping collapse of democratic governance and the rule of law can be resolved neither by any individual country, let alone by populist and nationalist politics that defy multilateralism, nor by conventional policy design. Humanity will have to find a way to come together and develop novel and innovative concepts of governance of global public goods and commons, and of global crises, under 21st-century conditions.

These are conditions of wickedness, ambiguity, non-linearity, multi-causality and multi-scalar occurrence at a planetary scale. Humanity and planet Earth, with all its living species, form a huge symbiosis, a socio-ecological system, much as depicted in James Cameron's 2009 movie "Avatar." There is no pristine natural space left untouched by human influence and no human remains untouched by at least one of the many disturbance regimes, such as climate change or the current pandemic, that are haunting us.

In our previous op-eds, we advocated that in the face of these mega crises, new or renewed social contracts are key and that social learning will provide for the vehicle to get us there. We argued that scientists play an important role if they become engaged citizens of their societies and that the self-serving politics of delusional populists and autocrats — whose global mushrooming coincides with the exponential rise of global crises — are to be replaced.

Future narratives that are necessary to guide collective action in the 21st century must be principled and must be about resilience and, sometimes, resistance, often through adaptive or transformative approaches and processes, as well as through education, learning, enlightenment, empowerment and responsible citizenship. Such narratives have to be global and universal, mirroring the scale and globality of the crises that are so daunting today.

The truth is simple: Solutions have to fit the scale and magnitude of the problems, as the pandemic has shown. Humanity must now

overcome the comfort zones and confines of tribalism, nationalism and self-interest, or it will perish. In the face of a perfect storm of global mega crises, we must transcend the ideological concept of self-interest driven nation-states, of hegemony and of balance-of-power ideologies that date back from the 17th century but still drive much of our modern world. The 21st century poses brutal challenges to humanity but bears the potential for an evolutionary leap forward, toward true global citizenship and a global social contract.

Transforming Globalization

In less than a year, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the very tenets of 50 years of globalization: the tyranny of international trade regimes, return on investment-oriented global supply chain management, carbon-intense industrial production, the brutal transnational labor market and related migration schemes and global air travel. The notoriously short-lived international capital flow and foreign direct investment came to a halt for a moment — something the 2007-09 financial crisis failed to achieve — and are now being questioned by unlikely sources.

Even die-hard Chicago School economists have started to explore the circular economy (better late than never). It appears that the pandemic and its fallout are a drastic eye-opener that forces us to realize, finally, that much of the "progress" that globalization has brought about is borrowed, if not stolen, from future generations, non-human species, ecosystems and the planet, divided as we are by equators of rich and poor, of winners and losers, of "developed" and "underdeveloped." It is simply not sustainable.

COVID-19, climate change and many of the other "Grand Challenges" are of course correlated with the so-called Third Industrial Revolution and 50 years of neoliberal globalization and Wall Street finance capitalism. One does not have to be a socialist to understand this simple truth. Indeed, there is hope that the current global public health crisis will lead to a

general reckoning, including of people in power, and that there will not be a mere continuation of business as usual after the pandemic.

Globalization and capitalism have to be transformed, enlightened, guided by mutuality and governed by wisdom and foresight based on the revitalized ideas of the global common good, of global citizenship and of a new global social contract. Think “Avatar.”

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Myanmar: What Comes Next for Minority Groups?

Daniel Sullivan
February 10, 2021

Ethnic minority groups in Myanmar know all too well that the military is capable of mass atrocities.

The military coup in Myanmar has been widely denounced as a lethal blow to a fledgling democracy. But it also increases the likelihood of further atrocities and mass displacement. The world cannot forget that the Myanmar military is the same institution that led the campaign of genocide against the Rohingya people.

The coup will negatively affect much of the population in Myanmar, rolling back tentative democratic reforms and freedoms and leading to further mass arrests. But ethnic minority groups,

which have long been a target of military abuses, have particular reason to be concerned.

