

Fair Observer

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CONTENTS

About Fair Observer	6
Share Your Perspective	7
Al-Zawahiri’s Killing Will Increase Global Chaos and Insecurity	8
Vas Shenoy	
The Israeli Bet on Audiovisual Culture as Soft Power	12
Franthiesco Ballerini	
Belgium’s Regrets Not Enough: Congo Deserves Apology and Reparations for War Crimes	15
Mehdi Alavi	
As the US-led Postwar System Crumbles, a New World Order Emerges	20
Syed Zain Abbas Rizvi	
Why Do Women Support Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi?	24
Christopher Roper Schell	
Our Alexanders are not Jesuses, nor Mohammeds	27
William Softky	
India’s Tradition of Tolerance Offers Lessons in Light of Salman Rushdie’s Stabbing	29
Soundarajan Narendran	
Ditching the Northern Ireland Protocol is unConservative and May Break the UK	32
John Bruton	

The AfD's Duplicitous Attempt to Target Germany's National Minorities

34

Kiran Bowry

An Indian Perspective on Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan Visit

38

Mauktik Kulkarni

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Al-Zawahiri's Killing Will Increase Global Chaos and Insecurity

Vas Shenoy
August 09, 2022

The killing of the aging top dog of al-Qaeda might unleash a can of worms in Afghanistan and Pakistan, worsening security worldwide. The timing of the killing leads to the suspicion that it was motivated by short-term electoral calculus, not long-term strategic interest.

On August 3, I was supposed to meet an old friend at a coffee shop near the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore, next to Rome's famous Termini station. Thanks to Roman gods or perhaps the heat, both of us got our wires crossed. I turned up for coffee while my friend embarked to Tagliacozzo, a charming medieval village in the Abruzzo region of Italy an hour from Rome. Despite the heat and the distance, I decided to make the journey to Tagliacozzo to meet my friend.

How do Rome and Tagliacozzo come into the picture in an article on Afghanistan?

Well, both places are relevant because my friend Tonino Bettanini is a philosopher, a politician and a Renaissance man with much expertise on Afghanistan. He was presenting his latest book, *Bruxelles, Les Pelouses des Anglais* (Brussels, the Lawns of the English) at the prestigious 38th mid-summer international festival

of Tagliacozzo. Fortuitously, Stefano Pontecorvo, a noted Italian diplomat and author was also presenting his book at the same time. Pontecorvo was NATO's last senior civilian representative to Afghanistan and served as Italy's ambassador to Pakistan.

Furthermore, Pontecorvo spent his childhood in the 1960s in Kabul and Islamabad, where his father also served as a diplomat. The good ambassador was presenting his book, *L'ultimo aereo da Kabul* (The Last Flight from Kabul), which describes the last few days of NATO's hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and his own departure on one of the last flights out from Kabul.

Going to Tagliacozzo did not only give me an hour with one of Italy's most talented and colorful diplomats, it also gave me Pontecorvo's point of view on the current situation in Afghanistan. This was a godsend because the US had just killed Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31. Obviously, Italy's star diplomat had a lot to say and I have done a lot more thinking on the matter since.

Why kill al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri?

The killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the lackluster, pedantic ideologue of Al-Qaeda, brings a strange closure to the US "War on Terror," which began with 9/11. Egyptian-born al-Zawahiri, was known to be a confidant of Saudi Osama bin Laden, who was America's public enemy number one, until he was found and killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan, over 10 years ago.

The world had all but forgotten about al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda. This organization had declined dramatically since the days of bin Laden

and was no longer the most dangerous global Islamic terrorist organization. More deadly organizations such as ISIS have taken its place. Islamic terrorism has evolved extensively since bin Laden and al-Zawahiri masterminded the attacks on New York and, before 9/11, on several other US targets. The aging al-Zawahiri neither had the finances nor the sophistication to upgrade to “Terrorism 4.0,” a concept popularized by Adewunmi J. Falode in 2018. Falode argues this terrorism “has two basic and definable characteristics: it is fratricidal and genocidal in nature.”

The killing of al-Zawahiri marks the end of a chapter for the US. However, its timing, significance and collateral results open uncomfortable questions. Since the killing of Osama bin Laden by the Obama administration in which Biden was vice president, al-Zawahiri’s role and importance has been downgraded by intelligence and political analysts. After bin Laden’s death, al-Zawahiri was proclaimed the leader of al-Qaeda. Under his leadership, the organization was unable to launch any significant attack on the West.

After hurriedly abandoning Afghanistan less than a year ago, the Biden administration has steered clear of South Asia. This has allowed China and Russia to increase their influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The region is now literally in flames. Myanmar is being ruled by a pro-China military junta that executes democracy activists arbitrarily. The Taliban control Afghanistan. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are at war with the Pakistani establishment despite Pakistan’s close relationship with the Afghan Taliban and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)

exercising much control over the Haqqani network. Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka are facing unprecedented economic catastrophes.

As if the mess in South Asia and Ukraine was not enough, Speaker Nancy Pelosi had to fly to Taiwan to fan flames in East Asia too. Curiously, this is precisely the time that the Biden administration authorized a drone strike to kill the most famous face in the US after bin Laden. That al-Zawahiri might never have been that relevant or important an operative is immaterial. It made Americans feel good and took Pelosi as well as Ukraine off the headlines for a day or two.

Not only Indian analysts but also South Asia expert Michael Kugelman, suggest Pakistan might have had a role to play in al-Zawahiri’s killing. The army and the ISI need US support. So does the ragtag coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif who is dealing with “an ailing economy amid political turmoil.” To ride out the crisis, Pakistani bigwigs have done what they always do: go with a begging bowl to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With US support, Pakistan could get the latest installment of funds from the IMF and avoid defaulting on its debt a la Sri Lanka.

Other analysts suspect that “Mullah Yaqoob, Afghanistan’s defense minister and son of the late Taliban founder Mullah Omar, disclosed al-Zawahiri’s location during his recent visit to Qatar.” Who enabled the killing of al-Zawahiri is neither here nor there. The key question here is simple: what does it achieve?

Justice, Revenge or Convenient Distraction?

One argument for killing al-Zawahiri is it brings this terrorist to justice. A reason to kill is

America's emotional need for revenge, which curiously might not be that different from the Pashtun tradition of badal. As this author mentioned earlier, the killing might just have been a convenient distraction at an inconvenient time.

The Russia-Ukraine War is not going terribly well. Boris Johnson and Mario Draghi, two great proponents of war, have been defenestrated. The Russians are making slow but steady and bloody progress. Inflation has ripped through the global economy, putting hundreds of millions at risk of starvation. Biden, Pelosi and their fellow Democrats are increasingly nervous about November's midterm elections. The word on the street in Washington is that Democrat staffers are now gunning for lobbying positions in anticipation of the defeat of their bosses.

The youthful-looking 82-year-old Pelosi has flown to Taiwan arguably to boost Democrat poll prospects and burnish her legacy. This visit has been an unmitigated disaster. The Economist has opined that her "trip to Taiwan highlights America's incoherent strategy" and that the Biden administration's foreign policy is a mess.

After al-Zawahiri's killing, the farce of the 2020 Doha Agreement has been formalized. The Taliban never observed this agreement. It is fair to say that it paved the way for the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. After all, al-Zawahiri was living in a building owned by the Haqqanis in a posh Kabul neighborhood. The Haqqanis are infamous and powerful. They hold key positions in the Taliban government. As per the BBC, the Haqqani network is "one of the region's most powerful and feared militant groups." With al-Zawahiri's killing, the US has joined the Taliban in signaling that the Doha agreement is dead and buried six feet under.

The Consequences of Killing an Aging Has-Been

The Biden administration might have scored a big point at home by killing al-Zawahiri. However, this killing will not go down well with the Haqqani network. As per the honor code of the Pashtuns, which is known as Pashtunwali, they are now duty bound to avenge the killing of a guest. After all, al-Zawahiri was under the protection of the Haqqanis and they have now lost face. Honor dictates that they act against the US.

As and when the Haqqani network strikes, Pakistan will find itself in a tight spot. Pakistani elites need to keep Uncle Sam in good humor. Inflation is rising, unemployment is skyrocketing and the state's coffers are empty. For the 23rd time since 1958, Pakistan needs loans from the Washington-based IMF. This is only possible with US blessing. If the ISI-backed Haqqani network strikes American targets, any politician in Washington will find it hard to make a case for Pakistan getting more IMF cash.

There is another fly in the ointment. Pakistan is not only suffering from economic meltdown but also political turmoil. The Afghan Taliban brokered talks between Pakistan and the outlawed TTP. They have ended in deadlock. A spike in cross-border terrorist attacks by the TTP have followed. In retaliation, Pakistan has launched airstrikes in Afghanistan targeting the TTP. This has led to a dangerous deterioration in the internal security situation in Pakistan.

The jihadist groups that the still somewhat secular Pakistani military backed to dominate Afghanistan and undermine India are now turning against their masters. It is yet another case of Dr.

Victor Frankenstein not being able to control his monster. In Islamabad's case, it has to deal with too many monsters.

Pakistan's turn to violence is also because the state has become completely dysfunctional. The populist Imran Khan has been turfed out by Pakistan's traditional dynasties. Military rule failed the country and now democracy is not delivering either. Kleptocratic elites are packing off their children abroad in droves. It is an open secret that property prices in Dubai go up when IMF money comes into Pakistan. The people are fed up with the system and are turning to jihadis for recourse.

Pakistan's colonial state has been unable to deliver basic services to its people. This includes elementary education. Religious schools termed madrassas have stepped in to fill the void. These madrassas teach millions of male children the Quran and the teachings of the prophet. Numerous reports by various intelligence agencies and think tanks chronicle how these schools have increased fanaticism and become breeding grounds for terror. The Taliban are their most illustrious alumni. Even China's CCTV News, generally not known for its worldliness, has now started making documentaries on madrassas.

