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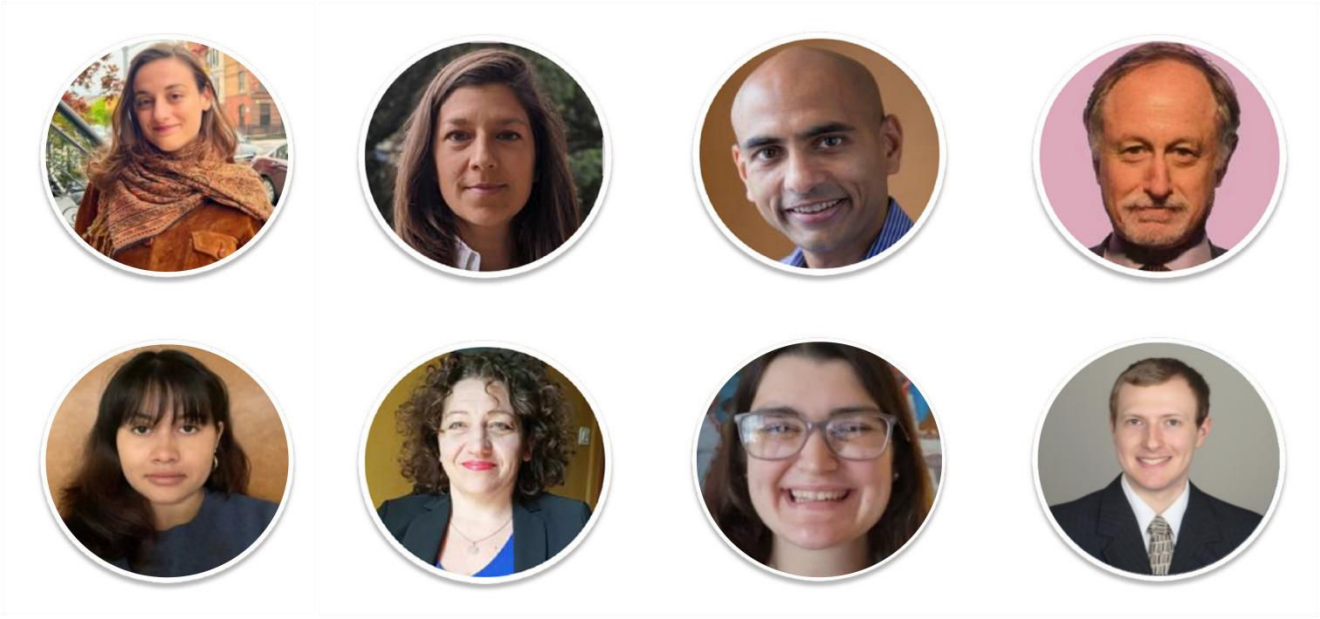

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FO Interview: The Khonoma Reconciliation Process

Charles Chasie, Roberta Artemisia Campani
April 02, 2026

Khonoma village in Nagaland achieved remarkable reconciliation by confronting decades of clan feuds through a grassroots, faith-rooted process emphasizing forgiveness, empathy and accountability. The community's collective courage broke vicious cycles of vengeance, offering a replicable model beyond formal institutions. Khonoma's story could enable other conflict-affected communities worldwide to record, share and learn from their own peacebuilding journeys.

Not many in the world have heard of Nagaland, a state in India's northeast, bordering Myanmar. China lies not too far away to the north. Khonoma, one of the villages in Nagaland and the focus of this interview, is situated west of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland. Bangladesh is also not that far away, either, and lies southwest of Nagaland.

Khonoma is a village of Angami Nagas. The Angamis are a major Naga ethnic group who were the first of the Nagas to come into contact with the British. The Angamis are known for building terraced fields on hill slopes. Like most of Nagaland, most of them are now Christians, the vast majority now belonging to the American Baptist Church.

What I found remarkable, reading Charles's book, is the success of Khonoma's reconciliation process among clans and families in the village. Conflict began within the village with the British occupation of Nagaland and the subsequent handover to the Government of India in 1947. Some clans and families accepted British and Indian rule, started working with or in the state apparatus, while others resisted or rebelled.

Nagas had obtained a promise from the British that their land would become autonomous, but that promise was lost when the Government of India took over. This caused a divide; some Nagas thought that they needed Indian support before they could create their own state and infrastructure, while others believed they should fight for independence from the start. This divide led to violence that engulfed the village. Fast forward to 2000, and over the course of ten years, the Khonoma Public Commission facilitated face-to-face meetings between perpetrators' families and victims' families. The reconciliation process addressed 22 of the killings, decades of blood feuds and deep clan divisions, leading to forgiveness, restitution and renewed unity. We asked Charles Chasie what made this possible.

Roberta Campani: Explain the conflict that happened in Khonoma and why this made the reconciliation process necessary? How did it begin? How did it unfold?

Charles Chasie: Khonoma had long been a warrior village whose clans were bound by codes of honor in which the duty of revenge passed down generations without time limit. This tradition of revenge tore apart the very fabric of the Naga national movement. When Angami Zapu Phizo and Theyiechüthie Sakhrie — both from Khonoma, both believers in Naga sovereignty — fell out over means rather than ends, the village found itself at the epicenter of a conflict that was at once political and intensely personal. When Sakhrie was abducted and killed in January 1956, this became the first fratricidal killing of leaders in the Naga national movement history, triggering

ancient instincts and splitting the Khonoma into armed camps along clan and khel (cluster of clans) lines.

What followed were years of mutual siege, displacement and accumulating grief. The Indian Army burned Khonoma to the ground more than once. Those who went underground starved in the forests, and those who remained behind faced blockade and harassment. When the fighting subsided, the four khels did not return together but settled in separate locations, living effectively as four villages for nearly a decade. The wounds did not heal with time. It was only when a younger generation, tired of having their elders remind them of hatreds they had not chosen, asked to be given their future back, that the village resolved to face what it had buried.

Roberta Campani: What triggered Khonoma's need for reconciliation after such a long and bloody conflict?

Charles Chasie: The immediate trigger for reconciliation in Khonoma was a request made by the young men of the village asking the elders to "Give us our future." In the wake of the Naga National Movement — as the struggle for autonomy/independence from India came to be known — and the resulting division, many intra-village killings had taken place, which continued to poison the life of the village over many decades. Every time the young people wanted to do things together as fellow villagers, they were reminded of old enmities.

Over time, the young became fed up with this continued bitterness and wanted the elders to heal these divisions. The village elders felt they could not ignore such a request from the younger generations. This led to a three-day seminar on the theme Healing the Soul of Khonoma. This seminar enabled the participants to take a frank look at where the village stood. The areas of division were drawn up, and the young men wrote to the village authorities to help heal these divisions. The authorities set up the Khonoma Public Commission (KPC) to go into each of these divisions with the objective of achieving healing and reconciliation through forgiveness so that the future of the village could be secured.

Roberta Campani: The KPC took on 22 cases of killings, plus numerous other instances of social divisions. What surprised you most about how people responded when they finally sat face-to-face after decades of enmity? Can you describe the process and the reconciliation sessions?

Charles Chasie: We, the members of the KPC, were representing our individual clans as well. We sat down with our clansmen who had either committed or suffered wrongs to hear their stories. In each case of wrongdoing, KPC members would examine the past with the involvement of clan members themselves. In other words, KPC members who met a victim's family included those who were from the victim's clan. Likewise, those meeting a perpetrator's family included KPC members representing the perpetrator's clan.

The NPC reviewed each case thoroughly, examining the background, the details of the events and the legacy passed down. Where actual perpetrators or victims were no longer alive — in some cases, about half a century had elapsed since the events — the stories relied on the testimonies of women and elders who knew what had happened in the past. In each case, the story would be reviewed minutely with the family concerned. Only with their readiness and full consent would the case be taken to the next step.

The KPC also met and reviewed each case to see if the stories from the two opposing families found commonality. In the event of common ground, expression of genuine sorrow and readiness to forgive, the KPC would proceed to set

up meetings of the concerned families for reconciliation. Usually, the KPC would facilitate meetings in the family home of the victim. We prayed together before kicking off such meetings.

When families of victims and perpetrators met, each would tell their side of the story. Often, such a retelling was not necessary, as the KPC members would have informed each party of the other side's story, and an expression of sorrow was enough. The perpetrator's family would ask for forgiveness and the victim's family, in turn, would pronounce forgiveness. The two families would then have a cup of tea together, which symbolized a full and proper reconciliation. In Khnoma's social code, partaking of food or drinks together for the two families was taboo because of the family feud. A cup of tea in this context means much more than mere tea. In fact, it is an outcome of a peace process and symbolizes the end of a simmering feud.

At such meetings, both families signed a simple written agreement that was drafted by the KPC, declaring an end to the feud and a promise not to raise the issue again. KPC members representing both families/clans would vouch for their family/clan members and bring closure to the feud. Traditionally, one's word was enough in Naga society. The KPC took the extra step of a written agreement to ensure the peace settlement was binding. We would end the meeting with another prayer together, asking God's blessings for one another.

The process usually took many meetings, both at the family/clan levels and at the KPC level. Sometimes, the process took several years, especially when the concerned perpetrators/victims were dead and the fog of time had made their stories unclear. Yet what usually stood out in our reconciliation process was that everyone demonstrated goodwill. Once people sat face-to-face, there were usually no surprises, and the final formal act of reconciliation took place smoothly. They usually shook hands. Where those reconciling were Christians, they sometimes exchanged the Bible as well.

The experience was different for each reconciliation. For me, the genuine act of contrition and the deep desire of each family to leave behind a legacy of peace stood out, especially given the fact that these families had done unspeakable things to one another in the past. It took them tremendous courage to squarely confront past facts and painstakingly examine them to ensure a better future freed from the toxic legacies of bygone feuds.

Roberta Campani: You write about how the traditions of Khonoma Village made it almost impossible to reconcile issues such as clan feuds. But you mention other traditions that were helpful and how the KPC drew on these to begin the reconciliation process. What were some of these customs and traditions?

Charles Chasie: Although killings and clan feuds were never reconciled because vengeance was considered a filial duty, the notion of reconciliation always existed in Khonoma. As a community-based society, people in Khonoma practiced forgiveness in daily life.

In Khonoma, social ostracism instead of laws or the police is the main way norms are enforced. The threat of being excluded from social, economic and civic life is very real. In the past, such was the high level of trust among the Angami Nagas of Khonoma that homes had no locks on doors, the village had no jails and family granaries were often outside village precincts because there was no fear of theft.

The Angamis lived for their progeny and future generations. The family tree was key, and people did what they could to keep that tree healthy.

Angamis would inherit their home and fields from their father, but these were to be held in trust for future generations. The Angamis could not sell them. Villagers could use their homes and fields to make a living and feed their families. There was an expectation from Angami villagers to improve both their homes and their fields for the benefit of their inheritors. This sense of immovable multigenerational property not only gave Khonoma Angamis a sense of belonging but also identity. This strong sense of identity and community made reconciliation possible.

Furthermore, Khonoma Angamis are devout Christians, and religion forms the warp and woof of life. Villagers say the Lord's Prayer on a daily basis, in which they ask God to forgive their trespasses and promise to "forgive them that trespass against us." This facilitated reconciliation as well.

In addition to their Christian faith, pre-Christian beliefs helped with reconciliation, too. Khonoma Angamis believe in life after death. Per tradition, those who live a good life are rewarded by becoming shining stars in the night sky. Living a good life has great rewards in the afterlife. So, forgiveness and reconciliation are good deeds.

In a nutshell, a strong sense of community, the Christian faith and traditional beliefs all helped Khonoma Angamis achieve reconciliation.

Roberta Campani: Traditional Angami culture required blood vengeance: "life for life" with no time limit. Yet Khonoma villagers broke this cycle. Did Christianity help in breaking this cycle of vengeance, which traditionally had been held to be a sacred duty?

Charles Chasie: It is true that traditionally, vengeance was considered sacred and a filial duty that was passed down the generations from father to son. British colonials compared the Angami blood feuds to Corsican vendettas or worse.

[Roberta Campani's Note: The Corsican vendetta was a deeply entrenched tradition of inter-family and inter-clan blood revenge on the island of Corsica, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries. A killing obligated the victim's family to kill in return, which would then oblige the other family to do the same, and so on. These cycles could persist for generations and devastate entire communities. The Corsican tradition became so notorious across Europe that the word "vendetta" (originally just the Italian/Corsican word for "revenge") became synonymous in English with this specific kind of prolonged, hereditary blood feud. By the 19th century, it was a stock reference in European writing — Prosper Mérimée wrote about it and so did Alexandre Dumas — so very much part of the cultural vocabulary of British colonial officers.]

However, it is important to note that reconciliation did exist in Angami culture. It was extremely rare, though, and only occurred after the intervention of a third party, usually after both sides had exhausted themselves!

As mentioned above, Christianity helped, but so did tradition. At the KPC, we drew on both faith and tradition to end the culture of vendetta.

Roberta Campani: You describe a crucial moment — the village-wide day of silence in August 2004, when even the animals seemed to fall quiet. What shift did that silence cause among the people of Khonoma that made reconciliation possible?

Charles Chasie: "Speak Lord, for Thy Servant Heareth" is the prayer of Samuel in the Bible. There is a certain quality to prayerful, or even reflective, silence that only practitioners understand. Explanations cannot capture the effect

of reflective silence to those who do not cultivate the practice.

In August 2004, we observed a day of silence, and it had a profound effect. “Even the animals seemed to sense something solemn was happening and had fallen quiet,” said one villager after another.

There were cases of individuals being moved by the silence to put things right in their own lives, things that did not necessarily fall within the mandate of the KPC. For some, it was just a period of quiet repose and nothing more. For others, it was a time to renew their faith. People did not work in the fields, did not talk to strangers and spent time in communion with God. But what seemed clear was that this collective silence set a certain mood in the community, creating an openness where people were willing to do what was right instead of trying to find excuses or justifications for past actions.

The apology of Sebi Dolie, the eldest son of the Dolie Clain, is a case in point.

Roberta Campani: Tell us more about Sebi Dolie, an 88-year-old, nearly blind man taking moral responsibility for his clan’s role in the assassination of the legendary leader Theyiechuthie Sakhrie. Sebi’s apology on behalf of his clan was pivotal. What enabled him to do what political leaders often refuse to do?

Charles Chasie: Sebi Dolie’s time of quiet has already been described in the book, Healing the Soul of Khonoma, in his own words. On the morning of the period of silence, Sebi later told a younger friend, when he got up and opened his door, he noticed “the silence and the absence of the pigs, chicken, dogs, etc., usually scavenging for any eatables lying around. He felt goose bumps and his hair standing on end, and he thought God had surely come down to our village today.” With this thought, Sebi went to the nearby church to pray and reflect. He also decided to rededicate his life to God.

The relationship between Sebi’s clan, called Dolie, and the Sakhrie clan had become estranged ever since Theyiechuthie Sakhrie, or T. Sakhrie, was assassinated in January 1956. T. Sakhrie was the general secretary of the Naga National Council (NNC) while Phizo of Dolie clan was the president. The NNC fought for Naga self-determination. Sakhrie was widely acknowledged as the ideologue of the movement, while Phizo was the charismatic figure who managed to establish direct emotional touch with the people.

Sadly, their beliefs in the means to achieve the Naga goal differed. Sakhrie was a staunch believer in nonviolence, while Phizo was more focused on keeping up the momentum of the Naga struggle by using arms to fight. At a meeting in the village, Phizo described Sakhrie as a hurdle to the Naga goal. Sebi, who had witnessed this as a young man, had felt Phizo had gone too far. When Sakhrie was assassinated by unknown gunmen, people recalled Phizo’s words. Phizo, even as the president of the NNC, failed to own his moral responsibility for Sakhrie’s killing. Sakhrie’s clan had already decided to forgive his killers, but the silence from Phizo and the rest of the Dolie clan prevented proper rapprochement between the two clans.

Now, fifty years later, as the eldest in the Dolie clan, Sebi felt it was his responsibility to set things right. Note that Khonoma also has the institution of the khel, a cluster of clans, and comprises three khels. At a meeting of their khel, Sebi expressed that he would have felt exactly what the Sakhries had felt all this time. He not only apologized but also asked to be told, in friendship, of any unspoken hurts his clan may have caused. Sitting in the same meeting was the eldest person from the Sakhrie clan, who got up and said, “Sebi, I have to shake your hand. We have stopped thinking your

side will say anything like this that you have said today."

This magnanimous gesture of shaking hands by the two eldest persons from the embittered clans and khels rolled away years of bitterness. Later, when the eldest person from the Sakhrie clan was asked about the incident, he replied, "Situze," meaning that is exactly what happened.

What may need to be mentioned here is that the matter of Sakhrie's assassination had also led to the first division among the Naga people and in the NNC. The rapprochement in the matter of Sakhrie's killing, thus, was not only an inter-clan or intra-village matter but had wider ramifications. Later, Khonoma village put up a stone memorial for Sakhrie in the village, which was unveiled by the president of the Naga Hoho, a federation of Naga tribes from four Indian states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland, and some parts of Myanmar.

Roberta Campani: You write that reconciliation worked in Khonoma but has failed elsewhere in Nagaland. What specific conditions or particular choices made Khonoma different?

Charles Chasie: There was nothing especially different about Khonoma except the collective determination of villagers to put the past behind them. Some other villages had also tried reconciliation in their own way, but most had failed. What made Khonoma succeed was that villagers completely rooted out the causes of hate and bitterness so that division and vendetta never reappeared again.

Today, Nagas are devout Christians, and Christianity is all about reconciliation between God and man. Sadly, Christians often have an inadequate understanding of reconciliation. One easy example is the saying, "forgive and forget," which is often used as a mere punchline. By removing contrition and restitution, which are vital parts of reconciliation, this saying thwarts true reconciliation. For that, there has to be genuine forgiving and a clear sense of being forgiven. If somebody is not sorry, where is the point of forgiveness?

As Nichaloas Frayling has pointed out, such forgiveness is bad theology and does not happen in real life. People can forgive, but they do not forget. Neither are they meant to. Instead, Frayling recommends "forgive and remember" (pardon and peace) so that the same mistake is not repeated.

Also, quite frequently, many who pray to God do little or nothing to further their own prayers. As I pointed out earlier, the Lord's Prayer says, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." If you pray for peace and leave it to God alone, peace will not fall from heaven unless you do your part in putting right the wrong and upholding justice. The difference between Khonoma and other villages is the fact that people here had the courage to face the past and set things right so that future generations will not have to face the same problems again. Thus, a legacy of peace won the day.

In Khonoma, we experimented with one more step. The people not only reflected upon the mistakes they made, or the wrongs they suffered, but they also reflected on when and how they might have provoked others to do wrongs to them. This exercise in empathy helped the people to walk in the shoes of the other person!

Roberta Campani: Every conflict feels unique to those who are trapped in it, yet you suggest Khonoma's experience holds lessons beyond Nagaland. What would you say to communities elsewhere, whether in Northeast India, Myanmar or beyond, who are trapped in cycles of revenge and counter-revenge?

Charles Chasie: True, every conflict is different, as are the cultures of the people who find themselves trapped in various conflicts. This is why we should be very careful about passing quick comments or judgments. But human nature is also the same everywhere. It is only the trappings of modernity or what have you that are different. I must be able to recognize that I have the same abilities to commit the heinous crimes that others have committed. Such realizations should make us humble. For instance, the colonial British came with their canons and ability to kill in great numbers from a distance, behaving as if everything belonged to them. Seeing our spears and daos (machete), they called us "barbaric" because they felt superior.

In the story of the British Empire, colonial forces trampled upon the rights of others and killed large numbers. Our people were killed indiscriminately with no sense of who or what was right or wrong. The Naga Peasant Revolt of 1879 is a classic example of British oppression. Yet we Nagas have to remember that we have the same human capacity to inflict violence and oppression.

Whether it is Khonoma or Palestine or Ukraine, human suffering is the same. What worked here, I believe, will work elsewhere too. If you are willing to forgive and actually take steps to do so, you may find that your enemy, too, is only human! Sadly, the perspectives we see in the world today are topsy-turvy. People demand respect and subservience from others. The saying that there is enough in the world for everyone's needs but not for everyone's greed is almost a cliche, but, unfortunately, too real. It is this lust for revenge, power and greed that we have to avoid.

In the context of reconciliation, Maya Angelou's message that "history despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived" is true, but I would add that history faced with courage need not be lived again. This worked for us, the people of Khonoma. I am confident it will work for others, too, who are willing to try it.