Even with the veil of a quasi-civilian government in recent years, the military has continued to commit atrocities against the Kachin, Karen, Rakhine and other states inside Myanmar. For the 600,000 Rohingya still living in Myanmar, the threat is even clearer. They survived the military’s genocidal campaign in August 2017. Indeed, the head of the military and now of the country, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has referred to the Rohingya as a long-standing problem and an “unfinished job.”

The coup will also affect refugees outside of the country. The more than 1 million Rohingya living in Bangladesh now face even greater odds against a safe return to their homeland in Myanmar. In a way, the coup only underscores the reality that conditions for return have been far from safe and sustainable all along.

Rohingya in Bangladesh have told Refugees International that they are alarmed by the coup and worried about the fate of loved ones still in Myanmar. At least with the quasi-civilian government, there was some hope that international pressure could eventually inspire a change. But as long as the military — the entity responsible for the genocide — remains in charge, the idea of a safe return seems inconceivable.

International Pressure on Myanmar

If there is a silver lining, it is that the newly galvanized international outrage about the coup might break the inertia in addressing the military’s abuses. In a report released in January 2021, Refugees International laid out critical policy advice for the Biden administration to address the Rohingya crisis. The report recommendations also provide a playbook for responding to the coup.

As a first move, the Biden administration must recognize the crimes committed by Myanmar’s military for what they are: crimes against humanity and genocide. Given the ample evidence available, it is perplexing that the

United States and many other countries have not yet made this determination. A genocide declaration would not only speak truth to power about what the Myanmar military has done to the Rohingya, but it would also galvanize more urgent global action. It would signal how serious the US and other allies take the threat of the Myanmar military.

Second, the Biden administration should use the urgency of the coup and a genocide determination to engage allies and lead a global response marked by diplomatic pressure and coordinated targeted sanctions. The Biden administration has already said it is considering new sanctions and is reaching out to other countries to coordinate. Those sanctions should be placed both on Myanmar's military leaders and military-owned enterprises, including, but not limited to, the two large conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL). Future lifting of sanctions should be phased and tied not only to a return to the quasi-civilian government elected in 2020, but also progress on creating conditions conducive to the return of Rohingya refugees.

Third, the US and other allies must push for a multilateral arms embargo. Ideally, this would be done through the action of the UN Security Council. But as long as China and Russia are likely to block such actions, countries like the United States and European Union members that have already ended arms sales to Myanmar should use diplomatic pressure to urge others — including India, Israel and Ukraine — to do the same.

Fourth, countries must revitalize support for international accountability efforts, including at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court. The Gambia's genocide case against Myanmar at the ICJ has the support of the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and Canada and the Netherlands have expressed their intent to intervene in the case. The US and other allies should add their support.

Finally, the United States and other allies must push for coordinated high-level diplomatic pressure at the UN Security Council, even with Chinese and Russian reluctance to allow stronger measures. As an important first step, the Security Council did issue a statement that expressed concern about the coup and called for the release of detainees; however, it fell short of outright condemnation of the coup and did not commit to any concrete action. Nonetheless, a discussion at this highest level still adds pressure on Myanmar's military by keeping the possibility of stronger action alive. The fact that there had been no UN Security Council session on the Rohingya for the past two years is ludicrous and only fueled the Myanmar military's impunity.

Ethnic minority groups in Myanmar know all too well that the military is capable of — and willing to execute — mass atrocities. The US and all states that stand for democracy, and against mass atrocities, must act now while the eyes of the world are on Myanmar.

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The Road to Yemen's Starvation

Zaid Ali Basha
May 4, 2021

Yemen was thrown into a downward spiral of rural impoverishment by a combination of irresponsible, short-sighted governance and a reckless global food regime.

Yemen's food crisis is not different in its nature from other regions of the Arab world and the agrarian south more broadly. However, it is a severe case, hence the warning issued a year ago by the United Nations that Yemen, along with other countries, faces the

imminent threat of famines of “biblical proportions.” The mass starvation that has engulfed the country is partly a consequence of the ongoing conflict, especially the economic blockade imposed in 2015. Yet the root causes predate the civil war, as devastating as it has been, and have only been revealed and exacerbated by it. At its core, Yemen’s food emergency is an agrarian and a rural social crisis that has been in the making since the formation of the two republics in the 1960s.