Reports that Pakistan provided the information that led to al-Zawahiri's killing will cause many, if not all, of radical Islamist Frankenstein's monsters to turn on their master. Terror incidents are likely to increase in the country. Even if Pakistan is absolved of blame, the blame may land on Yaqoob. This will pit the Loy Kandahar faction led by Yaqoob and Mullah Baradar against the Haqqani network, creating conditions for yet another civil war in Afghanistan.

As Pontecorvo aptly summed up, "When Osama bin Laden flew to Afghanistan in the early 1990s as a guest of Mullah Omar, he started marrying Arab fighters to local women and vice versa. This created over 300 mixed Arab-Pashtun families who were part of bin Laden's al-Qaeda entourage. Now, many of them are senior members of the Haqqani network, including Sirajjuddin Haqqani himself. These families have both Arab and Pashtun blood, making it improbable that al-Qaeda and the Loya Paktia faction of the Haqqani network will ever separate." The killing of al-Zawahiri might set off the Loya Paktia and the Loy Kandahar factions of the Taliban against each other.

Apart from triggering fratricidal fighting within the Taliban, al-Zawahiri's killing will cause an upheaval in al-Qaeda itself. A new leadership will take over and might be leaner, meaner, younger, hungrier and bloodier than bin Laden's sidekick. In fact, the killing might lead to just the sort of CEO change that al-Qaeda needed.

The Biden administration has clearly not thought beyond its nose while killing al-Zawahiri. This White House is proving to be fractious, overstretched and incompetent in its foreign policy decisions. Instead of closure to the trauma of 9/11, al-Zawahiri's killing has opened a Pandora's box in one of the most dangerous times since 1945.

This is not only my thinking but also those of my eminent Italian friends with whom I enjoyed an aperitivo in the glorious piazza of Tagliacozzo before driving back home.

(In an era of a global pandemic, social media wars and explosively evolving geopolitics, the human spirit and its expression have suffered the

most. With apologies to Edward Morgan Forster, “Rome, with a View” is a view of humanity from an interesting perspective. The author, a third culture kid, gathers from his various perches in the eternal city of Rome — Caput Mundi, the capital of the ancient world — the whispers of wisdom through the ages imperfectly and perhaps even unwisely.)

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The Israeli Bet on Audiovisual Culture as Soft Power

Franthiesco Ballerini
August 11, 2022

The first boom of Israeli TV shows generated award-winning adaptations in Hollywood like In Treatment and Homeland. Now Israel wants to conquer international festivals and the world audience with its own original series.

Economic and military hard power have not solved Israeli problems with its neighbors and with Arabs living within in the past few decades. The handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat, in September 1993, with the US president Bill Clinton in the middle, was the result of a long soft power effort of diplomats from all over the world. And it didn't bring peace among the two regions either.

Now, Israel's most recent soft power tool is audiovisual culture, especially TV shows. The main goal may not be peace or just profits to the country's production companies. Over the long term, those productions are made to seduce the hearts and minds of the worldwide population that watches these shows in streaming services, creating a positive perception of Israeli narratives concerning several issues shown in the series.

The most important ingredients to make a nation's audiovisual products a tool of a soft power exist in abundance in Israel today. There's enough money and international co-production agreements to make good-quality TV shows, full of special effects, different locations and talented screenwriters, directors and stars. There are enough interesting real stories happening every day in the region, inspiring writers to deliver products about religion, politics, sex, culture, corruption, violence, prejudice, social injustices and more. And the most important ingredient: Israel is a democracy with freedom of speech, an essential tool for touching sore spots concerning their own failures and regrets and favoring the production of compelling audiovisual art and entertainment.

The story of Israeli TV success

The kickoff of the Israeli audiovisual boom was the HBO psychotherapy drama *BeTipul* (2005-2008), that generated the HBO adaptation 'In Treatment' (2008), winner of two Primetime Emmys. Gideon Raff's *Prisoners of War* (2009-2012) was adapted in Hollywood as 'Homeland' (2011-2020), winning eight Primetime Emmys. But Hollywood's adapting and winning more awards than the original stories is just the tip of the iceberg. The new trend of Israeli audiovisual culture's soft power are TV shows spoken in Hebrew and Arabic, shot in the Middle East and distributed all over the world by streaming giants like Netflix, HBO Max and AppleTV+. Success of the original productions internationally and in festivals facilitates shaping the world's preferences toward narratives in which Israel controls the content, the moral of the stories and, of course, the profits.

The first non-English TV show on AppleTV+ — the International Award Emmy winner *Tehran*' (2021) — is spoken in Hebrew and Arabic. It is considered the new *Homeland* among TV shows, with the special participation of Hollywood star Glenn Close. After an explosive Season 2 finale late last June, fans are demanding its renewal for Season 3. The story follows a Mossad agent in her first mission as a hacker in Tehran.

With lots of political critique among the amazing scenes of car chases, explosions and betrayals, the show also emphasizes a "fictional" underground life in Iran, where women drink, have uninhibited sex and young people, including the son of the most powerful general of Iran, party with drugs and alcohol.

Ori Elon's show 'Shtisel' (2013-2021) became an international hit on Netflix using a different strategy designed to strengthen Israel's cultural soft power. Its brilliant screenplay tries to demystify religious orthodoxy by following the lives of Shulem Shtisel (Doval'e Glickman), a teacher, and his son Akiva (Michael Aloni), who discuss moral issues such as arranged marriage, pride, feminism and religion. With its style that combines the influence of *This is Us* and *Downton Abbey*', 'Shtisel' generated so many debates over the internet about fundamentalism — not only Jewish, but also Christian and Islamic — that Marta Kauffman, co-creator of *Friends* and *Grace and Frankie*, is now developing the American version for Amazon Prime.

Just like Hollywood, Israel's new boom of TV shows don't target only on Israeli cultural specificities. They seek to conquer the world thanks to stories with universal themes. One such is the psychological thriller *Losing Alice* (2021), premiered by Israeli channel Hot 3 in June 2020 and internationally on Apple TV+ in January 2021. The series follows a frustrated film director, Alice, mother of three daughters, and tracks her obsession with Sophie, a young screenwriter. Alice is played by Israeli star Ayelet Zurer, known for *Angels & Demons* and *Munich*.

The Israeli TV drama *The Lesson* competed in the 2022 edition of the prestigious TV Series Festival in Berlin and won two awards in the Canneseries Longform Competition. Co-starring Doron Ben David (*Fauda*), it tells the story of a high school teacher and the conflict with his students over racism following a social media post.

Soft power collateral damages

Controlling the narrative means owning the morals of the stories. But even if talented screenwriters try to make it as realistic as possible, collateral damage is almost certain. TV shows that are mega-hits like Netflix's *The Spy* (2019), *Fauda* (2015) and *Hit & Run* (2021) show ordinary Israelis recruited by Mossad or the Israeli Air Force, who become effective agents in infiltrating and capturing even the most difficult enemies, a clear message celebrating Israel's invincible secret service and its technologies. HBO's *Valley of Tears* (2020) goes further by turning the arrogance of the Israeli army in the initial moments of the Yom Kippur War into an overall lesson in overcoming adversity.

Another type of collateral damage to soft power occurs when its own citizens reject the show's perspectives. The HBO-Keshet co-production *Our Boys* (2019) was called "anti-Semitic" by Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who urged a boycott of the production. The show emphasized the death of a Palestinian boy rather than the Israeli victims whose death led to the Gaza conflict in 2014. The producers tried to show the violence caused by three ultra-orthodox Jews from the perspective of the Palestinian boy's family, but part of the Jewish audience in Israel and around the globe complained that the series left the deaths caused by Hamas in background.

Last but not the least, the collateral damage to soft power is competition. Everyone wants to claim a slice of the result of cultural increased soft power influence over the global population. Producing a full season of a TV show is usually more expensive than producing a film., Palestine is thus getting help from streaming services like

Netflix to tell their stories told in movies. *Palestinian Stories*, released last October by the streaming giant, is a collection of 32 award-winning films either directed by Palestinian filmmakers or recounting Palestinian stories. Most of them are about the life of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, both occupied by Israel since 1967. But there's also one TV show that aims at competing with Israeli narratives. After watching *Fauda*, Palestinian director Mohammed Soraya is making his own version of the conflicts in a Gaza TV studio. *Qabdat Al-Ahrar* (Fist of the Free) will revisit the 2018 Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip that resulted in the deaths of seven Hamas fighters and an Israeli officer. It is a modest, low-budget production with poor salaries for artists and crew. That helps to account for even the biggest problem of the Hamas TV series: Its lack of realism.: Local actors play Israelis and say they are exposed to real-world hostility. Israeli characters speak only in Arabic and, at the request of the Hamas mufti, women wear headscarves even if they are portraying Jewish characters. The perfect ingredients to turn *Qabdat Al-Ahrar* into a propaganda preaching to their own choir and not a soft power instrument to the world.

***Franthiesco 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.

Belgium's Regrets Not Enough: Congo Deserves Apology and Reparations for War Crimes

Mehdi Alavi
August 13, 2022

Belgium committed war crimes and vicious human rights abuses against the Congolese people. The Belgian King has finally expressed regrets but still not offered an apology. Belgium must offer an apology, pay reparations and bring its brutal officials to justice. So must the US, which colluded with the Belgians to exploit the Congolese.

On June 8, 2022, Belgian King Philippe expressed his regrets for the exploitation, violence and racism during the colonization of the Congo Free State, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This followed years of denials and excuses by Belgian authorities.

