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What China's Lavish Military Parade Revealed to the World

Jiahao Yuan
October 01, 2025

China marked the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II with a grand military parade in Tiananmen Square that drew leaders from Russia and North Korea. The event displayed advanced missiles, hypersonic weapons and unmanned systems aimed at reshaping strategic balances in the Indo-Pacific. The parade signals mounting pressure on Taiwan and compels US strategic recalibration.

On September 3rd, Beijing's Tiananmen Square once again became the world's eye-popping focus. A grand military parade commemorating the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War (World War II) was held there. This was China's first large-scale military parade in six years and the second commemorating the victory of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, following the 2015 event.

The majestic troops, sophisticated equipment and meticulous marching demonstrated the tremendous progress China's military has made in recent years. From the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 to 2025, China has held 20 large-scale military parades, the most numerous of which were themed around National Day.

China's strategic missile showcase

The global focus of this military parade was primarily on the various weaponry on display. For example, the DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile — a solid-fuel missile — boasts a 1.6-ton warhead. There's also the rumored DF-5C ballistic missile, which uses liquid fuel and is therefore with a higher level of stability.

Liquid fuel's high momentum allows it to carry a much heavier warhead than solid-fuel missiles. As a result, the DF-5C's warhead can weigh up to 7 tons and can carry 10 independently targetable nuclear bombs, posing a significant threat to defense systems worldwide.

Furthermore, its range has been significantly increased. Some Chinese military bloggers estimate the DF-5C's range to reach 25,000 kilometers, meaning it could strike any target worldwide from China. Additionally, its accuracy has been significantly improved compared to its predecessor, the DF-5B, with an estimated deviation of less than 500 meters. Therefore, in the event of a future nuclear war, the DF-5C would almost certainly become a powerful weapon for China's second-stage nuclear retaliation.

The surprise debut of the DF-61

Meanwhile, what drew even more attention was the "upside surprise" — the DF-61. Its detailed technical specifications remain unknown to the world. However, its unannounced appearance foreshadowed several key points. First, before the parade, global media and military enthusiasts mainly focused their discussions on the potential appearance of a modified version of the DF-41 and the DF-51.

However, the DF-61 suddenly made its debut, skipping over the DF-41 and DF-51. As a previously unforeseen new model, this undoubtedly signals a significant shift in the naming and sequence evolution rules for China's

strategic missiles. Second, based on these changes, it can be inferred that the range and targets of China's strategic missiles have also undergone significant adjustments.

Hypersonic weapons and the four-in-one system

Moreover, the parade also demonstrated that China has already established a comprehensive hypersonic missile system. Various hypersonic missiles, including the YJ-15, YJ-17, YJ-19 and YJ-21, were unveiled, ranging from 400 to 2,000 kilometers.

The YJ-21 hypersonic anti-ship missile, in particular, has even been dubbed as "US-exclusive" by Chinese military enthusiasts. It is 7.5 meters long, 70 centimeters in diameter, and has an 800-kilogram warhead. It boasts a range of 2,000 kilometers and a glide speed of Mach 6 to 7 in the intermediate phase. It is capable of maneuvering, changing trajectory and performing complex maneuvers such as the "Qian Xuesen ballistic trajectory" and the "sea skimming maneuver". Combined with satellite and radar/infrared guidance technology, its terminal attack speed can exceed Mach 10, though the exact speed is currently unknown.

A single YJ-21 missile costs roughly $20 million, yet it can destroy an aircraft carrier valued at $13 billion. Even at a terminal speed of only Mach 10, it can penetrate steel plates up to three meters thick. In a simulated attack test by the Chinese military, a YJ-21 sank a decommissioned cargo ship.

The JL-3 is another new submarine-launched missile that has been highly classified but has attracted great attention from governments and military enthusiasts around the world. It is said to have a launch range of up to 12,000 kilometers.

Implications for Taiwan and the US

Judging from the missiles displayed by China, it appears that China has already established a comprehensive missile system, including road-launched (DF series), air-launched (PL series), ship-launched (YJ series) and submarine-launched (JL series) systems, with most of them capable of being loaded with nuclear warheads. The consequence of this four-in-one strategic nuclear strike capability is that it will make it more difficult for other countries to detect the source of the missile in the future.

Judging from the performance of these weapons, approximately 75% of them should be aimed at the United States, while the remaining 25% should be targeted at the First Island Chain. Therefore, for Taiwan, situated at the most crucial point of the First Island Chain, this parade clearly does not bring good news.

Not only is it located in a strategically important location that China is determined to capture, but many of the weapons in the parade appear to have been designed explicitly for Taiwan as well. These include weapons such as the PHL-16 rocket launcher, which has a range of 400 kilometers, capable of covering nearly the entire island of Taiwan, as well as various latest amphibious landing combat equipment.

Overall, China's September 3rd military parade will have a significant, even fundamental impact on the future balance of power and geopolitical relations in the Indo-Pacific region. In particular, the parade showcased the most devastating trends in weapons development that could impact the future global strategic balance: automation and AI technology.

China mainly showcased three separate formations of unmanned weapons and equipment, including many unprecedented devices such as robotic dogs, unmanned vessels, various types of drones, and laser and microwave counterdrone

systems. Perhaps the most notable of these were the two 20-meter-long unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) — the HSU-100 and AJX-002. These are two other pieces of advanced equipment that have never been disclosed and are generally believed to be specifically aimed at the United States, particularly for their strategic nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers.

Given China's consistent low-cost manufacturing advantages, in the future, US strategic nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers could face pursuit, interception and suicide attacks in the vast Pacific waters from dozens or even hundreds of Chinese UUVs — the so-called "wolf pack" tactic. If this truly happens, it would undoubtedly force the US to make significant adjustments to its future combat tactics and even strategy.

Specifically, this parade framed the situation that will likely force the US to make vital strategic adjustments and structural rebalancing in the Pacific region, including its approach to Taiwan. Simply put, the First Island Chain will no longer be a place where the US can freely enter and exit. Forced to do so, the US may choose to adopt a strategic distance, given the threat posed by China's various hypersonic missiles to its aircraft carriers, since the potential costs are simply too high to bear.

US submarines attempting to enter the First Island Chain will also be subject to saturation attacks from China's low-cost but numerous UUVs. Thus, if the US cannot devise a countermeasure, it will have no choice but to withdraw. In reality, the US military bases in Okinawa, Japan — which are very close to China — are already gradually reducing their presence, a clear example of this. Gradually, the US concept of "assisting Taiwan" will become a strategy that must be abandoned.

In this context, for Taiwan, the sense of urgency is even greater than for the US. As mentioned above, Taiwan is directly on the front lines facing mainland China, with a distance of only 130 kilometers. Therefore, this parade also serves as a wake-up call and a paramount concern for the Taiwanese authorities: Taiwan urgently needs to change its approach to combating mainland China.

Taiwanese soldiers will no longer face hand-to-hand combat and urban warfare, but rather the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) various unmanned landing military equipment, such as robot dogs, drones and unmanned tanks. Perhaps in the future, before mainland China completely conquers Taiwan, many Taiwanese soldiers might never have even seen a single PLA soldier on the battlefield.

Yet in a shifting geopolitical landscape marked by China's parade, the first joint appearance of the leaders of China, Russia and North Korea is undoubtedly even more epoch-making than those weapons. It is definitely signaling the emergence of a group challenging the existing international order.

Interestingly, this is also thanks to US President Donald Trump. His policies, including the weaponization of trade and tariffs, have pushed China, Russia, India, North Korea, Iran and so many others into a common camp, but have also triggered a wide swath of allies to distance themselves from the US.

After the parade, China, Russia and North Korea are very likely to use this opportunity to establish a regional security coordination mechanism, further consolidating their respective regional influence. On the contrary, Japan and South Korea will ultimately bear the brunt of this impact.

Xi Jinping's political calculations and limits of force

From China's political system perspective, President Xi Jinping's current term will end at the 21st National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2027. Traditionally, the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, to be held in October of this year, will discuss the issues of leadership succession. At this somewhat delicate juncture, Xi's invitation to over 20 heads of state from around the world to put all their efforts into hosting such a grand military parade, in some ways, demonstrates his determination to remain in office after 2027.

Nevertheless, an assessment of China's military exercises cannot be based on social media outlets. Many Western netizens online criticize China's weapons as being made of "plastic" and lacking combat experience. These netizens' primary goal is to attract attention, generate net traffic and ultimately generate revenue for themselves.

A true assessment of China's military strength should be based on information and reports released by the Pentagon. People should believe that the US military understands whether to worry about these weapons, which may be made of "plastic".

In addition, the inner stability of China's political system is also a key factor limiting the ultimate effectiveness of these seemingly lethal weapons. Although Xi's power within the Communist Party's centralized system remains unshakeable for now, it's not as secure as a rock. Over the past two years, many of Xi's closest associates in the military have been investigated by the Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, reflecting a highly unusual political trend.

Generally speaking, in China's political system, so-called "disciplinary investigations" are merely a cover-up. In reality, they are just a political tactic to eliminate dissidents. If corruption and bribery were truly the standard, then at least half of the 100 million Communist Party members would be imprisoned. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether Xi still maintains unquestionable control over the military. Without absolute control over the military, dictators are generally reluctant to wage a war. Failure could mean the rapid collapse of the regime, a risk neither Xi nor the CCP dares to take.

The same is true of the Taiwan issue. From a purely military perspective, it would be easy for mainland China to defeat Taiwan's military. However, the question is, after conquering Taiwan, how would the CCP govern a place of 30 million people? If, as happened in Hong Kong before, there were a series of mass protests against authoritarianism and for democracy in Taiwan, the CCP would once again become an international laughing stock. This, more than military strength itself, is what the CCP fears most.

Military strength, certainly, is important and necessary. However, from the perspective of human history, the succession of dynasties isn't solely determined by force. What is more crucial is the will of the people. Looking around the world, from ancient times to the present, in the vast majority of dynasties, has the ruling class not possessed the most advanced weapons of the time? Yet, in the end, weren't their regimes overthrown by the people?

Force cannot solve all problems. Otherwise, the Soviet Union of yesterday would not have collapsed, and the US would also be invincible today. But how could it be so embarrassed because of a tariff war?

Albert Einstein once said, “Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding.” This statement reflects his profound pondering on World War I. That is to say, any country that insists solely on unilateral militarism will inevitably descend into war and violence, and its military power will lie more in parade than in execution. Only through mutual understanding and cooperation can we achieve peace and progress.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Jiahao Yuan is a Chinese economist who has been engaged in China's foreign economic cooperation, the “Belt and Road” strategy and international affairs for 20 years. His research interests are mainly focused on macroeconomics and development economics. Jiahao has rich experience in international affairs, especially in China's foreign economic cooperation and development strategy. He has elected to write under a pseudonym.

Western Recognition of Palestine Challenges US-Israel Position

Nathaniel Handy
October 05, 2025

Western governments face mounting pressure over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as public opinion hardens and alliances shift. The UK, France, Australia, Canada, Belgium and Portugal have recognized Palestinian statehood, breaking with the US stance. This recognition signals a growing fracture in Western unity that weakens Israel’s diplomatic position without changing realities on the ground.

The recognition of Palestinian statehood by the UK, France, Australia, Canada, Belgium and Portugal has been seen by some as a watershed, and by others as empty symbolism. But does it really matter?

The answer is: Yes, it does. It matters not only for Palestine and Israel, but also in the broader context of global geopolitics. In terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, there is undeniable momentum gathering. For those holdouts standing behind the US, the pressure is building.

However, like all aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this is not a sudden change. It is a conflict with deep roots, characterized by evolution rather than revolution. Back in the late 1980s, Russia and China recognized a Palestinian state as part of collective Communist support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).

Fast forward to 2014, when Sweden became the first Western European state to recognize Palestine, to little effect. Ten years later, in the wake of the current manifestation of the conflict in Gaza, four more European countries — Spain, Norway, Ireland and Slovenia — followed suit.

If one now looks at the UN General Assembly, non-recognition of Palestine is a lonely position. With the move by the UK and France, the US becomes the only permanent member of the Security Council not to recognize Palestine. Among the G20 (an international forum comprising 19 countries and two regional bodies that seeks to find solutions to global economic and financial issues), it is only joined now by Germany, Italy, Japan and South Korea.

Israel is losing the argument

Actions speak louder than words. The movement of states to a position of recognition of the Palestinian state is evidence that Israel and the US are losing the global argument regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That doesn't mean anything drastic will occur on the ground. Israel has overwhelming military superiority in the field and the backing of the world's leading superpower. That makes it secure in pursuing whatever course it chooses for the time being.

However, the drip-drip of loss of Western backing for the US position on the conflict is telling. Many observers have lamented that the current move by the UK and France is too little too late. Certainly, these nations' governments probably feel that their hands are being forced by events on the ground and the resulting public opinion.

It is also telling that three of the major states that remain holdouts — Germany, Italy and Japan — were defeated in the Second World War. Why bring up old history, you might ask? Because old history has everything to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the unqualified support for Israel that these states offer is deeply entwined with their wartime histories.

Nothing will change

Despite the pendulum swinging against the US position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, little evidence of that swing will be apparent in events in the conflict in the Middle East. This is because the US position is perhaps as entrenched as it has ever been, and seems unlikely to alter with the current administration.

It is also because, despite this significant gesture and the ensuing diplomatic ramifications, neither the UK, nor France, nor any of the other nations that have recognized the Palestinian state wishes to actively escalate the conflict. This is not state activism within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather state management of an acute public relations situation.

No Western nation has any plans to seriously strain ties with the Trump administration in Washington. A hallmark of bilateral relations in the new era has been a desire to work with, and at times placate, the US government. No Western government will allow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to derail such efforts.

However, the very fact that the domino recognitions are occurring at all points to a wider change in the geopolitical landscape. What they do represent is a further fragmentation of global alliances and traditional stances. In the new era of transactional foreign policy, led by the major powers of the US, China and Russia, we are seeing states branch out and take up positions on specific issues tailored to their own particular, sometimes domestic, needs.

For the likes of the UK, France, Australia and Canada, the recognition of Palestinian statehood must be viewed not only as a response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also as a response to the US administration of President Donald Trump.

The governments of these nations, which have all, in their different ways, found avenues to working with the Trump administration in pragmatic ways, are sending a proxy message to their domestic and international constituencies through this action. They can embed this decision within a narrative around international law and human rights.

