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Independence, Diversity, Debate

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The Future of AI-Enabled Drone Warfare After the US–Iran Conflict

Sajal Shahid
September 03, 2026

Technology has always outrun the laws of war, and AI-enabled drones are no different. The recent US–Iran conflict produced 13,000 strikes in 38 days, driven by autonomous targeting systems, operating faster than any human could verify. As cheap AI-guided drones continue to replace costly missiles and edge closer to non-state actors, the failure to regulate them increasingly becomes a threat to international humanitarian law.

Rapid technological advancements have always outpaced the legal and ethical aspects related to warfare. The strategic bombers used in World War I preceded the laws on civilian targeting. The development and use of the nuclear bomb predated the drafting of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which established the principal legal framework for international nuclear non-proliferation. Similarly, armed drones became a routine instrument of US foreign operations in areas such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Legal experts continued to debate whether their use outside active war zones could be deemed unlawful. In each case, the deployment of technology established the facts on the ground long before diplomacy could develop legal frameworks, which were ultimately shaped by the states already in power.

The US/Israel war on Iran marked the latest, and perhaps most consequential, instance in that

sequence. During the conflict, the US' use of AI-enabled targeting reportedly enabled 13,000 strikes in the first 38 days alone. Even with this technological development, international law remained stagnant. The formation of a binding international treaty on autonomous weapons, which the UN Secretary-General had called for by 2026, remained stalled due to opposition from the major military powers that have been developing and using this technology.

The US–Iran drone war

On February 28, the US launched Operation Epic Fury — a large-scale military campaign against Iran that featured one of the US' largest air-naval offensives in the region since the 2003 Iraq War. Aiding this operation was the Pentagon's Maven Smart System, an AI-based data fusion platform that processes drone footage, satellite imagery and signals-based intelligence to identify and select targets across the battlespace. Within 24 hours, the operation struck over 1,000 targets and assassinated Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and several senior officials. The more revealing development, however, was the types of systems this AI supported: cruise missiles and cheap, small drones.

The recently formed US Central Command's (CENTCOM) Task Force Scorpion Strike, created specifically to accelerate the acquisition and deployment of low-cost drones, flew the Low-cost Uncrewed Combat Attack Systems (LUCAS) into combat for the first time during this war. LUCAS, an inexpensive one-way attack drone, cost the US military approximately \$35,000 per munition compared to more than \$2.5 million for a single Tomahawk cruise missile. LUCAS represents a future where warfare increasingly employs cheap, mass-produced and AI-guided drones.

Iran responded in kind, countering with its own Shahed-136 swarms targeting the US Fifth Fleet

headquarters in Bahrain. Both sides were now fighting with the same category of weapons, but the difference lies in the targeting systems behind them. This advantage was later highlighted by CENTCOM Commander Brad Cooper's statement, where he credited AI tools as the main factor that allowed the force to "make faster decisions than the enemy."

The growing role of AI-enabled drones in the future

While both missiles and drones can be equipped with the same AI-driven targeting systems, they do not pose equivalent threats. Missiles, such as the US Tomahawk, are both expensive and finite, which is why states may prefer to produce and deploy them in limited quantities. In contrast, drones (with smaller airframes and commercial-grade sensors) are significantly cheaper, easier to produce and quicker to replace. This already makes them highly attractive for modern warfare, with the addition of AI further increasing their appeal.

Given the widespread use of drones by terrorist groups, this combination dramatically raises the risk of AI-enabled systems proliferating to non-state actors. Beyond that, deploying these drone platforms makes complying with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) much more difficult in comparison to missiles.

For instance, loitering munition operations can involve hours of surveillance over highly populated areas, and while AI pattern recognition can greatly aid in target selection, it can also increase the probability of misidentification. This, in turn, can have potentially disastrous consequences as the application of IHL (particularly the principle of distinction) in civilian-dense areas is already fraught with challenges such as the intermingling of combatants

and civilians and the close proximity of military objectives to protected infrastructure.

Similarly, AI-enabled swarms can saturate air defenses in ways no single missile ever could, further constricting defenders' reaction time. Iran's Shahed barrage used against the Israeli and Gulf air defenses during Operation Epic Fury hinted at this vulnerability. The next generation of these systems could be more difficult to intercept and nearly impossible to attribute once the resulting debris is dispersed across borders.

This issue of escalation can also arise as AI targeting algorithms become more entwined with the strike platform. AI has already shortened decision cycles to seconds and is likely to compress them further. When AI identifies targets faster than operators can verify them, the likelihood of keeping a "human-in-the-loop" becomes slim, at which point following IHL (which assumes actions are both deliberate and traceable) becomes very challenging.