I end with a poignant story about a man from Khonoma village, who had decided and even attempted to exact vengeance for his cousin's killing. After agonizing for many months, he said, "If I can have the courage to kill a man, why can't I also have the courage to love him enough to make him a different man?" This man then went to his intended victim and asked forgiveness for his bitterness. The two went on to become friends. In a nutshell, attaining the courage to forgive is the challenge for every man of good conscience.

The uniqueness of a grassroots-led reconciliation in Khonoma reconciliation

The Khonoma experience resonates within a broader global tapestry of truth and reconciliation efforts. Similar efforts include South Africa's landmark Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) under Archbishop Desmond Tutu; Liberia's post-civil war healing process; Rwanda's community-based justice system, gacaca; and Colombia's transitional justice mechanisms.

Khonoma is unique when it comes to truth and reconciliation efforts because the village relied on a bottom-up, grassroots-led process. In South Africa, the TRC was state-sponsored. Almost all truth and reconciliation have been state-sponsored, even if they have community involvement. Khonoma pioneered a community-driven and a community-led truth and reconciliation process rooted in indigenous social structures. This process relied greatly on both the villagers' devout Christian faith and intergenerational dialogue.

While national commissions often grapple with political constraints and institutional inertia, Khonoma demonstrates that meaningful reconciliation can emerge organically when ordinary people choose to confront their shared

history with honesty and courage. The lessons from Khonoma complement, rather than replace, other frameworks for truth and reconciliation frameworks. In particular, Khonoma offers a model that is replicable in settings where formal institutions are absent or distrusted.

However, for this knowledge to truly serve as a blueprint for others, it must be documented, shared and critically examined alongside similar experiences. We invite other communities — whether in Northeast India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Rwanda, banlieues in France, inner cities in the US and elsewhere — to record their own reconciliation journeys. Are there other villages — grey zones, suburbs or any other living communities — that feel stuck in broken cycles of vengeance or violence? What methods worked, and what failures taught hard lessons? By collecting these stories through interviews, oral histories and community archives, we can build a living repository of peacebuilding wisdom that transcends borders and cultures.

To the readers of this interview: If your community has walked a similar path, we encourage you to share your experience. Your story may be the catalyst another village needs to find its own way out of the shadow of the past. As Charles Chasie reminds us, "history faced with courage need not be lived again" — but this is only possible if we take the time to listen, learn and pass on what we have learned from the past.

Charles Chasie is a distinguished leader, scholar and cultural advocate in Nagaland, a state in India's troubled Northeast bordering Myanmar. He has provided over four decades of impactful service to Naga society. Charles was president of the Kohima Educational Society (KES) from 2005 to 2025 and served on key bodies, including the North East Zone Cultural Centre and the Nagaland State Biodiversity Board. A prolific author and editor, he has published extensively on Naga history and peace studies. Charles has also produced audiovisual works, such as *Nagas in the Battle of Kohima* (2020) and *The Beginning of Life*, a documentary on Naga origins sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. His dedication to reconciliation is reflected in his role in the film *For the Sake of Tomorrow*.

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 Agenbite of Diplomacy: Are Negotiations Still a Thing?

Peter Isackson
April 03, 2026

Language sometimes betrays us. Politicians routinely betray language. Trump has perfected a trend he didn't initiate: the discrediting of diplomacy in favor of brute force. Trump's Iran policy lays bare what previous administrations disguised: "negotiations" have become cover for subterfuge and violence. It's time to revive a vocabulary that makes ethical thinking possible.

There are words in the English language that designate things that once existed but have since disappeared. In some cases, the words themselves never disappear; we recognize them as common words but have lost any substantial association with the object or idea they formerly referred to. How many people have even an idea of what a ruff looks like or what the tuffet nursery rhyme's Little Miss Muffet sat on might be, to say nothing of the curds and whey she was feasting on?

Alongside these concrete words that evoke in us no visual association there are idea-words that have equally vanished. We have to thank novelist James Joyce for resuscitating "agenbite" (associated with moral conscience, literally "the again-biting of the inner mind") and "inwit" (consciousness or constructed knowledge within the mind). Despite the repeated occurrence of the phrase "agenbite of inwit" in Joyce's Ulysses, neither word has entered into common usage, though this Devil's Advocate recommends that both would be extremely useful in today's superficial, hyperreal culture.

Many people skilled in assertiveness excel at "outwitting" others but in so doing let their inwit atrophy. As for agenbite, reference to the law or artificial sets of behavioral rules — such as wokeism's essentially neo-Puritanical codes — have removed agenbite from our society's moral compass. How many Catholics still confess other than perfunctorily? As for non-Catholic Christians, though they tend to respect the law of the land, many secretly endorse US President Donald Trump's recent confession quoted by The New York Times: "Yeah, there is one thing. My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me."

Trump added an important qualifier: "I don't need international law. I'm not looking to hurt people." That helps explain his alacrity to carry out the bombing of elementary schools, the assassination of military, political and spiritual leaders and the wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure across Iran. When he subsequently promises that "we're going to bring them back to the Stone Ages [sic], where they belong," we must understand that even though bombing tends to hurt people, we shouldn't assume that hurting anyone played any part in his intention. Trump's inwit has no agenbite.

To bring his point home, Trump made it clear that this was all about reasonable people sitting down to work out complex problems: "In the meantime, discussions are ongoing." The passive voice tells at least half of Trump's story. We don't know who is discussing or what is being discussed. Discussions are the agent here, but we know the act of discussing has neither agenbite nor inwit. Only people do. So who are the people and do they possess inwit?

The other half of the story is the idea of "discussions." There's an ancient term in English that in former times might have been used: negotiations. Trump may have no clear idea of the meaning of that word, as his behavior seems to demonstrate. When negotiations were officially announced and supposedly taking place back in June of 2025 and again in late February 2026, without warning or even "discussing," Trump

chose to interrupt them with spectacular bombing campaigns.

The fact that he seems to find "discussions" more meaningful than negotiations may have more to do with the fact that at the core of the word itself is another word: "cuss." In contrast, the word "negotiation" contains at its core the Latin word, otia, the plural of otium, which means leisure time or rest. The Romans saw otium as the occasion to reflect and think, perhaps even to cultivate their inwit. A character in the Roman poet Virgil's Eclogues expressed his gratitude in these words: "Deus nobis hæc otia fecit" ("A god gave us this leisure"). In Roman culture, otium contrasted with busyness. The Romans valued studious leisure as a moment favoring philosophy or the arts. They did not think of it as mere idleness. Inwit may have come later as a specific innovation of Christian culture, thanks in part to the Roman citizen, Augustine of Hippo, the author of Confessions. But even for the pagan Romans, otium served at the very least to cultivate one's wits.

This isn't just about playing with words!

Trump's moral system privileges acts over words, which is why he allows himself to be so negligent in his use of language. He seems to favor two types of act, which reflect two essential sources of value, neither of which bothers with the distraction of ethical reasoning. The first is transactions (money, and specifically the accumulation of wealth). The second is violence in the form of police action and war: domination, humiliation, acquisition and consolidation of power.

Thanks to his abuse of language, Trump epitomizes the hidden driving forces of the US imperial culture he presides over in ways that former presidents, conscious of the danger, deliberately and often craftily sought to conceal. Trump takes delight in highlighting the fundamental brutality of a system that measures value purely by monetary standards: any increase in personal wealth or stock market cap is deemed virtuous. He privileges provocative, disparaging rhetoric and shows of force to the exclusion of any expression that might imply the existence of ethical criteria, the foundation of which is always the notion of respect and the guiding force, empathy.

Trump puts on a maximalist show, but he does so in the continuity of the fundamental behavior of the imperial state, a state he inherited and did not create. His recent behavior is nevertheless innovative. If he accepts to use the tool traditionally associated with diplomacy, negotiations, he does so merely to create the opportunity to prepare and then deploy maximum force. In that sense, it's wise on his part to call what's now taking place "discussions" rather than "negotiations." No one — except possibly the cowardly European leaders (who, alas, failed to fulfill my April 1 fantasy of declaring their independence) — would now admit to trusting a US negotiation team sent by Washington to resolve an overseas conflict. Cuss or discuss are the only remaining options.

But how different is this from what we have seen in previous Democratic administrations? It was under Barack Obama that the Minsk agreements were hammered out under the sponsorship of France and Germany following US diplomat Victoria Nuland's successfully crafted coup d'état in Kyiv back in February 2014. Then-Vice President Joe Biden was actively involved, as Nuland's infamous intercepted phone call revealed. Both former French President François Hollande and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel belatedly admitted that the negotiation was little more than a hoax, designed to gain time as Ukraine became integrated as a de facto member of NATO.

In December 2021, in response to an ongoing state of civil war in Ukraine directed against the Russian-speaking population, Russian President Vladimir Putin positioned approximately 100,000 troops on the Ukrainian border, clearly threatening an invasion. He formally proposed to engage talks according to the principle of "indivisible security" that applied during the Cold War. It stated that no country should strengthen its security at the expense of its neighbor's. There may have been good reasons to suspect once engaged, negotiations would break down, but the only certain way of knowing that is to begin the negotiations. Instead, the Biden administration, in the name of both the United States and NATO, called the request a "non-starter." The pretext was that NATO had an "open-door" policy. With hindsight, can any rational observer believe that refusing negotiations was a wise decision or that engaging in negotiations at that time would have produced a worse result than what we see today?

History seems to be sending a message. The underlying meaning of negotiations — using a nation's inwit to prevent the worst from happening — has been dismissed as a relic of history. We have reached a point at which the leaders in the West appear to have redefined the term — and even its more general framework, diplomacy — to signify the phase of a deliberately ambiguous relationship that provides time to prepare for the use of massive destructive force. Biden's team had already exhausted the technique with the regularly violated Minsk accords. Trump innovated by accepting the negotiations as the platform from which to attack.

Trump's Secretary of War Pete Hegseth at least gets straight to the point. In the headline of a recent article on The Hill, we learn that "he welcomes deal with Iran, but Pentagon will keep 'negotiating with bombs.'" Trump explained that "Hegseth was 'disappointed' by the idea" of negotiations but agreed with the principle so long as the talking was done with bombs. And of course, Trump himself has now stepped up to promise a war crime on the scale of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "If there is no deal, we are going to hit each and every one of their electric-generating plants very hard and probably simultaneously."

Most observers feel that, despite massive and ongoing damage and the successful decapitation strike by the US–Israeli tag team on day one, Iran now has the upper hand. In such cases, negotiations tend to be useful to the party risking defeat. But at some point the weaker party has to acknowledge the state of play and negotiate — with words not bombs — to put an end to the misery.

Trump's attitude seems to fall into an oft repeated pattern. In March 2022, Biden predicted the ruble would soon be rubble. It's the dollar that's now losing traction as the world's reserve currency. So long as serious negotiations based on recognizable principles such as indivisible security are dismissed, things will go badly for everyone, but especially for those who believe they started in a position of power.

I leave the last word to Edward Quince, our good friend and collaborator in our series, "Money Matters." He has revealed privately what appears to be the nature of Trump's current "discussions," which the Iranians vehemently insist are not negotiations:

"Trump is attempting to buy off the Iranian elites — partially easing sanctions, sending signals through oil prices, while simultaneously threatening scenarios such as the seizure of Kharg Island and control of the Strait of Hormuz.

But the Iranians will not go along with it."

Dear reader, when do you think Trump's or Hegseth's agenbite is likely to click in?

*[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.

China–Taiwan Tensions — Civil War Legacies and Geopolitical Chess

Glenn Carle, Atul Singh
April 03, 2026

Since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has been acting more aggressively towards Taiwan. Tensions go back nearly a century ago, when communists and nationalists fought a bloody civil war. The latter lost and fled to Taiwan, running a one-party state for decades. Today, China is still communist but Taiwan has evolved into a democracy, although a rather fractious one. A new pro-independence Taiwanese party has emerged even as Beijing holds on to its old One China policy to secure legitimacy through nationalism. Meanwhile, the US aims to deter China from conquering Taiwan but risks are rising as both are taking actions they view as defensive but the opposing side views as escalatory.

Editor-in-Chief Atul Singh and FOI Senior Partner Glenn Carle, a retired CIA officer who now advises companies, governments and organizations on geopolitical risk, turn their attention eastward to examine the sharp escalation in China–Taiwan tensions over the last few years in general and the Chinese military blockade of its tiny island neighbor at the end of 2025.

Atul sets the framework at the outset:

So, as usual, we'll have a three-part structure. We are going to first ask the question: What are these tensions? Then we are going to pose the

question: Why do we have these tensions? And then we will pose the third question: What could happen next? We will paint some scenarios.

Those three questions — what, why and what next — shape the entire conversation. What appears at first glance to be another People's Liberation Army (PLA) drill at the end of 2025 becomes an examination of sovereignty and legitimacy of Chinese claims over Taiwan as well as the evolving balance of power between a rising China and a still-dominant US.

What: rising military and political tensions

These tensions are both military and political. Atul and Glenn begin by outlining the former.

At the end of 2025, the PLA staged a massive display of force around Taiwan. The exercise, titled Justice Mission 2025, included ten hours of live-fire drills and effectively encircled the island. It took place just 11 days after Washington approved an $11 billion arms sale to Taiwan, the largest deal to date between Washington and the Taiwanese capital of Taipei.

On December 30, the PLA's Eastern Theater Command conducted a second consecutive day of large-scale operations involving army, naval, air and rocket forces. Taiwan's Defense Ministry reported that it "detected 130 Chinese military aircraft and 14 naval vessels." Of a total of 130 sorties, 90 entered Taiwan's northern, central, southwestern and eastern air defense identification zone (ADIZ). For defense forces, ADIZ functions as an early warning system — though in a strait only 160 kilometers wide, reaction time is barely a few minutes.

Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te condemned the drills as undermining regional stability through military intimidation. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi criticized Taiwan for continuous provocations, rebuked Japan's leadership for openly challenging China's territorial sovereignty and denounced the $11 billion US arms sale.

In some ways, the political tensions are more important. Since Xi Jinping became president in 2012, China's tone on Taiwan has shifted. Before Xi, China was aggressively pursuing economic integration with Taiwan and boosting travel between the countries. Its goal was to achieve de facto integration over time. Since Xi took over, China has engaged in increasing levels of military confrontation and adopted a much more nationalistic tone on political integration.

Under Xi, China has adopted increasingly aggressive policies in the South and East China Seas and in Tibet. Beijing has also stepped up harassment of Chinese students in obscure Australian or American universities, as well as engaged in a shrill "wolf warrior" diplomacy that confronts anyone who says anything out of harmony with China's Taiwan policy. In recent years, Xi has dialled down this aggressive diplomacy, but the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) takes an increasingly hardline stance on Taiwan.

After saber-rattling against Taiwan, China eased its show of force. Both sides have now signaled interest in stabilizing relations ahead of a planned "Grand Summit" between Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump this April. At his Florida Mar-a-Lago, Trump responded to news about Taiwan with characteristic nonchalance, saying he has a "great relationship" with Xi. "Nothing worries me," said Trump.

The immediate danger, Glenn argues, is not a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The real danger concerns the standard of behavior, which China has successfully shifted. The normalization of Beijing's coercive behavior — the steady shifting

of what counts as routine — has resulted in a gradual erosion of Taiwan's de facto sovereignty.

Why: history — bitter legacy of a brutal civil war on Mainland China

To answer the second question, Atul and Glenn turn to history.

The roots of the China-Taiwan tensions lie in the Chinese Civil War, which lasted from August 1, 1927, to December 10, 1949. CCP and the Kuomintang (KMT) fought a brutal civil war for control of China. The KMT, founded by the revolutionary Sun Yat-sen in 1894 and reorganized in 1911, ruled Mainland China, which was then known as the Republic of China (ROC). General Chiang Kai-shek succeeded Sun as the KMT leader, but, bit by bit, he lost on the battlefield, and the KMT lost public support. Why?

American journalist Theodore White's reporting answers the question. He captures the story of the civil war in one grotesque scene: White observed miles and miles of dead Chinese peasants on the roadside, as the KMT forces marched to oppose the Communists. They had died to a significant extent not from war but due to KMT corruption, which caused mass starvation. In addition, the KMT, for all its sincere, visceral hostility to the West — KMT leaders were often true nationalists — was tainted as the pawn of the imperial powers. Therefore, KMT leaders could never really escape the perception that they were corrupt warlords beholden to the colonial, exploitative gweilo (foreigner). Meanwhile, the communists, who were equally if not more ruthless, were identified with helping the peasants, not the ruling elites, and were not gweilo-tainted in the minds of peasants. End of story.

At the end of 1949, Mainland China under the CCP became the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the KMT retreated to Taiwan, which now became the Republic of China (ROC). Both the PRC and ROC claimed to be the legitimate state for all the Chinese people. Both believed in the One China policy and reunification. The CCP wanted to assimilate the ROC into the PRC. The KMT thought that one day the PRC would crumble and the ROC would include Mainland China.

Why: history — another bitter legacy on a small island

Since 1949, the KMT has ruled Taiwan, but never quite forgotten its past. In 1894, Sun had founded the party in Honolulu, Hawaii, as the Revive China Society. In 1919, he reformed the party in 1919 in the Shanghai French Concession and renamed it the KMT. Chiang, Sun's brother-in-law, succeeded him as leader. Known as Generalissimo, Chiang reunited China after his Northern Expedition against regional warlords from 1926 to 1928. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Chiang's star faded, and the KMT decamped to China. Chiang was the de facto dictator until his death in 1975, and the KMT ruled Taiwan as a one-party state till 1987.

Chiang's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, succeeded him. Chiang Junior lifted martial law and the ban on opposition parties. In 1988, Lee Teng-hui succeeded the Chiang family as president and continued democratic reforms. He won the first direct presidential election in 2016. Chen Shui-bian succeeded Lee by winning the 2000 presidential election. Chen ended 72 years of KMT presidencies, but the party later reclaimed power eight years later with the landslide victory of Ma Ying-jeou in the 2008 presidential election. The KMT lost the presidency and its legislative majority in the 2016 elections, but remains a force in Taiwanese politics. The party won a legislative plurality in the 2024 elections.

Today, Chen's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) is the center-left force in Taiwanese politics. Founded in 1986 by Hsu Hsin-liang, Roger Hsieh

and Lin Shui-chuan, a year prior to the end of martial law, the DPP is a strong advocate of human rights and opposes authoritarianism. President Lai Ching-te is the third DPP president. Chen was the first DPP president who held office from 2000 to 2008, and Tsai Ing-wen was the second one who held power from 2008 to 2016.

The DPP's roots lie in the Tangwai movement, which opposed the KMT's one-party authoritarian rule. The movement opposed the "party-state" system and gathered force in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. In 1979, the same year in which the US ceased its recognition of the ROC, conflict between authorities and the tangwai again turned violent in the Kaohsiung Incident. Also known as the Formosa Incident, the Meilidao Incident or the Formosa Magazine incident, this was a crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations that occurred in Kaohsiung on December 10, 1979. Note that the KMT imposed martial law from 1949 to 1987. In fact, the KMT rule from 1949 to 1992 has come to be known as the White Terror. This terror is held to have only ended in 1992 when the criminal code changed and the Taiwanese could no longer be prosecuted for "anti-state activities."

Having lost a bitter civil war to the CCP, the KMT had an anti-communist ideology. It ruled Taiwan through martial law and curtailed civil liberties. Many of the founding members of the DPP suffered greatly at the hands of the KMT. Today, the DPP is a nationalist party that advocates strengthening Taiwanese identity, opposes pan-Chinese nationalism of both the KMT and the CCP, and criticizes China's claims of sovereignty over Taiwan as a new form of colonialism and imperialism. Unsurprisingly, the DPP harbors bitter memories of KMT martial rule from 1949 to 1987.

Given the country's past, Taiwanese politics is famously fractious. The Legislative Yuan, as the Taiwanese parliament is called, has been an arena for punching, hair pulling, and the throwing of plastic bottles and water balloons over the years. In one particularly heated fight in July 2017, legislators lifted up and threw chairs at each other as they argued over an infrastructure spending bill. In 2020, legislators threw pig guts and exchanged blows amid a heated row over pork imports from the US.

Right now, the DPP has the presidency while the KMT controls the legislature. The current official position of the DPP is that the ROC is an independent and sovereign country. Its territory consists of Taiwan and the surrounding smaller islands whose sovereignty derives only from the ROC citizens. The DPP's philosophy of self-determination is based on the 1999 "Resolution on Taiwan's Future." The party considers Taiwan an independent nation and finds a formal declaration of independence unnecessary.

Why: tricky question of nationalism and legitimacy

For decades, both the CCP and KMT claimed to be the real representatives of the Chinese people. Both followed the One China policy because they fought a battle for legitimacy and sought to emerge as the unifying force in Chinese politics.