In doing so, they can establish a marker for certain principles they wish to be associated with, despite their need to employ considerable realpolitik in dealing with the new realities of great power politics. This is liable to be an issue-based alliance of circumstance, rather than any lasting move towards a new center of gravity.

Do not expect the likes of the UK and France to be moving decisively out of lockstep with the US more broadly. After all, on the very eve of the UK's recognition of Palestine, its Prime Minister and Royal Family were playing host to President Trump's second state visit, in lavish style.

Like many moments in the long history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this is a decisive and significant moment, yet it is also one that will not fundamentally alter the course of a conflict that continues to evolve according to its own merciless dynamics.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Nathaniel Handy is another academic and writer with over ten years of experience in international print and broadcast media. He has published many scholarly articles on the evolution of Turkey's political structure.

Beyond October 7: Memory, Mourning and the Need for Collective Healing

Roberta Artemisia Campani
October 07, 2025

It's been two years since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, a day many regard as "Year Zero" of the Israel–Palestine conflict, concealing decades of violence. Israel mourns those who died in the attack, while Palestinians grieve tens of thousands lost to the ongoing war. True remembrance must resist erasure, keep grief alive and pave a way toward peace.

Let the secular commemorate and the religious pray for the victims. We mourn the roughly 1,200 Israelis murdered on October 7, 2023, and the over 65,000 Palestinians killed since (most of them civilians) in a place where famine is officially confirmed. We hold in our hearts the grieving families on both sides and the injured who will carry scars for years to come.

But we should also ask: Why is October 7 treated as a zero point? Who decided that? The French historian François Hartog reminds us that dividing time into "before" and "after" is never neutral. He calls it a regime of historicity, the way communities shape their sense of past, present and future. In our presentist age, the present dominates, bending both past and future to its needs. Declaring October 7 as "Year Zero" is exactly that: a way of reorganizing memory around one rupture while pushing decades of siege, dispossession and occupation into the shadows.

How political narratives create beginnings

We have seen this before. February 24, 2022, is remembered as the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine, when tanks rolled toward Kyiv, Ukraine, and missiles fell across the country. Yet the conflict did not start there. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, redrawing European borders by force. In Ukraine's Donbas region, war had already killed

more than 14,000 people over eight years, long before the "official" invasion. By focusing on 2022, the deeper arc of Russian expansionism, NATO tensions and Ukraine's Maidan revolution gets folded into a single day.

The same pattern appears with June 28, 1914, the date of the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which textbooks still call the spark of World War I. Assassin Gavrilo Princip's shot mattered because Europe was already a powder keg: great-power alliances, an arms race, decades of mounting colonial competition and regional destabilization caused by the Balkan Wars. Teaching 1914 as the sole "start" of World War I ignores the long fuse that had been burning.

Even the Russian Revolution is commonly dated to October 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power. By then, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia had already abdicated after the February Revolution. World War I bled Russia dry, and workers' and soldiers' councils were already challenging authority. The October Revolution was decisive, but Soviet memory later fixed it as the singular start, erasing the February movement and the years of hunger, strikes and mutinies that made revolution inevitable.

History almost never begins on a single day. These dates are chosen because they make stories easier to tell — stories that comfort one community while erasing another.

And yet, not all ruptures are the same. When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, burying Pompeii, nature itself imposed the beginning and the end. No state, no narrative was needed to stamp the date in memory.

Human conflicts aren't like that. October 7, like February 24 or June 28, is not a natural eruption but a chosen symbol, a shorthand for histories that many would rather compress or forget. When the rupture is human, we have to ask: Who declared it? What gets silenced in the process? To stop at October 7 is to be duped, to be carried along by a story that comforts power and erases continuity.

Sacred rhythms of time

There is another way to build time. Polish-American Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called the Sabbath a "palace in time," a cathedral made of hours instead of stone. It is temporal architecture: continuity rather than rupture, a rhythm that holds communities together and resists the endless demands of commerce and domination. American journalist Judith Shulevitz describes the Sabbath as "counter-time," a disruption of ordinary chronology. And it isn't just Jewish: Christian Sunday, Muslim Friday and Jewish Sabbath all show how sacred intervals bind communities through shared time.

Time can therefore be structured to include or exclude. It can be continuity, like Sabbaths and Sundays, or it can be rupture, like political anniversaries. Declaring October 7 as Year Zero isn't neutral. It asks us to grieve one people's suffering in isolation while pushing another's into oblivion. If time is truly for community, remembrance must hold all griefs together or it isn't remembrance at all.

A more unusual example illustrates this point. The Hopi and Navajo tribes have ritual calendars tied to agricultural and cosmic cycles, where ceremonies renew harmony rather than move forward. The lesson is that time structures community by anchoring people in cycles of land, ancestors and renewal, quite different from the ruptures we see in a Western, commodity-driven view of time. In Hindu cosmology, time is vast and cyclical: yugas (epochs) and kalpas (cosmic cycles lasting billions of years). Festivals such as Diwali or Holi punctuate time as reenactments of myth, not as historical beginnings.

When memory becomes a weapon

Even within Judaism, voices warn against weaponizing memory. American Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Weiss has warned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war policies betray Jewish ethics and put Jews everywhere in danger by fueling antisemitism. Weaponized memory doesn't just endanger the "other" — it endangers the very community that claims it.

This is where we need to distinguish between two very different uses of time and, therefore, commemoration of anniversaries. On one hand, historiography can be bent to political and economic interests: It turns a date into a rupture, a "before and after," and organizes memory in ways that serve power. October 7 being treated as Year Zero is an example of this; it makes one story total while pushing others to the margins.

We have seen this before. The Holocaust, one of the greatest wounds of the 20th century, can be remembered as a universal warning against dehumanization — never again for anyone — or it can be weaponized to silence criticism and justify new forms of domination. When memory is instrumentalized, it loses its power to unite and heal; it becomes another tool of division.

On the other hand, ceremony and remembrance can build community. In the rabbinical tradition, the Sabbath is not a zero point but a rhythm, a weekly refounding of belonging. Heschel called it a palace in time: not history written against someone, but time consecrated for everyone. Here, remembrance is not about erasing or dividing, but about reconciling and holding grief together.

Toward shared remembrance and healing

Commemoration remains essential. We owe it to the dead and the survivors. Now the kind of commemoration we need is not one that hardens borders between peoples, but one that creates space for community across them. Hartog reminds us that societies always build their own regimes of historicity; Heschel shows us that time can be a sanctuary, not a battlefield.

If peace is to be rebuilt, it will not come from zero points imposed by politics. It will come from choosing a different architecture of time and symbols, one that resists manipulation, embraces continuities and allows us to mourn together. True remembrance is not a prison of the present; it is a palace to be built by all.

[Kaitlyn Diana and Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

Roberta Campani looks after business development at Fair Observer. She studied philosophy, history and linguistics at the University of Bologna before researching the Rwandan genocide. Roberta worked for a few years in an internet start-up as a marketing and business development assistant. She then interned for a year at the Centro Frantz Fanon in Torino, Italy. This experience led her to work as a social worker for the city of Lausanne in Switzerland. Since then, Roberta has worked with several nonprofits and civil society organizations. She now lives in Geneva with her family. In her youth, Roberta was active in theater and photography.

The Epstein Files: A Political Ticking Time Bomb

Liam Roman
October 07, 2025

The Department of Justice (DOJ) confirmed that US President Donald Trump's name was in the Epstein files, fueling bipartisan calls for transparency. Despite Trump's deflection, Congress and the public demand accountability, with divisions even within his MAGA base. The files remain volatile, blending unanswered questions, elite ties and victim protection, reflecting a trust crisis in US institutions.

The summer of 2025 was a very eventful season for the US as the Department of Justice (DOJ) notified US President Donald Trump that he appeared multiple times in the Epstein files. Congress is involved and has formed committees.

There has been backlash from Trump's own Make America Great Again (MAGA) supporters as he has resorted to his usual tactics of deflection. Despite this, Trump has not been able to avoid the whirlwind of events. The outcry for transparency is why the Epstein files remain a ticking public and political time bomb with escalating pressures from all sides.

Who was Jeffrey Epstein?

Jeffrey Epstein was a financier who was a convicted sex offender and an alleged sex trafficker accused of abusing dozens of teenage girls at some of his multi-million dollar estates around the US and private Caribbean islands.

Epstein was born and raised in New York City. Although he did not graduate from college, the prestigious Dalton School in New York offered him a position to teach math and physics. The father of one of his students had introduced Epstein to a senior partner at Bear Stearns, a respected Wall Street investment firm. Epstein quickly advanced through the ranks and earned a promotion to partner in under five years.

In the early 1980s, Jeffrey Epstein created his own firm, J Epstein and Company. His firm managed assets for uber-wealthy clients with assets reaching into the billions. Mr. Epstein quickly used his fortune to purchase mansions in New York and Florida, a ranch in New Mexico and two islands — Little St. James and Great St. James — in the US Virgin Islands. As his wealth grew, he began increasingly mingling with celebrities, artists and politicians.

In 2005, parents informed authorities in Florida that Epstein had molested their 14-year-old daughter at his Florida mansion. When the police searched the property, they discovered pictures of young girls throughout the house. Investigators later determined that Epstein had developed a scheme to exploit several vulnerable girls and women, some of whom were underage.

This scheme started in 1994 and lasted until at least 2004. Mr. Epstein made a deal with Federal prosecutors in 2008 that avoided federal charges and could have led to a life sentence. Instead, he was sentenced to 18 months and was released early on probation after only 13 months.

Fast-forwarding to 2019, federal agents again arrested Jeffrey Epstein on August 6 for running a large network of underage girls for sex that took place between 2002 and 2005. Mr. Epstein, if

found guilty, would face up to a 45-year prison sentence. Guards placed Mr. Epstein on suicide watch and recorded his behavior and activity every 15 minutes. However, on August 10, 2019, Jeffrey Epstein was found dead by suicide while awaiting trial.

Maxwell's trial and conviction

In July 2020, following Epstein's death, his former girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, became a person of interest in Epstein's sex schemes. She was arrested for her role in Epstein's crimes. Prosecutors alleged that Maxwell had helped recruit minors whom Epstein later abused.

Maxwell, an Oxford-educated scholar, introduced Epstein to her wealthy and influential acquaintances, including former US President Bill Clinton and the Duke of York. In June 2022, after a one-month jury trial, Ghislaine Maxwell was sentenced to 20 years for her role in helping Jeffrey Epstein abuse minors.

What the Epstein files contain

The Epstein files comprise documents from two criminal investigations, including interview transcripts with victims and witnesses, as well as items seized during raids on his properties. To date, the House Oversight Committee has released 33,000 pages, though a large portion of them have already been available to the public. Nonetheless, consolidating these documents into one official release has increased their impact, renewed public scrutiny and fueled speculation about what remains sealed.

The files reference numerous celebrities and politicians. Among those mentioned so far are Clinton and Trump, the late New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, actor Kevin Spacey, Prince Andrew, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, renowned attorney Alan Dershowitz and former US Vice President Al Gore. Along with the numerous names listed, the 900 pages of unsealed documents also named friends, associates and alleged victims.

Investigators and legal experts continue to emphasize that a mention in these records does not imply guilt or direct involvement in Epstein's crimes. Nevertheless, the association alone has proven damaging for many, as the shadow of Epstein's crimes has cast doubt on anyone connected to him.

Unanswered questions

Several questions remain unanswered, notably how Jeffrey Epstein accumulated his wealth. From 1998 to 2013, American multinational financial services firm JPMorgan Chase often allowed Epstein to withdraw large sums of money. His account frequently held hundreds of millions of dollars. Epstein also inexplicably received significant sums from some of America's wealthiest individuals, typically in installments of tens of millions of dollars.

Additionally, Epstein was a client of Deutsche Bank from 2013 to 2018. Both JPMorgan and Deutsche Bank settled lawsuits with their victims, who alleged that both banks knew about the underage sex trafficking network.

In a letter from Senator Ron Wyden, the ranking member on the Senate Finance Committee, to the DOJ, Wyden criticized the Trump administration for not conducting a thorough investigation into the funding of Epstein's network. Wyden urged the committee to investigate the role of sanctioned Russian banks involved in financing Epstein's sex trafficking network.

The Treasury Department's Epstein file shows that he used multiple sanctioned Russian banks to

wire hundreds of millions of dollars to his operations. This has raised urgent questions about how such transactions went undetected for so long.

Wyden also requested that the committee conduct depositions with the bankers responsible for overseeing Mr. Epstein's large transactions, especially when these bankers perform "know your customer" checks as part of their due diligence on large wire transfers — safeguards designed to flag suspicious activity and prevent this kind of abuse.

Mr. Epstein's flight logs and black books have attracted significant public attention. In February, Attorney General Pam Bondi released the initial redacted documents. The flight logs show how often Mr. Epstein traveled, along with his routes, destinations and individuals who traveled with him. The black book was Mr. Epstein's contact list, part of the first documents to be released, which included names and phone numbers of individuals he knew, redacted.

There have been several recent disclosures involving Donald Trump in the Epstein files. Among them is a "birthday book" entry that included a drawing of a woman's body outline with a sexually suggestive note allegedly signed by Trump, which was unsealed this summer and has sparked renewed scrutiny. Trump has denied writing it and has filed a lawsuit over its release.

Still, the controversy underscores Senator Wyden's broader point: without full transparency, the public cannot fully understand the extent of Epstein's financial or political connections. Alongside these revelations are photos documenting Trump and Epstein's decade-long friendship before their falling out in 2007, emphasizing how the circle of high-profile figures connected to Epstein continues to attract public and political scrutiny.

Legal and political fallout

Files related to Mr. Epstein have sparked investigations by congressional committees. These probes have led to legal and political repercussions, fueling debates over public transparency versus elite protection. A complex web of promises of transparency, partial disclosures and denials now surrounds the Epstein story — with President Trump firmly at the center of the controversy.

Politico published a timeline that raises questions for President Trump. Specifically, Kash Patel, during his confirmation hearing for Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director, promised to reveal connections to Epstein if confirmed. On February 21, Attorney General Pam Bondi stated that the Jeffrey Epstein "client list" was on her desk. Subsequently, on February 27, Bondi released the initial set of Epstein files. In May, Bondi informed Trump that the Epstein files named him several times. But on July 7, in a DOJ memo, Attorney General Bondi said there is no "client list" and that Mr. Epstein's death was a suicide.