It is difficult to understand how a country of experienced farmers, extensively terraced areas and fertile agricultural valleys could fail to feed itself. In 1955, a mission of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to Yemen concluded that it was one of the best terraced countries in the world at the time. Indeed, Yemeni farmers are worthy of being described as masters of their particularly harsh environment. The main features of Yemen’s geography and climate are seasonal rains in limited parts of the country and almost no precipitation elsewhere; semidesert coastal plains; western and central steep, rugged highlands of a volcanic mountain massif; and eastern and northeastern arid plateaus and vast deserts, including al-Rub’ al-Khali, literally the “Empty Quarter” — “the largest area of continuous sand in the world.”

But despite the fragility of the Arabian Peninsula’s environment, including its southwestern corner, the ingenuity of Yemeni farmers’ methods has successfully established innovative and truly sustainable systems of agriculture and food production since time immemorial. As it turns out, what has thrown Yemen into a downward spiral of rural marginalization and impoverishment is an insidious alliance between irresponsible, short-sighted governance and a reckless global food regime, one that is obsessed with the bottom line and market value. Together, as Utsa Patnaik and Sam Moyo write in “The Agrarian Question in the Neoliberal Era: Primitive Accumulation and the Peasantry,” they worked to “reinforce the

incorporation of the peasantry into volatile world markets and extend land alienation, while increasing import dependence.”

Once Yemen was hooked on “speculative world markets dominated by monopoly finance capital,” the rest of the damage was automatic. In fact, that is how free markets work, if that is what you feed into them. Yemen is a good case in point for malintegration with the global economy and the imposition of unequal agricultural trade at the expense of both food security and sovereignty.

Of Donkeys and Farmers

There are two main drivers of Yemen’s persistent and severe food insecurity. Both of them were simultaneously brought about by developmental interventions in the country, particularly in what is commonly referred to as northern Yemen. This part of the country is home to a major water-shed infrastructure spanning two fundamental food-producing systems: the mountain highlands and the lowland Yemeni Tihamah, the Red Sea coastal plain.

The first and foremost driver of insecurity is the large loss of domestic production of native staple grains, including, above all, sorghum. Called dhurrah in Yemen, sorghum is an important traditional staple for humans and livestock. As pointed out by Daniel Varisco in his study of agriculture and water rights in Yemen, sorghum is boiled to make Yemeni porridge, aseed, a nutritious popular dish, and ground to make flour for baking traditional bread. Sorghum leaves and stalks are fed to cattle, the bottom part of the stalk is used as fuel for a traditional clay oven, tannur, and the surplus of sorghum fodder and grain is stored for the rest of the year (it is a summer crop, planted in late spring).

This loss is the direct result of the agricultural trade liberalization of the country’s local markets that was indirectly dictated to Yemen. It was done in the name of development, of course, by luring the country into artificially low prices for basic commodities on global markets. In her review of Samir Amin’s writing and ideas, Ingrid

Harvold Kvangraven underscores that external dictates such as those imposed on Yemen have prioritized the demands of international capital over the long-term needs of the people. She adds that states, capitalists and non-capitalists alike, “need to invest not just in the goods that are the most immediately profitable on the world market or domestically, but in long-term projects that are the most likely to lead to improvements in living standards for people.”

As a consequence, Yemen became absurdly overdependent on basic foodstuff imports, including, notably, wheat and rice, from volatile world markets. In addition to leading to the country’s alarming state of hunger, the loss of domestic production has eventually resulted in a significant decrease in rural sustainability and livelihood. The domestic production figures speak for themselves. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization Corporate Statistical Database (FAOSTAT), Yemen produced between 700,000 and 760,000 tons of sorghum during the early 1960s. In 1960, the country’s population was 5.3 million. In sharp contrast, by 2014, one year before the start of the war, the quantity dropped to less than half, 341,000 tons, and then to 222,000 and 162,000 tons in 2015 and 2016 respectively.