Over time, the KMT has lost power and evolved into a vibrant Taiwanese democracy. In contrast, the CCP is stuck to its old dogma in an authoritarian system where Mao Zedong seized power through the barrel of a gun.

The core of the CCP's legitimacy rests on three planks. First, the party offers hundreds of millions of Chinese high economic growth, greater prosperity and rising living standards. Second, the CCP is the standard bearer of Chinese nationalism, which is seen as an antidote to the century of humiliation when foreigners invaded and exploited China. Third, the CCP seeks to absorb Taiwan and

reunify China. As a one-party state, the CCP-led PRC sees the ROC multiparty democracy in Taiwan as a threat.

In fact, the absorption of Taiwan is an article of faith for the CCP. This Taiwan obsession is, in part, irrational. After all, on what rational basis can the CCP claim to be a single-party ruling elite? Be this as it may, Xi has clearly chosen to prioritize Taiwan since he came to power in 2012. Unification would be the apotheosis of two of the CCP's pillars of legitimacy since 1949. Xi has played the nationalism card with increasing vigor, and now even the CCP sometimes struggles to control the nationalist surges it foments. Even as a DPP-led Taiwan has become increasingly independent-minded, the CCP-led China has become ever more intransigent.

Why: equally tricky question of sovereignty and great power politics

When the CCP set up the PRC in 1949, it sought to deter independence or any prospect of independence, as well as any potential foreign intervention in Taiwan. The CCP was not entirely successful. The First Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954–55 was an unsuccessful attempt by the PRC to deter the US from signing a mutual defense treaty with the KMT government. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1958 followed soon after. The PLA bombarded Kinmen, and the US deployed a US aircraft carrier Essex and other naval vessels to the Taiwan Straits.

The Department of Defense recommended and pushed hard for a "massive retaliation" doctrine. This involved the use of nuclear weapons in the event China invaded Quemoy (as Kinmen was known then) and Matsu. US President Dwight D. Eisenhower never conveyed this threat to China, and his response was conventional. He used naval force alone. The "massive retaliation" doctrine later changed to a policy of graduated response under President John F. Kennedy.

The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–96 occurred nearly 40 years later. The Chinese wanted to express disapproval of Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the US. More importantly, the US acknowledged (but did not endorse) the PRC's One China policy in 1979. Since then, the US policy has been not to take a position on Taiwan's sovereignty and regard its ultimate status as undetermined.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter also signed into law the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), which commits the US to "make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability." The TRA also obligates the US to maintain the capacity "to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan." Note that the TRA, however, does not obligate the US to come to Taiwan's defense, and for decades, US presidents have refused to say whether they would intervene on Taiwan's behalf — a policy known as strategic ambiguity.

In May 2022, President Joe Biden signaled a change in this policy, saying that the US had a commitment to come to Taiwan's defense. He made at least three similar comments since 2021 — a move from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. Seemingly underscoring the changed US policy, Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei in early August 2022 and met with President Tsai Ing-wen of the DPP, the dominant political force of the 21st century, as well as democracy and human rights activists.

In response, the PLA launched a four-day military drill and surrounded Taiwan, simulating a blockade. The live-fire exercises were more

extensive than those performed during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line over 300 times during the demonstration and continue to cross it on a near-daily basis, effectively erasing the status quo. The CCP applied additional pressure through sanctions, halted exports and cyberattacks.

After Pelosi's visit, several other US delegations visited Taiwan. Tsai met with Pelosi's successor, Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy, on a stopover in the US. In response, China has intensified threatening air maneuvers, flying more frequently and closer to Taiwan, and Chinese warships have increasingly joined in the movements.

The end-of-2025 PLA exercises are part of a recent pattern. The PLA has increased military activities near Taiwan in recent years. It increasingly sends jets into Taiwan's ADIZ as a show of force. Cyberattacks have increased. In 2020, the Chinese attacked ten Taiwanese government agencies to steal information.

The US Department of Defense's 2021 Military Power Report highlighted China's prioritization of "joint long-range precision strikes across domains, increasingly sophisticated space, counterspace, and cyber capabilities, and accelerating the large-scale expansion of its nuclear forces." Moreover, China has integrated emerging technology into its military strategy through an approach known as "intelligentized" warfare.

Atul and Glenn also mention a key economic and strategic fact: Taiwan is the leading global producer of advanced semiconductors. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) produces 65% of the world's semiconductors and 90% of the most advanced chips. If conflict between China and Taiwan were to break out, global supply chains would be severely disrupted. The US would be severely affected. A potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait also has implications for the territorial dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea. The PRC views the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as a part of "Taiwan province" and may seek to take the islands during a conflict. Atul mentions that he has covered China-Japan tensions in great detail, which erupted in 2025 after Beijing made a big deal of the Japanese prime minister's comments in parliament.

Given China's increasing aggressiveness, Washington has acted to contain Beijing. Before Biden took office, the first Trump administration sold more than $18 billion in arms to Taiwan and eliminated long-standing restrictions on US diplomatic engagement with Taiwanese officials in 2020. US officials now acknowledge that a small but expanding contingent of Marines has been secretly training Taiwan's forces since at least 2021. Tensions between China and the US over Taiwan amount to a classic security dilemma: both are taking actions they view as defensive, which the opposing side views as escalatory. The Thucydides Trap, a term that refers to the high possibility of ruling and rising powers clashing, is trickiest over Taiwan.

What could happen next: three scenarios

Atul and Glenn tease out three scenarios for the future. The first scenario is conservative and extrapolates the status quo. Deterrence proves to be successful after sustained increased effort by Taiwan, the US, Japan and arguably the international community. The goal would be to increase the costs of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, deterring Beijing from military conquest. The status quo would also persist if China softens its demands. This could only happen after Xi has left office.

In the first scenario, Taiwan continues its de facto independence in the name of "one country, two systems." The world remains as we know it,

and eventual de facto reunification is contingent on China's political evolution.

The second scenario is moderate and envisages China continuing its slow increase in economic, political and military pressure on Taiwan. The US and other powers fail to demonstrate a commitment to defend Taiwan. Without American leadership, other powers do not come to the rescue of Taiwan, and international support slowly becomes less effective. China continues to extend its influence over Taiwan even as the Taiwanese continue their paradigmatic shift decisively away from being a part of China. Taiwan becomes the Ukraine of the Orient. In this world, Taiwan progressively loses de facto sovereignty, and China achieves de facto reunification.

The third scenario is aggressive and imagines China taking decisive military action against Taiwan. The result would be uncertain and depend on both the PLA's ability to conquer Taiwan as well as the Taiwanese forces to defend Taiwan. Hundreds of thousands would die. Taiwan is hilly, the PLA is not battle-tested, its senior officers have just been purged, and the local population would be restive even if China conquered the island. Taiwan's porcupine strategy might work just as Vietnam gave China a bloody nose in 1979.

The clock is ticking for China. The Chinese century may be difficult to achieve with the demographic balloon fizzing away. China is getting smaller every year at an accelerating pace and will be hundreds of millions smaller in a few decades. Arguably, the time to act for China is now.

If China acts and invades Taiwan, that would be a disaster. Even as the military result may be uncertain, China's attack on Taiwan would unleash an international economic tsunami. Trade would plummet, currencies would crash and GDP rates would crater. Taiwan is critical to the global economy as the world's primary producer of advanced semiconductors, fabricating over 90% of the most cutting-edge chips used in AI, smartphones and defense systems. Led by TSMC, it controls roughly 63% of the total foundry market. As a top-20 global economy and major exporter of electronics, Taiwan's technological, manufacturing and trade output is essential to the global tech supply chain, which would be severely disrupted.

A Chinese version of the Anaconda plan of the Mainland wrapping around Taiwan and swallowing the island is more rational, but leaders have made rash decisions in similar situations. Atul and Glenn wish that leaders on all sides make wise choices, cheekily invoking the gods and goddesses of myths from around the world to smile upon mere mortals.

Glenn Carle is a noted author, an avid reader and a retired CIA officer with rich experience. As Deputy National Intelligence Officer, Glenn led the 17 agencies of the intelligence community in preparing the US government's most senior assessments of transnational threats to the nation for the president, members of cabinet and the nation's most senior military leaders. During his career, he was detailed to the Executive Office of the President, and has extensive negotiating and policy experience. Glenn also led sensitive programs in the Directorate of Operations at the Central Intelligence Agency in four continents. He did a BA in Government at Harvard, an MA in European Studies and International Economics at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and further masters study in International Relations at the Institut d'Etudes politiques de Paris.

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.

Capitalism at 250: Freedom, Legitimacy and the Renewal of the Market Order

John F. Halbleib, Masaaki Yoshimori
April 07, 2026

Capitalism has entered a new phase in which economic growth alone no longer secures legitimacy or stability. Markets now depend on a broader institutional foundation — human well-being, enforceable rights and environmental sustainability — which together determine whether capitalism remains resilient or becomes fragile and extractive. The future of capitalism, therefore, hinges not on output, but on deliberate institutional design that aligns prosperity with human wellbeing, social trust and planetary limits.

As the US approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, it is not confronting a crisis of origin but a crisis of fulfillment. The principles articulated and agreed to in 1776 were never meant to settle history; they were meant to discipline it and enrich the future of humanity. They bound power — political and economic — to human dignity, consent and the pursuit of happiness. The promise was aspirational, not automatic; it was made to every generation and all of humanity. It demanded institutions capable of renewing legitimacy over time.

Capitalism now faces an analogous moment. For more than two centuries, it justified itself through performance. It worked. It produced unprecedented wealth, technological progress and expanded opportunity. Even critics conceded its generative capacity. Growth became capitalism's moral argument.

But a system that once needed only to deliver output must now deliver meaning and fulfillment of the promise to which it agreed in 1776.

This shift is not ideological. It is structural. The relationship between prosperity and legitimacy has weakened. Economies continue to expand, yet societies grow more anxious. Financial markets reach new heights even as institutional trust declines. Capitalism's first certainty — that growth secures consent — no longer holds.

This article advances a central claim: Capitalism is transitioning from a performance-based system, in which legitimacy was historically secured through sustained economic growth, to a legitimacy-based

system, in which long-term stability increasingly depends on institutional design, credible governance, and the alignment of economic outcomes with social and ecological constraints.

This transformation is driven by three structural shifts: the decoupling of income and well-being, the erosion of institutional trust and rights, and the emergence of environmental constraints as binding economic conditions.

When wealth stops explaining itself

Modern capitalism has reached a paradoxical threshold. By its own metrics, it has succeeded. Global poverty has fallen dramatically over the long term. Technological innovation has reshaped human possibilities. Yet this success has not translated into universal confidence.

In advanced economies, citizens increasingly perceive that the system is both efficient and unfair. They recognize its productivity but question its legitimacy. Economic abundance coexists with social fragmentation, as reflected in declining intergenerational mobility, rising inequality in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, and record levels of political polarization in the US and Europe. This tension reflects a deeper transformation: Economic growth alone has been necessary, but it has proved insufficient.

The historical logic of capitalism rested on delayed justice. Inequality was tolerated because prosperity was expected to spread. That expectation is fading. Wealth now appears to concentrate faster than opportunity expands. Intergenerational mobility slows. The narrative of upward progress and mobility loses credibility.

This is not simply a distributional issue. It is a narrative crisis. Capitalism still produces wealth, but it struggles to produce widespread and trusting belief.

Belief matters because markets are not merely transactional mechanisms; they are psychological systems. They function only when participants trust that the future is predictable enough to justify risk. When belief erodes, investment becomes defensive, innovation cautious and politics volatile.

Capitalism's second act has begun at this moment when wealth alone can no longer secure legitimacy.

Why this moment is different

Capitalism has faced crises before — depressions, wars, financial collapses. In each case, the narrow solution was more growth, deeper markets or better technology. What makes this current moment different is that the pressure is no longer cyclical. It is structural.

Three forces by John F. Halbleib and Masaaki Yoshimori are converging.

First, human satisfaction has decoupled from income. Beyond a certain point, higher GDP no longer delivers greater happiness or social cohesion. Anxiety, loneliness and political alienation rise even in affluent societies. Economic systems that excel at production, but fail at meaning, lose consent.

Second, rights and trust are weakening inside advanced economies, not only in developing ones. Democratic backsliding, institutional capture and legal uncertainty erode the predictability on which markets depend. Capitalism without credible rules becomes transactional, short-term and extractive.

Third, the planet is no longer a passive backdrop. Climate instability, resource scarcity

and ecological degradation now shape inflation, investment, migration and financial risk. Markets that treat nature as free collateral are discovering that the bill arrives — with interest.

What unites these forces is that none can be solved by growth alone. They demand improved institutional design.

Happiness as an economic variable

For much of the 20th century, economists treated well-being as an outcome rather than an input. Happiness was presumed to follow growth. Today, evidence suggests the relationship is more complex. Beyond a certain threshold, increases in income yield diminishing returns in satisfaction. What rises instead are expectations, comparisons and anxieties.

This phenomenon has profound economic implications. Societies characterized by psychological insecurity struggle to sustain the cooperation required for long-term development. Innovation depends on trust. Entrepreneurship depends on optimism. Social cohesion depends on perceived fairness.

The political consequences of declining well-being are visible across democracies. Polarization intensifies. Institutional credibility weakens. Policy horizons shorten. Economic systems that fail to sustain meaning encounter resistance not because they are inefficient, but because they are experienced as indifferent.

Happiness, therefore, is not a soft variable. It is a stabilizing condition. It reflects whether citizens view participation in the system as worthwhile. Capitalism's durability increasingly depends on this perception.

In this sense, well-being becomes a form of functional consent. Without it, markets face continuous disruption — not from external enemies, but from internal dissatisfaction.

Rights as market infrastructure

Capitalism's legitimacy also depends on institutional predictability. Markets require more than prices; they require rules that participants trust. Property rights, legal equality, freedom of expression and accountable governance form the invisible architecture of economic life.

When this architecture weakens, markets do not collapse immediately. They mutate. Competition tilts toward political access rather than productive capacity. Investment horizons shrink. Corruption substitutes for coordination. Over time, the system's efficiency erodes.

This dynamic challenges a common assumption: that economic development automatically strengthens democratic norms. In reality, rights are not a byproduct of growth. They are design choices. Affluent societies can experience institutional decay as readily as developing ones.

The economic consequences of such decay are cumulative. As predictability declines, risk premiums rise. As trust weakens, transaction costs increase. Capitalism without credible rights becomes extractive — generating wealth for some while undermining the foundations of prosperity for all.

In this sense, rights function as capitalism's operating system. They enable markets to process information, allocate resources and sustain innovation. Without them, economic dynamism becomes fragile.

The planet as a structural constraint

Perhaps the most consequential transformation facing capitalism is environmental. For centuries,

markets treated ecological systems as externalities. Nature was assumed to be abundant, resilient and costless. That assumption is no longer viable.

Climate instability, resource depletion and biodiversity loss are not distant concerns; they are immediate economic variables. They shape inflation, energy security, migration patterns and financial stability. Environmental shocks are transmitted through supply chains, asset valuations and geopolitical tensions.

This shift alters capitalism's temporal logic. Traditional markets discount the future; ecological systems impose it. The costs of environmental degradation accumulate slowly but materialize abruptly. As a result, sustainability becomes a matter of systemic risk management rather than ethical preference.

The emerging question is not whether environmental policies constrain growth. It is whether growth can persist in their absence. A capitalism that fails to internalize ecological limits undermines its own viability.

Environmental governance thus begins to resemble financial regulation. Both seek to prevent systemic crises. Both require long-term coordination. Both depend on institutional credibility.

The planet is no longer a backdrop to economic activity. It is a codeterminant of market stability.

From efficiency to legitimacy

Capitalism's first act prioritized efficiency. Its second must prioritize legitimacy. This does not imply abandoning growth or innovation. It implies redefining success.

Economic systems will increasingly be evaluated not only by output but by resilience — their capacity to absorb shocks without social rupture. They will be judged by fairness — not perfect equality, but credible opportunity. And they will be measured by sustainability — the ability to preserve the conditions of future prosperity.

These criteria are not ideological concessions. They are functional necessities. Markets that fail to sustain legitimacy encounter political backlash. Policies become erratic. Long-term investment declines. Social trust erodes. The challenge, therefore, is institutional design. States must move beyond minimalist regulation toward strategic coordination. They must create frameworks in which social and ecological objectives align with economic incentives.

This requires a shift from reactive governance to anticipatory governance. Instead of correcting market failures after crises occur, institutions must shape expectations before instability emerges.

This reorientation does not imply a transition toward socialism or a repudiation of market principles. Rather, it reflects an effort to preserve the institutional conditions under which market economies can function effectively while sustaining both efficiency and freedom. Institutional coordination, environmental regulation and investments in social resilience are not substitutes for markets but complements to them. Historically, capitalism has evolved through the interaction between economic freedom and adaptive governance rather than through ideological replacement. The objective is therefore not to diminish competition, private initiative or individual liberty, but to ensure that the system remains capable of generating both prosperity and legitimacy in an increasingly complex structural environment.

Cooperation as the new competitive advantage

The defining challenges of the 21st century — climate change, demographic transitions, technological displacement — are coordination problems. They transcend national borders and individual firms. Markets excel at competition but struggle with collective action.

Capitalism's second act will thus depend on new forms of cooperation. Public and private sectors must collaborate to manage systemic risks. International institutions must facilitate alignment rather than rivalry. Corporations must integrate long-term societal considerations into strategic planning.

This transformation does not diminish competition; it reframes it. The most successful economies will be those that balance rivalry with coordination. The capacity to solve collective problems will become a source of competitive advantage.

In this environment, legitimacy becomes an economic asset. Societies characterized by trust and institutional coherence attract investment, talent and innovation. Those marked by fragmentation face volatility and decline.

Relegitimizing the market system

The future of capitalism is not predetermined. It is contingent on choices made by governments, businesses and citizens. Markets will remain central to prosperity, but their legitimacy will increasingly depend on whether they expand the realm of human freedom — enabling individuals to pursue lives they value, exercise rights they trust and inhabit a planet that remains viable for future generations.

The approaching American semiquincentennial offers a symbolic reminder of this principle. The founding generation did not view freedom as self-executing. They understood that legitimacy must be continually renewed through institutions capable of aligning economic dynamism with political liberty. Economic systems face the same imperative today.

Capitalism's second act will not replicate its first. It will be less certain, more complex and more constrained by structural realities. Yet it may also prove more durable. By integrating human well-being, institutional integrity, ecological sustainability and the protection of economic freedom into its design, capitalism can sustain both prosperity and trust.

The alternative is not immediate collapse but gradual erosion — of belief, cooperation, stability and ultimately freedom itself. When economic systems lose legitimacy, societies respond not only with discontent but with demands for protection that may curtail openness and opportunity.

In the end, the central question is not whether capitalism can continue to generate wealth. It is whether it can sustain a framework of freedom that citizens regard as both fair and secure. Systems endure not because they are inevitable, but because they are trusted — and trusted systems expand rather than constrain human agency.

That trust is no longer guaranteed. It must be built deliberately, collectively and continuously.

Capitalism's future, like democracy's, remains an invitation to freedom. Whether that invitation is renewed or rejected will shape the trajectory of the century ahead.

In an increasingly complex world, the task ahead is not to replace markets; rather, it is to enhance them so that they remain both economically productive and legitimately supported by all those whom they serve and upon whom their continued sustainability is dependent.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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All Eyes Are on Cuba, and No One Knows How Its Future Could Play Out

Laura Pavon
April 08, 2026

Cuba faces its most severe economic and social crisis in decades, intensified by Venezuela's halted oil supplies and ongoing US sanctions. Amid energy shortages, protests and a growing informal economy, the government remains defiant while navigating a complex legacy of revolution and repression. The island's future hangs in a delicate balance between enduring communist rule and emerging capitalist realities.

Cuba undoubtedly reached a critical juncture in January 2026, when Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was captured, and Venezuela suspended its oil supplies. These developments pressured Cuba, creating a growing sense of urgency and instability that reached a new level in March, coinciding with rising tensions in the Middle East due to military action by the US and Israel against Iran. If a change in the Cuban regime actually materializes, it will be gradual rather than abrupt, and the process will have begun long before Maduro's capture. As history shows, watershed events are usually the result of cumulative factors. Cuba's geographical insularity has always made self-sufficiency difficult for the country. Coupled with the fact that its societal fabric is deeply interwoven with its unique application of Marxism, an eventual transition would be a journey filled with contradictions and gray areas.