The governance issue and the need for change

It is important to note that the lack of a binding framework for this technology is not coincidental. The UN Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) — the main international treaty that bans or restricts conventional weapons deemed to cause unnecessary suffering or indiscriminate harm — has debated autonomous weapons since 2014, but has yet to produce a viable solution due to the lack of consensus among states developing this technology. The same occurred in November 2025 when the UN General Assembly (UNGA) passed a resolution calling for the formation of a binding treaty, and major powers, such as Russia and the US, opposed it.

In order to achieve change, two things must be considered. First, negotiations must move outside the CCW's consensus veto to prevent individual

state interests from blocking regulations. Second, meaningful human oversight must be redefined to include a universal standard rather than relying on the dubious diligence of independent actors. While the ways of warfighting have always outpaced the law, the current gap results from systems deliberately preserved by the leading powers. As conflicts evolve to include even more actors and cheaper systems, the need for regulatory frameworks becomes urgent.

[Christian Audia edited this piece.]



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Brazilian 2026 Election: Lula's Soft Power Skills Threatened by a Hard-Power World

Franthiesco Ballerini
September 05, 2026

Brazil's October election matches the polarized 2022 election, with incumbent Brazilian President Lula da Silva polling ahead of Senator Flávio Bolsonaro. He has artists' support and international recognition in

healthcare, diplomacy and political values — all soft power fields. Flávio, conversely, presents a challenge by focusing on vital hard power areas: public safety, national security and economy.

An unusual race is taking place in the 2026 Brazilian presidential election. On the surface, it seems to be a repeat of 2022's election, as polls show that the nation is still polarized between two candidates. Incumbent Brazilian President Lula da Silva leads with 41% of voting intentions while Senator Flávio Bolsonaro follows closely with 37%. All other candidates sit way below with 5% or less, a scenario that has not changed over the whole year.

But below the surface, a different battle is pulling the strings: the soft-power president against an opponent who appeals to hard power. Soft power is the ability to shape the people's preferences, and it operates mainly by diplomacy, science, sports, political values and culture. Hard power, on the other hand, is usually a coercive strength along with economy (the one who holds it against others that depend on it), politics (autocracy, dictatorship and non-democratic acts in democracies) and military (favoring relations by guns, conflicts and wars).

Lula's friend: soft power

Lula is undoubtedly the candidate best connected with cultural soft power. When racing against Flávio's father in 2022, former President Jair Bolsonaro, Lula had major support from the most preeminent artists in Brazil, who campaigned for him in the media and on the streets. For their decisive support, Lula had promised to recreate the Ministry of Culture and strengthen popular and peripheral culture, decentralizing public policy by state committees. Throughout his third

administration, artists have pressured Lula to approve the Streaming Bill, which charges taxes on streaming platforms and big tech corporations to strengthen national production. The bill, however, faced major resistance from conservative parties and is currently being processed in the Plenary of the Federal Senate, awaiting a vote after returning from the Chamber of Deputies with changes.

Lula also leads in diplomacy and political values. He's gained a great deal of recognition from international leaders: Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, said that Lula "is a leader deeply committed to the values we hold dear. Democracy, a rules-based international order, and respect. Respect for our planet, for communities, and for fellow nations. This is the leadership we need in today's world." Former US president Joe Biden saluted Lula for his effort to strengthen democratic institutions. French president Emmanuel Macron demonstrated tactile rapport and diplomatic closeness. And former UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak highlighted Lula's role in the "promotion of democratic values."

Science is another soft power source that Lula leads. His three administrations have always emphasized expanding the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS), and maintaining broad coverage even amidst an international landscape of strained healthcare funding. Leaders of the World Health Organization (WHO) have classified this system as one of the few that cover the entire population regardless of income or nationality. Brazil's policy for combating HIV/AIDS has been an international benchmark for decades, owing to its pioneering provision of free, universal and comprehensive antiretroviral medication through the SUS. The model frequently receives praise from agencies such as the WHO and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

Lula's rival: hard power

Lula's main opponent is not Flávio, a first-term senator whose only approved bill in seven years was to modify the rules of the National Program for Directed Productive Microcredit. Thanks to his surname, Flávio Bolsonaro is far ahead of conservative opponents who have much more political experience and approval. For example, former Goiás state Governor Ronaldo Caiado and former Minas Gerais state Governor Romeu Zema only have 5% and 3% of voting intentions, respectively.

No, Lula's true rival is the hard power that drives our world today. Wars, weapons, and public safety are hard-power instruments for politicians. In a national survey, 16% of respondents cited public security as the government's worst-performing area, topping the list of negative ratings. Like his father, Flávio explicitly supports strengthening police forces and making it easier for Brazilian citizens to access firearms. He advocates for civilian gun ownership for self-defense and national sovereignty and defense, justifying it by linking it to external conflicts. He cited the war in Ukraine to argue that weapons enable the population to "defend their nation and their homeland" during times of crisis regarding sovereignty.