The situation has raised questions about the "client list" and whether authorities are ensuring the protection of elite names on that list. The inconsistent statements and shifting timeline have intensified scrutiny over whether a definitive list exists, who appears on it and whether prosecutorial decisions and transparency have inadvertently protected — or intentionally shielded — influential figures implicated in the case.

The political fallout is where the files are most dangerous. In this rare situation, Trump could lose political support regardless of whether the Epstein files are ultimately released. On one hand, his base — normally steadfast and forgiving — has shown visible frustration with the way he has handled the controversy.

Many of his supporters rallied behind his 2024 campaign promise of "full transparency," and now view his refusal to deliver as a betrayal of that pledge. If the files are fully released and he is mentioned in them, as Pam Bondi told him he was back in May, then he is likely to lose more of his support for his alleged involvement in the sexual abuse of numerous women.

However, keeping the files sealed presents serious risks. Since Congress reconvened after its summer recess, calls for transparency have grown and the perception of a cover-up has only intensified the explosive nature of the issue. For Trump, the risk is that secrecy encourages speculation and fuels conspiracy theories, keeping the story alive in the news cycle.

The Epstein files have become a political ticking time bomb for both the administration and those lawmakers who appear unwilling to confront the scandal. Members of Congress who fail to demand the release may find themselves ousted in favor of challengers who promise openness and accountability.

While the House Republican leadership recently blocked an amendment that would have required the full release of the files, several rank-and-file Republicans broke ranks to support it, signaling cracks within the party. The longer the White House delays disclosure, the greater the risk to both Trump's support among voters and the unity of his congressional coalition.

In addition to these investigations, President Trump has encountered pressure and disagreements with his supporters over his failure to release the files. This was a promise he made during his 2024 campaign. The lack of transparency has fueled numerous conspiracy theories regarding Jeffrey Epstein's true fate.

Due to the lack of transparency, there is also an erosion of trust in institutions such as the Justice Department and the media. For many, this has been a call to arms; there has been a bipartisan push to unseal the documents.

While some are pushing to unseal the files, there is also resistance to keep the documents sealed for the protection of the victims, given that Epstein harmed more than 1,000 women, each of which have suffered unique trauma.

A memo from the Justice Department said, "[s]ensitive information relating to these victims is intertwined throughout the materials. This includes specific details such as victim names and likenesses, physical descriptions, places of birth, associates, and employment history." While victim protection is a legitimate concern, a large number of victims have advocated for the release of files, further fueling the crisis.

The case for transparency is straightforward. There has been bipartisan support to hold those involved in Mr. Epstein's sex trafficking network accountable for their crimes. Senator Ron Wyden wrote a letter to Attorney General Bondi, Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent and FBI Director Kash Patel, blasting the Trump administration for withholding documents that would limit the exposure to Donald Trump's ties with Jeffrey Epstein. Senator Wyden also noted that, following his investigation, there appeared to be additional individuals who need to be held accountable for the crimes they helped facilitate.

Growing pressures on Trump

This summer was a very eventful season with the Trump administration being under increased pressure to disclose the information from the Epstein files. Trump has resorted to his usual tactics of deflecting and has even gone so far as to accuse former President Barack Obama of treason.

While Trump has begged his supporters to "not waste Time and Energy on Jeffrey Epstein, somebody that nobody cares about," he has faced backlash from his MAGA base for the lack of transparency over a two-page memo from the DOJ. The memo claimed that after an extensive review, there was no evidence of a "client list."

The additional deflection has led to increased scrutiny from both the public and the legal system. Democrats, too, are taking this opportunity to attack Trump. Senator Jon Ossoff kicked off his campaign asking, "Did anyone really think the sexual predator president who used to party with Jeffrey Epstein was going to release the Epstein files?" House Democrats sought to introduce a long-shot resolution demanding the release of all files related to the Epstein case.

However, before the scheduled vote, House Speaker Mike Johnson concluded business early and gavelled Congress into its month-long summer recess to avoid holding the vote. Some Republicans, such as Trump's former Vice President Mike Pence and MAGA-supporting Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, have broken ranks.

Greene has said, "[c]rimes have been committed," and "[i]f there's no justice and no accountability, people are going to get sick of it. That's where people largely are." They are also diverging from Trump and pushing for the files to be released.

The DOJ, in its memo denying a client list exists, has cited victim protection precedents and stated that "much of the material is subject to court-ordered sealing." While the administration continues to cite victim protection precedents, many critics of the administration label the moves as politically motivated.

Jeffrey Epstein's files have shifted from a distant scandal to a highly charged controversy over accountability — or the lack thereof — in modern American politics. House Democrats have released hundreds of pages of documents. The birthday card that included a note for Epstein's 50th birthday, featuring an outline of a woman's body and a sexually suggestive tone, is reportedly signed by Trump, who strongly denies it and has even sued over it, bringing transparency into public debate.

Meanwhile, the Senate narrowly blocked a Democratic effort to require the full release of all related files. The DOJ has begun releasing redacted grand jury testimony, but with some reservations, citing ongoing victim protections.

Amidst this political maneuvering, legal battles and institutional hurdles, one fact remains undeniable: the Epstein files are still a ticking time bomb — one that could reveal truths, test and potentially destroy loyalties. Consequences, including denials, diversions and refusals, are just beginning.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Brazil at a Crossroads: The Farce of Amnesty and the Battle for Democracy

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
October 09, 2025

Supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro demand amnesty for the January 8 rioters, while civil society rallies against it and a proposed constitutional amendment in Brazil. Eduardo Bolsonaro traveled to the US to seek foreign support for his father's cause, but the effort collapsed. Brazilian democracy shows resilience yet remains under pressure.

In a world where democracy is increasingly being tested, Brazil has become a crucial stage for a symbolic clash. Recently, Paulista Avenue, the economic heart of São Paulo, was the scene of two opposing events that capture the essence of the country's polarization.

In one event, supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro called for amnesty for the "rioters" of the January 8 attack, those who invaded and vandalized the buildings of the Three Powers in the capital, Brasília, in an attempted coup d'état.

In another instance, defenders of democracy, in a more organic and subtle manner, demonstrated against this same amnesty and a Proposed Constitutional Amendment (PEC) that would shield politicians from investigations, showing that organized civil society is attentive to regressive movements.

The difference between the two groups, however, is deeper than simple political disagreement; it is rooted in a historical distortion that echoes the nation's darkest times.

Reversed history

The main banner of Bolsonaro's supporters is amnesty for those who participated in the January 8th protests — particularly Bolsonaro, who was sentenced to 27 years in prison for attacks on democracy. The narrative propagated is that they deserve the same pardon that was granted to political prisoners and exiles during the military dictatorship (1964–1985).

This comparison is not only fallacious but dangerously distorted. In 1979, the Amnesty Law was a historic achievement of social movements and the opposition. Pardon was granted to those who fought for freedom and against the oppression of an authoritarian regime. They were the victims of the state, the defenders of democracy.

The amnesty was, therefore, a victory for civil society against dictatorial power. Today, the request for amnesty is for the invaders and coup plotters, for those who attacked democratic institutions. It is the exact opposite. It is not about forgiving those who fought for freedom, but about absolving those who tried to destroy it.

To understand the gravity of the situation, one must look beyond the headlines. The pro-amnesty demonstration, led by the former president, took place on September 7, the date that celebrates Brazil's independence from Portugal.

However, in a scene that shocked many Brazilians, a giant US flag was unfurled in the middle of the crowd. This act, more than a mere show of support, is a glaring contradiction. The search for help and identification with a foreign superpower on the day of national independence reflects a departure from any real patriotism,

suggesting loyalty to external ideals that do not align with Brazil's sovereignty.

In contrast, the demonstration against amnesty, which gathered to defend democracy, proudly displayed the Brazilian flag, symbolizing the defense of the nation and its institutions. It was a milestone for a country that has become divided, especially due to the actions of former President Jair Bolsonaro in recent years.

The desperate movement

In the theater of global politics, few scenes are as strange and revealing as that of a Brazilian congressman seeking diplomatic help in Washington. Recently, in an unprecedented move, Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro traveled to the United States in an attempt to pressure the American government to intervene in the legal situation of his father, Jair Bolsonaro.

The goal was clear and bold: to avoid the former president's conviction and force political amnesty through the veiled intimidation of American figures such as President Donald Trump. But what this strategy ultimately revealed was the fragility of a political movement and the resilience of Brazil's democratic institutions.

The narrative being promoted is that Jair Bolsonaro is a victim of political persecution. The argument, repeated ad nauseam, is that he deserves the same amnesty granted to opponents of Brazil's 1964 military dictatorship. This historical farce that the congressman tried to export has already been explained above. The attempt to equate the two scenarios does not hold up in any court of reason or history. Eduardo Bolsonaro's trip was merely an attempt to give international weight to a fallacious narrative, presenting his father not as a defendant, but as a political martyr.

Eduardo Bolsonaro's plan was simple but naive: to pressure the Brazilian judicial system through Donald Trump's influence. The congressman participated in closed-door meetings, made public appearances and gave interviews in the hope that the weight of US conservative politics would intimidate Brazilian institutions. But the plan, in practice, fell apart.

Brazil's legal and judicial system, in a demonstration of its independence and strength, followed its course. The Supreme Court and judicial bodies did not allow themselves to be influenced by external pressures, whether they came from demonstrations on Paulista Avenue or from political corridors in Washington. The condemnation of Jair Bolsonaro for his anti-democratic acts is clear proof that this strategy failed.

Eduardo Bolsonaro's bold move to seek the support of a foreign leader in an attempt to reverse an internal Brazilian decision evaporated on Tuesday (September 23) during the UN General Assembly, when Trump said that the Brazilian president is "a nice guy" and that the two leaders should meet soon, without specifying how or where.

Current Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva responded that he hopes the possible meeting will take place "soon," "like two civilized human beings," and without "room for jokes." Responding to a question from BBC News Brasil about whether he fears any kind of "embarrassment," Lula said he is "very optimistic about the meeting." "Trump turns 80 in June next year. I turn 80 in October this year. There is no reason for joking around in a relationship between two 80-year-old men. I will treat him with the respect he deserves as president of the United States, and he will certainly treat me with the respect I deserve as president of the Federative Republic of Brazil."

Democracy in turmoil

It served as a reminder of how fragile some views of sovereignty can be. By seeking the intervention of a leader from another country, Eduardo Bolsonaro not only exposed the weakness of his own movement but also disrespected the principle that Brazil should resolve its own problems according to its own laws.

In the end, the trip and the attempts at intimidation did not result in amnesty or acquittal for his father. Instead, they served to demonstrate the strength of Brazilian democracy, which remained steadfast. This lesson, both for Brazil and the rest of the world, is a reminder that justice and the law must prevail over show diplomacy and blind family loyalty.

The coup movement, despite not being immediately successful, left deep scars. The attempt to delegitimize the elections, constant political instability and the denial of scientific and historical facts are symptoms of a broader crisis.

Economically, the climate of uncertainty drives away investment and undermines stability. Socially, the fabric of the nation is frayed, with families and friends divided by political lines that seem insurmountable. The current struggle is not only for freedom, but for a basic understanding of what reality is and respect for the rules of the democratic game.

The approval of an amnesty would be a dangerous signal, a testament that impunity for anti-democratic acts is possible, opening the door to future coup attempts.

Brazil in 2025 is at a crucial moment. Resistance to amnesty is not just a reaction to an act of violence, but an active defense of the future. Civil society, the independent press and democratic institutions, such as the Supreme Court, are being tested.

The lesson that Brazil can offer the world is that democracy is not something that can be taken for granted. It needs to be defended, valued and, above all, understood. The history of 1979 shows us that forgiveness is for those who fight for freedom, not for those who try to imprison it.

Today's battle is to ensure that history does not repeat itself in reverse, with the executioners being treated as heroes and the defenders of the law as enemies. It is a global call for vigilance.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Nuclear War Only Happens Once

Farhang Faraydoon Namdar
October 09, 2025

Assistant Editor Farhang Faraydoon Namdar explains how Russia's faltering war in Ukraine has exposed the limits of its conventional forces and heightened global concern over its nuclear threats. Moscow's leaders now face rising pressure as battlefield losses and internal instability test their resolve. This confrontation increases the risk of nuclear escalation and demands urgent international crisis management.

Iraqi Kurdistan is militarily safer than Russia or the US. That is what I told my security studies teacher eight years ago when I was a freshman in college. My argument was simple: We don't have thousands of nuclear warheads pointed at us ready to launch, while every sizable city in the US or Russia does.

He agreed, but reminded me that their militaries are also far better than ours. Russia, he said, increasingly relies on its nuclear weapons because its conventional army is smaller and cannot stand up to its main adversary, NATO.

Russia's war and the nuclear shadow

Russia has been at war with Ukraine since 2022. It initially invaded a large portion of Ukrainian territory but has since lost most of it. Now, it struggles to hold the remaining areas and relies on it from as far away as North Korea and Cuba. On occasion, Russia has threatened to use nuclear weapons, and Moscow has even changed its nuclear posture for the first time in decades. Additionally, President Vladimir Putin, who has defined modern Russia, has stated that he would not want a world without Russia. That sentiment alone brings us close to nuclear war.

Now, I live in the United States, and I am aware that many Russian nuclear weapons are aimed at where I live. When you want to forecast the probability of nuclear war, you need to look at the "base rate." That is, how many times nuclear weapons have been used. Nuclear weapons have only been used twice, during a prolonged war — World War II. Russia is currently in a prolonged war, suffering heavy casualties, led by a man who refuses to accept defeat. Even if the probability of nuclear war is low, there is still a chance, and that small chance represents the end of civilization.

The logic of absolute risk

However, even if we are dealing with a very low probability of our end, we need to treat it with absolute certainty. Think about this: if there is a bomb nearby, everyone is evacuated regardless of the odds of detonation. The same logic applies to nuclear war: even a low chance of catastrophe demands total precaution.

In December 2022, former Secretary of State and national security advisor Henry Kissinger warned that cornering Russia could drive it to use nukes, and that the world needs to give parts of Ukraine to Moscow. Kissinger was known for stabbing allies in the back to achieve the greater national interest. He did that in Vietnam, Chile, Iraq and other places. But he can no longer shape US policy for two reasons. First, he is no longer a US top official. Second, and most importantly, he has passed away. One could argue that his pragmatism sometimes prevented wider wars, but his assessment of Russia remains relevant today.