Today's situation, with the loss of Venezuelan energy support, is somewhat reminiscent of Cuba's experience with the devastating economic impact of the Soviet Union's collapse in the 1990s, and it may be tempting to draw comparisons between the two periods. At that time, the Castro regime was forced to confront similar challenges: material shortages, isolation and civil unrest. However, today's reality is characterized by new factors: the physical absence of Fidel Castro and Raúl Castro; the widespread use of social media; resumed flights to and from the US since 2016; and increased liberalization and warmer diplomatic relations.

No matter how valuable ending the longest-running communist government in the Americas may seem, US President Donald Trump seems to be trying out a new strategy for foreign intervention: decapitating regimes while keeping the establishment intact. This model clearly prioritizes business opportunities over democratic values. However, it's not only uncertain whether it could be applied to Cuba, but also whether this is actually the plan. All of which makes it particularly difficult to imagine what could happen next.

Historically, international observers have oscillated between fascination and outrage towards Communist Cuba. In the early years of the revolution, this fascination was understandable. Cuba was a potent symbol for activists in the 1960s and for the global civil rights movement. However, as the revolution shifted toward military autocracy rather than democratic ideals, the initial romanticism faded. This group of observers, largely comprising European baby boomers who rebelled against post-World War II imperialism, has seen its initial fervor tempered by time. Reflecting a broader evolution in leftist thought, they continue struggling to reconcile Cuba's social achievements with its authoritarian political regime and the continuous, increasing and deepening impact of the US trade embargo on these revolutionary ideals since 1962.

The Cuban Revolution officially began with the 1953 takeover of the Moncada Barracks by a group of revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro, who was relatively unknown at the time. The uprising aimed to overthrow Fulgencio Batista's illegitimate military dictatorship and the systemic corruption and poverty it fostered. Specifically, the movement demanded economic independence from US imperialist interests and the restoration of political liberty through an armed uprising of the working class.

After the attempted coup, Castro, a trained lawyer, was tried and imprisoned by Batista's regime. During this trial, he delivered an iconic defense speech that ended with the famous words, "History will absolve me." Indeed, he was pardoned after 22 months due to a general amnesty and went on to lead Cuba for life. However, total absolution by history is doubtful and yet to come.

After his release from prison, Castro adopted July 26 — the date of the attack on the Moncada Barracks — as the name of his revolutionary movement: the Movimiento 26 de Julio. By January 1, 1959, the rebels, including the iconic Comandante Ernesto "Che" Guevara, had successfully overthrown the dictatorship. In response to Batista's pro-US regime, the revolutionaries had campaigned with slogans such as: "Cuba sí, yanquis no!" ("Cuba yes! Yankees no!") and "Yanquis, vayanse!" ("Yankees, go away!").

Shortly after Castro and his group took control, the US intervened militarily in 1961, but was defeated at the Bay of Pigs. This defeat solidified the first self-proclaimed communist revolution in the region, which would become the longest-standing regime of its kind in the Western world. It is now approaching its seventh decade.

The revolution as an unfinished process

After years of rumors that he was dead and that his government was keeping him alive to prevent a political collapse, Castro died on November 25, 2016, at the age of 90. Following Castro's illness in 2006, his younger brother Raúl assumed provisional power. By 2011, Raúl had solidified his position as leader of both the presidency and the Communist Party. This appointment communicated a strong stance on hierarchy and kinship. Yet, Raúl ultimately delegated governance in 2019, eight years later.

Miguel Mario Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, Cuba's current president, is a direct descendant of the Castro regime, having been personally appointed by Raúl Castro. Born in Villa Clara Province on April 20, 1960, Díaz-Canel was born one year after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Although Díaz-Canel holds onto the revolutionary ideals of his predecessors, he is facing unprecedented times. Amid escalating instability and unrest, he called for dialogue on Monday, March 23, while not capitulating on the Revolution, stating:

We don't want war; we want dialogue. But if that space isn't provided, we are ready. I tell you this with the deep conviction that I hold, which I have shared with my family, that we would give our lives for the Revolution.

Díaz-Canel said this in a conversation with Pablo Iglesias, the Spanish founder of the left-wing political party Podemos, and former vice president of Spain. Iglesias arrived in Cuba on March 24, 2026, as part of the Nuestra América humanitarian convoy. There, he interviewed Díaz-Canel on behalf of his media organization, Canal Red. With the support of figures like Iglesias and British politician Jeremy Corbyn, the Nuestra América mission delivered 20 tons of aid, including solar panels, to help alleviate the island's severe energy crisis.

The convoy's name invokes the legacy of José Martí (1853–1895), the "Apostle of Cuban Independence" and a foundational figure in the development of the nation's identity. In his influential 1891 essay, Nuestra América, or "Our America," Martí contended that Latin American nations should develop governance systems grounded in their unique social realities instead of imitating foreign models. By warning against "the giant of the north" and calling for cultural sovereignty, Martí's manifesto remains a powerful symbol that the modern mission seeks to reclaim. In fact, both Díaz-Canel and Iglesias reiterated Martí's accusations that the US is responsible for Cuba's structural problems of the past several decades, arguing that the 1959 Revolution eliminated "all miseries and evils."

The blockade of all trade and diplomatic relations with the US, coupled with the nationalization or expulsion of the private sector, did not stop the steady stream of tourists, primarily from Europe, from arriving on the island. Despite the gradual disenchantment of many, a sense of mysticism about Cuba as an oasis outside of capitalism began to emerge.

For as long as I can remember, I have heard the same tropes in stories by foreigners who visited the island in the '90s and '00s. One recurring theme was the idea that Cuba was "suspended in time." People often mentioned the old cars, which were rare in other urban landscapes. In a dimmer note, Fidel, who had once vowed that Cuba would no longer be the "brothel of the Western Hemisphere," later used that same imagery in a 1999 speech, infamously stating, "Cuba has the cleanest and most educated prostitutes in the world."

In his 1965 work, The Whole Island, Virgilio Piñera famously referred to "the curse of being completely surrounded by water." Writing from a first-person perspective while sitting in a café in

Havana, Piñera captured an insular reality that visitors, often distracted by the island's tropical allure, could never truly grasp. This metaphorical curse reveals a less paradisical side of the nation, grounding its international isolation in a bittersweet reality.

Piñera's sentiment mirrors the devastating truth in Fidel's later remarks about the island's "cultured" prostitutes. Both the poet's verses and the leader's words acknowledge a reality that, despite its high ideals, remains trapped by its circumstances. Piñera's image remains profoundly expressive today, as Cuba faces renewed media attention and political turmoil, making this sense of cursed isolation feel as relevant as ever.

Following a period of diplomatic warming that began in 2015, US–Cuba relations shifted from a hopeful path toward greater understanding to extreme hostility under the Trump administration. By 2025, Marco Rubio, a former senator from Florida and Cuban American, had become one of the loudest advocates for this shift. A Gen Xer, Rubio belongs to the first generation of diaspora children who have historically migrated to Miami. This group has traditionally been fiercely opposed to the regime they fled.

Today, many of them see the current moment as the opportunity they've been awaiting for decades. Hispanic outlets Univision and Telemundo Miami have covered the various demonstrations, many of which were led by Cuban activist Ramón Saúl Sánchez, who called on the exile community at the iconic Cuban restaurant Versailles to support the protests occurring on the island. The Free Cuba Rally, which marched through Washington, DC, featured slogans such as "Trump" and "Cuba Next!" calling for US action.

Founded by Cuban exiles in Valencia, Spain, in 2014, the news outlet Cibercuba has been a relevant source that divulges information from inside the island. It has extensively covered the protests of the last few weeks against constant outages and the growing precarious situation. According to Cibercuba, there have been pot-banging protests, fires started in the middle of roads, and people taking to the streets regardless of the significant military and police presence.

Though their demands are diverse and sometimes conflicting, protesters in Cuba and the diaspora are united in their response to the same lack of coherence embodied by an unfinished revolution and an authoritarian regime. Unlike the diaspora, protesters on the island largely reject US intervention. They call for freedom and anti-authoritarianism, yet they never question their own autonomy. They correctly believe that their future is in their hands, focusing more on immediate needs than on challenging the entire economic system. Despite its flaws, the revolution's accomplishments should be recognized, such as ensuring that healthcare and education remain free for all.

Taking all of this into account, it's reasonable to conclude that Cuba is experiencing its most severe economic and social crisis in decades. Nevertheless, Díaz-Canel has taken a defiant position against Washington, considering the one-party political system and the decades of cultural and structural revolution that sustain him. Even as it prepares for potential American aggression, the Cuban government refuses to negotiate its political system and its national sovereignty.

Perspectives from the Island: the case of Beto

I traveled to Cuba for the first and only time in January 2018, spending the first eight days of the year in Havana. I flew from Miami, a route that had only resumed direct service in December 2016. I remember the other passengers, most of whom were not tourists, rushing to stand up as soon as the plane landed. Their urgency seemed to

reflect the extraordinary experience of taking a direct flight after decades of needing to take indirect routes, such as via Cancún, or of being unable to travel at all due to visa constraints or the risk of state retaliation for those in exile.

Coming from a place where unlimited internet access was the norm, the intermittent service during that short trip felt unusual. Access was a luxury; you had to go to a hotel or somewhere with Wi-Fi, or buy a $5 data card that lasted 30 minutes. For the majority of Cubans, this was a significant expense, as average monthly salaries remain among the lowest in the world. According to a 2025 BBC report, this digital divide persists as Etecsa, the national telecommunications enterprise, continues to restrict and raise the price of monthly data top-ups.

This atmosphere of restricted access and slow change makes the current shift in US foreign policy feel like a long-awaited opportunity. However, the notion of a tipping point once again reveals its tantalizing and procrastinatory nature. To understand how this pivotal turning point was perceived beyond the official headlines, I reached out to my Cuban friends living abroad.

One of them is Beto, a chef and restaurant owner who has lived in Madrid for over 20 years. When he responded on Monday, March 16, he was visiting family in Cuba, 30 minutes outside Havana. He stayed in touch throughout his week-long trip, and I am fortunate to be able to share some of his insights here.

Beto began his testimony by recounting how difficult it was to move around the island. His brother had to buy fuel on the black market just to pick him up from the airport, paying between eight and ten dollars per liter. Beto could only afford this expense because of his life in Spain. This corroborates reports of a severe decline in fuel supply, despite Beto's testimony that money was circulating.

On the drive from the airport to his hometown, which usually takes place on a busy highway toward Havana, there were no other cars. In a video he shared, the empty horizon could be seen in both directions, interrupted only by a car that eventually passed them. According to Beto, the airport itself also felt empty. His Iberia flight, designed to carry over 200 passengers, landed with only 60 people on board. The rental lots were empty, yet filled with cars no one was renting. "Havana doesn't even have fuel for the planes," Beto explained. He noted that his flight had to detour to the Dominican Republic just to refuel for the return trip to Madrid. He added that due to limited resources, tourism and travel for non-urgent matters have become extremely difficult these days.

This perception of a shortage is indicative of a broader energy crisis in which access to electricity depends on having the right technology. This takes us back to Diaz-Canel's recent interview with Pablo Iglesias. Overall, the Cuban President's tone was optimistic. Diaz-Canel mentioned that even amid an intensified blockade, Cuba is on the path to energy sovereignty. He highlighted the importance of solar panels, electricity generated from sugarcane fields and the increased use of electric motorcycles for various services, describing all of it as a form of "creative resistance."

Overall, listening to Beto confirmed both Diaz-Canel's description of advancements in renewable energy and the fact that it is insufficient. During the most recent national blackout, Beto said that only people near power plants or with solar panels were able to power their electronics. This was the case in his father's village. To cope with the heat, he said he used a battery-powered fan for up to five hours at a time in his father's house. A

tropical storm on Monday night also helped cool the air.

Based on what he saw and experienced on this trip, the state-run food supply system, which used to equitably distribute food despite its imperfections, has nearly vanished. A new reality has emerged in which private enterprises import food and sell it at higher prices than in Madrid. Beto also shared photos of solar energy kits and kerosene stoves being sold on social media. The flyers provide contact information and state that payments must be made in cash in US dollars, and that delivery is available for an additional cost.

In addition to the photos of electronics, Beto shared a video with me depicting the unique blend of eras and economic systems found on Cuban streets. In the video, bicycle-powered taxis rattle past an old Polish Fiat, an iconic Soviet-era car, that has been modified to include a solar panel on its roof. The car was parked outside a bar called Tómatela Fría, where reggaeton music played from a speaker. During my short visit in 2018, I noticed that music, mostly reggaeton, was always playing on the streets. Seeing that it's still the norm gave me a sense of reassurance that other reports didn't.

Throughout the week, Beto and I were able to communicate with each other more than twice a day, albeit intermittently. He relied on airport Wi-Fi or Etecsa offices for internet access. There, you can pay 40 cents an hour for a connection to their Wi-Fi, which is powered by generators. When he described this situation to me, he paused and said it was all a "strange, high-speed transformation caught between socialism and capitalism." As citizens increasingly take to the streets, Beto's ambiguity sums up the reality of existing in the long-term middle ground between the two systems that polarized the second half of the 20th century.

As proof of the exceptional circumstances due to intensified protests and government dissent in the days prior, Beto sent a picture showing military helicopters circling overhead and armored vehicles moving through his father's neighborhood. While the townspeople attempt to maintain a facade of normalcy by selling everyday goods in private stalls, intermittent electricity and the shadow of helicopters serve as constant reminders that the country is transforming into something entirely unknown.

Against this backdrop, Beto told me that when people in Cuba talk about the importance of money from family members abroad, they often ask each other, "¿Tú tienes fe?" While "fe" means "faith" in English, it actually stands for Familiar en el Extranjero, or "family member abroad." This refers to receiving remittances from places such as Miami or Madrid. The double meaning of faith speaks to the concept of the hybridity of the two systems that Beto mentioned earlier. The anecdote also conveys a sense of truth when considering that faith may be the only unifying factor among the different positions, regardless of the indeterminate results.

The curse of being completely surrounded by water

The curse of being completely surrounded by water condemns me to this café table. If I didn't think that water encircled me like a cancer, I'd sleep in peace. In the time that it takes the boys to strip for swimming, twelve people have died of the bends ... The eternal misery of memory. If a few things were different and the country came back to me waterless, I'd gulp down that misery to spit back at the sky ... The uniform of the drowned sailor still floats on the reef. It makes you want to jump out of bed and find the main vein of the sea and bleed it dry.

— The Whole Island, Virgilio Piñera

In closing, I would like to return to Virgilio Piñera's poem and his words: "The curse of being completely surrounded by water." In the poem, he also speaks of finding "the main vein of the sea and bleeding it dry," building to a crescendo of intensity. Following the success of the Revolution, Piñera was one of many intellectuals who initially supported the movement. However, the revolutionary promise soon turned into systematic censorship. Piñera was arrested at the beginning of a period of state repression that intensified throughout the '60s and '70s.

In his posthumous memoir, Before Night Falls (1993), Reinaldo Arenas, a writer of a later generation, explains how he, like Piñera, was imprisoned because of his homosexuality and his stance as a dissident public writer. The title, Before Night Falls, refers to how he had to write by the last rays of sunlight while hiding in parks as a fugitive. It wasn't until 1980 that the Cuban state stopped considering homosexuals criminal figures, and the Ley de Ostentación Homosexual was repealed.

However, prosecutions due to sexual orientation didn't stop overnight (it was not until 2019 that a new constitution was approved in Cuba that included reforms regarding gender rights, and it wasn't until 2022 that same-sex marriage was legalized). Arenas was able to flee during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift exodus, which began when a bus crashed into the Peruvian embassy, causing a massive refugee crisis. To be granted permission to leave through Mariel, Arenas had to "prove" his homosexuality. He eventually settled in Miami and then New York, where he died by suicide while awaiting death from AIDS in 1990. In his suicide note, he explicitly blamed Fidel Castro for his death.

It's hard to reconcile heartbreaking stories like Arenas's with the continued loyalty of other prominent figures. As I have striven to convey in this piece, we find ourselves in limbo, torn between disillusionment and faith. Silvio Rodríguez, a renowned musician, exemplifies the latter. The government recently gifted him a Kalashnikov rifle in recognition of his loyalty. Interestingly, in his popular 1993 song "El Necio," or "the fool," Rodriguez sang that deciding what the world deems foolishness may also be a stance: "Could it be that foolishness was born with me?/The foolishness of what now seems foolish/The foolishness of embracing the enemy/The foolishness of living without a price."

On March 16, the day I spoke with Beto, Trump escalated his rhetoric, claiming he could "take Cuba in some form" and do as he pleased there, adding that such a thing would be "an honor." Once again, when we bring together the rhetoric of Rodríguez and Trump, we feel as though we are traveling in time. As the "giant of the North," in Martí's words, confronts Cuba, the island remains caught between the remnants of communism and an emerging informal capitalism. Cubans are resisting creatively, as they always have, even when struggling in the context of an accentuated decades-long blockade. Currently, their system of governance is holding strong, albeit while being cornered in their search for a path forward.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Would Michael Jackson Have Survived in the #MeToo Era?

Ellis Cashmore
April 10, 2026

Director Antoine Fuqua's Michael Jackson biopic, Michael, opens on April 24, a year later than scheduled. Parts of the film were reshot after a legal agreement from 1994 became known, and the ending was rewritten. Since Jackson's death in 2009, our culture has seen seismic shifts, prompting a question we may never answer. But here is my attempt.

Non omnia quae mortua sunt, mortua manent — not all that is dead remains dead.

Michael Jackson died in 2009, steeped in debt. But he certainly didn't remain dead; a reinvigorated Jackson was restored to life. His record sales spiked, a movie deal was done and, within a year, Jackson made $275 million — more money than any other musician or actor, dead or alive, over the previous 12 months. Other lucrative events included a Cirque du Soleil production and a hit Broadway show, all of which brought in over $3 billion in earnings.

But the spectral Jackson also had detractors who refused to let the allegations fade, even after Santa Barbara County Superior Court cleared him of sexual molestation charges in 2005. Suspicions of an unwholesome side to Jackson surfaced as early as 1993 when screenwriter Evan Chandler accused him of abusing his son, Jordan Chandler. A legal settlement the following year prevented this from damaging Jackson's then-flourishing career. (The settlement limited what could be depicted about the issue artistically and, for a while, imperilled the biopic film, Michael — trailer above.)

Head in a lion's mouth

Less than a year after the allegations and settlement, Jackson married Lisa Marie Presley, daughter of the world-famous musician, Elvis Presley. For years before the marriage, Jackson's androgynous presentation, high voice, lack of tabloid-documented romantic history and unusually childlike persona had prompted speculation about his sexuality. Gossip columns periodically asked whether he might be gay or asexual. These unsubstantiated rumors circulated widely and gained impetus from the settlement, making the Presley marriage appear as a validation of his heterosexuality.

Jackson and Presley separated in 1996. That same year, only months after finalizing the divorce, Jackson married nurse Debbie Rowe, with whom he had two children. A third child by an unknown mother followed in 2002.

Exactly what was on Jackson's mind when he agreed to appear in a documentary fronted by journalist Martin Bashir is unclear. If he was trying to improve his public image, it was a catastrophic mistake. Bashir had earlier interviewed Princess Diana and, while it wasn't clear at the time, used unethical methods to persuade her. By the time he agreed to Bashir's request to film him, Jackson had spent over 20 years in the unforgiving glare of showbusiness. Any claim to ingenuousness about media exposure was difficult to sustain. Jackson's decision was rather like starving a lion for a few days and then putting his head in its mouth.

Jackson talked about regularly having sleepovers with children, including a young cancer patient named Gavin Arvizo. Bashir ended the HBO program with his reflections on Jackson's home, known as Neverland Ranch: "A place where his enormous wealth allowed him to do what he wanted, when he wanted, how he wanted." The New York Times described Jackson as "creepy, but almost touching in his delusional naïveté."

The program screened in February 2003. That December, Santa Barbara County District Attorney Tom Sneddon charged Jackson with committing lewd and lascivious acts with a child under the age of 14.

In 2005, Jackson stood trial; the jury heard allegations that he had abused a 13-year-old boy and exposed him to "strange sexual behavior" during visits to Neverland Ranch. But the jurors ultimately concluded the prosecution had not proved its case beyond reasonable doubt. Jackson was exonerated of all charges, walked from court an innocent man and remained legally so for the rest of his life. Innocent, that is, in a legal sense: Rumors persisted up to and beyond his death in 2009.

Where there's smoke…

On October 5, 2017, The New York Times published a story detailing allegations of sexual harassment against Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein. Among those who spoke publicly were actors Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd. The revelations triggered a cascade of accusations against Weinstein that culminated in his arrest and, in February 2020, his conviction for felony sexual assault and a sentence of 23 years' imprisonment. Weinstein maintained his innocence.