By that time, the population had grown to an estimated 27.2 million. Meanwhile, the country’s net domestic supply quantity of wheat, for instance, went from an average of 115,222 tons for the period 1961–69 to 3,104,625 tons between 2010 and 2017. Similarly, the average domestic supply quantity of rice went from 20,333 tons to 533,250 tons for the same periods. Given that Yemen does not grow rice and almost entirely imports wheat, these figures portray Yemen’s rapid and costly transformation from food self-sufficiency to striking food insecurity.

Capturing the essence of the collapse of Yemen’s agriculturally self-sufficient economy is the shrewd observation by a professor of political philosophy at the University of Sanaa that donkeys and smallholding agriculturalists in Yemen share the same fate. Originally published

in 1988, Abu Bakr al-Saqqaf’s analysis noted that lost donkeys that had been wandering the streets of the cities of Taiz, al-Hodeidah and Sanaa were dying of hunger or being killed by vehicles. Despite being an important agricultural asset, the animals were abandoned because their owners could no longer afford fodder. To deal with this problem, the Yemeni government borrowed money from the United States to supply fodder to local farmers instead of addressing the root cause of the problem.

The fate of the donkeys’ owners was no different. Coerced by the forces of the free market to abandon their agricultural lands altogether, they ended up wandering off en masse all the way to the Gulf, not just to urban Yemen. Previously dignified and accomplished farmers, Yemen’s smallholders and other rural male labor spent the rest of their working lives confined to small rooms they shared with other estranged comrades. Those who were better off lived in pathetic housing conditions in overpopulated and very poor parts of town. As such, Yemen’s peasantry was uprooted from the land, neither by chance nor by circumstances of their own making.

Draining Yemen’s Groundwater

The second driver of Yemen’s destitution is the major shift from longstanding rainfed agriculture to groundwater-dependent irrigated agriculture. It resulted from the introduction of hydraulic pumps powered by diesel in the country’s coastal region and dry plateaus, in addition to building expensive, high-maintenance barrages in the coastal spate-irrigated wadis — Arabic for valleys, watercourses without a permanent flow of water — as documented by Martha Mundy and several others. These new irrigation methods and permanent diversion structures were perceived by international development agencies as technological improvements.

From their point of view, groundwater mining served to increase water supply for the production of crops that had a high international market value. Thus, in a capitalist economy, they

were justified. However, by disregarding the country's well-known water scarcity, those substantial investments served as a second blow to Yemen's sustainable agriculture and rural productivity. Over-financed and unregulated, irrigated agriculture has overexploited and depleted Yemen's deep fossil aquifers. It favored perishable yet lucrative crops destined for local urban and Gulf markets.

In so doing, it benefited the country's large, wealthy and internationally connected landholders at the expense of its rural smallholders. In the short term, this market-oriented production policy impoverished the country's rural population by freeing it from the land. In the long term, it starved the whole country, today home to an estimated 30 million people, by reinforcing its dependence on imported wheat and other staples. Reporting on the findings of his ecological field study of tribal farmers in al-Ahjur, a rich agricultural valley in the central highlands of Yemen, conducted in the late 1970s, Varisco concluded the following:

"The emphasis on new machinery, cash crops, and experimental farms represents a potential threat to viable traditional agricultural systems such as ghayl [Arabic for water flowing from springs] in al-Ahjur. The role of the small farmer, growing crops both for his own needs and for a regional market, is being challenged. Al-Ahjur represents all that is right with traditional agriculture in the Arab world. ... Hopefully, the experience that has led to viable traditional agriculture in Yemen will not be ignored in the future development of the region and its resources."