The economy is another area of hard power where Flávio enjoys greater support from the business community. He has proposed an economic plan for his presidential campaign focusing on deep cuts to public spending, streamlining the state apparatus and revising fiscal rules. After public safety and health (15%), the economy comes third as Brazilians' main concern (13%).

Even Lula recognizes domestic and international conditions favor hard-power policies these days. During the launch of a national frigate

in the southern state of Santa Catarina — a major support state for Flávio — Lula said Brazil should invest more in national security because it cannot be “caught by surprise” and needs to “take care of itself.”

What an irony. In his 2002 campaign, Lula got the nickname, “Lulinha paz e amor” (“Little Lula peace and love”). But in 2026, during the party convention that formally nominated him, he said his fourth presidential term would switch it to “Lulinha porreta,” northeastern slang (from his birthplace) meaning “Little Lula Badass.” Bye-bye, soft power.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Franthiesco Ballerini is a Brazilian writer, journalist and filmmaker. Holding a PhD in media communications, his book *Soft*

Power was chosen as a finalist at the 60th Jabuti Awards for its investigation of cultural influences like Hollywood, tango, anime and Bossa Nova. His other works include *History of World Cinema* and *Cultural Power*. He addresses issues such as language, aesthetics, industry and power in film and entertainment.

To Be African Or Not: Morocco's Old Struggle

Yasmine Haji
September 06, 2026

Morocco's reliable and trusted media sources frequently use language that others Africans

from sub-Saharan countries. This subtly highlights how, despite being part of the continent, Moroccans look down on dark-skinned Africans due to their complex history. Moroccan society must address this stigma if it wishes to fully embrace the truth of its multiethnic heritage.

In June 2026, Hespress — Morocco's leading digital news source — published a headline that read: “Murder Case Haunts An African In Al-Darwa.” No nationality was mentioned or geographic detail. Just “an African”, as though Morocco were not itself on the continent.

The framing was not unique to Hespress. Others followed suit and covered the same incident under headlines such as: “The Royal Gendarmerie Arrests An African Immigrant On Suspicion Of Killing An Elderly Man In Darwa.” When major outlets standardize this language, they normalize a quiet act of exclusion through the positioning of Sub-Saharan migrants as the continent's representatives while implicitly placing Morocco outside it. One wouldn't know that Morocco is in Africa by reading these headlines.

The incident in Al-Darwa was one of dozens of crime reports published that month. Moroccan police were in the middle of a broad crackdown on organized crime, drug trafficking and individual incidents that filled local news feeds daily. None of the others identified suspects by continental origin. When the accused was Moroccan, he was simply a man from a city or a neighborhood. When the accused was Sub-Saharan, he became “an African.”

This is not a question of laws or institutions. Morocco has no apartheid-style legal framework; its citizens, regardless of skin color, navigate the

same economic pressures and bureaucratic frustrations. The problem is discursive. It lives in the language and discourse newsrooms choose, and in the categories they reach for without thinking.

But there is an important distinction to make: Arguing that Morocco's media has a language problem is not the same as arguing that the country practices systemic racism. However, language shapes perception, and perception shapes behavior. The events of 2026 have made this dynamic difficult to ignore.

Historical roots and the origins of black Othering

The reflex to other black Africans in the Maghreb did not begin with digital media. It has deep roots, but does not apply to Western conceptions of race, where the term carries a specific legal and institutional history. The American framework of white supremacy and the European colonial taxonomy of races do not translate directly to Morocco. Here, racial attitudes are entangled with ethnicity, religion, language and centuries of civilizational overlap — making them harder to name, but no less real.

Before the Arab conquest of North Africa, the indigenous Amazigh (or Berbers) organized themselves along tribal lines. As historian Chouki El Hamel documents in *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*, some Amazigh communities held explicit prejudices against black Africans through enforcing restrictions on land ownership and intermarriage.

When Arab settlers arrived in the 7th century, they brought their own racial hierarchies. Influential scholars of the period entrenched these views: 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun associated dark skin with savagery, and 14th-century scholar Ibn Battuta's accounts of Mali

carried similar contempt. A loose but durable hierarchy — Arab, Amazigh and everyone else — took shape, which French colonial authorities later exploited through divide-and-rule policies such as the Berber Decree.

After independence, Moroccan nationalists pursued Arabization. This policy sought to consolidate a single Arab-Moroccan identity through educational reforms in a multiethnic country. The project largely failed due to the reluctance among elites to embrace Morocco's Africanness fully. The impulse behind it persists in nuanced forms, though. One of those forms is the language of the press.