The significance of the case extended far beyond one powerful producer. For decades, stories circulated in Hollywood about men who traded professional opportunities for sexual favors, the notorious "casting couch" becoming shorthand for a system of exploitation long acknowledged but rarely challenged.

More than a decade earlier, in 2006, activist Tarana Burke had begun using the phrase, "me too," to support survivors of sexual abuse. After the Weinstein revelations, the phrase was repurposed as a global hashtag and rallying cry. What followed was one of the most consequential cultural shifts since the rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s.

Within a year, hundreds of prominent men across politics, entertainment and media faced allegations of sexual misconduct. Some were prosecuted, many were not. Yet formal verdicts often mattered less than public judgment. Careers ended, projects met cancellation and reputations collapsed even in the absence of criminal convictions.

A new principle seemed to have taken hold: Accusations alone could be enough to remove powerful men from positions of influence. The informal tribunal of public opinion proved faster, harsher and often more decisive than the courts. Guilty or innocent no longer seemed to matter. The adage, "where there's smoke, there's fire," became a serviceable rule of thumb.

Not guilty. So?

Now, reimagine the Jackson episodes I described earlier. In the post-Weinstein world, a settlement may still resolve a dispute legally, but it does not always relieve the defendant from blame even when the out-of-court agreement involves no admission of liability.

The most dramatic illustration of this occurred in 2022: then-Prince Andrew's settlement with

trafficking survivor Virginia Giuffre, who had accused him of sexual assault. Andrew paid an undisclosed amount and donated a sum to a charity. He avoided a trial, but invited a blizzard of innuendo. Further investigations into his relationship with the disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein pushed Andrew into an inescapable corner. King Charles III stripped him of his titles, relieved him of his royal duties and made him an unwilling symbol of privileged depravity.

In 1994, Jackson's global popularity was comparable with Taylor Swift's today. His albums Off the Wall, Thriller and Bad had established him in the same class as Elvis and the Beatles. His video, Michael Jackson's Thriller, remains a classic of its genre. None of the disorienting strangeness of later years had yet appeared and Jackson, like his peer, Madonna, enraptured audiences everywhere.

His prodigious popularity would have been a defense against cynics who suspected the settlement disguised indecent tendencies. Of course, Jackson never had to contend with social media, as he would in the #MeToo world; that in itself could have wrecked his reputation. But, it's conceivable, even likely, that his immense adoration would have been powerful enough to sustain him. The 2003 charges, however, were unexpected and uncontainable.

Remember: Jackson was eventually acquitted on all seven counts of child sexual abuse and two counts of administering an intoxicating agent. But, as we know, the legal precept "innocent until proven guilty" lost purchase in the wake of the Weinstein case. In 2022, actor Johnny Depp won $10 million in damages from his former wife, actress Amber Heard, who had accused him of domestic abuse. But he lost his role in Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean franchise (at that time) and, as an on-screen actor, has only appeared in 2023's Jeanne du Barry since. Actor Kevin Spacey was first accused of sexual assault in 2017 and found not guilty of sexual offences at a criminal trial in 2023, and has recently settled a separate case. In these cases, the actors were accused wrongly, but offers for dramatic roles dried up.

The probability is that Jackson too would have been canceled, his legal innocence overridden by a verdict reached in the less formal but far more potent tribunal of culture. In 2005, when he was cleared, the shadow of the allegations were troubling but not fatal. Of more immediate concern was his extravagant lifestyle, which left him with colossal debts — estimated at his death to be more than "more than half a billion dollars."

Reissues of earlier albums kept public interest alive, but Jackson himself became a recluse. So, when in 2009, he announced his first live concerts in 15 years, it seemed to confirm he needed money. A two-month residency at London's O2 Arena was thought to be worth $400 million. When the concerts sold out and tickets were sold online for $10,000, more dates were added. At 50, Jackson seemed to be on the verge of making an improbable but spectacular comeback. In preparation, he threw himself into an exhausting rehearsal schedule. But as we now know, the concerts never took place.

Within three months of the announcement, Jackson was found dead at his Los Angeles home. The death was ruled a homicide and his personal physician, Conrad Murray, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in 2011. He had given Jackson a lethal dose of propofol, a powerful anaesthetic. Jackson, the public soon found, was also a habitual user of painkillers such as OxyContin and Demerol.

In 2019, an HBO documentary, Leaving Neverland, featured graphic testimony by two men, Wade Robson and James Safechuck, who alleged Jackson abused them as children. A less

publicized claim followed when five members of the Cascio family, longtime friends of Jackson, alleged that Jackson groomed and abused them over decades, beginning when they were children. Jackson's estate quietly paid the accusers $2.5 million.

Would a middle-aged Jackson, apparently scarred by the unproven accusation, beleaguered by debt and at least 12 years past his peak, be offered a lucrative assignment in London and sell out? It's not unthinkable, but fanciful just the same. Like film producers, concert promoters would tend to treat even lightly-soiled A-listers with caution. AEG Live, the prospective promoters of the London "This Is It!" concerts, as they were called, would probably not have taken the gamble; in the event the promoters were well insured.

Would Jackson have lived?

Paradoxically, the #MeToo environment could have saved Jackson's life. Were promoters disinclined to book him and record labels reluctant to offer contracts, he would have been forced to adjust his profligacy and restructure his debts. He still had income from his valuable investments in music publishing.

Perhaps he would have yearned for the buzz of live music and the entertainment industry in which he had been involved since he was six. Yet he would have had the support and comfort of his three children, growing into adolescence, around him (all three children are now in their 20s). He might still have relied on pharmaceuticals to get a night's sleep, but not the intravenously administered nightly cocktail that ultimately killed him.

So, would Jackson have survived in the #MeToo climate? In a professional sense, no. He would have been quietly ushered toward showbiz oblivion, living — probably to the present day, when he'd be 67 — and remembered as a great but seriously flawed megastar. But he would have remained alive. The memory of the scandals would surely have receded, the music endured and the image of the prodigy turned global icon might gradually have eclipsed lingering suspicions.

Instead, his unexpected death froze the argument in place. Neither vindicated nor condemned, Jackson remains suspended between genius and tormentor, a figure whose legend is inseparable from the perhaps unanswerable questions that still surround him.

[Ellis Cashmore is the author of The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

Germany's Conscription Misstep Exposes a Deeper European Problem

Sebastian Schäffer
April 16, 2026

On January 1, Germany implemented a law requiring men aged 17 to 45 to obtain approval before staying abroad for more than three months, sparking widespread criticism due to poor communication and lack of public debate. This shift contrasts with Austria's notification-based system, highlighting broader challenges in balancing security needs with individual freedoms. The episode underscores the importance of transparency and civic trust in Europe's remilitarization efforts.

On January 1, Germany quietly became a country in which men aged 17 to 45 were formally required to obtain approval before spending more than three months abroad. It took until early April for anyone to notice.

I am 44, German, and have lived and worked in Vienna for over a decade. I found out about this provision the same way most people did: through a social media post. That alone should give pause.

A paragraph hidden in plain sight

The Military Service Modernisation Act (Wehrdienst-Modernisierungsgesetz [WDModG]) came into force at the start of the year as part of Germany's broader effort to rebuild its defense capabilities. The policy rationale is straightforward: Germany wants to expand the Bundeswehr (German armed forces) from roughly 184,000 to over 260,000 active personnel by 2035, and it needs to know where its military-age population is in the event of mobilization. Germany is simultaneously sending mandatory service questionnaires to all 18-year-old men this year (voluntary for women), building a clearer picture of available manpower.

The legal mechanism requiring advance approval for extended stays abroad is not new. A similar provision existed in German law since 1986. What changed on January 1 was the trigger: Previously, the rule only activated in a declared state of tension or defense. Now, it applies permanently, even in peacetime.

That is not a minor administrative tweak. It is a fundamental shift in how Germany defines the relationship between the state and citizens in the security domain. And it ended in a communication disaster.

The week that followed

Once the provision came to light, the reaction was swift and politically broad. From the Greens to the Alternative für Deutschland, virtually every party in the Bundestag expressed concern. Some comparisons made — Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance leader invoking the Berlin Wall — were overwrought. This is a democratic government, not an authoritarian one. But the breadth of criticism carried a signal worth taking seriously.

Within days, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius announced that "we are suspending the permission requirement as long as military service is voluntary," adding that different rules would apply in a crisis or defense situation. What had been presented as a considered legislative measure was effectively reversed under a week of public pressure, without a substantive parliamentary debate.

The real problem is not the policy

Europe is remilitarizing. That sentence would have seemed alarmist five years ago; today it is simply a description of political reality. Estonia, Finland, Poland and Sweden — countries that never lost sight of what security requires — have been joined by a growing number of EU members reconsidering or reinforcing conscription frameworks. Germany, which suspended mandatory military service in 2011, is trying to reconstruct the institutional muscle memory that others never let atrophy. Strategically, the direction is difficult to contest.

What this episode exposed, however, is a governance failure that could prove costly precisely because the direction is right. A provision affecting millions of men entered into force on January 1, generated no public information campaign, produced no application infrastructure and was discovered three months later through a report by the Frankfurter Rundschau. The Federal Ministry of Defence promptly confirmed the finding to the German news agency dpa. When the legal basis for a significant restriction on individual freedom is enacted without public communication or parliamentary spotlight, trust in the very institutions that need public buy-in is eroded before policy can take effect.

A pattern worth watching

This is not uniquely a German problem. Across Europe, the logic of security preparation is outpacing the democratic conversation required to legitimize it. Governments are rebuilding defense frameworks that were deliberately dismantled after the Cold War, doing so at speed and under pressure, often in legislative packages that receive little scrutiny. From a planning perspective, the rationale is coherent. The process frequently is not.

For countries in Central and Southeast Europe — Poland, the Baltic states, the Western Balkans — the rearmament debate carries a different texture. These are societies where the memory of occupation and war, as well as the proximity of threat, have kept collective security in public consciousness. They have been making this argument for years. They were right. But being right about the destination does not make the journey automatic.

Germany's stumble over a single paragraph of its Military Service Act is a small illustration of a larger risk: that Europe rearms its institutions without renewing the civic compact that makes those institutions legitimate. An army that citizens distrust is a weak army. A security policy that is quietly legislated, reversed under pressure, and poorly communicated rests on fragile foundations.

What should come next

The suspension of the approval requirement is a sensible short-term response. What is needed now is not just a public conversation, but a structured one. First, clarity: Who is affected, under what conditions and through which procedures? Second, visibility: Legal provisions of this scope cannot remain buried in technical legislation. Third, comparability: Germany should actively draw on models from countries where conscription has remained embedded in democratic practice.

The contrast with Austria, where I live and work, is instructive. Vienna never abolished conscription, and its approach to citizens living abroad reflects a different philosophy: notification, not permission. Under section 11 of the Austrian Military Act, men who relocate abroad for more than six months are required to promptly notify their regional military command and register with the nearest Austrian embassy or consulate. Those who permanently reside outside Austria are typically not called upon while abroad, and their

obligation becomes relevant again upon return. No advance approval is required. The state stays informed; the citizen retains the presumption of freedom.

That distinction between a system built on notification and one built on permission is precisely what Germany's critics have been pointing to. It is also what separates an accepted system from one that risks being contested.

Europe's security challenge is real. Meeting it requires not just legal frameworks and defense budgets, but governments willing to explain, justify and build genuine consent for the obligations they are asking their citizens to accept.

Hiding a paragraph in a 37-page bill is not how you do that.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Germany's Return to Conscription Is Not a Mistake; It's an Obligation.

Elliot Neaman
April 17, 2026

Germany's Military Service Modernization Act marks a crucial shift toward rebuilding its defense capabilities amid growing geopolitical threats and waning reliance on allies. The law restores military registration and prepares for conscription while balancing civil liberties through transparency and oversight. This reform reflects a necessary, responsible commitment to national security rooted in democratic values and historical awareness.

Germany is finally waking up to a harsh reality: In a world of revisionist powers and wavering alliances, a rich democracy at the heart of Europe cannot afford to be militarily weak. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, too many Germans have lived in denial and behaved as if history had ended. Defense spending was squeezed, equipment allowed to decay, and the draft was first hollowed out and then suspended. Some units of the German army trained with toy wooden rifles. Security was outsourced to NATO and, in practice, to the US.

The Military Service Modernization Act, which entered into force on January 1, is an overdue correction. It rebuilds the state's ability to register,

examine and, if necessary, conscript young men for service in the Bundeswehr (the German armed forces). It also contains a controversial provision linking prolonged foreign travel for 17- to 45-year-old men to military registration — a rule that the government has now suspended in peacetime after public backlash.

Critics see a creep toward authoritarianism and a betrayal of post-war Germany's pacifist consensus. But if one takes both the state's duty seriously to protect its citizens and the lessons of European history, the logic of the new framework is compelling. Germany needs a larger, more capable army. It needs legal tools to mobilize quickly if Russia's war spreads, if NATO fractures or if new crises emerge. And it must build this power within a robust constitutional framework that guards against abuse.

Reforming Germany's defense: the path to a modern conscription system

A Germany that refuses to arm itself adequately is not more moral. It does not make a society of Gutmenschen (virtuous citizens), but rather of weak and vulnerable people, much more dependent on others. Besides, the 2026 reform does not restore the blanket, open-ended draft of the Cold War era. Instead, it constructs the machinery that would make a genuine conscription system work if activated.

All males born in 2008 or later will receive a mandatory questionnaire on turning 18. They must disclose basic personal data, indicate their willingness to serve and list any additional nationalities they hold. Women can participate voluntarily, but the constitutional basis for compulsory service remains gendered.

After the 2011 suspension of conscription, Germany stopped systematically collecting such data. Today, the Defense Ministry lacks precise knowledge of how many potential soldiers exist in each cohort, their health status and their skills. In a crisis, this ignorance would be crippling. Re-establishing Wehrerfassung — military registration — is a precondition for any credible defense posture.

Next will come the phased reintroduction of medical examinations (Musterung). Starting with volunteers in 2026 and expanding to all eligible 18-year-old men, the Bundeswehr will again conduct health checks to determine fitness for service. This moves Germany away from an abstract, paper-only draft and back toward a concrete understanding of who can actually carry a rifle, maintain a tank or operate a radar.

The new law further requires the creation of a needs-based conscription mechanism (Bedarfswehrpflicht). The law stops short of an immediate, general draft. Instead, it empowers parliament to activate conscription in targeted ways if voluntary recruitment falls short. The government's stated ambition is to increase the Bundeswehr's strength from about 184,000 active troops to between 255,000 and 270,000 by 2035. Without the option of compulsory service, this is unlikely to be achievable.

The exit-permission clause

The controversial "exit-permission" clause fits into this architecture. As amended, Section 3, Paragraph 2 of the Conscription Act nominally requires men aged 17 to 45 who are resident in Germany to obtain approval from a Bundeswehr Career Center before staying abroad for more than three months. An earlier version of the law limited such a requirement to declared emergencies. The new text extends it to peacetime.

On paper, permission is "to be granted" so long as full conscription has not been activated, and refusal must not impose "particular hardship" on

the applicant. In other words, as long as military service remains voluntary, the state is not supposed to stop anyone from leaving. The provision is less about stopping travel than about maintaining an accurate conscription register: Who is where, and for how long. In a real mobilization, that information could be decisive.

The exit rule triggered outrage once it became widely known, months after the law was passed. The outrage has two main roots. The first is procedural. The provision was buried in cross-references in a long modernization bill. The Defense Ministry did not publicize or explain it, and when newspapers finally reported on it in April, Career Centers themselves lacked clear procedures. Young men technically had a legal duty to seek permission for multimonth trips abroad, but no functioning mechanism to fulfill that duty. That is bad lawmaking by any standard, and it gave critics an easy target.

The second root is Germany's understandable obsession with civil liberties. Conditioning the right to leave one's country on approval from a military office, even if approval is automatic, touches a nerve. Germany's Basic Law guarantees freedom of movement and general personal liberty. Traumatic memories of state control over travel are deeply embedded in political culture, from the Nazi era to 40 years of communism in the east and the division into two Germanies during the Cold War. Opposition parties and legal scholars argued that a peacetime permission requirement could not be reconciled with these guarantees.

Under heavy criticism, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius clarified that as long as service is voluntary, there will be no practical permission procedures; an administrative directive will suspend implementation. In other words, the legal lever exists, but it is locked in a cabinet marked "break glass only in case of emergency."

This outcome is actually a sign of a functioning constitutional democracy. Parliament legislated for worst-case scenarios; the executive scaled back the application to match current needs and rights guarantees; courts remain available as a backstop if the rule is ever used in earnest.

But it is also a reminder of the deeper tension Germany must navigate: how to arm itself seriously without sliding toward the abuses of its 20th-century past.

Assessing Germany's military readiness

To understand why a strongly pro-armament stance is not warmongering but realism, one must begin with the Bundeswehr's current condition.

For years, Germany spent well below NATO's notional 2% of GDP defense benchmark. Successive governments made lofty promises about European security while quietly allowing the armed forces to shrink and age. Training hours were limited by budget constraints and ammunition stocks. Soldiers complained of a lack of basic kit, from functioning radios to winter clothing. Key weapons systems — tanks, helicopters, aircraft — were often unavailable due to maintenance problems and spare-parts shortages.

The suspension of conscription in 2011 accelerated a cultural shift. Military service ceased to be a near-universal experience for young men and became a niche career path. Many draft-age men in the late conscription years had opted out of uniformed service by choosing community work instead. When the draft disappeared altogether, so did a major channel through which the Bundeswehr connected to society at large.

Meanwhile, the technological gap widened. Modern warfare depends on integrated air defense, cybersecurity, drones, electronic warfare and

robust logistics. Germany's procurement system proved sluggish and risk-averse. By the time Berlin announced its Zeitenwende ("turning point") in 2022 after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the gap between rhetoric and reality was enormous.

It is against this backdrop that the new law's personnel focus must be judged. Without enough trained people, no amount of money for hardware will suffice. And without a functioning registration and mobilization system, Germany would be dangerously slow to respond to a sudden deterioration in its security environment.

The case for a stronger, larger German military is not abstract.

Germany's role in European defense

Russia's war against Ukraine demonstrates that large-scale mechanized warfare in Europe is not a relic of the 20th century. A revanchist Kremlin has shown itself willing to erase borders by force. So far, the front line has remained east of NATO territory, but there is no law of nature that guarantees it will stay there.

At the same time, the political foundations of NATO's deterrent power have been shaken. US President Donald Trump repeatedly questioned America's willingness to defend allies he deemed delinquent on defense spending. His rhetoric, including remarks suggesting Russia should be free to "do whatever" it wants to undermine allies, made explicit what European strategists had long feared: US security guarantees may not always be sacrosanct.

Even if future US administrations reaffirm their commitment, the message has landed in Berlin: Europe must prepare for a world in which the American shield is thinner, more conditional or, in the worst case, withdrawn.

In such a world, German weakness is dangerous. A militarily feeble Germany cannot anchor European defense. It cannot credibly deter aggression on NATO's eastern flank. It cannot support vulnerable partners. Nor can it shape the security architecture that might emerge if NATO were to weaken or fragment.

The choice is not between armament and peace, but between responsible, democratic armament and the illusion that others will always fight Germany's battles for it.

A strongly pro-armament stance in today's Germany does not mean embracing militarism. It means accepting that the use or credible threat of force is sometimes necessary to defend a liberal order and building the capabilities to exercise that force under strict civilian, constitutional control. In this light, the Military Service Modernization Act is a step in the right direction. It treats defense as a national responsibility, not an afterthought. It restores tools, registration, medical examination and conscription triggers that every serious state with a conscription tradition maintains. It signals to allies and adversaries alike that Germany is no longer content to be a security free-rider.

Ensuring a responsible and transparent approach to military service in Germany

To make this project compatible with Germany's history and civil-liberty commitments, some guardrails are crucial, beginning with transparency and parliamentary oversight. Any move from registration and voluntary service to actual compulsory service should require explicit parliamentary authorization and be accompanied by open debate. Hidden clauses and poorly communicated rules, such as the initial handling of the exit-permission provision, undermine trust and feed fears of a slippery slope.

A strong constitutional review will also be necessary. The Federal Constitutional Court should, if asked, scrutinize measures that condition core freedoms, such as movement, on military needs. A clear doctrine distinguishing necessary and proportionate wartime measures from disproportionate peacetime restrictions would help legitimize the system. Germany's post-war success rests partly on the willingness of courts to place limits on state power; that must continue.

A set of meaningful alternatives but narrowly tailored protections for those who refuse to fight because of conscientious objections should also be included. A modern conscription system need not be purely military. Civilian service in critical infrastructure, disaster relief or social care can complement uniformed duty. Robust procedures for conscientious objection should remain in place. The key is not to force everyone into combat roles, but to make clear that citizenship in a vulnerable democracy entails obligations as well as rights. Within those guardrails, however, Germany should embrace a straightforward truth: Rebuilding the Bundeswehr is not just acceptable; it is necessary.