History, identity and change

Would Putin and his siloviki ("people of force" or "strongmen") sit by while Ukraine takes back all the occupied territories? History says otherwise. Russia has often seen regime collapse after military defeat. The Russian Empire fell after World War I, and the Soviet Union collapsed shortly after the failed invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, which was preceded by a coup. In 2024, Ukraine destroyed around $7 billion worth of Russian warplanes, some of which were irreplaceable, despite crude Russian efforts to disguise them with car tires.

Still, the Kremlin might interpret its "special military operation" as a lesson to Ukraine and NATO that they needed to change. Now, let's focus on that last word: change. In international relations, the theory of constructivism argues that ideas and identity are crucial in global politics, alongside power and weapons. The logic is straightforward. Washington fears a few North Korean nukes more than it fears hundreds of British nuclear weapons. That is because the Brits and the Americans are friends and share a long history, while North Korea's values and identity are contrary to America's.

We have seen many recent examples of groups undergoing dramatic changes. For example, Egypt was fighting Israel for years. Now they cooperate and exchange diplomatic missions. Is that gonna happen to Ukraine? Do the Russians believe that their special military operation has convinced Ukraine to change? Eschew NATO and make relations better with Russia.

That is a little difficult to imagine, as Ukraine would not trust Russia not to invade if it were not under NATO's protection. Practically speaking, Ukraine already enjoys many of the benefits that a NATO member actually enjoys. Kyiv receives all the military, diplomatic and financial support it needs from the alliance.

The escalation trap

In fact, NATO's Article 5, the core of the alliance that declares an attack on one member an attack on all, is not automatic. It requires a political decision by member states. If Russia shares this assessment, then the likelihood of it using nuclear weapons only increases, even though China, Iran, North Korea and others are helping Russia fight its war in Ukraine. That also includes many NATO members that continue to buy Russian energy every day.

This could explain the Russian drones and warplanes flying over NATO borders in recent weeks. Is Russia planning to expand the war, or testing the limits before a limited nuclear strike to stop NATO's support for Ukraine? The war seems to be only escalating, and each escalation raises the chance of a nuclear holocaust.

When I was a child, I was fascinated by apocalyptic stories. Especially those describing how nuclear war would bring a nuclear winter and end more than 99% of life on Earth. I have read almost every book on the apocalypse and watched nearly every apocalyptic movie. Most of them agree that the end of the world would come not from nature, but from human hands: a mad scientist or leader. Today, I think that nuclear war is far closer than we realize. There may already have been near-misses worse than the Cuban Missile Crisis, but we don't know about them.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Chile's Indigenous Rapa Nui Wants Its Stolen Moai Back

Priya Acharya
October 12, 2025

Rapa Nui natives are demanding the return of Hoa Hakananai'a, a venerated statue taken by the British from their island in 1868. The British Museum argues that housing Hoa Hakananai'a is not a symbol of theft of other people's cultural heritage, but a way of preserving and sharing different cultures with a global audience.

About 3,700 kilometers off the Chilean coast, on one of the most remote inhabited islands in the world, stand the moai of Rapa Nui. Moai refers to the large, monolithic stone statues of deified ancestors on Easter Island in Eastern Polynesia. European explorers first visited this island in 1722, and it now belongs to the South American country of Chile, just as Hawaii belongs to the US and French Polynesia belongs to France.

Carved between the 11th and 16th centuries AD, these towering stone figures act as guardians of the island and enduring symbols of Rapa Nui culture. Yet one of the most important moai, Hoa Hakananai'a, is missing. Like the Elgin and the Amravati marbles, this moai rests in London's British Museum. Understandably, the moai is the subject of a heated debate that calls into question far more than the fate of a single statue.

For the people of Rapa Nui, the moai in the British Museum is not just art — it is ancestry, spirituality and history carved into stone. Hoa Hakananai'a, the name for this moai, once stood at Orongo, the island's ceremonial village, where it became associated with the tangata manu ritual that was an annual competition to secure leadership without war.

To the indigenous people of Rapa Nui, the moai in general and Hoa Hakanaia'a in particular embody peace. For many, the removal of Hoa Hakanaia'a in 1868 by a British expedition feels like the theft of a relative. "Allowing the British to hold onto this piece of our history," says Rapa Nui's mayor Pedro Edmunds Paoa, "is like keeping our family away from us."

The British case for retaining foreign cultural treasures

By law, the British Museum cannot return objects in its collection to their original sites. The return of Hoa Hakananai'a, aside from being unlawful, could set off a wave of global repatriation claims. Laws aside, such a case would run the British Museum dry. As any visitor to the museum knows, this venerable British institution is "home" to thousands of artifacts gained through colonial efforts or expeditions that mimicked the manner of the expedition that resulted in Hoa Hakananai'a standing in the British Museum.

Many cultures around the world see the possession of their cultural treasures in the British Museum as "theft," and the Greeks have been demanding a return of the Elgin Marbles for decades. On December 4, 2024, a former advisor to the Greek government told the BBC that a deal to return the Parthenon Sculptures — what the Greeks call the Elgin Marbles — was "close" but, as of today, they still remain in the British Museum.

The British Museum not only makes a legal case for retaining foreign treasures but also a public interest argument. It argues that keeping the statues is in the world's best interest. The British argue that their prized museum is a global public good where world heritage is preserved and shared. Anyone from around the world can visit the British Museum for free or see the museum's treasures online. The Hoa Hakananai'a moai would not be accessible to the world were it to return to remote Rapa Nui.

Museums in richer countries, often former imperial powers, make this argument that foreign cultural treasures are better off with them. Were the treasures to return to their native lands, they might be damaged or destroyed. Humanity would lose them forever. These treasures might also be stolen and sold on the black market, ending up in private hands. Public access to these treasures would then be lost. Ironically, world heritage is best preserved in the British Museum or the Louvre, which have decades of expertise in preserving and displaying cultural treasures of the past.

If every great work of art remained in its cultural home, how could it be shared with so much of the world? How would people around the world have the chance to learn about a culture that they were unlikely to come in contact with?

The case for returning cultural treasures

The British argument for retaining Hoa Hakananai'a, the Parthenon Sculptures and the Amravati Marbles for global public benefit over time calls into question the very meaning of "cultural preservation." Is a culture preserved if one of its symbols is looked after very well in a wonderful museum and kept in good condition? Or is a culture preserved when the symbol is part of a living tradition in the society where it is the warp and woof of the culture?

If Hoa Hakananai'a is just a historic stone statue, then the British Museum is perhaps the best place to preserve this wonderful art. If Hoa Hakananai'a is still a part of the culture of the indigenous people of Rapa Nui, then perhaps the arguments of rightful ownership, collective dignity and cultural perpetuation trump the legal and public benefit arguments of the British Museum. Hoa Hakananai'a is a moai venerated by the people of Rapa Nui in a way it is not by the most interested, invested and culturally sensitive visitors to the British Museum.

When colonization, slavery and disease nearly destroyed the Rapa Nui population in the 19th century, the moai remained steadfast symbols of identity. Losing Hoa Hakananai'a meant more than losing a statue — it meant losing a part of the island's indigenous population's survival story. There is an argument to be made that Hoa Hakananai'a is integral to the identity of the people of Rapa Nui.

A tricky and complicated issue

As you can see above, there are good arguments for both retaining and returning the Hoa Hakananai'a moai. That is why the remote islanders and the British have been disputing ownership for decades. Delegations have traveled back and forth from Rapa Nui to London, but the issue is unresolved. The British have made promises of collaboration, but Hoa Hakananai'a still remains in London.

Perhaps the answer is not as simple as "returning" or "retaining" Hoa Hakananai'a. Some Rapa Nui leaders have even floated the idea of keeping Hoa Hakananai'a in London as an ambassador, as long as the British acknowledge that it belongs to Rapa Nui.

The Rapa Nui community itself is divided over the moai's fate. While many argue passionately for

its return, others recognize that the British Museum may offer the best conditions for its preservation. On Rapa Nui, hundreds of moai remain exposed to wind, saltwater and rain. In the past, many fell and all have already suffered damage.

By contrast, Hoa Hakananai'a is protected, conserved and well-positioned in the British Museum to share Rapa Nui culture with a global audience. Some form of the status quo is perhaps the most sensible path forward. Cultural preservation takes multiple forms: The moai on Rapa Nui island embody ancestral presence, while Hoa Hankananai'a in the British Museum serves as the island's cultural ambassador to the world.

The Hoa Hakananai'a debate points to a broader tension concerning the repatriation of cultural treasures. Colonial theft is an undeniable truth. Naturally, many people want to right that wrong and return these treasures to their native lands. Some play the morality card and try to guilt descendants of their former colonial masters or imperial adventurers into returning these treasures.

Yet the practical question of returning these cultural treasures is more complex. If every piece of art, sculpture or cultural artefact taken during the height of the European empires were repatriated, global museums would be stripped of their collections. More importantly, millions of people would lose access to cultural traditions that differ from their own. As pointed out above, these artifacts may be destroyed or end up in private collections, with the public losing access to them forever.

In the case of Rapa Nui, the return of Hoa Hakananai'a would not significantly affect the island's tourism economy. Tourists can and do visit the hundreds of moai still guarding Rapa Nui's shores. The return would certainly deprive millions of British Museum visitors from around the world to learn about a culture that they might never have heard of or ever explored.

The operative question is not simply whether Hoa Hakananai'a should stay or go, but what does cultural preservation truly mean today? Is heritage best preserved when artifacts remain in their place of origin, fulfilling their intended spiritual role, or when they are safeguarded and shared with the world? In practice, both approaches matter — Rapa Nui can retain its sacred moai and spiritual traditions, while Hoa Hakananai'a extends the island's cultural reach far beyond its shores.

In the case of Hoa Hakananai'a, the best solution is what some islanders themselves suggest. The British Museum should continue housing the moai in its fantastic building in London, but the British government should acknowledge the indigenous islanders' ownership of the statue. Until the British Isles and Rapa Nui island can come to an agreement, Hoa Hakananai'a remains a symbol of a larger, unresolved question: Who has the right to control cultural treasures — global museums that house them, or the communities that created them?

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Argentina's Endless Cycle: Why Sovereign Debt Crises Keep Returning

Masaaki Yoshimori
October 16, 2025

Argentina's recurrent debt crises reflect deep structural weaknesses: fiscal dominance, financial dollarization and institutional fragility. Despite repeated reforms, external bailouts and policy swings, the country remains trapped in a cycle of over-borrowing, defaulting and restructuring. Understanding these crises requires an empirical look at debt dynamics and a theoretical framing in terms of financial fragility, creative destruction and credibility traps.

Cyclical crises, exemplified by Argentina's repeated sovereign debt defaults, exhibit recurring patterns of financial distress, currency depreciation and external shocks. The Schumpeterian framework of creative destruction, created by Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, is particularly instructive, highlighting how economic crises periodically restructure inefficient or unsustainable systems. Simultaneously, financial fragility can precipitate collapses, as seen in Lebanon's ongoing banking crisis, where systemic instability in the financial sector, currency devaluation and sovereign debt defaults reinforce each other.

These phenomena are consistent with Minsky's financial fragility hypothesis, which emphasizes how cycles of excessive risk-taking and leverage generate recurrent financial instability. The comparative perspective underscores that recurring sovereign crises are rarely random; rather, they reflect the interaction of structural vulnerabilities, policy missteps and endogenous financial dynamics — crisis cycles driven by forces within the economy itself rather than external shocks.

The serial defaulter

A serial defaulter is a sovereign borrower, typically a country, that has a history of repeatedly failing to meet its debt payment obligations in a timely manner, often experiencing multiple default spells over time. Few countries illustrate this term better than Argentina. Since gaining independence in 1816, the nation has defaulted on its sovereign debt nine times, most recently in 2020. Each episode follows a familiar rhythm: optimism and capital inflows during commodity booms, excessive borrowing to finance fiscal expansion and an eventual collapse as global conditions tighten or domestic credibility erodes.

The 2001–2002 economic and financial crisis, among the most dramatic in modern financial history, saw GDP contract by over 10%, unemployment surge to 25% and poverty rates exceed 50%. Two decades later, Argentina once again faces unsustainable debt and inflation surpassing 95%. These recurrent crises are not mere cyclical misfortune — they reflect systemic failures embedded in institutional and financial structures.

At the core lies fiscal dominance, the subordination of monetary policy to government financing needs. Argentina's Treasury has historically relied on central bank credit to cover persistent primary deficits, undermining central bank credibility, fueling inflation expectations and discouraging demand for Argentine peso-denominated assets.

Dollarization compounds the problem. Distrust of the domestic currency leads Argentines to save

and price assets in US dollars, limiting monetary policy effectiveness and creating balance-sheet mismatches — when debts are in one currency and assets in another. When the peso depreciates, dollar-denominated liabilities surge, amplifying crisis dynamics.

These vulnerabilities are reinforced by institutional fragility — weak fiscal rules, politicized policymaking and unpredictable regulatory frameworks. In such an environment, even carefully designed reforms struggle to gain traction.

The 2001 crisis and its aftershocks

The 1990s opened with cautious optimism. Under the Convertibility Plan of 1991, Argentina pegged the peso one-to-one to the US dollar to end hyperinflation and restore credibility. At first, this plan yielded striking results: Inflation collapsed, capital inflows surged and investor confidence returned. Yet the system rested on fragile foundations — continuous external financing and strict fiscal discipline — that proved impossible to sustain.

Global shocks soon exposed these weaknesses. The Russian and Brazilian crises of the late 1990s eroded Argentina's export competitiveness and triggered capital flight. Growth stalled, debt dynamics turned explosive and International Monetary Fund (IMF) support proved insufficient to bridge the widening gap between fixed exchange rates and fiscal laxity. In December 2001, Argentina defaulted on $95 billion in sovereign debt; this was the then-largest default in history. The collapse left enduring scars on public trust in both domestic institutions and the international financial system.

After abandoning the currency board — a system that fixes the domestic currency's value to another — in 2002, Argentina's economy rebounded sharply. A global commodity boom and a newly competitive exchange rate fueled growth averaging nearly 8% between 2003 and 2008. The administrations of Presidents Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner pursued expansionary fiscal policies focused on redistribution and domestic demand.

But the recovery masked familiar vulnerabilities. Public spending and subsidies soared, inflation data became increasingly opaque and the central bank once again financed fiscal deficits. Capital controls distorted investment incentives, and by the mid-2010s, inflation expectations were entrenched while foreign reserves dwindled. The foundations of macroeconomic instability had quietly reemerged.