The DRC, a territory 76 times bigger than Belgium, is the second largest country after Algeria in Africa and the 11th largest in the world. Today, it is torn by conflicts between armed groups that recruit children as soldiers. To make matters worse, DRC's security forces operate with impunity. They continue harassing, threatening, attacking, arresting and murdering human rights defenders, journalists and members of the political opposition. Civilians are arbitrarily killed and abducted. Women and girls are systematically raped and subjected to other forms of violence.

Communal violence and ethnic cleansing are widespread. Most minorities including Hutu, Tutsi, Hema, Lendu, Lunda, Luba, Mbororo, and Batwa live under continuous threat. The country remains the source and destination point for trafficking in children and women for prostitution. The country desperately needs humanitarian assistance.

The DRC's problems are not entirely the fault of the Congolese people. Their roots can be traced back to Belgian King Leopold II and successive Belgian governments.

The Belgian King belatedly expresses regrets

Before his recent admission, Philippe denied Belgian atrocities and made excuses for Leopold II and Belgium for years. Despite pressure from his own country's people along with that of the international community who were inspired by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Philippe hesitated to take any action other than offer excuses for the last two years.

On May 27, 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke at the genocide memorial in Rwanda's capital Kigali where many victims were buried. He asked Rwandans to forgive France for its role in the 1994 genocide. On May 28, 2021, Germany apologized for its genocide against Herero and Nama tribal people in Namibia and offered to launch "projects over a billion euros" as compensation. Even those apologies did not inspire Philippe to admit Belgian atrocities in the Congo.

Over a year later, increased Belgian and international pressures finally forced Philippe to face reality. When he finally spoke out, the Belgian king just expressed regrets. Philippe

stopped short of formally apologizing for Belgian atrocities during the colonial period. "This [Belgian] regime was one of unequal relations, unjustifiable in itself, marked by paternalism, discrimination and racism," he said before a joint session of parliament in the DNC capital Kinshasa. He wanted to state: "I wish to reaffirm my deepest regrets for those wounds of the past."

The toxic legacy of the past

Leopold II was a tyrant who pursued a brutal pogrom that resulted in the deaths of millions. His policies also led to the destruction of the livelihoods and cultures of the people of the Congo. Leopold II came to power in 1865 and was determined to build an empire. Authorized by the 1885 Berlin Conference, he formed the Congo Free State, separate from Belgium but privately owned and controlled by himself. Leopold II knew evangelization was the most effective way to dominate people. He took the view that, if the Congolese converted to Christianity, they would become more subservient. This would allow Leopold II to plunder Congo's valuable resources. So, this ruthless Belgian king brought in missionaries to convert the Congolese people to Christianity. He issued and enforced inhumane decrees that not only caused misery and death but also pushed the Congolese to convert to and practice Christianity.

To extract ivory, rubber, and minerals, Leopold's men viciously used whipping, wounding, enslaving, beheading and severing body parts, including the penis. They routinely resorted to sexual violence against the Congolese people. They treated the Congolese as animals, exhibiting them in their zoos in Belgium. Their atrocities are estimated to have caused the deaths of around 10

million, then 50% of the Congolese population. This led to international scandal and outrage, forcing the Belgian government to take over the colony.

In 1908, under immense international pressure the Belgian government took over Leopold II's private estate and made it a Belgian colony, christening it Belgian Congo. After 23 years of Leopold II's rule, the Belgian government ruled Belgian Congo for another 52 years. The colony only gained its independence in 1960.

Under Belgian rule, genocidal actions reduced in number and severity but persecution and forced labor continued. The racism initiated by Leopold II continued though. Africans were excluded from education, employment and other opportunities. Children of mixed race were abducted and sent to orphanages in Belgium.

After World War I, European and US companies moved in and used the Congolese as indentured laborers to produce cotton, coffee, cacao, palm oil, rubber, copper, gold, diamond, cobalt, tin, zinc, uranium and other raw materials. They used forced labor to develop roads, railroads, utility stations, and other public facilities in Belgian Congo. During World War II, the US was heavily involved in mining uranium in the Congo. When postwar decolonization began, Belgium insisted that the Congolese were not mature enough to run their own country. So, Belgium stood firm on retaining its Belgian Colony, forgetting that the Belgians had wanted freedom from Nazi Germany themselves.

Under Belgian annexation, Congolese education undermined critical thinking and ripped up the social fabric. Only a very few were allowed

to get basic education by the government-paid Christian missionaries whose primary goal was to advance colonization and conversion to Christianity. Only in 1954, a Congolese was first admitted to a Belgian university to study a subject other than Christian religion. To this day, the DRC is hobbled by its toxic colonial legacy.

Independence is snuffed out, exploitation continues

Starting from 1919, the Congolese began fighting for their independence. Their revolts were regularly suppressed by the Belgian authorities. In 1958, the Congolese formed their first political party. Riots broke out in 1959 with mobs demanding independence. A year later, Belgium capitulated, granting its huge colony independence. On June 30, 1960, the nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba became the prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu president. They put Colonel Joseph Mobutu in charge of the defense. Backed by Colonel Joseph Mobutu, Kasa-Vubu soon removed Lumumba. In January 1961, the US and Belgium backed a military coup. Mobutu murdered Lumumba. Mobutu went on to take over the presidency from Kasavubu in 1965. Backed by the US, he ran the DRC as a brutal dictator for 32 years, embezzling government funds at a gargantuan scale.

In 1997 backed by Rwanda and Uganda, Laurent Kabila took over the presidency and ruled for 4 years, causing over 3 million deaths. In 2001, he was killed and his son Joseph Kabila took over the presidency and ruled until late 2018 when opposition leader Felix Tshisekedi supposedly won an election that did not meet international expectations and was contested by the country's

dominant Catholic Church. He has remained in power as president to the present time.

In the 1880s, the US was becoming a world power. Leopold II used the services of an American to survey the Congo. He also sought American recognition of his personal rule over Congo. Some Americans were fearful of the power of American blacks who were demanding equality and liberty. They saw Leopold II's request as an opportunity to cleanse the US of its black population by sending them to the Congo. In exchange for the favor, Leopold assured the US that its citizens could buy lands in Congo and US imports would be exempt from all customs duties. Leopold received recognition of his rule in Congo by the US, paving the way for him to earn recognition from European powers. Leopold II's deal with Uncle Sam also opened the gate for the US to plunder Congo's wealth.

The US emulated Leopold II's egregious abuses in minute detail, including displaying Congolese people in zoos in numerous cities across the country. As late as 1906, New Yorkers would rush to see a Congolese in the Monkey House at Bronx Zoo. This led to protests by American blacks and became a national scandal.

Suffice to say, the US has been exploiting Congo since Leopold II's days. In particular, the US has been extracting uranium from Shinkolobwe mine since the 1930s. This small mine in the southern province of Katanga provided most of the uranium used in the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Today, US mining companies backed by the American military continue taking cobalt, copper, zinc and other minerals from the DRC, giving the country peanuts in return.

The Belgian role in the Rwandan genocide

After World War I, the League of Nations transferred Rwanda and Burundi from Germany to Belgium. Taking a leaf out of its Congo playbook, Belgium yet again resorted to Christian evangelization and appointed white agents to dominate and control the new colonies. It also implemented a caste system, decreeing the minority Tutsis, a cattle-herding people, as superior to the majority Hutus, a farming people, and the native Twa, a pygmy people.

In Rwanda, the Hutu king was removed for refusing to convert to Christianity. Then, the religion was forcefully imposed on the masses. Imana, the local monotheistic religion, was wiped out. For centuries, it had been the cultural force unifying the community. To dominate Rwanda, Belgium offered the Tutsis access to education and designated them as superior to others. The Tutsis became subordinate agents of Belgian colonial administration.

Belgium authorized the Tutsis to impose forced labor and punishments on other communities. Belgian policies imposed by Tutsis caused several famines. Later, Belgian colonial authorities took the administrative step of issuing identification cards for each ethnicity. That racial segregation policy along with the removal of their king angered the majority Hutus. To the Hutus, the Tutsis became known as “invaders”. In the late 1950s, the Hutu movement began to organize to oppose the Tutsis and expel Belgium. The Hutus also finally began to earn some sympathy from Belgians.

When Rwanda won independence in 1962, a Hutu campaign to incinerate Tutsi huts sent many

Tutsis fleeing into exile. The Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana, known for his anti-Tutsi rhetoric, maintained a good relationship with Belgian King Baudouin. On April 6, 1994, a plane carrying Habyarimana, Burundian President Cyprien Ntarvumira, and other high-ranking officials was shot down, killing all on board. Blaming the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), Hutu extremists began the slaughter of Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers. On April 7, 1994, Rwandan forces killed 10 Belgian officers. They threatened Belgium not to intervene in the ongoing genocide against the Tutsis. Belgium dutifully abandoned Rwanda to the Hutu killers. In April 2000, Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian prime minister, went to Rwanda and said, “In the name of my country and of my people, I beg your forgiveness.”

French forces were also present in Rwanda during the genocide. They watched the massacres, but did nothing. The French government persistently denied this until recently. After 27 years of denial, France was finally forced by its own government commission to officially admit its complicity in the 1994 Rwanda genocide. As stated earlier, Macron asked Rwandans for forgiveness in May this year. He said, “Only those who went through that night can perhaps forgive, and in doing so give the gift of forgiveness.”

As in Rwanda, Belgium divided Burundi people into Tutsis and Hutus, which led to ethnic conflicts and civil war, causing the deaths of 300,000 people. In 2009, Belgium officially apologized for its atrocities.

Imperial powers must compensate their victims

In 2022, the time for reparations has come. So far, the UN proved impotent in the face of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The oppressed people of the Congo are still waiting for justice and reparations for Belgian atrocities that still haunt them. It is for good reason that Human Rights Watch observed, “Belgium cannot undo its colonial past but it’s not too late to redress its contemporary fallouts to build a future based on justice and equality.”