Many other informed experts have repeatedly cautioned that the injection of external agriculture technology and knowledge cripples Yemen's development. In its report titled "Groundwater depletion clouds Yemen's solar energy revolution" published in April, the Conflict and Environment Observatory issued yet another blunt warning. According to the report, solar power is "vital to break a crippling dependency on diesel for water supplies but it risks increasing

unsustainable groundwater abstraction." The report states that "urgent action is needed by all stakeholders to prevent groundwater levels falling to the point that they become inaccessible," stressing that "the consequences of inaction may be dire." They already are.

Regrettably, all alarms sounded over Yemen's food insecurity and water insecurity have been deliberately ignored. The obvious dispossession, displacement and imprudent exploitation of agricultural assets, labor and resources under neoliberal conditionalities make it a foregone conclusion to state that Yemen's famine is but a historic policy failure, as Patnaik and Moyo demonstrate in their book. In the words of Ali Kadri, "Yemeni labour and resources have to be continuously undermined and cheapened." He explains: "The labouring classes in Yemen have to be denied control of their resources and readied to enter the global accumulation system as material of capital via its encroachment side."

At any rate, agricultural policy in Yemen has commodified human life and dignity. Going forward, two things must change. First, Yemenis need to own their national development strategy. Second, the mainstream doctrines and attitudes toward the development of Yemen's agriculture sector and the whole economy more broadly must change. In other words, postwar agricultural development policy must be both inward-looking and holistic. In agrarian societies, agriculture and rural production are integral to the whole economy. In the case of Yemen, a major change in agricultural policy that shifts away from ill-conceived neoliberal policies is inevitable, for they have not only silenced the interests of Yemen's mostly rural population but famished the whole country.

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The Hazaras of Afghanistan Face a Threat to Survival

Naweed Jafari
July 31, 2021

If Hazaras are to remain in Afghanistan, a political solution is required.

September 11, 2001, is internationally recognized as a date associated with terrorism and mass murder by al-Qaeda militants based in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Yet the current situation in the country means that September 11, 2021, could see another tragedy: the ethnic cleansing of the Hazara minority. In April, President Joe Biden announced that US forces, and NATO troops along with them, will depart from Afghanistan after 20 years of conflict. This is despite the absence of a peace treaty between the Afghan government and Taliban insurgents.

Unconstrained by the presence of foreign forces or the binding conditions of a peace agreement, Afghan civilians will be vulnerable to attacks by the Taliban and other terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Khurasan Province (IS-KP). Yet if history and the current situation are indicators, the Hazaras are at the greatest risk.

The Hazara of Afghanistan

Before the 19th century, Shia Hazaras were the largest minority in Afghanistan, making up 67% of the population. Between 1890 and 1893, Pashtun Sunni leader Amir Abdur Rahman Khan declared jihad upon Hazaras, who resisted by declaring jihad against the ruling forces. Although their fighting was fierce, over half the Hazara population was killed or forced into exile, their lands confiscated and thousands sold via slave markets that remained active until 1920. Women were coerced into marriage with Pashtun men, a practice intended to destroy the cultural integrity and identity of Hazaras.

This period has been described as the “most significant example of genocide in the modern history of Afghanistan.” The historic significance of Khan’s jihad not only galvanized Pashtun and other Afghan tribes against the Hazaras, but it institutionalized their relegated status within Afghan society to an inferior position. This continued until the invasion of US and NATO forces in 2001.

Today, Hazaras make up around 20% of Afghanistan’s 38-million population. Some, such as international relations scholar Niamatullah Ibrahim, put this figure at 25%. Yet regardless of how many remain, one thing is clear: The Hazaras are amongst the most discriminated against and persecuted people in the world. As such, they form one of the largest groups of asylum seekers and refugees.

The Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 precipitated the largest exodus of Hazaras since 1890. After 10 years of war, the Soviets withdrew. A vacuum ensued that led to various factions vying for power. The Taliban seized control and ruled the country from 1996 to 2001. The Taliban soon launched another era of persecution of Hazaras. Two years after taking control of the Afghan capital, Kabul, the Taliban slaughtered 2,000 Hazaras in Mazar-e-Sharif. An estimated 15,000 Hazaras lost their lives under the Taliban regime. The US-led invasion removed the Taliban from power and resulted in less violence against the Hazaras. Yet the community continued to be deemed an inferior group in Afghanistan. Historically, Hazaras were relegated to menial labor.