When President Mauricio Macri took office in 2015, he pledged to restore credibility through liberalization and fiscal reform. Early market enthusiasm was palpable: by 2017, Argentina had issued a 100-year bond, symbolizing renewed investor confidence. Yet fiscal consolidation, or the reduction of government deficits and debt accumulation, lagged. Inflation remained stubbornly high and rising external debt deepened the country's exposure to global volatility.

By 2018, sudden capital outflows forced Argentina to seek another IMF rescue — this time a record $57 billion program. Despite temporary stabilization, the plan suffered from overoptimistic assumptions, limited domestic ownership and politically costly austerity. Recession returned, social tensions escalated and Macri's government was voted out in 2019.

President Alberto Fernández inherited an economy already under strain. In 2020, Argentina restructured about $65 billion of debt, but the pandemic soon reignited crisis dynamics. Emergency fiscal spending, financed largely through monetary expansion, drove inflation into

triple digits even as reserves dwindled under a maze of multiple exchange rates and import restrictions.

The IMF's 2022 Extended Fund Facility (EFF) aimed to promote gradual fiscal consolidation and tighter monetary control. Yet structural weaknesses — fragmented governance, inconsistent implementation, and eroding credibility — undermined progress. By the mid-2020s, Argentina once again stood at the intersection of economic fragility and political fatigue. Its recurring crises served as a reminder of the enduring tension between sovereignty, populism and macroeconomic discipline.

The 2025 bailout and emerging fault lines

By mid-2025, Argentina once again stood on the brink of financial collapse. President Javier Milei's administration secured an emergency stabilization package jointly backed by the IMF and the US Treasury. The arrangement combines short-term liquidity, policy conditionality and bilateral support designed to restore market confidence and avert a full-blown balance-of-payments crisis — a severe economic emergency in which a country cannot fulfill its payment duties.

US President Donald Trump, who regards Milei as a kindred ideological ally, has stepped in to support Argentina's stabilization effort. This September, Washington agreed to extend a $20 billion Federal Reserve swap line to Argentina and expressed readiness to purchase Argentine sovereign bonds in secondary markets. This extraordinary gesture underscores both geopolitical and financial stakes.

Simultaneously, the IMF Executive Board approved a 48-month EFF valued at $20 billion (479% of quota). It came with an immediate $12 billion disbursement and a first review scheduled for June 2025, tied to an additional $2 billion tranche. The program is intended to catalyze further multilateral and bilateral financing and facilitate Argentina's gradual reentry into international capital markets.

Despite this unprecedented support, the stabilization effort remains precarious. Equity markets have tumbled, capital outflows have intensified and the peso faces relentless depreciation pressures. The central bank, while nominally independent, has intervened heavily in currency markets to contain volatility that threatens to unravel early disinflation gains. US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent affirmed that "all options" remained on the table, signaling Washington's commitment but also its growing anxiety over Argentina's policy credibility.

Structurally, Argentina's economy remains both diverse and constrained. Agriculture and natural resources account for roughly 15% of GDP and generate more than 60% of export revenue — around $35 billion in 2024, led by soybeans, corn and beef. Despite the currency collapse, export volumes remain near record highs, sustaining a large trade surplus. Services, including finance, logistics and tourism, represent approximately 60% of GDP, while manufacturing, food processing, automotive production and mining contribute the remaining 25%.

Yet the country's external position — what Argentina earns from abroad versus what it owes — remains chronically fragile. Total external debt, estimated at around $400 billion, imposes an annual interest burden exceeding $10–15 billion. This drains hard currency and undermines the current account. The paradox persists: Argentina earns dollars through strong exports yet remains starved of liquidity — a reflection not of trade weakness but of deep-seated credibility deficits and recurring policy reversals.

Why reforms rarely last

Argentina's crises are as much institutional as economic. Short political horizons, fragmented coalitions and public distrust generate time-inconsistent policies. Each government inherits imbalances, implements partial stabilization and then succumbs to electoral pressures.

The inflation-tax mechanism — which erodes debt through rising prices — creates incentives for short-termism. IMF programs often act as temporary stopgaps rather than durable solutions. Credibility, once lost, is hard to regain. As Columbia University Professor Guillermo Calvo observed, even orthodox policies fail if agents anticipate reversal.

Breaking Argentina's debt loop requires credible fiscal and monetary institutions. Independent fiscal councils, binding expenditure rules and inflation targeting insulated from political interference are essential.

Dedollarization, which aims to reduce the country's reliance on the US dollar, demands restoring trust in the peso through consistent policy and transparent governance. Fiscal and inflation data must be reliable to rebuild confidence. Equally important is fostering broad political consensus: Durable stabilization requires institutions that outlast administrations, as seen in Chile.

Toward a credibility-based framework

Argentina's economic history reads like a laboratory of macroeconomic dysfunction, where short-term imperatives repeatedly override long-term credibility. Fiscal dominance and dollarization persist not through ignorance but as a balance of mistrust among citizens, markets and the state.

Breaking this equilibrium requires a new contract of credibility: monetary institutions insulated from fiscal capture, fiscal rules that survive electoral cycles and data transparency that earns trust. Credibility is not declared — it is accumulated through consistent policy.

Argentina's challenge is entanglement, not isolation. Its fragility mirrors, on a smaller scale, the credibility dilemmas confronting advanced economies. The difference lies in degree, not kind: When trust erodes — whether in pesos or treasuries — the cost of restoration multiplies.

Stabilization, therefore, is not about inventing new policies but sustaining consistent ones long enough to reanchor expectations. The real challenge is political, not technical: transforming credibility from a temporary byproduct of crisis management into a durable public asset.

Only by achieving this can Argentina escape its chronic oscillation between hope and disappointment, turning macroeconomic stability from an exception into the norm.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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work delves into the political economy, exploring the impacts of globalization on the monetary system and the evolving challenges faced by global financial institutions.

Chaebol Versus Capitol: Shaking Down Seoul for Dollars

Alex Gloy
October 16, 2025

Washington pressed Seoul to deliver $350 billion for tariff relief, while Seoul sought gradual investments and a permanent dollar swap line. Federal agents then arrested 475 Korean workers at Hyundai and LG's Georgia battery site, disrupting key projects. The confrontation signals deeper strains that may weaken trust in the alliance.

Washington wants Seoul to write a big check in exchange for lower tariffs. After not getting its way, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested hundreds of Korean workers at Hyundai-LG's Georgia battery site—a high-stakes attempt at shaking down a (supposed) ally for protection money.

The skirmish: tariffs for cash (and control)

In early 2025, the US slapped broad tariffs on Korean exports. During negotiations, the US offered to lower those tariffs if Korea pledged to invest a considerable amount of money in the US. The number that stuck was $350 billion from Seoul (as part of a larger US–Asia push), which the White House at times framed as "upfront" money.

However, Seoul pushed back, offering incremental, commercially justified projects, not a lump-sum transfer, and only with financial safeguards like a standing dollar swap line to prevent a balance-of-payments shock. Talks stalled; the won slid to ₩1,400 per dollar; and South Korean President Lee Jae-myung warned that agreeing on Washington's terms could recreate a 1997-style crisis.

While some central banks enjoy standing (permanent) swap lines with the Federal Reserve, the Bank of Korea had only temporary, limited access on two occasions ($30 billion in October 2008, $60 billion in March 2020).

A swap line is an agreement between two central banks to exchange currencies now and swap them back later at a fixed rate. This enables the foreign central bank to lend dollars to its commercial banks during times of market stress without anyone taking currency risks.

Since a lot of lending and trade finance is conducted in US dollars, a financial crisis can lead to a dollar shortage, funding problems for corporations, and speculative attacks against the currency. This, in turn, could make raising interest rates necessary, potentially aggravating economic conditions.

Having a standing swap line of a decent size sends a message to speculators that any attempts to attack the currency would be futile.

The Georgia shock: 475 arrests at the EV hub

Then came the raid. On September 2–4, federal agents detained roughly 475 workers — mostly Korean nationals, many employed by subcontractors — at Hyundai Motor Group

Metaplant America (HMGMA) and the adjacent LG Energy Solution (LGES) battery joint venture (JV) near Savannah, Georgia, the largest single-site immigration action in the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) history. Hyundai now expects the battery plant's startup to slip by at least two to three months.

President Lee praised US President Donald Trump's handling of the incident in public — a bid to keep lines open — but warned the broader climate could chill Korean capital in the US.

Georgia is the anchor of Korea's US electric vehicle (EV) production plans. Hyundai's Georgia build-out has a combined investment volume in the low double-digit billions — the auto plant and the battery joint-venture each costing around $7.5 billion. A construction-phase labor shock pushes back Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)-sensitive timelines and adds perceived "rule-of-law risk" to foreign capex.

A Big Ask

The US is offering lower tariffs (Korea seeks parity with Japan/EU around 15%) in exchange for a Korean-funded US investment vehicle of nearly $350 billion, with rapid disbursement and strong US say over where the money goes. That's paired with pressure to re-shore or "friend-shore" sensitive supply chains and to align with US tech controls. The US is demanding that Korea hand over an amount equal to 20% of its GDP.

Seoul, however, is suggesting stretching the funding over years, replacing most of it through loans and guarantees, and getting a standing Fed swap line or an equivalent backstop (so the dollar reserves at the Bank of Korea aren't depleted). Korea's foreign exchange (FX) reserves were $416.3 billion at the end of August. Demanding that Korea hand over 84% of its dollar reserves seems neither reasonable nor practical.

Korean reactions

Lee has tried to run a two-track strategy: talk tough at home, pragmatic abroad. He flagged the currency risk ("without a swap, crisis risk rises"), criticized US control over any investment pool and simultaneously kept praise handy for Trump on the Georgia enforcement episode.

Politically, his approval has been whipsawed: it rebounded to 59–62% after his late-August US–Japan swing, then dipped toward 55% after the tariff standoff and FX jitters returned, narrowing his room for concessions.

The skirmish is unpopular. Surveys conducted in August showed most Koreans are opposed to tariffs and skeptical of the compromise; Pew also recorded a decline in Korean favorability toward the US this summer.

Impact on Korean battery manufacturing in the US

In the short term, the Georgia raid delays commissioning and creates supply-chain friction (visa checks, contractor audits, insurance repricing). Hyundai expects a delay of two to three months in the case that tariff relief doesn't arrive. Korean autos and parts could face a price handicap into 2026, eroding the logic of US final assembly. Certain production steps face deadlines in order to qualify for IRA credits (US federal tax credits created by the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act to subsidize clean energy, EVs and domestic manufacturing).

For now, batteries could be sourced from other producers as a temporary patch. The broader effect is a chilling realization — "we invested billions, then got hit with raids and tariffs".

Lithium Power Play

While the US Geological Survey (USGS) does not disclose domestic lithium production, it is estimated that the US currently has a global market share of less than 2%, stemming from a single mine. As electric vehicles replace ICE cars, access to inexpensive lithium becomes critical.

The "Thacker Pass" project in Nevada is expected to ramp up production in 2028, giving competitors in battery production a multi-year head start. The US Department of Energy intends to swap its $2.26 loan into a 5% equity stake in the company developing the lithium deposit (Lithium Americas). With General Motors being the main customer for lithium produced in Nevada, disrupting competitors, like Korean Hyundai, might have played a role in the ICE raids.

One nation's trade surplus is another nation's deficit

In 2024, the US exported $66 billion to and imported $132 billion from Korea, for a $66 billion US goods deficit, fueled by $50 billion in imports of autos and parts. The US enjoyed a $12 billion surplus in services, which partially mitigated the deficit in goods.

US trade deficits can be traced back to an overvaluation of the US dollar. By insisting on remaining the world's reserve currency, surplus nations, like Korea, are forced to accumulate dollars as a safety cushion, to provide coverage for imports, and for lack of alternative uses. The natural adjustment in exchange rates, therefore, is not allowed to happen.

A weak currency would not be suitable for reserves; central banks would shun wasting assets, since losses would raise questions and potentially endanger their independence.

A foreign-sector surplus, from a US perspective, dictates that one or more domestic sectors must run a deficit, causing perennial US government fiscal deficits. Lacking domestic savings, the US is dependent on external financing, leading to increased indebtedness towards foreign investors. Billions of interest are due to friends and foes alike.

Russian dollar reserves were "neutralized" via sanctions. Now, the US has laid its eyes on other countries' dollar stashes.

The Miran Plan spelled it out

Few should have been surprised by economic bullying from the US. All the steps, from tariffs to forced investments, have been laid out plainly by Stephen Miran, now Trump's Chief Economic Advisor, in his 2024 paper "A User's Guide to Restructuring the Global Trading System". He writes: "There is another potential use of the leverage provided by tariffs … the removal of tariffs in exchange for significant industrial investment in the United States by our trading partners."

So far, Trump has followed the Miran Plan diligently. The next step would shock foreign holders of Treasury securities: a withholding tax on interest. Instead of paying coupons to, say, the People's Bank of China at 4%, the US Treasury would simply snip off 10 or 20%.

This would likely upset US trade partners even more, potentially leading to an accelerated dumping of US securities, with negative implications for the US dollar, too. It is not hard to see the adventure ending with an own goal.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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US Revokes Colombian President's Visa: The Volatile Relationship Between North and South America

Laura Pavon
October 22, 2025

Colombian President Gustavo Petro confronted US President Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly over foreign intervention and climate policy. Washington revoked Petro's visa after he urged US soldiers to disobey Trump's orders. This clash may redefine Colombia's ties with Washington and shape Latin America's stance toward US influence in 2026.

In September, Colombian President Gustavo Petro delivered two controversial speeches at the 2025 United Nations General Assembly in New York. The first was his speech at the podium to a crowd of international leaders, where he called for the creation of a UN army to liberate Palestine and denounced US attempts to intervene in Venezuela and Colombia.

Following his speech, he addressed a gathering of pro-Palestinian protesters and journalists outside the UN building using a megaphone, where he urged US soldiers to disobey President Donald Trump's orders. His exact words were:

> The people united will never be defeated. We are going to present a resolution ordering the United Nations to form an army to save the world, whose first task will be to liberate Palestine. From here, from New York, I ask all soldiers in the US Army not to point their guns at humanity. Disobey Trump's orders, obey the orders of humanity.

Washington responds: visa revocation and diplomatic fallout

In response, the US State Department announced on X that it was revoking Petro's visa due to his "reckless and incendiary actions." This is the second time a Colombian president has had his visa revoked by the US. The first was Ernesto Samper during former US President Bill Clinton's first term in 1996, due to his alleged connection to the Cali drug cartel and Colombia's refusal to extradite drug traffickers. In August 2025, Arturo Arias, the ex-president of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, stated that the US had canceled his visa after he voiced his criticism of Trump on the internet.