Fortunately, many Belgians today recognize that apology must be accompanied by reparations. Patrick Dewael, the speaker of the Belgian federal parliament, said: “apart from any apologies or excuses ... anyone who makes a mistake, says our legal code, must compensate for the damage.” In 2001, the Belgian Parliament found the nation morally responsible for the assassination of Lumumba and apologized for its role. Belgium has yet to make any reparations though.

The “Belgium’s Colonial Past” commission, founded in 2020, is still working on issues related to the pre-independence history of the country’s three former colonies: Belgian Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda. To address the crimes of the past, Belgium must take these actions:

1. Acknowledge all the past abuses that include genocide and crimes against human rights.
2. Bring to justice all those individuals, living and dead, who perpetrated those egregious abuses.
3. Make reparations to all three former colonies based on the harm done to the Congolese people from Leopold II’s

personal rule as well as Belgian colonial exploitation. The reparations must meet the following criteria:

- a. correlate directly with all the economic profits Belgium earned from Congo, and
- b. ensure that reparations do not go to the coffers of DRC’s corrupt government but are spent to improve education and infrastructure, bringing them to Belgian standards within 10 years.

As we have seen above, the US was Belgium's accomplice in colonization of the Congolese people. Therefore, the US must take the following actions.

1. Acknowledge its collaboration with the Belgian authorities in the Congo regarding human rights abuses, including violence and genocide, and economic exploitation..
2. Form a committee that brings to justice US officials, living or dead, who abetted Belgian atrocities in the Congo.
3. Make reparations to remedy the harms done to the Congolese people. The reparations must meet the following criteria:
 - a. include a bipartisan committee to evaluate all the economic profits earned by the US from the Congo, starting 1885 to today, and
 - b. ensure that reparations do not go to the coffers of DRC’s corrupt government but are spent to improve education and infrastructure, bringing them to Belgian standards within 10 years.

-
4. Emulate Belgium and apologize for assassinating the nationalist leader Lumumba,

None of these actions can destroy the hurt and pain from the past but they will make our world a kinder, gentler and more just place.

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As the US-led Postwar System Crumbles, a New World Order Emerges

Syed Zain Abbas Rizvi
August 17, 2022

Vladimir Putin's visit to Tehran embodies a renewed tactical shift in the power games of regional influence. As Russia cozies up to the hardline leaderships of Iran and China, the world seems increasingly shifting to an

unprecedented rise of an authoritarian axis - rivaling the democratic order led by the US.

Five months after the 9/11 attacks, US President George W. Bush asserted his acrid perception of the enemies of the United States by introducing the notion of an "Axis of Evil" comprising the tripartite entity of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Ironically, none of the criminals involved in the terrorist attacks trailed back to any of these three nationalities. However, that anecdotal coinage was enough to serve as a pretext for the ultimate invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Now, two decades later, that phrase has been conveniently reformed by a Russian parliamentarian, touting the "Axis of Good" Russia is shaping through a convergence with Iran and China in their shared anti-American rhetoric. While calling it 'good' is a long stretch given the backdrop of the raging war waged by Russian President Vladimir Putin, the underlying tenets should not be dismissed even as they are shrugged off by the western coalition. And while the Cold War 2.0 is still a distant possibility, the birth of this new world order is visible though not entirely material.

Putin's first international visit since the invasion, beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union, was to Iran. The official rationale was a tripartite discussion of Syrian policy with Iran and Turkey. But no one should be so naive as to accept that description at face value. The trilateral meeting was a strategic statement; a formulation of options, for all three countries involved.

The Strategic Genius of Turkey

Turkey is portraying its political artistry in the region. It is playing the Western alliance through its veto power over the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden. Simultaneously, Erdoğan is flirting with Russian favors by mediating negotiations with Ukraine and concerting on crucial regional issues (like Syria) with Putin despite his brutal alienation of the West. While supplying arms to the Ukrainian front, Turkey has also refused to comply with Western sanctions against Russia and is even planning to trade oil in rubles. Consequently, these contradictory policies have rapidly positioned Erdoğan as a strategic champion, indispensable to both the United States and Russia. And admittedly, this strategic game plan works wonders and could yield another electoral win for Erdoğan in the 2023 General Elections, despite his disastrous mismanagement of the Turkish economy.

The Russo-Iran Polarity with the Western Order

It is obvious why Putin wants to highlight his political brinkmanship by establishing a unique alliance with Iran. It is his way of saying the Kremlin is fully prepared for a reshuffle in power dynamics of the region, spurred by the invasion of Ukraine which was itself catalyzed by the eastward expansion of NATO. Putin's renewed affection for Iran could also be construed as a response to Biden's dimly unproductive visit to the Middle East and his failed attempt to woo the Saudi Kingdom. However, Iran is a staunch enemy of Israel, a sentiment not shared by Russia, which limits the scope of this peculiar alliance. Nonetheless, Israel is not nearly as pivotal to the long-term eventually hegemonic goals of Putin as

Iran, especially when the pretext for collusion is a shared hatred for American supremacy.

For Iran, the motivation is easier to unravel. The nuclear deal is still in limbo. The Iranian position has visibly hardened after the ill-timed discourse between Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid. Biden's frivolous remarks regarding Iran did not help the Western view of containment. Biden's call for action to "stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons by any means, including force, as a last resort" in his attempt to muster a Gulf alliance against Iran was particularly awkward, given with the negotiations of an essential deal still hanging by a thread.

Budding Leverage in Respective Regions

Contrary to Biden's hapless efforts, the Gulf States - including the UAE and Saudi Arabia - are mulling the idea of rewiring their frayed diplomatic relations with Iran. In a recent interview, Anwar Gangash, the diplomatic adviser to President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, stated that "the conversation is ongoing," and the UAE is "in the process of sending an ambassador to Tehran. All these areas of rebuilding bridges are ongoing." Even the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) voiced his aspirations in an interview with The Atlantic earlier in March, stating: "[Iran and Saudi Arabia] are neighbors. Neighbors forever. We cannot get rid of them, and they can't get rid of us. So it's better for both of us to work it out and to look for ways in which we can coexist."

The trajectory of the Middle East is seemingly tilting toward regional concord, beyond the lines of sectarian and ideological differences consistently exploited by successive American regimes in the

past. And thus, Iran's collusion with Russia (and the Gulf states) could lead the Islamic Republic away from its hardcore resentment for Israel. At least in the short term. But it would also integrate Iran into a parallel bloc no longer submitted to American restrictions, whether it be the form of human rights policing, economic sanctions, or international isolation.

In a high-profile meeting with Putin, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei unequivocally voiced his support for the Russian invasion, stating: "War is a violent and difficult issue, and the Islamic Republic is in no way happy that civilians get caught up in it, but concerning Ukraine, had you not taken the initiative, the other side [NATO] would have taken the initiative and caused the war."

Such an explicit assertion is not dependent on any detailed analysis or interpretation. Iran is unambiguously throwing its weight behind Putin to advance the Russian claims against the US. And the excuse of a palpable competition in the market for sanctioned oil is simply wishful thinking, a product of Western think tanks. Despite sanctions, Russia has already surpassed its budgetary revenue estimates from fossil fuel imports. And according to Elvira Nabiullina - the Governor of the Russian Central Bank - Russia would categorically refuse to sell oil to countries attempting to place a price cap on Russian energy supplies.

The gas supplies through the Nord Stream 1 (NS1) pipeline have already been squeezed down to 20% of capacity. Thus, demand would not be an issue when Europe freezes next winter. That is bad news for Joe Biden. And while a recession could undercut the abnormal prices of commodities and fuel, inadvertently financing Russia's war in

Ukraine, it would also debilitate Europe's ability to wean itself from Russian energy. This is especially true of Germany, the bedrock of the European economy and its manufacturing hub. Hence, Iran, a member of the OPEC+ alliance alongside Russia, would gain significant leverage in the broader market when the Western defiance loses its luster in the face of domestic economic misery.

The Geopolitical Vision of China

The simmering tensions in the Taiwan Strait may initially seem little more than an over-aggressive response to Ms. Nancy Pelosi's recent visit to Taipei. However, the underlying factors are much more about a power statement made by Washington and now reciprocated by the Chinese Communist Party. Vying for another term to consolidate his legacy, President Xi Jinping is surely not looking to project a docile image, especially when Russia is braving an allied Western front on its periphery.

However, China, contrary to Iran, has been particularly distant from the chaos in Europe, tip-toeing the fine line between condoning and censuring the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, by no means can we deem China neutral. Even India, a bellwether American ally, is not a neutral player as it continues to profiteer off discounted Russian oil despite Western reservations. China has remained critical of the US response against Russia, terming the sanctions illegal and immoral. China continues to fill Russian coffers by procuring sanctioned oil despite its ongoing economic slowdown.

While I admit it is unrealistic to assume that Beijing would outright support the anti-Western rhetoric reflected by Moscow or Tehran, it would

presumably back any alliance that shapes a parallel hegemon to the transatlantic order. Cues abound to back up this assumption, such as Xi's welcoming Putin at the Winter Olympics mere days before the invasion of Ukraine, or convening the BRICS Summit at the very moment Russia was wreaking havoc. Hypothetically, nurturing an alternate order would not only allow Beijing to set in place a new cornerstone in Middle Eastern and European politics, it would also ensure both diversified energy supplies for its industries and new investment avenues in the region. This would make it harder to isolate China (economically or diplomatically) in the event of an invasion of Taiwan. Ultimately, I believe that China, though not yet open to complete defiance of the Western world order, would still support a fledgling rivalry on the global diplomatic canvas, reinforced by the regional sway of Iran and Russia.