Despite the legacy of persecution, marginalization and exclusion from the highest levels of government, Hazaras have achieved important gains in the fields of education and culture since 2001. The Hazaras advocate and practice democratic participation, universal education and tolerance for religious and ethnic pluralism. These values are indispensable for the creation and maintenance of a healthy civil society. Yet Hazaras are anathema to the Taliban and IS-KP.

Targeting the Hazara

With the US departure imminent and the return of the Taliban inevitable, the identity, values and achievements of the Hazara people make them a primary target. The formula was repeated throughout the 20th century: An ideologically intolerant group obtains political power and accentuates salient differences of a minority. The dominant group discriminates against minorities, marginalizes them to the lowest caste in society and then systematically eliminates them.

The pattern of violence often appears to the outside world as random. But to the Hazaras, the violence is systematic. Due to their religious and ethnic identity, passion for education and procreation, the minority community has been targeted for ethnic cleansing.

Since December 6, 2011, when thousands of Hazaras were attacked in Kabul during the holy day of Ashura, the violence has resembled a genocidal character. The bombings, which killed 70 in Kabul and four in Mazar-e-Sharif, were claimed to be conducted by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Lej) a Pakistan-based group strongly affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In May of this year, triple bombings left nearly 100 dead, 85 of whom were students at Syed-Al-Shuhada high school, which is predominantly attended by teenage girls. Last year, a maternity ward of a hospital operated by Médecins Sans Frontières was attacked. Twenty-four people died, including 16 mothers and two children. In the same year, 40 students were killed at the Kawsar Danish tutoring center.

Currently, the Taliban control more than half of Afghanistan's territory. This includes 17 out of 19 districts in Herat's province, which is densely populated by Hazaras. With repeated attacks against Hazaras, it is clear that ethnic cleansing is taking place in Afghanistan.

The Taliban have applied this formula before and are deliberately using it again with renewed expectation for its all-out assault on Afghanistan after the US departs. Vulnerable groups in the country are already arming themselves and realigning their relationship with the Taliban. Yet

not all of these groups support or embrace the Taliban. Rather, they are only doing so out of political necessity and survival. In other words, act supportively of the Taliban or die.

The litmus test of loyalty will be measured by the degree to which other ethnic groups hold the Hazaras in contempt and advance the Taliban's agenda against them. The phenomenon is called a "cascade," wherein acts of violence against a marginalized group establishes one's legitimacy in the eyes of the dominant group.

What Can Be Done?

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission has called for the UN to appoint a commission of inquiry to investigate the murder of Hazara school children and attacks on Shia worshippers. The International Criminal Court has authorized the chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, to investigate war crimes committed by all responsible parties, including the Taliban.

Yet more needs to be done. The international community should acknowledge the emerging signs that genocide is underway against the Hazaras and will only escalate. Global powers, such as the United States, must call for the protection of the most vulnerable people. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should place Hazara refugees on the high-priority list for asylum.

In response to the Taliban's territorial gains, several mujahedeen commanders, including Hazara leader Mohammed Mohaqiq, have organized local civilian forces whose presence has strengthened and inspired government troops. In the recent past, the government armed Hazara civilians, who successfully defended mosques and sacred celebrations from Taliban attacks. Kabul must consider this strategy again.

Yet local civilian forces, the Afghan army and international troops alone will never bring peace, security and stability to Afghanistan. If Hazaras are to remain in the country with any expectation of a recognizable civil existence, a political solution is required. But a settlement without

involving Pakistan, China, Iran and the US is doomed to fail.