Petro's visa cancellation appears to have added him to the list of current or former presidents banned from entering the US. This list also includes Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, who was unable to attend the UN assembly for this same reason.

A fractured relationship: Colombia and the United States through history

The revocation of Petro's visa is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the United States' decades-long challenging relationship with Colombia, a pivotal nation in the South American political landscape. This relationship is typically portrayed by endeavors to combat drug trafficking, the contradictory romanticization of figures like Pablo Escobar by popular culture — as depicted in the Netflix series Narcos — and the cloaking of the shared history of North and South American decolonial struggles for independence and the contributions of figures like Gabriel García Márquez (the Colombian Nobel Prize winner in literature in 1982 and author of One Hundred Years of Solitude [1967]).

More specifically, setting aside magical realism, the relationship between Petro and Trump has been brief yet intense, and it has been defined by a series of mutual accusations that began in January of this year.

Petro initially rejected two planes carrying Colombian deportees, arguing that they were not receiving dignified treatment. However, the two countries later reached an agreement amid threats of tariffs.

Petro's rhetoric of resistance and the echo of Bolívar

Petro chose X to address the US president directly. In this missive, which begins with a confessional tone, he writes:

Trump, I don't really like traveling to the US. It's boring, but I must admit that there are some good things about it … I don't like your oil, Trump. You're going to destroy the human race because of your greed. Maybe someday, over a glass of whiskey, which I accept despite my gastritis, we can talk frankly about this. But it's difficult because you consider me inferior, and I'm not, nor is any Colombian.

In his lengthy letter, Petro suggests taking a historical journey and recalls the US intervention against Chilean President Salvador Allende, which elevated Augusto Pinochet to power. He appears to be defending Colombia's global standing, highlighting aspects such as "Colombia is the heart of the world, and you misunderstood that. This is the land of yellow butterflies, the land of Remedios' beauty," drawing a literary parallel to one of the most stunning scenes in One Hundred Years of Solitude.

Among other references to the past struggles of the US civil rights movement, Petro contradicts his willingness to share a whiskey with Trump when he adds, "I do not shake hands with white slave owners. I shake hands with white libertarians, the heirs of Lincoln, and black and white peasant boys of the United States."

In this X message, Petro uses the plural form of "Americas," making it clear that Colombia will no longer look northward. He also mentions Venezuelan statesman and military officer Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), the hero of South American independence — also known as El Libertador, "the liberator" — highlighting the shared, collective and plurinational history of the Americas, which he believes Trump does not represent.

He draws attention to Trump's immigrant past and lack of Native American ancestry, referring to him as an "immigrant" as well: "I raise a flag and, as Gaitán said, even if I am alone, it will continue to fly with Latin American dignity, which is the dignity of America, which your great-grandfather did not know, but mine did, Mr. President, immigrant in the United States."

Although several months had passed and the scenario was different, Petro maintained the core sentiment of his aforementioned X epistle when he addressed the UN General Assembly. His speech was equally assertive and combative.

Climate, conflict and calls for a new world order

He addressed statements made by the US government one week prior to the assembly, in which they claimed that neither Venezuela nor Colombia was cooperating in the fight against drug trafficking.

These statements were made amid the sensitive situation involving the US troops' launch of a missile at a small boat in Caribbean waters in early September. The US alleged that the ship was trafficking drugs. Standing before the UN, Petro shared that an investigation was underway to determine if Colombian civilians were aboard the boat. He stressed the importance of initiating due process against the US officials who ordered the missile strike.

From the podium, Petro provocatively proposed that "Drug traffickers live elsewhere. They live in New York, a few blocks away, and in Miami. They make deals with the DEA. They live in luxury, not poverty. Not in the Caribbean or Gaza."

The Colombian President also devoted much of his speech to discussing the climate crisis and clean energies, such as green hydrogen and decarbonization. He praised the "enormous absorbent sponge of the Amazon rainforest". He also accused the "most powerful government in the world" of not believing in science: "That is called irrationalism, and it was that same irrationalism that filled Hitler's Germany."

When it was his turn, Trump devoted a significant portion of his address to the UNGA to criticizing renewable energy and rejecting the scientific consensus on climate change. He claimed that clean energy sources, such as solar and wind power, are less effective and more expensive than fossil fuel alternatives.

Speaking from the UN podium, Petro adopted the tone of the Latin American independence heroes he mentioned in his January letter when he proposed the creation of a UN armed force. He made statements such as, "There is no superior race, gentlemen. There are no chosen people of God. Neither the United States nor Israel are chosen by God. Ignorant fundamentalists of the extreme right think that way. The chosen people of God are all of humanity."

After this, he added that diplomacy had run its course and urged the UN to establish an armed force to protect the lives of Palestinians: "Words are no longer enough. It is time for Bolívar's sword of liberty or death because they are not only going to bomb Gaza and the Caribbean, they already are, they are attacking humanity, which cries out for freedom."

From Bolívar's dream to a divided continent

In addition to his defiant tone toward Trump and his call for the US military to rebel against him, Petro's recent public statements are notable for their repeated mention of Bolívar. During his visit to New York, he granted an interview to the BBC News World based in Manhattan. The words chosen for the headline of the interview's video were "Trump has failed to understand that Bolívar's children are not subordinates."Bolívar, the "Liberator of America," fought against the Spanish crown for 20 years to achieve independence for Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Born in Caracas to a family of Creole nobility, Bolívar received a European education. He then brought what he had learned

about liberation in France to the other side of the ocean.

In August 1819, Bolívar crossed the Andes mountain range and defeated Spanish troops in the Battle of Boyacá, achieving independence for the region of New Granada, now Colombia. Interestingly, in 1691, Palenque, located in present-day Colombia, was the first colonial settlement to free African slaves, who became the first officially freed black slaves anywhere in the Americas.

One of Bolívar's greatest hopes was a grand confederation of all the former Spanish colonies in America, inspired by the United States' model. To this end, in 1826, he convened the Congress of Panama to organize a confederation of American nations that would support and cooperate with each other for the common good. However, as we know, he did not achieve his goal.

Nowadays, the differences among countries in the region continue. In the current state of affairs, Trump is favored by Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa and Argentine President Javier Milei, who distance themselves from other regional leaders, such as Chilean President Gabriel Boric and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, who oppose US interventionism.

Domestic backlash and regional uncertainty

2026 will be a pivotal year for South American politics, with upcoming presidential elections in countries such as Peru, Brazil and Colombia. A map that has always been of strategic imperial interest to the United States, as evidenced by its long history of interventions in regime changes. According to the Harvard Review of Latin America, "In the slightly less than a hundred years from 1898 to 1994, the US government has intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America a total of at least 41 times."

Since the late 20th century, the international relations between Colombia and the United States have been marked by bilateral efforts against drug trafficking, such as the Plan Colombia, signed in 1999 between the administrations of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango and Clinton, who signed it into US law as an approval of an aid package to both keep drugs outside the US shores and "help Colombia promote peace and prosperity and deepen its democracy."

A fundamental aspect of the Plan Colombia was indeed supporting the disarmament of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country's largest insurgent group, founded in the 1960s, and the National Liberation Army (ELN), both designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the US State Department.

Álvaro Uribe, elected Colombian president in 2010, began formal peace talks with the FARC in 2012. It wasn't until US President Barack Obama's and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos's terms that the peace process actually reached its culmination in Colombia, after only four rounds of negotiations, and with the governments of Chile, Cuba, Norway and Venezuela as hosts, mediators and observers.

The peace agreement called for the guerrillas to hand over their weapons to a UN commission. It also contemplated that international aid, especially from the United States, would be needed to invest in neglected rural areas and create economic alternatives to drug trafficking.

Unlike the FARC, the ELN remains active, particularly along the Colombia-Venezuela border. During his presidency, Petro has pursued the idea of achieving "total peace" by disarming the ELN. However, negotiations broke down in July after the ELN attacked civilians in the Catatumbo border region.

Due to its involvement in illegal economies, peasant agriculture and the centuries-long indigenous struggle for land sovereignty, it seems that the ELN continues to hold significant social power.

Returning to Petro's controversial visit to New York, during the BBC News World interview, journalist Tom Bateman asked Petro, "Are you concerned that taking this approach of resisting the US administration risks further isolating your country?" Petro responded that he believes it is President Trump who is isolating himself from the world regarding his position on the Palestinian genocide.

However, a quick review of mainstream Colombian media shows the opposite: the president is facing fierce opposition in his own country. Journalist Daniel Coronell claims that Petro is "building his pedestal as a martyr" and "dragging Colombia down with him."

Former Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón told the Colombian media outlet Semana, "This country does not need clowns." Pinzón, who is presenting himself as a potential presidential candidate and former ambassador to the United States, also said, "We will resolve the issue with Israel immediately." The newspaper El Colombiano ran the headline, "Petro without a visa but with a megaphone."

Francia Márquez, the current Vice President and representative of the Afro-Colombian community, is a prominent figure on the left in Colombia. However, in recent months, her relationship with Petro has been filled with disagreements, despite their cordial appearance together at the UN. Adding to the political tension, Manuel Uribe, a future Colombian presidential candidate, was shot and killed earlier this year. US Secretary Marco Rubio blamed Petro's inflammatory rhetoric for the assassination.

Colombia clearly has its own internal and historical struggles to tackle. Only time will tell how Petro's continued antagonism toward the United States will affect the Colombian general elections next year and how the region's new leaders in 2026 will align with or oppose the United States' imperialistic endeavors.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Why the Success of Prabowo's 2024 Presidential Campaign Strategy Matters

Amirah Darwisyah Hamita
October 23, 2025

Prabowo Subianto secured Indonesia's presidency in 2024 by recasting his image from strongman to "cuddly grandpa." His campaign used strategic marketing, TikTok virality and AI-generated propaganda to reshape public perception. Calculated image management, not

charisma or policy, proved decisive and signals a new era in Indonesia's electoral politics.

Winning a presidential election involves a whole lot more than just grit and pure charisma in today's political landscape.

Decked in a light blue checkered dress shirt and jeans, Prabowo Subianto waltzes across the stage, performing an awkward jig in front of a jubilant crowd. This was the reaction of Indonesia's current President upon claiming his victory in the 2024 presidential election — a performance synonymous with his successful rebranding as a "cuddly grandpa".

Prabowo is lauded by his younger Generation Z (Gen Z) and millennial supporters as "gemoy" and "gemes", meaning overcome with cuteness, as seen in circulated TikTok videos. This stands diametrically opposed to his formerly contentious, Machiavellian image — one smeared by a dark and bloody past.

Prabowo: a "political chameleon"

Prabowo's political career is marred by human rights abuse accusations, with links to Suharto's military dictatorship and massacres during Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste (1975-99). Barred from entering the US as late as 2012, Prabowo's political path began tumultuously. After losing several presidential cycles, he even filed a lawsuit — albeit an unsuccessful one — alleging election fraud when he lost the 2014 election to Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, the Indonesian politician and businessman who served as Indonesia's seventh president from 2014 to 2024.

However, Prabowo's longtime political resilience built him an army of supporters. The results of the 2024 presidential election showed that Prabowo garnered 59% of the vote, a testament to the seismic political shift and recalibrated strategy adopted by the Prabowo-Gibran campaign.

But it is not his resilience that changed the game. It is a result of a deliberately curated marketing ploy. A convergence between being a "political chameleon" and strategic incremental decisions, leveraging both to fulfill an overarching goal: to achieve slide-rule authoritarianism. The "Dark Indonesia" movement reflects the reactionary response to the administration's austerity policy and revised military law.

Prabowo's 2019 campaign: the Islamic populist strategy

Much like the Trump administration, Prabowo is unafraid to engage with divisive and controversial populist rhetoric. Whereas US President Donald Trump's appeal relies on his cult of personality — possessing presidential charisma bordering on self-caricature — which resonates with a vital fraction of the American electorate, Prabowo takes on a contrarian approach by necessity.

Unlike the polarizing demographic in the US, Indonesia's population consists predominantly of Javanese Muslims. Prabowo's strategic foregrounding and cultivation of a pious Muslim image expose the importance of having a cohesive political identity, one that aligns with the greater part of the electorate.

His 2019 presidential campaign is a testament to Prabowo's overt engagement with Islamic populism. At the end of his official national speech (2019) at the Jakarta Convention Centre, titled Indonesia Menang (Indonesia's Victory), he constructed the image of himself and his close proximity to Islam:

"As a proud son of the nation and of Islam, allow me to proclaim the takbir, 'Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Independence! Independence!"

Islam became the vehicle in which he performed religious authenticity, a crucible for populist rhetoric, to stitch himself within the social fabric of the Indonesian electorate.

However, the Islamic populist strategy belies his true intentions. The U-turn in Prabowo's 2024 presidential campaign strategy marks a crucial inflection point in his political career. The president's decreased engagement with Islamic political rhetoric, in comparison to the 2019 election cycle and earlier years, is not a sign of a shift toward progressive values. It is a shift aimed at broadly appealing to younger voters; it is a means to an end.

The power of political marketing: Prabowo's reformed image

This phenomenon has a direct consequence and correspondence with the increase in online pandering and deliberate curation of his new image. In other words, Prabowo's reformed image and accumulated years of Islamic populist strategy boil down to the very core of predatory populism: molding his identity to the prevailing sentiments of mainstream consciousness.

The key differentiator of the 2024 presidential election cycle is that Prabowo has an excellent marketing team backing him up.

The clearest example is turning around a losing debate against his political rivals. The presidential debate between him and the other two political candidates, Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo, became one of the pivotal moments of the entire campaign. These videos — carefully edited clips — were disseminated through his party's social media channels. In doing so, he raptured the hearts of voters as well as capitalized on its virality.

In a bid for strategic self-victimization, Prabowo, or rather his marketing team, successfully reframed what would have been a lackluster performance into craftily manipulated propaganda against his rivals.

An AI-generated image of a stylized billboard, portraying infantilized cartoon versions of Prabowo and Gibran, presents the perfect analogy: the idea is to soften his reputation and lodge himself within a digestible narrative. Another instance is a fake, also AI-generated video of Suharto circulated by Prabowo's party, endorsing his presidency, which amassed as high as 4.5 million views.

Therein lies the core of his newly founded magnetism: an orchestrated reinvention that navigates between algorithmic reach and performative authenticity; the importance of image management has superseded actual engagement with public policy.