The blend of economic and diplomatic adjustment has been a marvel of the Chinese regime. While the Western alliance has noticeably shifted gears to cultivate allegiances in the Asian-Pacific peninsula, China has maneuvered to push the US to a second-tier position across the Horn of Africa. From Ethiopia to Zambia, Beijing has cultivated loyalty through debt-relief and conflict mediation strategies gauged towards famine-stricken nations dominated by authoritarian regimes.

Leveraging the Communist Party's innate understanding of their leadership model, Xi Jinping has masterfully perpetuated his One-Party ideology in Africa to supersede the traditional American meme of democracy. However, contrary to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) – a ruse to cajole the Indo-Pacific nations into an

anti-Chinese economic model with apparently no free-trade access to the American market – China is courting African loyalties with relative empathy. The trade between China and the African continent surpassed \$250 billion in 2021. Compare that to less than \$65 billion for the United States. And while massively debt-ridden, nations like Zambia are still active investment pools for Chinese businesses without the harsh perquisites and crippling conditions imposed by the Western multilateral institutions offering bailout packages. Ultimately, the Chinese model of diplomacy and economic integration, despite an alleged legacy of chronic debt-traps evoked by the West, comes with a no-strings-attached offer. At the same time, the US - and its European allies - remain focused on the idea of acute economic discipline and regulatory restrictions that complement and condition the flow of funds. This idea is rapidly turning unpopular and leading to an Asian/African shift of preference towards China.

Headway Toward a Multipolar Reality

Over the last few decades, the US has tirelessly pursued a policy of pressure and surrender. This is how it has played out in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria and elsewhere! The US has sketched out a diplomatic code that suits the pseudo-liberal definition of its goals and the means required in any region. And it has used this subjective code to rally neighboring nations in various parts of the globe against regimes it manages to isolate to achieve dominance. Biden has not deviated from this traditional course of American foreign policy. On the other hand, he has been relatively less bombastic about it than his Republican predecessors.

The world, however, has evolved beyond the unipolar political template established in the post-Cold War era. Today the world is intricately globalized and perilously interdependent. The US cannot undercut the economic rise of China without inflicting severe damage to its own productivity. European economies - like those of Germany and Hungary - cannot shed their dependence on Russian energy without facing a significant economic slowdown and a painful recession. And the Middle East cannot stabilize by normalizing relations with Israel while simultaneously isolating a belligerent Iran in its periphery.

Ultimately, I believe the constituents of this new world order are indispensable, even if the Western coalition continues to act as the guarantor of a rules-based order. And hence, the potency (or villainy) of this newly synergized axis, its success or failure, would largely depend on the conciliatory (or retaliatory) role played by the United States in this recalibrated global political structure.

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Why Do Women Support Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi?

Christopher Roper Schell

August 19, 2022

More women than men now vote for the BJP. By building toilets, providing homes with piped water, delivering gas cylinders that replace firewood for cooking, and focusing on menstrual health, the BJP has won the trust and support of female voters.

In the leadup to the 75th anniversary of Indian independence, a variety of articles appeared in the US press writing the epitaph for its democracy. The future of India's democracy "looks increasingly bleak," according to the Associated Press, and we learn in The Washington Post that India's democracy "dies in prime time." These articles attributed many of India's woes to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Yet few of these articles asked why Modi and his party continue to win elections. One answer might be his success in attracting female voters.

Few in the US or the UK realize that Modi's party has been increasingly successful with women voters. This year key Indian states went to the polls. The BJP did better among women than among men. In India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), 48% of women voted for the BJP in comparison to 44% of the men. Despite the BJP's UP success, the BBC dryly asked "Are women really thriving in UP as PM Modi claims?"

The article concludes with the quote “Women here have very little freedom. They are told who to vote for and they often vote along with the rest of the family.”

Data shows women exercise choice

The BJP is facing a common refrain: India is a misogynistic country that disempowers women, and women vote dutifully for the BJP because they are instructed to do so by their men. If that is true, how do we explain women voting for the BJP in greater numbers than men?

According to a survey done by India Today-Axis My India (the group that most accurately predicted the May 2019 national election results), 46% of women voted for the BJP and its allies, 27% for the Congress and its allies, and 27% for other parties. In comparison, 44% of men voted for the BJP and its allies. The male vote lagged the female vote by two percentage points. Notably, this election marked the first time more women than men voted for the National Democratic Alliance, a coalition of the BJP and its allies, in a national election.

So what is going on here? Are women doing as they’re told more often than they’re being told to do it? Some have concluded the data suggest “women voters are perhaps making different political choices from the male members of their families.” If so, then why? The answer seems to lie in the BJP’s prioritization of women’s issues. From toilets and menstrual hygiene to piped water supply and cooking gas, the BJP has made women’s issues central to its agenda.

In 2020, Modi broke a longstanding taboo by addressing the issue of menstrual health in his

August 15 Independence Day speech. He declared “Through 6,000 Jan Aushadhi centers, about 50 million women have got sanitary pads at [Rupee] 1 . We have worked for women's empowerment. Navy and Air Force are taking women in combat roles...women are now leaders.” Note that one rupee is a little over one cent. This means that women can get sanitary napkins at the cheapest rate in the world.

Modi’s claim of putting women in positions of power is no empty boast. In Gujarat, he was succeeded as chief minister by Anandiben Patel, who is now the governor of UP. This year, Modi’s BJP has elected Draupadi Murmu as president. She is the second woman to hold that office. More importantly, she is the first woman who comes from India’s long-oppressed scheduled tribes to become president.

Modi’s outreach to women is part of a longstanding BJP tradition. From the very beginning, the party created Mahila Morcha, its extremely active women’s wing. It had strong female leaders such as Vijaya Raje Scindia and Sushma Swaraj, both of whom died after decades of public service. With Murmu as the head of state, the BJP is sending the signal to women from underprivileged backgrounds that they too can rise to the top.

Well-implemented schemes prove popular with women

Newly independent India’s socialist state proved adept at highfalutin rhetoric but poor at the delivery of public services. Since Modi came to power in 2014, these fundamental services have been prioritized with effective outcomes. Some

schemes are noteworthy to understand what is going on.

- In 2014, the state of sanitation in the country was poor. Only around 40% of households had access to a toilet. With the introduction of Swachh Bharat Mission - Grameen (SBM-G), over 100 million household toilets have been constructed in rural India over the last six years. Toilets have led to improved sanitation and better hygiene for millions, especially women and girls. Household toilets ensure better menstrual hygiene, fewer bladder infections and better reproductive health. Women's personal safety improves because they are not going out to the fields or the train tracks where they could be harassed or even assaulted by men.
- On May 1, 2016, the Modi government launched Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) to provide a clean cooking fuel: liquified petroleum gas (LPG). For decades, Indian women were using firewood, cow dung and other biomass to cook. Long term exposure to biomass as cooking fuel is disastrous. The disastrous effects of long-term exposure to biomass as a cooking fuel are well known: it damages lungs for life and shortens lifespans.

With the implementation of PMUY, the national LPG coverage has increased from 61.9% percent as of April 1, 2016, to 99.5% as of January 1, 2021. Academics rightly point out that this transition from biomass to clean cooking has faced challenges. However, it is also clear that the Modi

government's efforts are starting to pay off.

- Since Modi came to power in 2014, his BJP government has focused on the Jal Jeevan Mission. By 2024, the government aims "to provide safe and adequate drinking water through individual household tap connections to all households in rural India." Access to clear water is a common problem throughout developing countries and causes deaths of millions. To Modi's credit, he has focused on solving this problem for India.
- As recently as 2019, only 17% of Indian households had access to functioning tap water supply in contrast to 52% today. Strikingly, more than a third of India (35%) gained access to clean water in just three years. Hundreds of millions no longer have to trek to community wells or other water bodies away from their homes. Now, they can get water through the tap. Note that fetching water is an arduous job that is almost invariably done by women, who are delighted that the Modi government is delivering on something that matters to them.
- Launched in 2015, the Modi government's Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save Daughter, Educate Daughter) has sought to change attitudes towards birthing and the rights of girls. Over the course of just a few years, the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) has improved by 16 points from 918 in 2014-15 to 934 in 2019-20. Some of this might be a feature of economic growth.

The narrative of a fashionable, barrel-chested Modi may have an element of allure. It may even appeal to some voters. However, this narrative is woefully incomplete. Under Modi, the polls give a sense that the BJP has successfully delivered on issues that matter to women.

Cannily, Modi is cultivating his female voter base. Earlier this year, the prime minister declared: “Women...have blessed us – we have won splendidly in areas where women voters have dominated.” He went on to say, “It is our good fortune that BJP has got so much love, so many blessings from mothers-sisters-daughters.”

Women seem to have blessed the BJP, and a fair review of the data might reveal this fortune is no mere accident, nor the result of “toxic men” telling women how to vote, but because the Modi government has been successful in improving the domestic lives of women. As independent India celebrates its 75th birthday, western journalists and Americans should recognize India is a robust democracy. Honest assessments are fair and to be lauded, and no one should uncritically accept any narrative, but the recent stories in Associated Press, The Washington Post or The New York Times seem facile at best and dismissive at worst. Women from disadvantaged groups in India’s society are rising to better lives, greater hopes, and hundreds of millions have reason to believe a healthier, brighter future awaits them. If that’s not a democratic ideal, I don’t know what is.

[An earlier version of this article referred to the president belonging to the scheduled castes. This error was spotted by many readers and was corrected at 15:00 GMT]

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Our Alexanders are not Jesuses, nor Mohammeds

William Softky
August 20, 2022

Just as Alexander the Great’s teacher, Aristotle, set metaphysics above physics, today’s technological conquerors need metaphysics and morality (via nanoscopic biophysics) to complete their large-scale physical triumphs.