Pakistan continues to provide safe harbor and assistance to the Afghanistan-based Taliban. China, a key ally of Islamabad, is the only global power with credible influence over the Pakistanis. Iran now supports the Taliban. It does so in order to counter the emergence of an anti-Iranian Islamic state in Afghanistan. The long-term interest of the United States is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a training ground for anti-Western terrorists. The presence of all these parties, particularly the Iranians and Americans, is required at the negotiating table.

International leadership capable of identifying and appealing to these four powers, whose current relationship is shaped more by enmity than commonality, has yet to emerge. The situation on the ground requires immediate remedies specifically addressed to the threats posed to the Hazaras. It is time to take notice.

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India's COVID-19 Vaccination Drive Is Failing the Transgender Community

Preeti Choudhary
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The removal of vaccination data on non-binary individuals reveals just how problematic the transgender community's situation in India is.

Amid a raging pandemic, India's transgender community, which numbered 5 million a decade ago, is at its nadir when it comes to vulnerability to disease and

distress. The reason why there are no recent statistics is because the 2011 census was the only time that population data for non-binary persons, referred to as "others," was recorded. In 2014, transgender people were given the status of the third gender in India after a long legal battle. The NALSA verdict mandated the government to add a third-gender column to all its documents as legal recognition.

Unfortunately, transgender people are still being "othered." Most recently, the registration form on the official COVID-19 vaccine portal of the government of India has three gender categories: male, female and others. "It sounds discriminating and demeaning," Dhananjay Chauhan, a leading transgender activist from Punjab, told me over the phone.

What came as an even greater disappointment was the fact that participation data for transgender persons have been removed from the dashboard of the CoWIN online vaccine registration portal. The infographic now reflects only the data for males and females under the vaccination category, delineated in blue and pink respectively.

The figure for "others" can't even be determined by calculating the difference between the total number of vaccinated and the vaccinated males and females added together because the dashboard lists the overall number of doses administered to date, which includes both the first and second shots. This erasure becomes a journey from "othering" toward rendering the "others" invisible, revealing just how problematic the transgender community's situation in India really is.

No, I Haven't Been Vaccinated

On January 16, India began its vaccination drive. However, data show that by May 16, only 3.97% of "others" have received at least one shot, just 0.013% of the overall number of vaccinated. With the third wave of infections ravaging through the country, the third-gender population is still waiting for vials to get allotted for their vaccination camps. Pushpa Mai, a leading trans

activist from Rajasthan, says: “So far, we have been able to vaccinate only 50 transgender persons in Jaipur and we are waiting for our another camp date. As soon as we are sanctioned the vials, we shall proceed further. Till then, what else is in hand than to wait — such is the situation everywhere.”

Simran, from Rajasthan, was coughing during the phone call. She was out of the town to participate in a kinnar sammelan, the community congregation. When asked about getting vaccinated, she snapped: “Didi, why do you keep on asking the same question every time you call? Don’t you know the state already? I HAVEN’T been vaccinated. Would you arrange it for me? Can you?” She said that none of her dera (community house) friends were vaccinated, which has caused a lot of problems.

Sometimes, transgender people who live in deras, those who prefer to call themselves kinnars or hijra and are engaged in traditional community-specific roles, often keep a distance from the transgender people running NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). Simran relies on badhai for her livelihood, a practice where the hijra or kinnars — who are said to be bestowed with a divine gift — go door to door on festive occasions asking for presents and alms in return for blessings. During the pandemic, this source of income has largely dried up, leaving many helpless and reliant on begging and worse. A vaccination certificate would go a long way to help them return to their traditional way of life.

According to Mai, pooling in NGOs and CBOs is not enough because there are districts and villages that don’t have educated transgender representation to be able to organize such camps or even know whom to approach. With large parts of the transgender population lacking education and tech literacy, many are unable to register online, which is the only option to get in touch with vaccination centers. There is a need to raise awareness through television, newspapers and other media to get transgender people to get vaccinated and convince their friends to do so as well. Mai’s proposal is that besides the approach

of looping in NGOs and CBOs, local chief medical health officers should take initiative to get the transgender population vaccinated in their respective areas.