It is not Prabowo's charisma nor his resilience that allowed him to clinch the top spot, but a structured marketing strategy that can easily be emulated. Prabowo's successful campaign would not be a blip in the political arena, but the bellwether for Indonesia's future voting behavior.

[Claudia Finak-Fournier edited this piece.]

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The UN at 80: The Superpowers Have No Clothes

Cathleen Jeanty
October 26, 2025

Global leaders mark the 80th anniversary of the UN as its founding powers face political turmoil and declining credibility. The UN's authority falters while the Global South rises, with new agencies preparing to move to Nairobi. This shift signals a coming reordering of global governance led by emerging nations.

The world that the United Nations was born into no longer exists. So why do the diplomats and politicians gathered for the UN General Assembly this year, during its 80th anniversary, pretend that it does?

The founding of the UN

At the time of the UN's founding, the post-World War II world order was dominated by a handful of victorious, allied nations that affirmed their status by fashioning a world order with themselves at the helm.

The UN Security Council, established in 1946, created a structured, formal mechanism to promote peace. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) provided the means to settle international disputes. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund offered the infrastructure to fund global development.

The UN has since expanded its mandate to include things like sustainable development, gender equality and inclusive governance to keep pace with global shifts in priorities. Despite this, the institution is not moving fast enough. And now, a mere 80 years later, it is time for a new structure.

The fractures and moral failings of the UN

Among international institutions, the UN's name has near-mythic resonance. Yet, its ideals of global governance seldom translate into action, and the global superpowers at its helm are now beset by challenges.

US democracy is being dismantled at record speed. Hours after naming a new government, the French Prime Minister resigned after less than a month on the job. By mid-October 2025, France has had six Prime Ministers in two years, while the United Kingdom, still reeling from the fallout from Brexit, has seen five Prime Ministers since it voted to leave the European Union.

The international structures were built on the assumption that a few leading nations would maintain order and stability, and are now, ironically, cracking under the weight of these same nations' governance failures.

The UN Security Council's veto power is a perfect manifestation of this. The UN instituted this mechanism to ensure the world's superpowers refrained from warring with one another. But instead, it has become a legal contrivance that enables more powerful states to deny less powerful nations their sovereignty.

This imbalance of power is playing out in real time. For nearly two years now, we have watched as the United States vetoed measures to demand a ceasefire in Gaza. These actions are part of a larger historical pattern. Over the past five decades, the United States has vetoed over 50 Security Council resolutions critical of Israel. South Africa, on the other hand, has stepped up and led the charge, bringing a case against Israel's actions in Gaza to the ICJ.

The United States' moral failing extends beyond the Security Council. In 2010, the United States abstained from voting on a UN resolution declaring water a human right — an act that evidenced an all-too-poignant truth: the current paradigm of the UN Security Council exists to buoy the material interests of the few and powerful. It is past time for the Security Council to reflect the true composition of all its 193 UN Member States.

Is the Global South the new future for the UN?

Earlier this year, the UN announced that, by 2026, major UN agencies like the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women may move to Nairobi, Kenya, signaling an end to the 80-year-long reign that the Global North has had over international institutions. And, as the veneer of Western liberalism begins to crumble under democratic backsliding, corruption, inequality and autocracy, maybe it is time.

Small Island Developing States have been on the frontlines of committing to a world with net-zero carbon. Meanwhile, the United States is reneging on climate agreements, withdrawing grants and now refusing to acknowledge the existence of global warming. Our institutions' constant capitulation to the short-termism of Western interests leaves us with systems so at odds with the values they purport to hold that the global order is now adrift.

The world is in the midst of the most violent conflicts since World War II, with a rudderless United States ceding its position of global leadership more each day. As the V-Dem Institute has asked so poignantly, has democracy been trumped? If the measuring stick is the inability to act consequentially on climate change, gender equality and conflict, the answer is yes.

If the world's major powers, with all their resources and might, cannot stand up and meet the myriad of crises befalling us, who will? The limited capacity of the UN and its Security Council impairs us all. A radical new architecture — whether inside the UN or beyond — will be needed for the future; let the Global South lead us into it.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Cathleen Jeanty is a rising expert in human rights with Young Professionals in Foreign Policy (YPFP) and a former Innovation Fellow at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. She is a master's candidate in international affairs at Columbia University.

Bangladesh Now Aligns With China, India Worries

Shokin Chauhan, Atul Singh
October 26, 2025

China seeks to counter India's rise by deepening its influence in South Asia and binding Bangladesh through trade, infrastructure and military ties. Interim leader Muhammad Yunus has pivoted Dhaka toward Beijing with major investments, including control of Mongla Port. This shift threatens Indian security and demands urgent diplomatic recalibration.

China has long aimed to be the top dog in Asia. Historically, the Chinese have called their state Zhōngguó, which literally means the Middle Kingdom. For centuries, China was the dominant global economy and the most powerful empire in the world. Beijing sees itself as reclaiming its rightful position in the world after the century of humiliation that began with the First Opium War (1839–1842) and ended with the defeat of Japan in World War II (1945).

The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission tells us that China's strategy in South Asia is to check the rise of India. To do so, Beijing is exploiting the India-Pakistan rivalry. It is also cultivating influence among other South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The China-Pakistan relationship is well known. Not so well-known is the fact that China has deepened its relationship with Bangladesh. Beijing has entwined itself deeply into Bangladesh's economy, infrastructure, digital systems and security matrix.

The courting of Dhaka: How the Dragon slipped in

Bangladesh was born in 1971 thanks to India's going to war against Pakistan. Thanks to its role in liberating Bangladesh, India earned much goodwill in the young nation on the Bay of Bengal. Relations between the two countries remained close for decades.

Warning signs for the India-Bangladesh relationship appeared as early as 2004. That year, China replaced India as Bangladesh's "top source of imports." One of these was cotton, a key ingredient for Bangladesh's booming textile industry that churns out jeans, t-shirts, shirts, etc, for Western retailers like Costco, Walmart and Amazon.

Bangladesh has given China special economic zones, such as one in the strategic port city of Chittagong and the other in the national capital of Dhaka. China has also invested and continues to invest in roads, bridges, power plants and ports. Bangladesh became the first country in South Asia to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Dhaka and the two countries, upgrading the China-Bangladesh relationship to "a strategic cooperative partnership." Since 2016, Chinese investment has flowed into Bangladesh. As in many other parts of the world, China is involved in huge infrastructure projects. Importantly, China has a near-monopoly in high-tech construction and a key presence in key transportation corridors.

Early this year, Bangladesh made a major foreign policy shift. Under Sheikh Hasina, the previous leader who was ousted by street protests in July-August 2024, Bangladesh walked the

diplomatic tightrope, balancing India and China. Wahiduzzaman Noor and Samantha Wong of the Atlantic Council point out that China became Bangladesh's top trading partner during the last ten years of Hasina's rule. Worryingly for India, China also became Bangladesh's top supplier of military hardware. Yet Hasina was able to keep India onside. It helped that her party had historic links with India. Her father was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, who began the Awami League, and Hasina inherited his legacy.

Since Hasina was ousted, relations between Bangladesh and India have steadily and dramatically deteriorated. Historically, every new Bangladeshi leader has made India the first foreign destination after taking power. Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser of the Bangladeshi interim government, broke with tradition and made his first state visit to Beijing, not Delhi. Bangladesh has now very publicly made a "pivot toward China."

Closer Bangladesh-China relations threaten India

The March 2025 Yunus Beijing visit has led to increased Chinese investments in Bangladesh. Yunus secured $2.1 billion in investments, loans and grants. Notably, the Chinese will invest $400 million to modernize Mongla Port. This is Bangladesh's second-largest seaport, and just before Hasina was defenestrated, India had secured operating rights to a terminal at Mongla. Last year, India scored "a strategic win" in the port wars of the two Asian giants. In March, China came out tops.

Chinese investment in Mongla raises Indian concerns because it is part of Beijing's "String of Pearls" strategy. China is building the ports of Chittagong in Bangladesh, Gwadar in Pakistan, Colombo and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Marao in the Maldives, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Lamu in Kenya and Bagamoyo in Tanzania**.** Beijing claims that these facilities are for commercial use, but in the future, the Chinese navy could use these ports as naval bases or logistical hubs. This geopolitical string of pearls contains India and ties up China's populous southern neighbor in its own backyard.

China will also help Bangladesh in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project. This alarms India. Originating in the Indian state of Sikkim, the Teesta flows into Bangladesh, and its water secures the lives and livelihoods of millions of Bangladeshis. India has built the Teesta Barrage to generate electricity and supply water to farmers in the state of West Bengal (note that West Bengal and Bangladesh were both part of the state of Bengal in British India till independence in 1947). Both India and Bangladesh want more of Teesta's water. A population explosion since independence means that northern West Bengal and northern Bangladesh have a greater demand for water. The Teesta Water Dispute is one of the rising number of geopolitical tensions over water.

There is another matter of critical geopolitical importance of which coon of the authors has considerable personal experience. The first author served extensively in India's northeast and commanded Assam Rifles, a body of troops engaged in the region. India's northeast is connected to the rest of India through what has come to be known as the "Chicken's Neck." This 20–22 kilometer stretch of land surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh is a key choke point for India, akin to the Strait of Malacca for China. Exacerbating Indian concerns about the Chicken's Neck is the fact that the seven states in India's northeast have been turbulent and China disputes Indian control of much territory of the northernmost state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The northeast's "Seven Sisters" (a term for the seven states) have been home to fierce secessionist insurgencies that have cost India much blood and treasure. Reports that China plans to construct an airfield in Bangladesh's Lalmonirhat district close to the Indian border naturally set alarm bells ringing in India. During his visit to Beijing, Yunus mused that Bangladesh could serve as "an extension of the Chinese economy." He spoke of Bangladesh becoming the sole oceanic gateway for India's landlocked Seven Sisters. Tellingly, supposedly democratic Bangladesh now explicitly opposes Taiwan's independence. A Yunus-led Bangladeshi government has now clearly thrown in its lot with China, which is terrible news for India.

China's growing digital footprint and rising PLA presence

In the new world of digital connectivity, China dominates Bangladesh's 4G infrastructure and is now building 5G. Huawei rolled out the country's first 5G network in Dhaka in December 2021. Surveillance systems, smart city components, data storage centers and facial recognition systems, all powered by Chinese technology, are becoming embedded in Bangladesh's civic and policing infrastructure.

China's digital penetration of Bangladesh has sparked concern among Indian cyber experts and policymakers. Data collected via Chinese-controlled systems, even if operated under Bangladeshi supervision, is potentially vulnerable to siphoning by the Chinese state. In an era where information is power, Bangladesh's growing digital dependency on China is a great strategic worry for India.

A more obvious worry is Bangladesh's extreme dependence on China for military equipment. After Pakistan, Bangladesh is the second-largest importer of Chinese kits. Since 2002, China has been Bangladesh's largest supplier of military hardware, providing tanks, artillery, naval vessels, radar systems, fighter aircraft and training aircraft. China provided 73.6% of Bangladesh's arms acquisitions between 2010 and 2020.

Bangladesh Navy acquired two Type 035G Ming-class submarines in 2016, marking a major shift in the maritime equation of the Bay of Bengal. In 2023, Dhaka inducted Chinese-origin VT-5 light tanks, and the Chinese are upgrading Bangladesh's missile systems as well as air defense platforms.

Increasingly, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) trains Bangladeshi military officers. Till not too long ago, the Indian and Bangladeshi militaries had close links. Both were descended from the British Indian Army. Now, China has replaced India and Bangladesh's National Defense College has a number of instructors from the PLA.

Rising India-Bangladesh trust deficit and why Delhi needs to act now

Over the years, a trust deficit has developed between Delhi and Dhaka. Even under Hasina, Bangladesh was deepening relations with China. It is an open secret that Hasina returned to power in 2008 with India's support. Therefore, Delhi was able to convince Dhaka in 2016 "to abandon the Sonadia deep water port project China intended to build." Yet by the end of 2003, 700 Chinese companies operated in Bangladesh. After the bloody 2020 India-China border clash, rising Chinese presence in Bangladesh fuelled disquiet in Indian national security circles.

Another issue muddying India-Bangladesh waters is immigration. Just as many Americans are concerned about migrants flooding in from across the Mexican border, some Indians worry about Bangladeshi immigrants flocking to their country. The Indian government's attempts to institute a

National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 led to nationwide protests and misgivings in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi scholar Sadia Korobi makes the point that complex demographics make the NRC and CAA emotive issues. Bangladeshis have settled in India in large numbers. They "frequently travel across to exchange commodities, work informal jobs, and visit family members." In 2023, India-Bangladesh trade reached $15.9 billion. Bangladeshis worry that both the NRC and the CAA could cause an influx of Muslim immigrants to Bangladesh and damage trade.

Historians point out that the Muslim League began in 1906 in Dhaka. The religion that caused the partition of the states of Punjab in the west and Bengal to the east is still a fault line. Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan in 1971 through Indian support. The Awami League championed the Bangla language and Bangladeshi nationalism. Yet there were Bangladeshi Islamists who distrusted India even in 1971.

Hasina severely repressed Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party in Bangladesh. It is an offshoot of an Islamist movement founded by Syed Abul A'la al-Maududi in 1941. This so-called direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad wanted to institute sharia (Islamic law), oppose Western imperialism, and oppose the three evils of secularism, nationalism and socialism. Jamaat-e-Islami opposed the independence of Bangladesh and the dismemberment of Pakistan. With Hasina's fall, Jamaat-e-Islami's influence has risen. The caretaker Yunus government regularly confers with Jamaat leaders who want closer ties with Pakistan and Turkey. Bangladesh's political center of gravity has shifted away from India.

The fact that India has given refuge to Hasina sits poorly with Bangladesh's new regime. As mentioned above, Nobel laureate Yunus has thrown in this country's lot with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Ironically, democratic Bangladesh now supports authoritarian CCP claims over Taiwan. Though India-Bangladesh trade ties are still strong, Delhi and Dhaka no longer trust each other.

The authors believe that all is not lost yet. Many Bangladeshis still value a close relationship with India. They treasure trade ties and shared history. They have not forgotten that India backed Bangladeshi independence at a time when Pakistani troops were engaged in violent repression, genocide and mass rape. Delhi must engage with Bangladeshi civil society as well as the youth. Note that over 40% of the Bangladeshi population is under 25. A renewed emphasis on connectivity, cultural ties, educational exchanges and digital collaboration could potentially offset Beijing's checkbook diplomacy.