As a lifelong technologist, I have always fiercely admired those few individuals who change the world with ideas which outlive them, for example by inventing new technology. Tesla did it, as did Edison, Feynman, Einstein, Ford. There are new technological titans like that today, I have met many and worked for a few. They are geniuses in multiple dimensions.

As a lifelong physicist, I most admire the uber-technologists whose primary accomplishments are not merely in marketing or software optimization, but in mastering Laws of Nature so severe that cheating can be deadly in every sense. Rebooting

and re-entry are entirely different realms. Those who change humanity in those domains, deploying natural law within their lifetimes, are the Alexanders of today. They have conquered whole new worlds alone to make a lasting imprint.

So it pains me when they say things that are silly and destructive, things outside their core domains with lasting impact, but impact in the wrong direction.

Alexander was a conqueror and administrator, not a spiritual leader. His specialty was making people do his will, not healing and transforming them as humans and spiritual beings like Jesus and Mohammed set out to do. To my knowledge Alexander didn't speculate aloud on how to pray or meditate, even as he remade cities in his wake. Yet some new Alexanders talk of uploading our personalities in various file formats, and speak of so-called "digital communication" as if it bore some actual resemblance to real live human touch. Such talk is an insult not just to human decency and common sense, but to the very laws of Nature on which such folk presumably build their empires.

For their children's sake, I certainly hope they ignore their own advice in dealing with kids. An algorithmically mesmerizing blinking piece of glass is not a substitute for loving lips and giggles. Parents know this, children need it.

I have done the bandwidth calculations now for years, the latest published just last week, the earliest published in a prestigious journal, showing implications of the rather simple idea that trust requires continuous re-calibration[]. I enjoy explaining these bandwidth calculations and implications in person to almost anyone, but

especially to independent-minded technologists like myself. For free, if necessary.

An effective, potentially change-your-life explanation requires interactive 3-D proximity in a quiet location, AKA face-to-face. By the numbers, proximity bandwidth beats a kilobyte of explanatory text at least a billion-to-one. At the opposite extreme, here is an even more over-compressed (80 bytes), caricatured cartoon "explanation" of this very same deep point, the point the titans miss: **trust is built from high-bandwidth neuromechanical interaction, nothing else.** From our eyeballs to our eardrums to our spines and souls, human muscle tissue vibrates and our brains reciprocate those vibrations at multiple scales. Those vibrations constitute our informational oxygen. We need to be gentle with them.

So my lord Alexander, I beg stop toying with the human spirit. That is foolhardy and dangerous, and presumes that you can fix what you might break. You already have accomplished more than almost any human, pushing size and scale beyond the limits Nature set.

But your approach will fail with human brains. When dealing with information, the least rules the greatest. Near-infinite room at the bottom, but none at the top. Nanoscopic ultrasonic wavefronts, not big clunky chunky bits. Always moving, never stopped. Fluid flow, not frozen memories. Nothing to be stored, much less uploaded. Just like mere integers cannot hold real numbers, no simple set of propositions or stored digits could restore a human spirit or make up for lived experience. During Catholic Mass, the prayer "Our Father" rises up from murmuring human voices. It

is not a list of abstract PowerPointed bullets up for rifling.

This clean and simple technical conclusion was written by Mother Nature eons back in equations you respect, equations like those of Mr. Newton. Written in her usual cursive hand. Nature also wrote them into our bodies' inflammatory reactions to digital decalibration and damage, damage you may promote.

My lord Alexander Technologist, triple-check your technical understanding before deploying at scale. If your first rough estimate of what the human brain can do is off the mark by much at all, much less by millions-fold, or if you accidentally introduce a subtle poison, the damage to childrens' brains could be considerable. Don't force anyone, especially kids, to hook their minds to interfaces which are bad for us. Loneliness, anxiety and addiction are bad enough as it is.

***William Softky** is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms.

India's Tradition of Tolerance Offers Lessons in Light of Salman Rushdie's Stabbing

Soundarajan Narendran
August 22, 2022

The Indian dharmic and karmic traditions prize debate, cross-examination, self-reflection and introspection. With no central authority figure, they lack popes or ayatollahs, leading to a relatively more tolerant society over many centuries. These traditions have renewed relevance in this new age of intolerance.

Salman Rushdie is battling for his life. He was stabbed multiple times for merely being a writer. A cartoonist in France lost his life for merely being a cartoonist. Many other writers and artists across centuries have paid the price of expressing themselves with their lives.

Intolerance is not new to humanity. After all, ancient Athens made Socrates drink hemlock. The Catholic Church did better. On 17 February 1600, a great Renaissance mind was hung upside down naked and then burnt at the stake in Rome's Campo de' Fiori. His name was Giordano Bruno who envisioned an infinite universe whose center was everywhere and circumference nowhere, teeming with countless stars. He was also a pantheist who believed in the transmigration of the soul. The Catholic Church saw it fit to dispatch his soul to hell and his ashes to the Tiber.

Like Bruno, Rushdie was condemned to death. Unlike Bruno, he has managed to evade death for a long time after Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for his death. Rushdie's editors, translators and publishers were not spared in this 1989 fatwa, In the West, even as people were celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall and, by extension, of communism, a new menace was emerging to threaten freedom and peace.

What was Rushdie's great sin?

Well, this Mumbai-born writer authored a book, *The Satanic Verses*. Apparently, this book demeaned Muhammad whom Muslims consider a prophet. Iran's supreme religious leader thought that this was reason enough to send Rushdie to hell.

Fast forward to 2022. Rushdie was giving a talk at the Chautauqua Institution. My American friends tell me this is a magical institution. The audience gets to interact with authors. There are no elaborate security checks and people can really get to know each other. This is tragically going to change because of Hadi Matar.

The BBC reports that this 24-year-old who reportedly attacked Rushdie had read just two pages of *The Satanic Verses* but believed Rushdie was "someone who attacked Islam" and deserved to die. This is madness. Actually, this is not just madness, it is medieval madness.

Throughout history, a number of the most path breaking ideas have offended someone. Today, scientists and philosophers celebrate Bruno. There is a foundation in Germany by his name. Socrates is considered the father of European philosophy. Among others, the editor-in-chief of this publication is known for using the Socratic method in his instruction. Sane people would agree that the killings of the likes of Socrates and Bruno are the great human tragedies of all time.

In my view, so is the fatwa against Rushdie and his stabbing. It brings to the fore the challenge Islam faces today in an increasingly questioning, plural and multicultural world. In an article co-authored with the eminent scholar Professor

Ishtiaq Ahmed, Singh has argued that "minorities are fleeing Muslim countries and radical Islamists are taking to the sword, raising a critical question about Islam's ability to secularize." Their thesis is validated by Matar's murder attempt, Iranian media calling Matar's stabbing "divine retribution" and thousands of both Shia and Sunni Muslims celebrating Rushdie's stabbing on social media.

A case for sanity, plurality and tolerance

No two people see the world the same way. As Singh often remarks when he speaks about Fair Observer, all of us view the world through our own prisms. No two apples are exactly the same. Any two tea bushes or any two mango trees are never the same. The same holds true for any two pigeons or any two lions or any two whales. The point I am making is simple: every living or even non-living thing in this universe is unique.

Even factory-made cars, phones, refrigerators and other mass-produced goods have tiny if unobservable differences. We live and have always lived in a heterogeneous world. Yet it is also true that human beings tend to seek homogeneity. Japanese culture imposes its tea rituals, France its *laïcité* and, even immigrant America, a pledge of allegiance to its flag.

We will never overcome this human instinct to achieve some form of homogeneity. However, we have to accept a base level of heterogeneity. Intolerance of diversity and plurality is insanity in an increasingly globalized world of nearly 8 billion people. It could unleash violence of terrible proportions and the loss of many lives. Even more importantly, it would create a culture of fear, imprisoning minds, dampening creativity and throttling ideas.

As a deeply spiritual Indian steeped in the Upanishadic tradition, I believe in the uniqueness of all living and non-living things. It is for this reason that I go both to the heights of the Himalayas and the shores of the Indian Ocean. My ancestral land has nearly 1.4 billion people, more than 1,600 languages, over 10 religions and hundreds of ethnicities. We have lived in relative peace for centuries. Yes, independence in 1947 was accompanied by partition but there are still more Muslims in India than either Pakistan or Bangladesh, which was East Pakistan until its independence in 1971.

Some argue this is just a historical accident. They view India as a ticking time bomb where everything will blow up in some sort of mob violence if not civil war. I disagree. It is my fundamental belief that Indian philosophy with its continuous, unbroken tradition of thousands of years has extraordinary collective wisdom and valuable lessons for mature societies.

As Singh constantly points out, the Indian Shastrarth tradition is analogous to the Socratic method. India also came up with the example of sages looking within to find insights and even enlightenment. Siddhartha was one such sage who is now known and followed from Sri Lanka to Japan as the Buddha. The essence of this tradition is not adherence to a holy book, one son of god or an infallible prophet. Instead, every being is seen as unique. All of us are drops in the ocean and the ocean itself is nothing but infinite drops coming together.

If every drop of water has the right to be unique, it follows that each of us has the right to think, speak or write what we want. It follows that blasphemy could not exist in such a society

because there is no reigning god or authority figure to blaspheme against. Yes, people might get offended but they would have the right to avoid the offending individual. People could agree to disagree.

In such a society, there would be no need to burn the libraries of Nalanda or blow up the statues of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Lest we forget, these were both the work of intolerant jihadis who deemed these intellectual and artistic creations blasphemous to Islam. The Turkish general Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji destroyed Nalanda in the 1190s AD and the Taliban destroyed the invaluable 6th century AD Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 to the cries of Allahu Akbar.

The same intolerance that led to the slaughter of thousands of Buddhist scholars has caused both the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shooting and the 2022 Rushdie stabbing. This intolerance must end. Every individual must have infinite freedom. Freedom of expression has to be unlimited. The likes of Socrates, Bruno and Rushdie must not pay with their lives for their ideas, thoughts and works of art. Neither should anyone else.