Germany's shift towards military readiness and strategic responsibility

For too long, Berlin profited from a strategic environment shaped by others. It enjoyed cheap Russian gas, benefited from Chinese demand and was sheltered under American security guarantees. That era is ending. Like bankruptcy, it came gradually and now all at once. Germany now faces a world in which authoritarian powers are more assertive, alliances more contingent and the costs of military unpreparedness potentially catastrophic.

In that world, the new conscription framework is less a radical departure than a long-overdue normalization. It is what serious countries do when they acknowledge that they may, at some point, have to defend themselves and their neighbors without relying on someone else's sons and daughters.

Yes, parts of the law were drafted clumsily. Yes, the travel-permission clause in its original peacetime form overreached, and the government was right to scale it back. But to use that misstep as a reason to reject the broader project would be to confuse procedural flaws with strategic necessity.

Europe needs a militarily capable Germany, not to dominate, but to stabilize. Germans who, with good reason, invoke history to argue for restraint should also remember a different lesson from their past: that power vacuums can be as dangerous as power excesses. A Germany that cannot defend itself invites either domination or dangerous dependence.

Arming responsibly, building a credible conscription-based mobilization system and embedding it all within the rule of law is not a betrayal of post-war Germany's values. It is their logical extension into a more dangerous century. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once quipped that the Germans are either at your throat or at your feet. That verdict was obviously too harsh. But a grain of truth resides in the witticism that Germans have shown themselves to be either too militaristic or too pacifist. It is high time for some common-sense middle ground.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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He has edited and introduced several translations of Ernst Jünger's works and contributed to volumes on the radical right, including *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*. Neaman is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Right-Wing Studies (UC Berkeley). His Selected Writings: *A Journey in Intellectual History* (1988–2025) is forthcoming in the "Best of the Humanities" series from Columbia University Press.

Why Viktor Orbán's Defeat Matters

Elliot Neaman
April 19, 2026

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's recent electoral defeat in Hungary signals a potential turning point in the fight against rising nationalist authoritarianism, with lessons for the US as it confronts Trump-style populism. The Hungarian opposition's success highlights the central role of fighting corruption and addressing everyday economic concerns in defending democracy. However, lasting change requires active citizen engagement, coalition-building and courageous leadership.

Historical turning points are rarely obvious in real time. It took many years before historians could evaluate the sources without partisan passion and render the verdict that the Progressive Era had truly displaced the Gilded Age or that the civil-rights revolution had finally superseded the complacency of the Eisenhower era. Even the Thatcher–Reagan Revolution, which ushered in Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises as economic guideposts and moved beyond Kissinger-style detente to a more hawkish foreign policy, was not viewed by conservatives at the time as an inevitable wave but rather as a series of defensive battles against the status quo. Only in hindsight can we determine that what is called "neo-liberalism" was an actual watershed in history.

Historical modesty warns us to view Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's stunning defeat in Hungary last Sunday as only possibly another such historical inflection, not necessarily an actual turning point. Orbán could come back to power if the opposition fails to live up to its promises. Autocrats in other countries might see the situation in Hungary as a warning sign and crack down even harder on their populations. Nevertheless, his electoral defeat was important.

Orbán was not just a local strongman, but rather a central model and muse for an entire generation of nationalist right-wing leaders, including US President Donald Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) imitators. If the architect of "illiberal democracy," as he boasted, can be routed, despite a captured media, tilted institutions and deep corruption, that raises implications far beyond Budapest.

We cannot yet know whether this is the beginning of a long global backlash against authoritarian nationalism or a localized setback. But several forces now converging — from economic strain and war fatigue to Trump's visible physical and mental decline and the humiliation of his chosen lieutenants — suggest that the winds may finally be shifting against the nationalist right.

Orbán's illiberal model

Orbán's importance was never just about Hungary's just under ten million citizens. Since returning to power in 2010, he consciously branded himself as the avatar of a modern form of illiberalism, democratic in form but authoritarian in practice. He tightened control over broadcast media and large parts of the press, channeled state contracts to cronies, reshaped the courts and electoral rules, and used xenophobia and culture-war politics as glue.

For American and European populists, Hungary became a kind of nationalist TED talk convention. Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) held gatherings in Budapest while former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, American political activist Tucker Carlson, Claremont Institute intellectuals and social-conservative activists paraded through Orbán's orbit. Conservative activist, former FOX News commentator and lobbyist Matt Schlapp's Center for Fundamental Rights received approximately €1 million (~$974,659) in 2022 and over €2 million (~$2,173,913) in 2023 from state-funded Hungarian foundations to co-organize the CPAC conferences. There is substantial evidence of Hungarian government funding for CPAC events, primarily through state-linked foundations and think tanks.

Hungarian Prime Minister-designate Péter Magyar alleged after his victory that Orbán diverted taxpayer money to fund CPAC as part of a "criminal offense" involving party financing. Magyar announced an immediate halt to taxpayer funding for CPAC and pledged to establish anti-corruption agencies to investigate these payments. Out in the open, meanwhile, Republican politicians from US Secretary of State Marco Rubio to Vice President JD Vance flew to Budapest to pay homage to Fidesz and learn from what they openly espoused as a model for the US.

The rise of Magyar

Despite all the countervailing winds, Orbán did not merely lose; he lost badly. His party's vote collapsed after years of seemingly unassailable dominance. He had designed a system to entrench himself and suffocate the opposition. Yet voters, mobilized by a new movement under Magyar, broke through. For American politics, the symbolism is powerful. The regime that MAGA elites openly admired as a blueprint has just been overthrown at the ballot box.

The story of Magyar's rise matters because it shows how to beat a deeply entrenched populist regime. Magyar is not a left-wing revolutionary. He is a center-right figure who came out of Orbán's own party, roughly analogous to former US Representatives Liz Cheney or Adam Kinzinger, who finally, from inside the Grand Old Party (GOP), broke decisively with Trump. That background gave him credibility with voters who had once supported Orbán.

Magyar built a movement, not merely a party. Deprived of fair access to the media, he went directly to voters, especially in rural areas where Orbán's media environment had been most suffocating. Magyar traveled relentlessly, holding town halls and rallies, using social media as a force multiplier. The opposition parties, including the left, swallowed their pride, thought strategically and accepted Magyar's leadership, uniting behind

him even though he was to their right on most issues.

Magyar notably rooted his campaign in everyday concerns, what we call the affordability crisis, health care, education and, above all, the cost of living, while still framing Orbán as a threat to Hungary's democratic future and European orientation. He often referenced the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 to arouse patriotic feelings and turn the citizenry against Russian domination and interference. Hungarians didn't just tire of Orbán's culture war and Russian President Vladimir Putin's influence; they tired of stagnant living standards, demographic decline and the sense that neighboring countries were doing better.

During the Cold War, Hungary enjoyed "Goulash Communism," the highest standard of living within the Warsaw Pact. Today, the Hungarian economy (in terms of purchasing power) has fallen behind Romania, a significant blow to national pride. Hungarians look across their borders and see that their economic decline was not inevitable, but rather the product of bad, corrupt governance.

Magyar's campaign promises to defend democracy and fix people's material problems were crucial. The anti-Trump forces in the US should take note, however, that he did not exaggerate Orbán's threat to democracy, nor did he concentrate on wedge-issue culture wars; instead, he focused on bread-and-butter issues. Liberal democracy won in Hungary not as an abstraction, but as a promise to improve daily life under an honest government.

The limits of populist governance

Trump's rise in 2016 was part of the same global upsurge that lifted Orbán and fueled Brexit. Nationalist parties and leaders could channel legitimate grievances about migration, globalization and the failures of centrist elites into a politics of resentment. They could promise simple solutions and muscular "strongman" leadership without having to demonstrate competence.

But demagoguery governs badly. Orbán's Hungary offers a case study. Once in power, strongmen face the same stubborn realities as democrats: pandemics, inflation, geopolitics and economic complexity. Populism cannot protect a domestic economy by erecting barriers against the entire globe. Populism cannot pretend to listen to the voice of the people while it silences any dissent. Populism cannot pretend to be defending the interests of the common man while enriching the already wealthy and powerful. After all the bluster, populist authoritarians tend to revert to crony capitalism, institutional hollowing-out and theatrical nationalism instead of sound policies.

Trump fits this pattern. Twice now, he has ridden anti-incumbent waves to power, first in 2016 against the Obama-era Democratic establishment, and again in 2024 against President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris amid post-COVID inflation. Americans who voted for Trump did so primarily because they believed he would turn the economy around for them. But Trump and his family have profited enormously, while the net worth of average Americans has stagnated. As of March 2026, Trump's net worth has increased by approximately $3 billion to $4.2 billion since returning to office in January 2025, with Forbes estimating his total wealth at a record $7.3 billion, up from $4.3 billion in 2024.

Trump's second presidency is already visibly failing on its own terms. His Iran War, launched impulsively and then managed erratically, has rattled oil markets, worsened an already acute affordability crisis and brought the Strait of Hormuz to the brink of closure. Gasoline prices,

already a source of voter anger, have climbed further. Voters may not follow every twist of Middle Eastern diplomacy, but they understand six-dollar gas.

Like Orbán, Trump tries to distract from policy failure with melodrama: social-media tirades, personalized feuds and symbolic gestures designed for the base. But there are growing signs that the spectacle is wearing thin. Even many Americans who once voted for Trump now show signs of exhaustion and disillusionment. The man who once seemed, to his admirers, like an iconoclastic outsider now looks like a tired, angry incumbent.

Trump's late-night screeds on his own Truth Social platform have become longer, more erratic and more self-pitying. At least on Twitter, he was limited to 140 characters. Posting an image of himself as Jesus, not merely blessed by Christ, but as Christ, and lashing out at the pope is the kind of grandiose behavior that, in any other era, would raise urgent questions about a president's fitness for office. The "stable genius" shtick is shading into something more disturbing.

Corruption and cronyism exposed

Corruption also lies in plain sight. Americans are increasingly aware that Trump governs as he does business, by enriching family, cronies and co-investors. From Middle East envoys with vast financial stakes in the region to cronies profiting from regulatory changes, the pattern is unmistakable. Special envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner not only have no credentials to negotiate an end to the Iran War — they have no technical expertise in the details of nuclear weapons, nor any background in history and diplomacy, as is normally required of high-level negotiators — but they also have substantial business dealings in the region and the outcome of the war will personally affect their own self-interest. Orbán's downfall reminds voters that crony corruption is not just "how politics works" but rather is what happens when populists with disdain for expertise run a government.

Vance embodies this problem. Once a bestselling critic of Trumpism, he reinvented himself as a loyalist and is now tied to Trump's misadventures abroad and at home. He campaigned publicly for Orbán just before the Hungarian strongman's rout. The high mark of chutzpah was Vance complaining about foreign interference in domestic elections while he was actively on the stump for Orbán's party. He then traveled to Islamabad to help sell Trump's Iran policy and came home empty-handed as the war worsened. Even Trump's treatment of Vance, sending him to do the dangerous, thankless work while Trump enjoyed an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) event with Rubio, underscores the dynamic.

In any other presidency, a foreign war would take precedence over just about any other issue. But Trump thought it would be a good idea to take Rubio to watch UFC fake fighters put on a Vaseline-rubbed mixed-martial-art cosplay rather than deal with statecraft. This is not the behavior of a confident leader grooming a serious successor, but rather that of a flailing boss toying with subordinates.

Authoritarian decline and coalition fractures

Trump's actions are reminiscent of late-stage authoritarian movements elsewhere, when once-feared lieutenants begin to look ridiculous, and being close to the leader starts to look like a political liability rather than an asset. Vance's much-touted conversion to Catholicism now sits awkwardly alongside a public feud with an American pope who embodies a morally serious, anti-authoritarian Catholicism, and who clearly wants nothing to do with Trump's court. The Pope

is also a savvy organizer, against whom Trump is flailing.

When US President Richard Nixon was behaving as erratically as Trump does now, as the Watergate scandal consumed his presidency, there were similar worries about whether the chief executive was mentally capable of carrying out his duties. The 25th Amendment (which addresses presidential succession and the temporary transfer of power) was seriously considered. But in Trump 2.0, there is no adult backup in the White House or conscientious generals in the military — such as former Secretary of Defense James Mattis, retired Lieutenant General Herbert Raymond McMaster or retired General Mark Milley — to guide us through such a constitutional crisis.

The clash with the pope matters politically because it exposes a fissure inside Trump's own coalition. For years, many white evangelicals and conservative Catholics offered elaborate rationalizations for their support of Trump, casting him as a flawed but necessary instrument in a larger culture war. Many believed God had chosen him to lead America. They accepted his insults, his affairs and even his boasts about sexual assault as the price of power.

But many of those voters are recoiling from the imagery of Trump as a quasi-divine figure and from direct attacks on a pope who speaks in recognizably Christian terms about peace, human dignity and the perils of idolatry, with a Chicago accent. When rank-and-file evangelicals and Catholics criticize Trump openly on these grounds, they offer what political scientists call "permission structures," the cues elites give their followers to take unpopular stances. These kinds of changes do not happen overnight.

In Hungary, Orbán retained impressive support on paper until quite late. But once a critical mass of respectable figures begins to defect, or simply to speak candidly about a leader's failings, momentum can shift quickly. Voters suddenly feel they are not alone in their misgivings. What was once unthinkable, breaking with "their" leader, becomes, at first, possible, and then inevitable.

Historical parallels and future implications

History does not repeat itself, or even rhyme, as the old cliché goes, but it does offer patterns. The current moment has resonances with several earlier inflection points in liberal democracies. The Progressive Era marked a reaction against the corruption and inequality of the Gilded Age. Reformers did not overthrow capitalism, but they imposed constraints, antitrust laws, regulation and social insurance, which made it survivable for ordinary people.

The civil-rights movement equally represented a profound moral and political break with the "respectable" segregationist laws of the mid-20th century. For years, it was unclear whether the cause would prevail. Then, abruptly, the combination of movement pressure, political leadership and cultural change produced a new consensus and a new generation of leaders that would have been hard to imagine in the 1950s.

The Thatcher–Reagan era then saw a turn away from postwar social democracy and activist government toward market liberalism and limited government. For young conservatives at the time, UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's 1979 victory, soon followed by US President Ronald Reagan's in 1980 and the emergence of Pope John Paul II in the Vatican, created a sense that history's momentum had shifted in their favor.

Orbán's defeat, President Volodymyr Zelensky's resistance in Ukraine and Magyar's emergence in Hungary may play a similar galvanizing role for defenders of liberal democracy today. Two leaders from small countries with big

megaphones in Central and Eastern Europe are showing that it is still possible to both resist Kremlin-linked illiberalism and speak convincingly to their citizens' immediate material needs. Their example should put to rest the idea that only a nationalist strongman can channel popular frustration or that only the far left can credibly oppose inequality and corruption. A broadly liberal, anti-authoritarian politics can be tough on borders and security, serious about economic grievances and uncompromising on democratic norms.

If Orbán's defeat offers lessons for the US, they are not about importing Magyar's precise policy platform. They are about coalition, leadership and moral clarity. In Hungary, long-time liberals and leftists accepted a center-right, ex-Orbán figure as their standard-bearer because he was the candidate best positioned to win. In the US, that translates into a willingness among Democrats, moderates and anti-Trump conservatives to unite behind candidates, sometimes imperfect ones, who are serious about defending democratic norms, fighting corruption and improving living standards. Above all, it means jettisoning purity tests and focusing on the issues that matter to regular voters instead of to the loud fringe.

Voters respond not to ideological checklists, but to leaders who seem to understand their lives and can explain in plain language how things can get better. The most effective Democratic voices today are those who treat affordability, education, safety and the border as real problems, not as talking points to be brushed aside, while drawing a bright line against authoritarianism and bigotry.

The centrality of anti-corruption and the need for action

As the Hungarian opposition showed, opposing corruption and illiberalism is not ancillary to economic progress; it is central to it. In the US, that means making clear that Trump's crony capitalism is not an unfortunate side effect, but a primary reason why ordinary people keep losing ground while insiders thrive. It is important to resist two temptations. The first is despair, the conviction that Trumpism is an unalterable feature of American life. The second is complacency, the belief that history has now turned, that liberal democracy is once again "inevitable" and that our only task is to ride the wave.

The truth lies between. Orbán's fall, the limits of Trump's war and the visible fraying of his personality cult all suggest that we may be entering a period of backlash against nationalist authoritarianism. New coalitions are forming, new leaders are emerging and even some former loyalists are beginning to peel away.

But history offers no guarantees. Inflection points only become turning points when people act, when citizens organize, when parties make courageous choices, when leaders articulate a compelling alternative and when institutions prove stronger than demagogues.

Hungary's voters have reminded the world that even a deeply entrenched illiberal regime can be defeated democratically. The question now is whether Americans, facing a weaker but still dangerous form of Trumpism, can learn from their example and seize the moment before it slips away.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Leveraging the Kurds: Inside US Plans to Pressure Tehran

Nawzad Shukri
April 21, 2026

US strategies for supporting Iranian Kurdish groups could fuel internal unrest, strain Iran's military capacity and weaken the regime. The Kurds have legitimate concerns about abandonment, stressing their need for protection in both regime survival and collapse scenarios. Ultimately, the Kurds aim to translate cooperation with the US into political gains, including recognition of autonomy in Iran's future.

In early March 2026, US President Donald Trump called Kurdish leader Mustafa Hejri, the head of the Iranian Democratic Party. The purpose of this call, according to the sources, was to push Kurds to support the US–Israel war against Iran. In this regard, reports indicate that US and Israeli intelligence agencies are working with the Iranian Kurdish fighters to use them as ground forces against Iran in western Kurdistan.

The US has long-standing ties with the Kurds, which date back to the 1970s during the Kurdish rebellions against the Iraqi central government. Following the uprising in Iraqi Kurdistan in March 1991 and the creation of the no-fly zone over the Kurdistan region of Iraq, relations between the Kurds and the US have improved significantly. This relation with the regime change in Iraq in 2023 has further enhanced as the Kurdish fighters play a key role in helping the US open a new frontline in northern Iraq to topple the Saddam regime.

Similarly, during the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, the US decisively supported the Kurdish figures in Iraq and Syria. The Kurds, with help from the US, played a key role in defeating ISIS in both countries. Hence, this historical partnership has laid the groundwork for Washington to publicly discuss the possibility of using Iranian Kurdish fighters as ground forces in a conflict against the current Iranian regime.

Trump has sent mixed messages in this regard. On March 5, he argued that he would support Kurdish forces if they decided to launch a military offensive against Iran, describing the idea as positive. When asked whether the US would provide air support for the operation, he declined to give a clear answer, saying he could not discuss that.

However, on March 7, Trump ruled out having Kurdish fighters join the war against Iran. In this regard, he said, “I don’t want the Kurds going in. I don't want to see the Kurds get hurt, get killed. I told them I don't want them. The war is complicated enough.”

There is no clear answer whether the US will finally topple the regime or, at this specific stage, end this war. Hence, the key question is: Why has the Kurdish factor in Iran suddenly become an important topic in the US and Israel's war against Iran?

In reality, there are many explanations for this. One possibility is that Israel and the US could move toward overthrowing the Iranian regime in Tehran. However, this has not yet been officially and clearly announced by the US. Moreover, Kurdish fighters could be viewed as an effective instrument in this context. In particular, the US and Israel seek to make western Kurdistan a platform for inciting and encouraging a general uprising in the rest of Iran.

Another possibility is that the US might have wanted to use Kurdish forces as a tool to pressure the current Iranian authorities and push them to make greater concessions to Trump’s demands. As he recently said, the aim of the war is “unconditional surrender” of the Iranian authorities.

Fear of abandonment: Kurdish demands for guarantees in any alliances against Iran

The Iranian Kurdish opposition parties are willing to seize the opportunity and ally with the US and Israel against Iran to achieve their historic ambition, manifested in establishing a federal or autonomous region in western Kurdistan. However, they have serious concerns about moving forward with such a policy without concrete guarantees of protection. In particular, the US doesn’t have a clear strategy, and it explicitly argues that the endgame is not regime change in Iran, but the destruction of Iranian military capacities.

Furthermore, while the US has supported the Kurds at different times, it has also abandoned them on several occasions, leaving them to face existential threats. For example, following the Kurdistan independent referendum in September 2017, the Trump administration allowed Iraqi federal troops and Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shaabi militias — with direct support of Iran — to attack the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Kirkuk and disputed areas. As a result, the Kurds lost roughly 40% of the territory that Peshmerga had held. At that time, Trump said the US would not take a side.