As of now though, the Indian government has to recognize the urgency of countering China's moves. Delhi fears antagonizing Dhaka. Indian diplomats speak of strategic patience. In reality, muddled thinking, lack of focus and inaction imperil long-term Indian interests. Indian policymakers need to engage the new Bangladeshi regime with a judicious mix of accommodation and assertion. If Delhi does not act now, it may lose its leverage in Dhaka permanently.

[Shokin Chauhan first published a version of this piece on Substack.]

[Members of Fair Observer's Young Editors Program collectively edited this piece.]

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Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Atul studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He worked as a corporate lawyer in London and served as an officer in India's volatile border areas where he had a few near-death experiences. Atul has also been a poet, playwright, sportsman, mountaineer and a founder of many organizations. His knowledge is eclectic, and his friends often joke that it comes in handy when access to Google is limited.

"Which way, American man?": The Utility of Memes for the Trump Administration

Elliott Frey
October 30, 2025

The second Trump administration has revolutionized government communication on social media. By frequently posting memes and engaging in viral internet trends, the administration is able to both rile up its base and distract from structural damage done to US institutions. It is crucial to recognize the role that memes play for the administration while remaining aware of these structural harms.

On August 11, 2025, the official Department of Homeland Security (DHS) X account posted an image showing Uncle Sam at a crossroads. Signs pointed in various directions read "Cultural Decline," "Homeland," "Invasion" and more. Above the photo is a caption, reading "Which way, American man?" While this phrase may not seem overtly sinister, it signals an evolution of political propaganda.

Signaling extremism

The slogan that captioned that photo is a play on the title of American white nationalist and neonazi William Gayley Simpson's book Which Way, Western Man? Right-wing extremist groups have

since adopted this title as a popular meme caption. The phrase has been used to glorify Nazism, criticize feminism and push the white nationalist Great Replacement Theory.

While many people may not be aware of what the DHS account was referencing, it serves as a signal, or dog whistle, to those radical right-wing extremist groups highlighted above. This kind of posting can embolden these groups, as it shows that their ideology has a place in the institutions of the US. The DHS example also highlights the utility of memes as tools of political rhetoric, a reality that could have massive impacts on the political alignment in the US.

Memes as political rhetoric

Memes as features of internet culture existed long before they were prominent tools for political activism. For example, the popular "lolcat" memes or various iterations of Bad Luck Brian are two notable examples of memes from the mid-2010s. While these meme examples are relatively benign, it is important to recognize them as customizable units of information.

Specifically, template and character-based memes, where a certain image and/or character situation is replicated with certain aspects customized to fit a creator's perspective or motivation, can be a vital and effective tool for political activism. These templates and characters create a shared language that, although overwhelmingly used for harmless comedic purposes, enable a creator to seamlessly transition the purpose of the meme to political extremism.

For example, popular meme templates such as the "Boy and Girl Texting" exist in harmless, mainstream social media discourse. However, an extremist creator can utilize this template as a vessel for extremist political rhetoric, thus making extremist politics more accessible and understandable to a new audience.

Utility to the Trump administration

The second Trump administration has revolutionized online government communications. The previous world of press releases, polished interviews and well-rehearsed statements has now been supplemented by memes, shit posting and viral internet trends. The administration's posting habits have multiple effects on the public.

First, these posts serve as red meat to rile up the passionate Make America Great Again (MAGA) base. In a political climate so centered on "owning" the opposing side, the second Trump administration is going to previously unseen lengths to placate its base through the internet culture war.

Secondly, these posts aim to desensitize the political opposition. In terms of desensitization, by posting so forwardly about their actions, the Trump administration numbs the public to the inhumanity of what they are doing. This is especially true of the administration's deportation efforts. When the administration posts so unashamedly about their deportations, the humanity of immigrants becomes lost in the endless sea of internet posts and comments, scrolled past by users as just another fixture of their timeline.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the administration's posts overwhelm the political opposition and distract from the administration's destruction of American government foundations. Although it is crucial to recognize memes for their potential as vessels for extremist ideology (i.e., making extremism more accessible to the non-extreme), if this is the primary point of contention

with the Trump administration, then the forest is being missed for the trees.

While outwardly memeing about deportations and using AI to make fun of political opponents, the Trump administration has quietly crushed the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, allowed forever chemicals to remain in drinking water and continually sided with corporations and CEOs over the working class. Not to mention personally enriching the Trump family through a $5 billion cryptocurrency issuance. While these facets of the administration impact the material conditions of Americans far more than their meme warring, these policies are enacted quietly; they often escape the watchful eye of social media.

Opposing the Trump administration can feel like drinking from a firehouse. In the age of social media, the 24-hour news cycle unfolds in front of our eyes every second of the day. With the rise of establishment figures and government organizations engaging in meme wars online, it is important not to lose sight of the quiet actions taken by the Trump administration outlined above. While it is essential to recognize the utility that memes provide the administration, it is just one facet of many that require our resistance in these uncharted times.

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Halloween Special: Is Trump a Devil Masquerading as a Monster?

Peter Isackson
October 31, 2025

Is US President Donald Trump truly "evil" or merely a "monster?" While acknowledging his fascist tendencies, aggression toward immigrants and critics and casual embrace of killing, it's too soon to categorize him as Satan himself or a member of the devil's legions. In some sense, he's just doing his job.

Friends and acquaintances who have discovered my recent identity as Devil's Advocate at Fair Observer increasingly ask me to weigh in on a question they seem obsessed with: Can a devil be elected to serve in the White House? Given the havoc Trump creates whenever he speaks or acts, their curiosity is understandable. Many appear convinced Trump is the embodiment of evil, an American Prince of Darkness.

In other words, they would like me to use this column to declare officially that the current president of the United States is either the Devil himself, a bona fide member of Satan's cohort or, at the very least, worthy of being publicly recognized as one through a process mirroring the canonization of a saint. I remind them that the

business of a Devil's Advocate only concerns dossiers for sainthood, not demonhood.

At first I resisted, but I must admit that I increasingly find the question compelling. Therefore, though I honestly consider it outside the realm of physical or even metaphysical possibility — since among living humans there is clearly no consensus that devils even exist — I've decided to review the available evidence for the case concerning Trump's possible demonic identity.

What's in the dossier concerning Trump's devilry?

Most of the plaintiffs who have brought my attention to the case highlight what they call Mr. Trump's "fascist tendencies." A nation whose military is now called upon to wage war on its major cities at some point stops resembling a democracy. On that score, they have good reason to highlight Trump's treatment of two statistically significant classes of people the president clearly wishes to either exile or suppress.

The first category includes individuals whose cutaneous pigmentation is neither Caucasian nor African, but somewhere in between. They are usually referred to as "brown" and represent approximately 20% of the current American population. Their facial and morphological traits suggest traces of Native American ancestry and family origins linking them to Spanish-speaking American nations. My friends typically refer to them as Hispanics, Latinos or (the silliest among them) Latinx. Trump has spent a lot of energy and resources reinforcing an arm of government called Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to arrest, manhandle, bully, intimidate or deport them. ICE was originally created in the wake of September 11 when US President George W. Bush's administration took a major step in installing xenophobic paranoia as a permanent feature of the logic and culture of the federal government.

The second category includes people of any race or origin who publicly (and even privately) convey messages indicating disapproval of policies, actions or attitudes manifested by or associated with the state of Israel. Washington is fair game (to some extent), but Tel Aviv is sacred. NDTV World quotes US District Judge William Young in saying: "the Trump administration targeted non-citizen students backing the Palestinians as the war in Gaza grinds on, with the 'goal of tamping down pro-Palestinian student protests and terrorizing similarly situated' students."

Concerning the first category, the Hispanics, Trump appears to believe that they do not qualify as archetypical "Americans," despite the fact that most have bloodlines reaching far back in history to a period before the first Europeans had even set eyes on the New World. (Note that I'm using the term "American" inaccurately, following traditional practice. Instead of designating a continent, we have been told that "America" should refer exclusively to the United States of America).

For Trump, true Americans are easy to identify. They have similar sounding names, such as Vance, Drumpf, Jones, Petitbon, Macgregor, Stevenson, O'Neill, Rosenfeld, Barzetti, Van de Camp, Kowalski, Johanson. In other words, a similar style of name that so clearly connotes a people with a common origin and shared culture. Cutaneous pigmentation (or a paucity of it), we should be reminded, has nothing to do with defining this perfectly unified group. Why should it?

To put it more bluntly, as Trump sees it, there's already enough diversity just among white people, meaning there's no need in such a broadly inclusive system to so much as think of adding

supplementary colors when seeking to define what it means to be American. It's been hard enough bringing together all those varied people of European extraction. Inclusion and diversity have their merits, but like any good thing, one must never overdo it.

It isn't just about race

The reasoning doesn't stop there. Trump has consistently reminded us that there are totally pragmatic reasons to seek to exclude a lot of the darker-hued people. Terrorism and narcotics trafficking, for example. Trump is now using these criteria with increasing aggression as the means of preventing random South Americans in speedboats from getting anywhere near the US coastline. If they're speeding they must be terrorists or narcotraffickers, or preferably both.

J. Michael Luttig, writing for The Atlantic, complains that "Trump has turned the federal government against the American people, transforming the nation's institutions into instruments for his vengeful execution of the law against honorable citizens for perceived personal and political offenses. He has silenced dissent by persecuting and threatening to prosecute American citizens for speaking critically of him, and he has divided us, turning us against one another so that we cannot oppose him."

Most observers would classify such a political attitude as neo-fascist if not simply fascist. But the complaints include more than just the pressure on US citizens. My friends cite other factors that could lead us to qualify Trump's policies as resembling the classic fascism of Italy and Germany in the last century. For example, in January, Trump began talking about invading and conquering Panama and Greenland, as well as annexing Canada. It's difficult not to see a resemblance with Adolf Hitler's ambition to extend Germany's Lebensraum. Journalist and geopolitical analysis Ben Norton on Geopolitical Economy Report describes the broader implications: "The Donald Trump administration seeks to forcibly impose the US empire's hegemony in Latin America. While hypocritically using "war on drugs/terror" rhetoric, it is reviving the colonial Monroe Doctrine, which top officials now call the Donroe Doctrine."

One of the diabolical traits of political personalities associated with fascism that people like to highlight is their appetite for killing for the sake of killing, including a delight in the numbers of people they are willing to sacrifice. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has built up a solid case, successfully prosecuted at the International Criminal Court, for designating him as a sanguinary, genocidal sadist who, in a world that believed in justice, would not be allowed to walk the streets, let alone govern a nation. But does Trump live up to that image?

During a press conference last week, Trump explained why declaring war made no sense when one can simply "kill people that are bringing drugs into our country. OK. We're gonna kill them. They're going to be, like, dead." To some people that sounds even more diabolical than the genocidal programs of Hitler and Netanyahu. After all, those two villains carefully "reasoned" their campaign, which they conceived as a scientific plan destined to fulfill their own perverse vision of a world that reflected their understanding of their role in history as the master race, in one case, and the chosen people, in the other. Trump's delight in killing isn't ideological, religious or even nationalistic. It appears as something personal, symbolizing his power over life and death.

Devils or monsters?

I have to admit that the case for branding Trump as an incarnation of the devil seems superficially attractive. But for the moment I don't find it totally

convincing. A better case for demonic identity could be made for what some call the "technofascists" of Silicon Valley. They're a select group that have assumed greater power over the world's population than any US president. That makes sense since any president may disappear from the scene at four-year intervals, at least under the current constitution. The technofascists, all of whom exhibit different degrees of diabolical intent, have names like Peter Thiel, Alex Karp and Elon Musk. Their ambitions are quite literally cosmic as Thiel is ready to sanguinelty envision the end of humanity and Musk is convinced that humanity, lacking both his intelligence and especially wealth, isn't ready for the coming catastrophe, for which only he has the answer. Unlike Trump, these people actually spend massive amounts of money on recrafting the world and even the universe to make it conform to their vision.

It doesn't matter that they do such things in the framework of a political democracy. The people have no say concerning their influence and decision-making and no access, other than as passive users, to the tools they control. Politics, even at Trump's level, cannot compete with the technofascists with regard to the capacity for evil.

Former New York Times and now independent journalist Patrick Lawrence just this week called out the moral failure of the Trump administration with regard to Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. He compared their insensitivity and moral cowardice to the bold stance of Ireland's newly-elected president, Catherine Connolly, who has not hesitated to call Israel a "terrorist state." "The president, Marco Rubio, Pete Hegseth, Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner, and the others on Trump's foreign policy 'team' are by comparison monsters diametrically out of touch with the world, the zeitgeist, of another time, of another cause—a cause other than the human cause."

At this point, terming such people "monsters" seems to me more appropriate than devils. Monsters appear threatening because of their sheer force and physical capacity to do harm. But is all harm evil? The monsters are what they are, and some may exist to do harm, but "evil" is about intentions, not just force. Think of Frankenstein's monster or King Kong.

The reason politicians who endorse harmful policies are monsters and not devils is that, like Frankenstein's monster, they execute the program that has been devised for them by people who have decided to play with evil, whether their specific intention is to wreak evil or not. Trump is a special case. Nothing he does is inconsistent with the institutions that he has under his full or partial control: the military, intelligence and the executive branch of the US government. He didn't invent the logic of a system that has been built over decades, if not centuries, to exploit and rule the nation's resources and, increasingly over time, the world's resources.

Trump merely has a more frank and openly aggressive way of doing it and making it more visible. Doing the bidding of Israel, for example, has been the game that every president since Lyndon B. Johnson has embraced and played with increasingly high stakes. Provoking wars around the world and supporting the "allies" (puppets) who are sacrificing their populations in those wars is not a practice Trump invented.

For the moment, let's prefer to call Trump a monster. The case for his demonic identity remains to be examined.

[The Devil's Advocate pursues the tradition Fair Observer began in 2017 with the launch of our "Devil's Dictionary." It does so with a slight change of focus, moving from language itself — political and journalistic rhetoric — to the substantial issues in the news. Read more of the

Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary. The news we consume deserves to be seen from an outsider's point of view. And who could be more outside official discourse than Old Nick himself?]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer . He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics. Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Oxford, Peter resides in France and shares US and French nationality. His Fair Observer column, The Daily Devil's Dictionary created in 2017, which now appears in a weekly format, provides ironic perspectives on the news, and has attracted fans across the world.

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