In India, we have never had a religious authority like the Pope. There is no one holy book. The ideas of dharma, the essentially individual pursuit of righteousness, and karma, the carrying out of the dharmic action, still form the bedrock of various Indian philosophies. The idea of shishtachara where we set an example by our behavior and our lives instead of fatwa or edict has held strong in this diverse land. Such ideas prizing the individual, which Europe adopted during the Enlightenment, have limited violence in India for centuries.

A case in point are the Khajuraho Temples built between 885 AD and 1000 AD by the Chandela dynasty. Peter Popham has called these temples the “apogee of artistic development” and lauded the “fabulous efflorescence of erotic sculpture.” They are one of the one “of the most stunning UNESCO World Heritage Sites in India.” To this day, hardline Islamists see these temples and want to do to them exactly what they did to the Bamiyan Buddhas.

In India, we have long seen things differently. I am an Ayyangar Brahmin from Tamil Nadu. We come from an ascetic, mathematical tradition. Our editor-in-chief is a Rajput with a Chandel grandmother. He comes from a more rambunctious, sensuous tradition. Yet neither of us claims or argues that our version of the dharmic or karmic tradition is what everyone must follow. Each of us is unique like any drop in this ocean of humanity. All of us have to learn to live together as per the ancient Indian idea of the world as one family: vasudhaiva kutumbukam.

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Ditching the Northern Ireland Protocol is unConservative and May Break the UK

John Bruton

August 25, 2022

If Liz Truss ditches the much-discussed protocol, both the Union and unionists will suffer. It would be unpopular and undemocratic, and could unleash a trade war.

While visiting relatives in London recently, I was invited to give an interview to Times Radio. It was a great chance to speak to an English audience.

The subject was the stated policy of Liz Truss not only to enact but also to implement the legislation that would unilaterally disregard the Northern Ireland Protocol. This is an international treaty that the UK freely agreed to, signed off on and then ratified through parliament.

From Brexit to Broken Protocol

Now, the UK government is looking to break this protocol on the grounds that this would be a good thing for the Union, i.e. the union of Britain and Northern Ireland. Indeed it is being pressed forward by a self-described “Conservative” and supposedly “Unionist” party.

My argument to Times Radio listeners was that this radical, and deeply unconservative, attempt to break a solemn treaty, is actually damaging to the Union, for the following reasons:

1. It is opposed by a majority in Northern Ireland. A majority there would like changes to the protocol alright, but do not favor such a radical course as Truss is insisting upon. Adopting a course, in defiance of a majority view in Northern Ireland, politically weakens “unionist” sentiment there. That should be fairly obvious.

2. Northern Ireland has prospered disproportionately under the protocol. Before this treaty, Northern Ireland was one of the worst performing regions of the UK. Now, it has become the second best in the country after London.

Prosperity in Northern Ireland, as part of the UK and under the protocol, is objectively good for the Union. While business in Northern Ireland knows this, the “Conservative and Unionist” party in Britain does not seem to care. Incidentally, the more Northern Ireland prospers under the protocol, the less subsidization it will require from London, which would also strengthen the Union.

3. Unilaterally ditching the protocol will initiate a major trade war between the UK, including Northern Ireland, and the EU. Northern Ireland would suffer most and this would be bad for the Union. Liz Truss, a former trade secretary, is bound to know this well.

This UK-initiated trade war will also weaken the western alliance's economic and

political capacity to support Ukraine. Those who believe in and support democracy will be concerned.

4. Ditching the Protocol will not restore the pre-protocol economic status quo ante for Northern Ireland. In this period, this region lagged behind the rest of the UK.

Worse Than Pre-Protocol

In fact, the new situation will be much worse than the pre-protocol era for Northern Ireland. This is because its economy will be engulfed by a new duplicative bureaucracy of a kind never seen before.

Long existing links will be broken.

Supply chains will be destroyed.

Expensive investments will be rendered valueless.

The above three things will happen because the ditching of the protocol will allow the UK to impose increasingly different product regulations in Northern Ireland to the ones the region uses at the moment. The current regulations allow Northern Ireland free access to the EU market, the only market in the world to which the region has unimpeded road access.

The damage will be felt especially severely by Northern Ireland's dairy sector. One-third of Northern Ireland milk is processed in Ireland, a member of the EU. There are 5,400 dairy businesses in Northern Ireland and the business generates over \$1.75 billion (£1.5 billion pound sterling) every year. This cross-border processing of Northern Ireland milk will have to stop if the

milk is longer produced to EU standards. This will be massively disruptive.

To get around this problem, a special supply chain would have to be developed. Farmers could either supply milk to Northern Ireland and the UK or to Ireland and the EU. Currently, they do not have to choose. They supply both markets at the moment.

Thus, massive duplication and additional expense would be imposed on dairy producers in Northern Ireland. Ironically, most of them probably vote for “unionist” parties, are enterprising people and vital contributors to their neighborhoods. They do not deserve this disruption.

It turns out that ditching the protocol will not only be bad for the Union, it will be bad for unionists. For all these reasons, Liz Truss’s policy is not only unConservative, it is also anti Unionist.

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The AfD’s Duplicitous Attempt to Target Germany’s National Minorities

Kiran Bowry

August 27, 2022

By spreading its nationalist ideology, Germany’s far-right party is trying to appeal to the strong sense of home and belonging among many members of the country’s minorities and capitalize on this electorally.

Most Germans would fail to recite the four national minorities that are officially recognized by the German government. This lack of awareness of the broader population elucidates the national minorities’ seemingly infinite endeavor of gaining attention for their respective concerns. Germany’s far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is trying to exploit this predicament of national minorities being on the periphery of societal perception by trying to cast itself as their patron saint. Yet, a closer look exposes their cynical attempt to pit the interests of some national minorities against those of other immigrant groups. The AfD also openly directs racist slants against the national minority of the Sinti and Roma.

Who Are Germany’s National Minorities?

Four state-recognized autochthonous national minorities live on German territory: the Danes, Frisians, Sorbs, and the German Sinti and Roma. In accord with the International Covenant on Civil

and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), five criteria need to be fulfilled to be granted minority protection by the German government: the minorities' members are German nationals; they have a distinct identity, consisting of an own language, culture, and history; a wish to maintain and preserve that identity; they have settled in Germany for a long time within traditional settlement areas.

As demographic statistics and socioeconomic data based on ethnicity are historically not collected in Germany due to the Nazi past, the numbers of people belonging to the national minorities are estimates. About 50,000 members of the Danish minority live in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein, bordering Denmark, and 50,000-60,000 Frisians live along the North Sea coastline between the Netherlands and Denmark. About 60,000 Sorbs, a Slavic minority, live in the Lusatia region, close to the Polish border in East Germany. The minority of the Sinti and Roma provides an exemption from the criteria of residing in a specific settlement area with 70,000 members living all across Germany.

Instrumentalizing National Minorities

The lack of demographic data on national minorities implicates that no figures are available on the number of eligible voters in the respective minority groups. Despite only making up a small proportion of the German electorate, Germany's far-right AfD has increased efforts to stage themselves as their true advocates.

In November 2020, a speech by Beatrix von Storch, deputy chairwoman of the AfD Bundestag faction, laid bare the AfD's attempt to

instrumentalize national minorities to stigmatize other ethnic groups in Germany. Storch deliberately misrepresented the federal government's pledge to protect national minorities. According to Storch, the fact that national minorities are promised protection based on origin, language, and culture, irrespective of their German citizenship, confirms the AfD's long-held view that national identity cannot be obtained through the acquisition of German citizenship: "If we state that ethnic groups and national minorities have a cultural identity that should be preserved, then the same applies to national majorities. You can't claim that national minorities like the Sorbs, Frisians, and Danes have a cultural identity and at the same time declare that the national majority in Germany doesn't."

With this statement, Storch argumentatively and tacitly deprives some German citizens with an immigration background of their German identity as she had openly claimed before: "Islam is not part of German tradition and identity, and therefore it does not belong to Germany." Furthermore, Storch misuses national minorities to spread an ultra-nationalistic ideology harbored by large parts of the AfD, according to which there is a national identity of a people that is deeply rooted.

Misusing the Sorbian Minority for Electoral Success

By spreading its nationalist ideology, the AfD is trying to appeal to the strong sense of home and belonging among many members of Germany's minorities and capitalize on this electorally. Yet, the election results of the last two federal elections do not indicate that the AfD is succeeding in areas with large populations of national minorities –

except in eastern German constituencies and settlement areas of the Sorbs.

During the 2017 federal election, the AfD managed to muster up 40 percent of the votes in the Sorbian-dominated district of Spree-Neiße in southeastern Brandenburg. Despite significant gains, the party still lagged behind the CDU, traditionally voted for by the mostly Catholic Sorbs. In the subsequent federal election, in 2021, the Sorbian village of Puschwitz hit the headlines when the AfD candidate emerged as the victor. Curiously, in the neighboring Sorbian village of Crostwitz the CDU candidate pipped the AfD's competitor to first place. Hence, it remains questionable whether these two stand-out successes of the AfD in Sorbian counties and municipalities express a seminal affinity of the Sorbian minority to the AfD, especially since the economically weaker eastern German states have been AfD strongholds anyway.

On the contrary, the relationship between Sorbs and the AfD was strained before these election results. Sorbs have long experienced right-wing extremist hostilities and attacks, but since 2014, with the beginning of the far-right PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the Occident) demonstrations and the rise of the AfD, the extent has significantly increased. According to Heiko Kosel, an MP of the Saxon state parliament for the leftist party Die Linke, "attacks on Sorbs are linked to increased xenophobia in Saxony in recent years." Bilingual street signs were smeared and even graffitied with swastikas. Another example of the AfD's contribution to the hostile climate toward Sorbs was its resistance to a socio-cultural community center in the East German city of Bautzen, where

many Sorbs live, warning against ongoing "ethnic mixing".