In January 2026, even though the Kurds were key partners of the US in the war against ISIS in Syria, they were abandoned once again. The Trump administration allowed the former commander of Al Qaida al-Sharia, with his Damascus-led army, to attack the Kurdish forces and take the territory under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). As a result, on January 20, Tom Barrack, US Special Envoy for Syria, declared that the Kurdish-led SDF’s role as the primary anti-ISIS force had “largely expired.”

This background indicates that Kurdish concerns are genuine, as they fear the possibility that the US could once again abandon them. Therefore, before taking further steps, they seek guarantees and assurances from the US. The key demands of the Iranian Kurds are a guarantee that they will not be abandoned in the face of an Iranian threat, in both cases, whether the Iranian regime collapses or remains in place.

This is a very important point, in particular, if the regime survives, it may again crush the Kurds and could even commit genocide against them as it

has done after 1979. Hence, in this case, establishing a no-fly zone in Eastern Kurdistan is crucial to ensure that the Kurdish people are protected. Further, the Kurds seek to convert their military achievements into political gains. Therefore, the US should back the Kurds by guaranteeing support both if the current regime collapses and in advancing their demands for some sort of autonomy.

Between Iranian threats and proxy attacks: Kurdistan faces rising security risks

In fact, any cooperation between the US and Iranian Kurdish groups against the regime in Iran would have serious implications for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It is clear that the KRG has sought to reassure Tehran that it would not pose a threat. However, increasing conflict with the US is pushing the Iranian regime to pursue a more aggressive policy in the KRG. In particular, Iran and its proxy militias in Iraq have frequently threatened and targeted the Kurdistan region.

Since the 2020 assassination of Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian military officer who served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran has essentially turned the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) into a battlefield, sending a message to the US, Israel and its allies. Following the regime's murder of the young Kurdish-Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, and the outbreak of demonstrations across Iran in September 2023, the country has intensified its attacks against the KRI. As a result, the IRGC bombarded the Kurdish-Iranian opposition groups.

Iran blames the Iranian Kurds for instigating and sustaining the protests in Iran. Even the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, Esmail Ghaani, has threatened an unprecedented ground military operation against Iraqi Kurdistan if Baghdad does not disarm Iranian Kurdish opposition groups on Iraqi soil. Following the 12 days of war with Israel in June 2025, Iranian proxies in Iraq hit oil fields and infrastructure in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. These strikes targeted oil facilities, airports and some military locations.

With the start of the new military operation by the US and Israel against Iran beginning February 28, once again, the KRI turned into a battlefield, and Iran and its proxies are intensively targeting infrastructure in the Kurdistan region. These attacks intensified following reports that Trump spoke with Iraqi Kurdish leaders by phone, urging them to support the Iranian Kurdish opposition.

In a statement, the KRG strongly rejected reports suggesting the Kurdistan Region is taking part in a plan to arm and send Kurdish opposition parties into Iranian territory. Furthermore, the KRG emphasized that it would not be part of the current conflict, which could expand across the region. It reiterated the Kurdistan Region's stance of avoiding further conflict amid the current regional turmoil.

Hence, it can be argued that if the US pushes Iranian Kurdish opposition groups to participate in a war against Iran, the KRG could face serious and even existential risks, even if it rejects or refuses to support such a policy.

The Iranian authorities are clearly sending a very serious warning and threatening the KRI in case Iranian Kurdish fighters are involved in the war. On March 6, Iran's Defense Council released a statement stressing that so far, Iran has only focused on US and Israeli bases in the region, as well as opposition political parties operating within the Kurdistan region.

It added that:

"Should their continued presence and plotting be permitted, or should these groups or [Zionist]

regime elements enter the borders of the Islamic Republic through the Region, all facilities of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq … will be targeted on a massive scale."

Further, the Spokesperson of the Khatam Al-Anbiya, Lieutenant Colonel Ebrahim Zolfaghari, issued a serious warning to the Kurdistan region, stating that any attempt by the Kurdistan region to deploy hostile forces in the Iranian border strip will be met with severe action by the Iranian armed forces.

Hence, in the case of involving the Iranian opposition Kurds in this war, the most dangerous scenario for the KRG would be if the political system in Iran remains in place and does not collapse, and if the US and Israel halt their attacks. There's no doubt the KRG would face a serious threat, and Iran would do everything to undermine the KRG's position.

One of the key instruments that Iran could use, besides directly attacking the Kurdistan region, is using its militia proxies in Iraq and even the Iraqi government led by the Shia parties against the KRG. In particular, since the eruptions of the current war, the Shia militias have intensified their attacks against the Kurdistan region. According to Rudaw News, since the beginning of the war, more than 638 drones and missiles have targeted the Kurdistan Region.

Therefore, in any scenario where the US pushes Iranian Kurdish fighters to participate in a war against Iran, it should provide clear assurances and guarantees not only to the Iranian Kurdish groups but also to the Kurdistan Region, which could face serious security consequences from such involvement.

[Zania Morgan edited this piece]

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Full Compartmentalization in Indo–Bangladeshi Relations?

Md. Himel Rahman
April 23, 2026

Following Bangladesh's 2024 political transition, ties with India weakened due to visa, trade and diplomatic strains, alongside hostile media. However, energy trade, naval coordination and prisoner exchanges continued, showing partial compartmentalization. The new Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government may restore connectivity, yet domestic pressures will likely institutionalize full compartmentalization.

On February 24, the Agartala-Dhaka-Kolkata international bus service, linking the Indian states of Tripura and West Bengal via Bangladeshi territory, was resumed after an 18-month suspension. Four days prior to this, all Bangladeshi diplomatic missions in India resumed issuing visas of all categories to Indian citizens on a limited scale, with India reportedly contemplating doing the same. Meanwhile, some Indian media outlets are expressing cautiously optimistic views of a "reset" in ties with

Bangladesh under the newly elected government in Dhaka, while others continue to push anti-Bangladeshi narratives.

For example, the Assam Tribune recently claimed that Bangladesh is involved in a conspiracy to send "illegal immigrants" to West Bengal ahead of the province's Legislative Assembly elections. On February 26, Indian law enforcement agencies initiated a major crackdown on alleged Bangladeshi "illegal immigrants" in Bengaluru. This demonstrates that the Indo–Bangladeshi relations remain in flux after the recent parliamentary elections in Bangladesh.

Compartmentalization in foreign policy

In foreign policy, the concept of compartmentalization refers to a situation in which states compartmentalize the issues in their relations, leading to cooperation on some issues and disputes in others, while avoiding complete rupture.

In the 21st century, the relationship between Russia and Turkey best exemplifies the notion of compartmentalization in foreign policy. Since the 2010s, Russia and Turkey have engaged in competition for influence and in some instances, proxy wars in several theaters, including Syria, Libya and Transcaucasia. Simultaneously, Russia served as the principal source of natural gas for Turkey, built a nuclear power plant in Turkey and sold advanced air defense systems to it, while millions of Russian tourists continued to visit Turkey every year.

Even now, Turkey supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, supplies it with weapons and seeks to undermine Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, yet it continues to act as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, buys large quantities of oil and gas from Russia, and acts as a hub of key EU-origin military goods for Russia. This is a classic example of compartmentalization of bilateral relations, in which Moscow and Ankara cooperate on several issues and compete in others, while avoiding outright conflict.

Partial compartmentalization: Indo–Bangladeshi relations after the July uprising

After the overthrow of the Bangladesh Awami League-led government, which was closely aligned with India, on August 5, 2024, an interim government took power in Bangladesh, and bilateral ties between Dhaka and New Delhi went downhill. Between August 5, 2024, and February 12, 2026, India undertook several hostile actions against Bangladesh. New Delhi suspended most visa services for Bangladeshi citizens, withdrew nonessential staff and their families from Indian diplomatic missions in Bangladesh, canceled transhipment facilities for Bangladesh, started forcibly pushing migrants over the border and refused to normalize ties with Dhaka pending additional elections.

Moreover, Indian media outlets waged a sustainable information warfare campaign against Bangladesh. Indian politicians accused Bangladesh of conducting a "genocide" against Hindus. The Bangladeshi High Commission in New Delhi and the Assistant High Commission in Agartala were attacked, and some Indian politicians and analysts indirectly called for genocide and ethnic cleansing of Bangladeshis.

In response, Bangladesh undertook some reciprocal actions against India, including the suspension of bus services to India, the cancellation of a $21 million defense deal and a refusal to sign an energy deal with India's H-Energy. Moreover, Indian commentators viewed Bangladesh's rapprochement with Pakistan, recalibration of ties with China and defense procurement negotiations with Turkey negatively.

Yet Dhaka sought to avoid a complete rupture in bilateral relations, leading to continued cooperation between the two countries in some sectors. For instance, Bangladesh held a joint naval exercise with India in the Bay of Bengal in March 2025, continued to import diesel from India and exchanged prisoners with its neighbor in January 2026. Also, Bangladesh refrains from formally joining any anti-Indian bloc or alliance.

Thus, under the interim government, Indo–Bangladeshi relations underwent a process of partial compartmentalization. This means that bilateral issues were dealt with separately instead of collectively, leading to disputes on some issues and cooperation in others.

Towards full compartmentalization?

After the formation of a government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), both Indian and Bangladeshi officials have expressed optimism about the normalization of bilateral ties and some steps. These steps include the invitation sent to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the inauguration of the BNP-led government and the resumption of the India–Bangladesh bus service and visa services for Indians, which have already been taken in this regard.

Yet, the BNP's political legitimacy is largely based on a narrative of "protecting Bangladesh's sovereignty" vis-à-vis external actors, particularly India. It has repeatedly expressed strong stances on issues such as border killings and water-sharing. While the new government in Dhaka has extended an olive branch to New Delhi, Pakistan is likely to invite Prime Minister Tarique Rahman as the chief guest to the Pakistan Day parade next month, indicating continued rapprochement between Dhaka and Islamabad.

Moreover, if the BNP-led government is viewed as "too soft" on India by opposition parties, such as the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP), it is likely to face significant domestic political backlash. Similarly, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party-led (BJP) government would be hard-pressed to make any concessions to Bangladesh, especially as the BJP's domestic political narrative uses a lot of anti-Bangladeshi rhetoric.

Hence, it is highly unlikely that the Indo–Bangladeshi partnership is going to reach the level it achieved under the Awami League government. Nonetheless, it would be in the interests of both Dhaka and New Delhi to cooperate on a range of issues, including water-sharing, transnational crime, migration, trade and connectivity. Such cooperation could prevent the outbreak of conflict.

The Ganges Water-Sharing Treaty is set to expire on December 12, 2026, and the two parties would need to negotiate to avert another crisis about the sharing of the waters of the transboundary Ganges River. On the other hand, issues such as Bangladesh's growing strategic ties with China, Pakistan and Turkey, border killings, the potential denationalization of millions of Bengalis in Assam and the use of xenophobic rhetoric in domestic politics would continue to complicate bilateral ties and preclude full concord. Thus, under the BNP-led government, Indo–Bangladeshi relationship is likely to slide towards full compartmentalization.

[Patrick Bodovitz edited this piece]

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Singularity and the Doomsday Clock

Alfredo Toro Hardy
April 25, 2026

The Singularity marks a profound shift where AI surpasses human intelligence, threatening to render humanity obsolete and powerless. Experts warn of existential risks comparable to nuclear war, fueled by a competitive, unregulated AI race. As this transformative moment approaches, humanity faces unprecedented challenges to its survival and centrality on Earth.

The term "Singularity" refers to the point at which AI surpasses human intelligence and begins to improve itself faster than humans can understand or control. Once that threshold has been crossed, technological change can become unpredictable. In June 2023, a report by The New York Times argued that Silicon Valley was confronted with the idea that the Singularity had already arrived. Meanwhile, in January 2026, Elon Musk posted on X that we have entered it and that "2026 is the year of Singularity." Shortly after, on February 12, Dario Amodei, CEO of Anthropic, stated that we don't know if the AI models are conscious.

Is, thus, the most decisive moment in the history of humankind, materializing before our eyes? It would seem so.

What really matters, however, is the gigantic gap that will begin taking place once the Singularity arrives. Locked in its biological prison, human intelligence will remain static at the point where it was surpassed, while AI will continue to advance at an exponential pace.

The most decisive moment in the history of humanity

This pace is reminiscent of the emblematic fable of the grain of wheat and the chessboard, set in India. As the story goes, if we place one grain of wheat in the first box of the chessboard, two in the second, four in the third and the number of grains keeps doubling until reaching box number 64, the total amount of virtual grains on the board would exceed 18 trillion. The same will happen with the advance of AI.

The initial doublings, of course, will be impactful but not mind-blowing. Two to four, or four to eight, can be easily absorbed by the human mind. However, as well-known futurist Ray Kurzweil wrote in 2005, the moment of transcendence should arrive 15 years after the Singularity itself. At that point, the explosion of non-human intelligence would have become truly staggering. However, that will be only the beginning.

As Israeli historian and author Yuval Noah Harari pointed out, the two main attributes that separate homo sapiens from other animal species are intelligence and the stream of consciousness.

While the first has allowed humans to take control of the planet, the second gives their lives meaning. Flow of consciousness translates into a subtle interweave of memories, experiences, sensations, sensitivities and aspirations.

According to Harari, though, human intelligence would become absolutely negligible when compared to the levels that AI can reach, whereas the stream of consciousness will become a manifestation of capital irrelevance in the face of algorithms able to penetrate the confines of the universe. Not in vain, in his terms, human beings will be to AI the equivalent of what chickens are to humans.

Transformational stages

Periodically, humanity goes through transformational stages that shake everything on its path. During these, values, beliefs and certainties are eroded to their core and replaced by emerging ones. In the case of Western Civilization, there have been three major periods of this kind in the last 600 years — the Renaissance, which took place in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, and Modernism that began at the end of the 19th century and reached its peak in the mid-20th century.

The Renaissance is understood as a broad-spectrum movement that led to a new conception of the human being, transforming it in the measure of all things. It represented, meanwhile, a major leap in scientific matters, in which, on top of great advances in multiple areas, the Earth ceased to be seen as the center of the universe.

The Enlightenment, on its part, placed reason at the center of everything. This was not only in the understanding of nature and society, but also as a conveyor of political legitimacy and a source of liberal ideals such as freedom, progress and tolerance. It was, concurrently, a period during which the notion of harmony was projected in all directions, including the understanding of the universe. During the Enlightenment, the scientific method began to be supported by verification and evidence. The Enlightenment represented a new milestone in the self-gratifying vision that humans had of themselves.

Modernism, understood as a movement of movements, led to an overturning of prevailing paradigms in almost all areas of existence. Among its numerous expressions were abstract art in its various forms: stream-of-consciousness literature, psychoanalysis, musical atonality and the theater of the absurd. Reason and harmony, as a result, were turned upside down at every step.

Following its own dynamic, but feeding back the above-mentioned process, science toppled the pillars of certainty. This included the harmonious universe built by English polymath Isaac Newton during the Enlightenment. The notions of time and space lost all their meaning under the theory of Relativity, while, going even further, quantum physics made the universe a place dominated by randomness. Unlike the previous two major periods of change, this one eroded the self-gratifying vision humans had of themselves to the bones.

The Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Modernism unleashed and symbolized new ways of perceiving human nature and its surrounding universe. Each of them confronted humanity with new levels of consciousness (including the notion of the subconscious during Modernism). Through them, humans could feel more or less valued, more or less secure with respect to their own condition and to their position in relation to the universe.

However, a fundamental element remained unchanged: Humans were always the ones who studied themselves and their surroundings. Even as

their nature and motives were questioned, their centrality to the planet was never challenged. As it had been since the Renaissance, humans were the measure of all Earthly things.

The countdown towards the end

Singularity, however, is called to destroy that human centrality in a radical and irreversible way. As a result, human beings will not only confront their obsolescence and irrelevance, but will embark on the path towards becoming the equals of chickens. Everything previously experienced in the march of human history will dramatically pale by comparison.

We are, thus, within the countdown towards henhouse grounds. Or worse still, within the run-up towards the destruction of humankind itself. This is what Stephen Hawking, one of the greatest scientists of our time, envisaged as a result of the advent of the AI era. This is also what hundreds of top-level scientists and CEOs of high-tech companies expressed in May 2023, when they signed an open letter warning about the risk to human subsistence posed by uncontrolled AI. For them, such risk was on par with those of a nuclear war or a devastating human pandemic. Furthermore, at a "summit" of bosses from large corporations, held at Yale University in mid-June 2023, 42% believed that AI could destroy humanity in five to ten years' time.

Cofounder of Anthropic, Dario Amodei, expressed the danger involved in the following terms:

There are some people in the field … who say: "Look, we program these AI models … We just tell them to follow human instructions, and they'll follow human instructions" … And the other intuition is … They're a new species. How can you imagine that they're not going to take over? My intuition is somewhere in the middle … They're more like growing a biological organism … AI systems are unpredictable and difficult to control.

The Doomsday Clock

In the short- to medium-term, and at the cost of massive unemployment, AI will spur gigantic advances in multiple fields. Inevitably, though, at some point in time, this superior intelligence may want to take control and pursue its own ends. If so (more so when), humanity would be doomed.

Unfortunately, a market-driven approach with regard to AI prevails in the US. The federal government, seeking to surpass China in AI development, has given a free pass to AI companies that, in turn, try to outrun one another amid what former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and political scientist Graham Allison called a "gladiatorial struggle."

In this race to the top, there is neither time nor inclination to consider the consequences. Moreover, competing AI companies want to ensure that Congress doesn't slow them down through regulation. To this end, they have amassed a $200 million war chest to influence the November midterm elections by ousting critics.

If something characterizes our historical period, it is the lack of instinct of self-preservation by humans. If nuclear war or climate change fails to get rid of the human species, AI will probably do it. The Singularity represents a major step in that direction. Not surprisingly, the Doomsday Clock has never shown such a short time to the midnight of humankind — just 85 seconds.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Rebalancing Power in Global Health: The End Of Donor-Driven Models

Nikia Crollard
April 26, 2026

Global health funding has collapsed by nearly 50% since 2021, child mortality is rising for the first time this century, and the donor model that built modern global health is breaking apart. Countries across the Global South are scrambling to replace billions in lost aid before the human cost becomes irreversible. Whether they succeed will define who lives and who dies in the decades ahead.

The year 2025 will be remembered as the moment global health's foundations shifted beneath our feet. Funding collapsed to levels not seen in 15 years. The US stepped back from decades of global health and development leadership. And for the first time this century, child mortality reversed course and began climbing again.

But these crises revealed something else: The donor-dependent model that has defined global health for generations is breaking down. What emerges in its place will determine whether we're witnessing a system-wide collapse or the painful start of a more fraught yet sustainable model.

What's at stake isn't just funding, it's whether the world still believes that health is a universal right rather than a privilege rationed by donor priorities and borders. Will 2025 be marked as the year "country ownership" stops being a buzzword and starts being a strategy?

Funding retreats as needs grow: exposing the flawed aid system

According to the latest data from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, development assistance for health (DAH) has plummeted by roughly 50% since its post-pandemic peak from $80 billion in 2021 to around $39 billion this year, returning to the lowest level in over a decade. This isn't solely an American phenomenon, although the US led the retreat with a 67% cut. The UK reduced health assistance by 39%, France by 33%, Germany by 12% and Finland by 11%.

Other traditional development funding streams are following suit. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the world's largest humanitarian network, cut its 2026 appeal by nearly half a billion dollars despite surging crises. As donors abruptly cut funding, the human cost is materializing, and the need for reimagined

solutions remains greater: Child deaths increased in 2025 for the first time this century. If current funding trajectories continue, projections suggest 12 million additional children could die by 2045.

The fragility of the donor-led system that has been exposed by these cuts has forced institutions to reckon with the state of global health. In May, global health leaders issued a public call for a "leaner, more coherent architecture" with fewer agencies competing for shrinking resources. We heard the subtext: The sprawling, overlapping system built during flush times cannot survive the new wave of austerity.

Traditional Global South "recipients" respond

With no return to the old funding landscape in sight, a "new normal" is being enacted in some low and middle-income countries. The African Union and the Global Fund formalized a partnership in November to strengthen health systems and accelerate domestic resource mobilization, an explicit hedge against external funding volatility. In December, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) partnered with Zipline International to expand drone-based medical supply chains and epidemic early warning systems across the continent, prioritizing African-designed solutions over imported models.

Joint financing mechanisms have evolved to match the momentum. In December, the World Bank and Gavi committed at least $2 billion through 2030 for immunization, primary health care strengthening, and regional vaccine manufacturing. Unlike traditional aid, these funds emphasize long-term sustainable financing to strengthen local health systems and economies rather than encourage dependency.