Another roadblock to registering for vaccination is a lack of identity documents. Due to the stigma surrounding them, many transgender people have abandoned their parental homes at a young age or have dropped out of school due to discrimination and outright assault. This means that the majority are left with either no proof of identity at all or only with one that states the gender they were assigned at birth, which they no longer identify with. The provisions of providing them with transgender identity cards are still being discussed out by the government, which couldn’t come soon enough at this critical time.

Vaccine Hesitancy

Alisha (not her real name), from Chandani Chowk, had to resort to prostitution in order to survive during lockdown and is now exposed to a higher risk of catching the virus through her clients. “Initially, I was scared to death of getting this vaccination,” she tells me. “But then I decided that anyhow I am going to die, better take a chance by getting vaccinated; probably I might survive. And I contacted an NGO and got vaccinated through their vaccination camp.”

This initial vaccine hesitancy Alisha describes has deep roots and is among the factors affecting the low uptake rates among the community. Transgender people often report discrimination at hospitals and public places because of their non-conformity. In colonial times, transgender people, then commonly known as eunuchs, were categorized as habitual offenders or natural-born criminals under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and were punished for their cross-dressing practice. Historic persecution not only rendered transgender people invisible in the public sphere but also laid the foundations of a transphobic society.

To this day, transgender people are seen as a matter of curiosity. “There are various layers of

discrimination in health care access in this country. The doctors are curious about the transgender identity, and so exploit them in the process,” Shuvojit Moulik, founder of Civilian Welfare Foundation, a Kolkata-based NGO, told LiveMint. During my research, many reported that doctors and medical professionals would examine their genitals even when the only complaint is a cold or a cough. Many report medical negligence. It is hardly a surprise that transgender people try to evade these discriminating and transphobic spaces, preferring to rely on traditional medicine or local quacks for treatment.

Shreya Reddy, who identifies as a transwoman and works as a clinic manager at a transgender health center in Hyderabad, points out the irony that even those transgender volunteers running the vaccination camps aren’t taking the jabs. This often creates further skepticism among those who come to the vaccine camps.

Exposure to hormone therapies, HIV and complex sex reassignment surgeries leave transgender people immunocompromised and thus more vulnerable, and understandably more skeptical about the side effects of a new vaccine. According to Equality magazine, “communities that are underrepresented in medical trials, including those for vaccines, have developed considerable mistrust in the overall effect certain medicines and products will have on their health.” This is compounded by the fact that the scarcity of doctors who specialize in gender reassignment has resulted in many transgender people reporting being treated like subjects of an experiment by plastic surgeons who lack the necessary expertise.

Reddy shares her own experience of vaccine hesitancy. She says that there is no information regarding the possible side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine, like fatigue, fever and body pain. Because of this, the severity of post-vaccination symptoms made many like herself who have undergone gender reaffirmation surgery believe that they were going to die. She herself felt pain and dizziness for two days after receiving a shot,

thinking that something has gone wrong. Despite being a health worker, Reddy had no one to assuage her fears.

A Time for Recognition

Following criticism of the low vaccine uptake among the community, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment issued directions to states and union territories to facilitate unhindered and indiscriminate vaccination for transgender persons. The states invited community organizations to act as a bridge to get the transgender population vaccinated. But since transphobia has them to live on the margins of society, unidentified, local authorities don’t even have proper records of the transgender population and need the community to help them reach this most vulnerable group.

The complete erasure of vaccination data on a site like CoWin deals a further blow to representation and equality. It is high time that the Indian government and society acknowledge that if transgender persons are being “othered” or neglected in something as seemingly innocuous as writing, this will inevitably translate to deadly neglect in real-life terms. Thus, the primary need here is to impart their transgender identity on registration forms and certificates and abandon the anonymous and dismissing “others” classification. There must be the inclusion of the transgender population in other sets of government data to address their needs and demands. Only then will there be a realistic hope for the emancipation of this long-marginalized community.

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