Against this backdrop, an incident during the 2017 general election stirred up the Sorbian community when the AfD once again instrumentalized minority groups to incite xenophobic attitudes toward other ethnic groups. The bone of contention was an election poster that depicted three women in traditional German, one of them in Sorbian attire, with the caption "Colorful diversity? We have it already!" That was unequivocally condemned by the umbrella organization "Domowina," representing the interests of Sorbs in Germany: "We reject the use of the Sorbian people to exclude other minorities."

Overt Racism Against Sinti and Roma

The fact that the AfD's representation of the interests of national minorities is nothing more than a smokescreen is shown not only by its attempts to play national minorities off against each other but also by its open racism against the national minority of Sinti and Roma. Among Germany's national minorities the Sinti and Roma occupy a special historic role. During Nazi Germany, they were prosecuted and murdered, resulting in a Genocide of up to 500.000 Sinti and Roma, often referred to as the "forgotten Holocaust." To this day, Sinti and Roma face discrimination and structural racism. In 2021, authorities recorded 109 antizigan crimes, the year before 128. Antizigan attitudes and sentiments in the center of German society are prevalent. According to a 2021 study, 29 percent of the population showed antipathy toward Sinti and Roma. To uncover the dark figure of antizigan sentiment and crime, the German government mandated the Independent Commission on

Antiziganism (UKA) in 2019, and an anonymous Reporting and Information Center Antiziganism (MIA) started work in July 2022. In March 2022, the government appointed the first commissioner against Antiziganism and for the life of Sinti and Roma in Germany.

Concerning the Sinti and Roma, the AfD has willingly and repeatedly dropped the covers and counteracted its supposed self-image of being the true representative of the interests of all national minorities. The AfD has been a driving force behind picking up on and promoting antizigan racial prejudice. In a 2019 speech in the German Bundestag about measures to combat antiziganism, the AfD MP Markus Frohnmaier referred to Sinti and Roma as “Zigeuner” („Gypsies“), a racial slur that is condemned by the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, the main advocacy group representing the interests of German Sinti and Roma: “‘Gypsies‘ is a foreign term used by the majority society that is overlaid with clichés and rejected by most members of the minority as discriminatory – because the Sinti and Roma have never called themselves that.” Disregarding this terminological clarification of the people concerned, Frohnmaier contested the designation Sinti and Roma as an “art term.”

Evoking Ghosts of the Nazi Past

In June 2018, the Saxon AfD showed no inhibition to evoking the inhumane ghosts of the Nazi past. They did so by submitting a parliamentary request, demanding the collection of demographic data on Sinti and Roma living in Saxony. Part of the requested data was the number of German and foreign Sinti and Roma living in Saxony, including their education status. Particularly startling were the queries about irregularities in the compliance

with compulsory education and the number of homeless Sinti and Roma. With these suggestive and disparaging questions, the AfD consciously tapped into the persisting circulating prejudices of educational alienation, homelessness, and criminality among Sinti and Roma. With the feeding of false preconceptions and request for a registration of the Sinti and Roma population, the AfD summoned gruesome memories of the systematic genocidal policy of the Nazis against the Sinti and Roma and the Jews, which had also entailed a registration of respective population groups. Hence, collecting population data based on ethnicity is prohibited in Germany.

Not only the Sinti and Roma were affected by the AfD snubbing this particular lesson from the past. A few weeks after the request for the data collection on the Sinti and Roma, the AfD in the Saxon state parliament also asked for "reliable data" on the number of Sorbs in Saxony. Given these efforts, Germany's National Minority Secretariat, which bundles the interests of the four national minorities, reaffirmed that belonging to a minority is the personal decision of each individual, which may not be registered, verified, or disputed by the state.

The national minorities in Germany unite in the same vulnerability and need for protection, although their identities and cultures differ. Be it the pitting national minorities against other ethnic groups in Germany, the abuse of national minorities' symbols for electoral campaigns, open racist attacks against Sorbs and Sinti and Roma, and the disregard for the Nazi past. All these incidents contribute to exposing the AfD's duplicity and its specious advances toward national

minorities for electoral success at the misfortune of others.

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An Indian Perspective on Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan Visit

Mauktik Kulkarni
August 28, 2022

The speaker of the US House of Representatives went on a flamboyant Taiwan visit. Her rhetoric made pro-democracy activists swoon, but how do her words square with recent American interventions?

In these times of global democratic decline, Nancy Pelosi's rhetoric while in Taiwan was like a breath of fresh air. Having split my life between the United States and India, it is great to see some pro-democracy grandstanding. But that doesn't mean the United States and India have been the best of friends. Americans winning the Cold War and India embracing free markets in the

1990s have brought them closer. However, recent American interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine make India doubt its commitment to Taiwan.

Even amid the prevailing polarization, American foreign policy is largely driven by bipartisan consensus. Living in the United States, it is easy to buy into American exceptionalism and its do-gooder approach globally. The popular story is that Pearl Harbor dragged a reluctant America into World War II, but democracy prevailed over fascism. Yet few Americans realize that we propped up dictators around the world during the Cold War, even as we rescued humanity from communism.

An Indian perspective, though, can offer more nuance, especially regarding America's recent conflicts.

The Afghanistan, Iraq and Ukraine Wars

The Afghanistan War was the closest to being a just war. The US used Afghani jihadists to defeat the USSR and then abandoned them in the 1990s. The 9/11 attackers were primarily Saudi but trained by al-Qaeda. Afghanistan's offer to turn in Osama Bin Laden would not have dismantled its terrorist infrastructure, which posed a direct threat to America. The US went in to bring democracy to a country seemingly stuck in the 19th century. The Taliban's dogged resistance, Pakistan's double-dealing and a lack of yearning for democracy among Afghans precipitated in a chaotic American retreat. Two decades and billions of dollars later, the direct threat to America is diminished, but the Taliban is ruling Afghanistan again.

Based on a deceitful premise, the Iraq War was an exercise in American hegemony. The weapons of mass destruction were never found and more than twice as many US soldiers died in Iraq as in Afghanistan during this period. Ironically, the war led to some sort of democracy in Iraq. It is still early to judge whether this democracy or even Iraq is viable. However, in the heart of the Middle East, this invasion has been more successful than all the subsequent Arab Spring uprisings. It certainly led to the rise of ISIS but it also created a democratic foothold in the Middle East. The relative success of Iraqi democracy could be attributed to Americans finding local partners willing to build institutions perhaps because Iraq was a more developed and educated country than Afghanistan. If Iraqi democracy succeeds, it would be George W. Bush's enduring legacy.

The Ukraine War is a safer conflict for America. Instead of overthrowing a dictatorship, it is helping preserve democracy. NATO's eastward expansion might have threatened Russia, but invading a democratic European country posed a threat to the West. US President Joe Biden has been clear-eyed about not wanting any American boots on the ground against a nuclear Russia. So, in the name of realpolitik, he is arming Ukrainians with advanced weaponry to decimate Russia. In the Cold War, America befriended China to fight the USSR. Today, neutralizing Russia through Ukraine at minimal cost would allow the US to focus on China. Even the worst-case scenario of Ukraine losing eastern territory in exchange for NATO's expansion to the Russian border and Ukraine entering the EU will be a victory for the United States.

This American record indicates several possibilities vis-à-vis Taiwan. America has been one of the most benevolent imperialists in recent history. However, it evokes mixed feelings in India. Even if we discount Cold-War-era mutual suspicion, the United States selectively ignored Pakistan-sponsored terrorism against India as long as Islamabad was supporting Washington, albeit half-heartedly, in post-9/11 Afghanistan. When the United States negotiated the withdrawal from Afghanistan with the Taliban, India was not invited despite its significant rebuilding efforts. The ongoing India-China border standoff, more than two years old, has evoked little pushback from Washington, DC. The West was a mute spectator to China's Hong Kong takeover. Would the US come to Taiwan's rescue if attacked by China? If it does, would India's interests be factored in?

India cannot decouple from the United States because there is no alternative to American military might. However, India has been left to fend for itself in the past by American foreign policy. Leaving Pelosi's pro-democracy rhetoric aside, two major factors are driving American saber-rattling: Taiwan's advanced semiconductor industry and Taiwan Strait trade. With its \$280 billion initiative to bring chip manufacturing back home, America could secure one of its national security priorities in the next decade. By then, if Xi Jinping is replaced by someone less autocratic, willing to negotiate Taiwan Strait trade in America's favor, the West might not wage a full-fledged war with a nuclear China to save Taiwanese democracy.

Repercussions of Taiwan going the Hong Kong way could be severe for India. While advanced

economies like Australia and Japan have more leverage in navigating an emboldened China, India's still developing economy will make it more vulnerable. After the recent border standoff, India flirted with economic sanctions, but going by the latest trade numbers, India cannot compete with China economically. On the other hand, India has done well to withstand Chinese military pressure. If China unifies with Taiwan, India could be next on China's list to make it accept China as the dominant Asian power.

Until now, by carving out waivers for India in global sanctions, the United States has softened its blows to India. More recently, continued post-Cold-War strengthening of Indo-US military ties saw, for the first time, an American naval ship repaired in India and an Indian naval ship docked in San Diego. However, reunification with Taiwan could expand China's influence and limit America's ability to help India. While Bush Jr.'s unjustified war might eventually reestablish democracy in the Middle East, Pelosi's justified Taiwan visit could prove more dangerous to democracies in the Indo-Pacific. No wonder befriending America while sharing a border with China is a complicated beast!

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