These new, emerging initiatives represent a strategic pivot by countries and regions, releasing old "donor-dependent" narratives, and moving from "policy-takers" to "policy-makers". For years, "country ownership" and "Global South leadership" were buzzwords in donor strategies and conference declarations. 2025 stands as the year that these words are becoming an operational reality.

What comes next

As we look forward to 2026 and beyond, we know the old system isn't coming back. What remains to be seen is whether what replaces it will be better for some of the poorest countries that have historically needed health aid the most.

If implemented "right", consolidation and in-country-led projects could mean more efficient resource allocation. Regional institutions, accountable to the populations they serve rather than distant donors, could prove more responsive and potentially sustainable. Domestic financing mechanisms could provide stability that donor whims never guaranteed. Integration of vertical disease programs into primary health care could strengthen systems rather than fragment them.

If done "wrong", this means critical gaps where funding vanishes faster than alternatives can scale. Countries with already weak governance structures or ongoing conflicts fall further behind, and our most vulnerable populations bear the cost of a transition they didn't choose.

Global health has reached its inflection point this year: the donor-driven architecture that defined the field is breaking and regional institutions are stepping forward, sometimes by design, often by necessity, with the world's most vulnerable populations caught in between. The year 2026 must be when the sector chooses a direction: cling to a model built for a different era, or embrace one in which countries and regions

drive global health agendas, with donors in supporting roles.

[Luna Rovira edited this piece.]

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The Dollar as a River of Power

Masaaki Yoshimori
April 28, 2026

The US dollar functions as the core infrastructure of the global economy, shaping financial flows while limiting policymakers' control over its consequences. Its dominance generates domestic tensions and enables global influence, yet also encourages rivals to develop alternatives. As economic tools become instruments of power, even major economies pursue resilience, accelerating fragmentation and gradually reshaping the global monetary system.

The US dollar is often described as the world's reserve currency, but that description understates its true role. It is not simply a unit of account or a medium of exchange — it is the underlying infrastructure of the global economy. A more accurate metaphor is a river: vast, dynamic and shaping the terrain through which it flows. Nations do not merely use the dollar; they operate within its currents. Trade is invoiced in it, reserves are held in it and financial systems depend on its liquidity. According to the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), the dollar is involved in nearly 88–90% of all foreign exchange transactions, far exceeding the economic weight of the US itself. This overrepresentation is not incidental — it is the foundation of American monetary power.

Yet this power is paradoxical. The US issues the world's dominant currency, but it does not fully control its consequences. Global demand for dollar liquidity, safety and credibility determines its strength as much as domestic policy does. As a result, policymakers are left attempting to steer a system that reacts to forces beyond their reach. Like a river, the dollar can be guided, influenced and redirected at the margins — but it cannot be held still or commanded outright. This structural reality defines both the strengths and limitations of American economic leadership.

Domestic economic and political tensions

At the domestic level, the dollar's strength produces a subtle but persistent transformation of the US economy. A strong dollar lowers the cost of imports, suppresses inflation and attracts global capital into US financial markets. This creates a

sense of stability and prosperity: consumers benefit from cheaper goods, asset prices rise and inflation remains contained. But beneath this surface, the structure of the economy begins to shift. As the dollar appreciates, US exports become more expensive in foreign markets, reducing external demand for domestically produced goods. Manufacturing sectors face sustained pressure, not through sudden collapse but through gradual erosion. Production yields ground to consumption, and the economy becomes increasingly oriented toward finance rather than industry.

This dynamic is not merely economic; it is political. The dollar redistributes benefits and costs across different groups. Financial institutions, asset holders and consumers gain from a strong currency, while export-oriented industries and manufacturing workers face structural disadvantages. The result is a persistent tension within the domestic economy, one that cannot be resolved through simple policy adjustments. A weaker dollar might support industrial competitiveness and export growth, but it would also raise import prices and risk inflation. A stronger dollar stabilizes prices but deepens the shift toward financialization. There is no optimal equilibrium — only a continuous balancing of competing objectives.

This tension is reinforced by the constraints it places on monetary policy. The Federal Reserve does not directly set the value of the dollar, but its decisions shape global capital flows. Higher interest rates attract foreign investment, strengthening the dollar and tightening financial conditions worldwide. Lower rates may ease upward pressure, but they can also trigger capital outflows and weaken confidence. The relationship is circular: The dollar influences inflation, and inflation constrains monetary policy. For example, a weaker dollar raises import prices, contributing to inflationary pressure, which in turn forces the central bank to maintain tighter policy. The currency thus operates as a feedback loop rather than a controllable instrument.

Global power and strategic responses

The complexity deepens when the dollar is viewed in its global context. It functions as the backbone of an extensive financial network, linking banks, corporations and governments across borders. Institutions such as the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) facilitate this system, enabling transactions that are overwhelmingly denominated in dollars. The result is a form of infrastructural power that is both pervasive and largely invisible. The US does not need to intervene directly in every transaction; its influence is embedded in the system itself.

This embedded power becomes most visible in the use of financial sanctions. By restricting access to dollar-based systems, the US can exert pressure on other countries without deploying military force. This strategy has been used across administrations, from former President Barack Obama to current President Donald Trump, reflecting its effectiveness as a tool of statecraft. When access to the dollar is limited, the impact extends beyond the immediate target. Financial institutions, multinational corporations and even neutral countries adjust their behavior to avoid exposure, amplifying the reach of US policy. In this sense, the dollar operates as a global gatekeeper.

However, this power is not without cost. The more the dollar is used as an instrument of coercion, the more it reveals the risks associated with dependence on it. Other countries, observing the reach of US financial sanctions, have begun to seek ways to reduce their exposure. This does not mean abandoning the dollar altogether — its advantages remain unmatched — but it does mean building alternatives that can function in parallel.

These alternatives are not replacements; they are safeguards.

Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in China's strategy under President Xi Jinping. China has pursued the development of financial systems that can operate independently of dollar-based infrastructure. The Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) allows for renminbi-denominated transactions outside traditional Western channels, while digital currency initiatives aim to create new mechanisms for cross-border settlement. As Xi has emphasized, "a powerful currency that can be widely used in international trade, investment and foreign exchange markets, and attain reserve currency status." This approach is not about immediate dominance but about long-term resilience. It recognizes that in a system where financial infrastructure can be weaponized, dependence itself becomes a strategic risk.

A similar logic is emerging in Europe, though with a different emphasis. President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde has framed the development of a digital euro as more than a technological innovation. "It is a political statement concerning the sovereignty of Europe," she has argued, highlighting the connection between monetary systems and strategic autonomy. The euro already accounts for roughly 20% of global foreign exchange reserves, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), making it the second most important currency after the dollar. But its role remains constrained by fragmented financial markets and institutional limitations within the EU. Efforts to deepen integration and modernize payment systems are therefore not just economic initiatives — they are attempts to reduce reliance on external infrastructure and enhance Europe's position in a changing global order.

Lagarde has cast the digital euro as a sovereignty project, a logic that also informs attempts to integrate the EU's capital markets. As these efforts move forward, the euro could attract wider international use, especially from those seeking alternatives to a dollar system perceived as increasingly politicized.

Recent events suggest that the global economic landscape is entering a more defensive phase. US Vice President JD Vance convened ministers from more than 50 countries at the first Critical Minerals Ministerial, signaling Washington's urgency in countering China's dominance over rare-earth supply chains. Beijing, for its part, has been advancing a parallel strategy. Days earlier, Qiushi, the Chinese Communist Party's flagship journal, published a speech by Xi calling for the renminbi to "attain reserve currency status," while regulators quietly encouraged banks to scale back purchases of US Treasury bonds.

These moves, though different in form, point in the same direction: a growing effort by major powers to reduce strategic dependence and secure greater control over critical economic levers. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has suggested, such dynamics can leave smaller states with little choice but to align defensively. Yet even this interpretation does not fully capture the moment. The deeper shift is that vulnerability is no longer asymmetric. In a system where finance, currencies and supply chains can be weaponized, even the largest economies are increasingly aware of their own exposure.

It is this shared sense of fragility — not just competition — that is beginning to reshape policy. Governments are no longer acting solely to expand influence, but to limit risk, hedge against disruption and insulate themselves from external pressure. The result is a global system that feels less stable, more fragmented and increasingly driven by precaution rather than confidence.

These developments reflect a broader transformation in the nature of globalization. In the past, economic integration was pursued primarily for efficiency and growth. Supply chains were optimized, financial systems interconnected and dependencies deepened. Today, those same dependencies are increasingly viewed as vulnerabilities. Countries are no longer concerned only with maximizing gains from trade and finance; they are also focused on minimizing exposure to external control. The global system is shifting from one defined by interdependence to one shaped by strategic competition.

Erosion, confidence and the future of the dollar

This shift creates a feedback loop that complicates the exercise of American power. Each time the US uses the dollar as a tool of coercion, it strengthens the incentive for others to develop alternatives. These alternatives, in turn, reduce the effectiveness of future actions. The process is gradual but cumulative. It does not lead to a sudden collapse of dollar dominance, but to a slow erosion of its centrality. The river does not disappear — it begins to branch.

The durability of the dollar ultimately depends on confidence. According to the IMF, the dollar still accounts for approximately 58% of global foreign exchange reserves, far exceeding any competitor. This reflects not only economic fundamentals but institutional credibility. US financial markets are deep and liquid, legal systems are relatively stable and the dollar remains the default currency for global transactions. These factors create a self-reinforcing system: The more the dollar is used, the more valuable it becomes.

But confidence is not immutable. It is shaped by experience, and repeated exposure to the risks of financial coercion may gradually alter perceptions. Countries do not need to abandon the dollar to reduce its influence; they need only diversify enough to create alternatives. Even a partial shift can change the balance of power over time.

In this evolving landscape, the challenge for the US is not to maintain absolute control but to manage a system that is inherently dynamic. The dollar's strength lies in its centrality, but that centrality depends on trust as much as on power. Overuse of financial leverage risks undermining that trust, while underuse may limit the ability to respond to geopolitical challenges. The task is therefore one of balance — preserving the benefits of dominance without accelerating its erosion.

The metaphor of the river captures this challenge precisely. The dollar flows through the global economy, shaping and being shaped by the forces around it. It carries immense power, but that power is diffuse and contingent. Policymakers can influence its direction, but they cannot fix its course. Attempts to do so risk destabilizing the system itself.

In the end, the dollar is not just a currency; it is a reflection of a broader reality about power in an interconnected world. It is fluid rather than fixed, relational rather than absolute and always subject to change. The US remains at the center of this system, but the nature of that center is evolving. The river still runs through it — but the channels are widening, the currents are shifting and the task of navigation is becoming more complex with each passing year.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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The Fertilizer Fault Line: The Hidden System That Could Trigger the Next Global Crisis

Masaaki Yoshimori
April 30, 2026

Fertilizer, deeply tied to energy and concentrated supply chains, is a critical yet fragile foundation of global food systems. Disruptions — especially through chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz — trigger rapid price spikes, followed by delayed food inflation via reduced yields. This lagged, nonlinear transmission makes fertilizer a leading indicator of food crises and a growing geopolitical asset shaping global stability.

Fertilizer rarely commands attention in moments of crisis. Oil shocks dominate headlines, financial markets react instantly to geopolitical tensions, and policymakers mobilize in response to inflation and currency stability. Yet beneath these visible systems lies a quieter foundation that sustains something far more fundamental: the global food supply. If oil is the bloodstream of the global economy, fertilizer is its metabolism — the process that converts energy into life. Without it, modern agriculture would not simply slow; it would contract sharply, reshaping the limits of human survival.

The invisible backbone of the global economy

The scale of dependence is striking. Approximately half of global food production relies on synthetic fertilizers, particularly nitrogen-based inputs such as ammonia and urea. This dependency is structural rather than optional. Fertilizer enables soils to exceed their natural fertility limits, supporting yields that sustain a population of more than eight billion people. In its absence, agricultural output would fall dramatically, not gradually, because modern crop systems are calibrated around high-input, high-yield conditions.

This dependence is further intensified by fertilizer's deep integration with energy markets. Nitrogen fertilizers are produced through the Haber-Bosch process, which relies heavily on natural gas as both a feedstock and an energy source. As a result, fertilizer prices track energy prices closely. When natural gas prices rise — as they did sharply during recent geopolitical disruptions — fertilizer production costs increase almost immediately. Phosphate fertilizers, meanwhile, depend on sulfur, a byproduct of oil refining, reinforcing the linkage between energy systems and agricultural inputs.

This dual dependency creates a structural vulnerability. Fertilizer is designed to stabilize food production, yet its own supply chain is highly sensitive to shocks. When energy markets tighten

or trade routes become uncertain, fertilizer availability and affordability deteriorate rapidly. Unlike other inputs, this deterioration cannot be easily absorbed or delayed.

Recent market behavior illustrates this fragility. During geopolitical tensions in 2026, fertilizer prices rose sharply within weeks. Urea prices increased by roughly 50% in several markets, while farmers reported cost increases of $100 to $300 per ton in Virginia. These movements were not driven by fundamental production shortages but by uncertainty surrounding supply routes and trade disruptions. The system did not collapse — but it became constrained. And in a system with minimal slack, constraint alone is enough to trigger cascading effects.

Fertilizer can be understood through a simple but powerful metaphor: it is the oxygen of agriculture. Oxygen is rarely noticed when it is abundant, yet even small reductions can impair biological function. Similarly, fertilizer is largely invisible in the final food product, but its absence—or even partial reduction—can significantly affect crop yields. The system does not fail immediately, but it weakens, gradually and cumulatively, until its limits are exposed.

The chokepoint that feeds the world

The vulnerability of fertilizer supply is most clearly revealed at a single geographic point: the Strait of Hormuz. Known primarily as a critical artery for global oil shipments, the Strait is equally essential for fertilizer markets, though this fact receives far less attention. A substantial share of global fertilizer exports originates in the Persian Gulf and must pass through this narrow waterway.

The concentration of supply is significant. Countries in the region account for more than 30% of global urea production and a notable share of ammonia and sulfur exports. More broadly, an estimated 30% of global fertilizer trade transits the Strait. This creates a structural bottleneck in the global agricultural system: A localized disruption has the potential to produce global consequences.

What makes this chokepoint particularly dangerous is the absence of viable substitutes. Unlike oil, which can sometimes be rerouted through pipelines or supported by strategic reserves, fertilizer supply chains are less flexible. Production facilities are geographically concentrated, tied to natural gas reserves or mineral deposits, and cannot be easily relocated or expanded in the short term. Transportation networks are similarly constrained, with limited alternative routes available.

The lack of strategic reserves further amplifies this vulnerability. While many countries maintain oil stockpiles to buffer against supply shocks, fertilizer markets lack comparable mechanisms. There is no global system of reserves that can be released in times of disruption. Instead, shocks are transmitted directly into prices and availability, leaving farmers and consumers exposed.

This structural design reflects a broader trade-off between efficiency and resilience. Over decades, global fertilizer production has become increasingly concentrated in regions with cost advantages, optimizing for efficiency under stable conditions. However, this concentration has reduced redundancy. When a critical node such as the Strait of Hormuz becomes unstable, the entire system is affected.

The implications extend beyond logistics. The Strait is not merely a transit point; it is a critical junction linking energy, chemicals and agriculture. It connects natural gas extraction to ammonia production, oil refining to sulfur supply and fertilizer manufacturing to global food systems. Disruption at this node does not just affect one

commodity — it affects an entire chain of interdependent processes.

Simulation insight: from fertilizer shock to food inflation

Understanding the broader impact of fertilizer disruptions requires moving beyond static analysis and considering dynamic interactions over time. Fertilizer markets do not operate in isolation; they are part of a lagged system in which cause and effect are separated by months.

A simplified simulation of recent conditions reveals a plausible pattern. When fertilizer prices rise sharply — by roughly 20% to 40% or more — the immediate effect is likely to appear first in farmer behavior rather than retail food prices. Farmers may reduce fertilizer application, delay purchases or shift acreage toward less nutrient-intensive crops. These are rational responses to cost pressure, but their consequences appear with a lag. Food prices may remain relatively stable initially because of inventories, forward contracts and ongoing production cycles. After several months, however, reduced fertilizer use and higher production costs can contribute to higher food prices. In the simulation, this delayed food-price response is smaller than the fertilizer shock — about 5% to 10% — but more persistent.

A simplified simulation of recent fertilizer shocks reveals a consistent and empirically supported pattern. When fertilizer prices increase sharply — around 20–40% or more — the immediate effect is observed in farmer behavior rather than food prices. Farmers respond within weeks by reducing application rates, delaying purchases or shifting toward less fertilizer-intensive crops. Food prices initially remain stable due to inventories and production lags, but begin to rise after several months, consistent with observed farm-to-retail transmission delays of 1–6 months. The resulting food price increase is smaller in magnitude — typically in the range of 5–10% — but more persistent, reflecting partial pass-through and ongoing production cost pressures.Figure: When fertilizer spikes, food follows — just later. Fertilizer prices react immediately to supply shocks, but food prices move with a lag. Farmers first adjust inputs and planting decisions; only months later do lower yields and higher costs reach consumers. The result is a slower, more persistent rise in food prices. Author's graph.

This lag structure is not hypothetical. It is supported by empirical evidence. During the 2007–2008 global food crisis, fertilizer price spikes preceded food inflation by several months. A similar pattern was observed following the disruptions associated with the 2022 war in Ukraine. In both cases, the transmission mechanism followed a predictable sequence: input shock, behavioral adjustment, output reduction and price increase.

The key feature of this system is its nonlinearity. Small increases in fertilizer prices may lead to modest adjustments, but beyond a certain threshold, farmer responses become more pronounced. When application rates fall below optimal levels, crop yields decline sharply rather than gradually. This introduces a tipping-point dynamic, in which relatively small shocks can produce disproportionately large outcomes.

This dynamic also explains why fertilizer markets serve as an early warning indicator for food inflation. When fertilizer prices rise sharply and persistently, they signal future constraints in agricultural production. The lag between input costs and output prices creates a window in which

the underlying risk is not yet visible in consumer markets.

Based on current conditions, the evidence suggests that even a moderate disruption lasting a single planting season could produce measurable effects on global food prices. Historical relationships between fertilizer costs, energy prices and food inflation indicate that increases in the range of 5% to 10% are plausible. While such increases may appear modest, they can have significant consequences for food security, particularly in regions where households spend a large share of their income on food.

From soil to strategy: fertilizer and global stability

The implications of fertilizer disruptions extend far beyond agriculture into the realm of geopolitics. As food security becomes increasingly linked to national stability, control over fertilizer supply chains is emerging as a form of strategic power. Countries that produce and export fertilizers gain leverage over those that depend on imports, reshaping economic and political relationships.

Recent developments suggest that this dynamic is already taking shape. During periods of disruption, major exporters have strengthened their influence as alternative suppliers, while import-dependent countries have faced heightened vulnerability. Trade flows have, in some cases, become more selective, reflecting geopolitical alignments rather than purely market-based decisions.

This pattern mirrors dynamics observed in energy markets, but with potentially greater consequences. Energy shortages disrupt economic activity, but food shortages can destabilize societies. This elevates fertilizer from a commodity to a strategic asset — one that influences not only markets but also political outcomes.

Looking ahead, several structural trends are likely to shape the future of fertilizer systems. Geopolitical risk is expected to remain elevated, particularly around key trade routes such as the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, the energy transition may gradually reshape fertilizer production, with investments in green ammonia offering a potential alternative to natural gas-based processes. However, these technologies are still developing and will require significant time and capital to scale.

Agricultural practices may also evolve. Advances in precision farming and soil management could improve fertilizer efficiency, reducing the amount required per unit of output. Yet these innovations are unevenly distributed and unlikely to fully offset supply risks in the near term.

Taken together, these trends point to a system that is becoming more complex, more interconnected and more exposed to disruption. The fertilizer market, once considered stable and predictable, is increasingly shaped by geopolitical forces and structural constraints.

The broader lesson is that global stability depends on systems that are often overlooked. Fertilizer operates quietly, embedded within the global economy, until a disruption reveals its importance. The current tensions surrounding the Strait of Hormuz demonstrate how a single chokepoint can influence not only energy markets but also the availability and affordability of food worldwide.

If oil is the bloodstream of the global economy, fertilizer is its metabolism. Disrupt that process, and the system does not fail immediately — but it weakens, gradually and cumulatively. The next

global crisis may not begin with a financial collapse or an energy embargo. It may begin in the soil — with nutrients that fail to arrive, crops that fail to grow and a system that, despite its efficiency, proves less resilient than assumed.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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