The AFCON fallout

The 2026 Africa Cup of Nations final between Morocco and Senegal brought these tensions into sharp relief. The disputed match — settled by a procedural ruling that many Moroccan fans considered unjust — triggered reactions that went beyond standard football hooliganism. Sub-Saharan-owned businesses were attacked, verbal abuse escalated, and social media became a forum for explicitly racist commentary. The violence was the work of a minority, but the discourse it unleashed revealed how quickly racial resentment could be mobilized when given a trigger. A search through social media in the weeks that followed reveals the scale of the reaction.

Social media platforms like Reddit threads filled with rhetoric that went far beyond football grievances. The algorithms did their magic, and many were piling into the comments in a frenzy of hate speech targeting Sub-Saharan migrants who were attacked and labeled as criminals, religious outsiders, and threats to public safety. The AFCON fallout did not create new prejudices; rather, it permitted existing ones to speak openly.

The reality paradox

The paradox is stark. Diplomatically, Morocco has spent the past decade positioning itself as a leader on the continent. Since rejoining the African Union in 2017, it has pursued economic, financial and religious cooperation across Sub-Saharan Africa. Through investing in infrastructure, banking and religious training programs, Moroccan soft power extended southward.

The kingdom has deliberately distinguished itself from the openly hostile rhetoric toward migrants in neighboring Tunisia, where President Kais Saied's 2023 remarks about Sub-Saharan migrants cast them as demographic threats. In the same week as the Hespress headline, footage emerged from Tunisia of a sexual assault on a pregnant Sub-Saharan migrant, which drew domestic outrage. Many would see this as a coincidence, of course, but it's hard to deny that this is where unchecked dehumanization and casual othering can eventually lead.

Morocco's record is different. Its 2014 migration policy regularized tens of thousands of undocumented migrants, a rare step in the region. But a country that aspires to continental leadership cannot simultaneously permit its most widely read newsrooms to treat "African" as a synonym for foreign. The dissonance between the Foreign Ministry's pan-African ambitions and Hespress's headline is just embarrassing. And worse, it is strategically corrosive.

Days after the Al-Darwa incident, Moroccan police arrested a citizen for online hate speech against a Sub-Saharan migrant. In contrast, this story received minimal coverage compared to the original crime report. The asymmetry is telling: the alleged crime committed by a migrant warranted national headlines with racial markers, but the hate crime committed against one barely registered.

An outcome of careless language

There is no evidence that Hespress or any Moroccan parasitic news outlet is out to promote racism. The framing is more likely a habit than a strategy. It is not even consistent: The same outlets sometimes use nationality or more precise descriptors in other reports, which cancels any allegations that deliberate editorial policy is at work.

Perhaps this is a strategy. But intent is not the issue; the effect is. Comment sections beneath such articles fill reliably with dehumanizing rhetoric. Social media groups amplify the framing further, layering onto the word "African" a set of associations — criminality, religious otherness, sexual threat — that bear no relationship to the individuals described, but that are legitimized with repetition.

The term "African," deployed this way, does particular discursive work. It does not simply mean "black." It compresses multiple forms of othering into a single label. And in the context of Morocco and the Maghreb region generally speaking, it selectively implies foreignness, non-Muslim identity and danger all at once. That compression is what makes it so effective as a vehicle for prejudice.

And to put this in real-life context, when Morocco's most recent national protests erupted, demonstrators did not call for deportations or raise ethnic grievances. The Gen Z's concerns were inflation, corruption and opportunity. The country's future human capital, in other words, is not demanding the exclusion that its media language performs.

Morocco is a multiethnic nation on a multiethnic continent. Its history includes colonial manipulation and inherited prejudice, but also coexistence and a diplomatic vision that takes African solidarity seriously. The gap between that vision and the casual othering of a leading

newspaper headline is not just a journalistic failure. Arguably, it is a contradiction that, if left unexamined, feeds the very attitudes Morocco's own policies are working to overcome.

At a moment when economic anxiety driven by inflation and organized crime dominates public life, careless racial framing offers a convenient scapegoat. It channels real frustration toward people who had nothing to do with its causes. Ironically, Morocco's top newspaper is failing to fulfill the profession's basic responsibility: to report the world accurately. As a consequence, they're doing their readers a disservice.

[Casey Herrmann edited this piece]



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Cassandra Crossing: The Strange Alarmism in Germany's Security Debate

Michael Rühle
September 06, 2026

Moscow's ongoing war against Ukraine has fueled increasingly dire warnings from German military experts about a possible Russian attack on NATO, but much of the public remains skeptical of such alarmism. While Berlin's defense buildup is justified by genuine security concerns, exaggerating Russia's capabilities and NATO's vulnerabilities risks undermining public trust. Even Germany's most vocal alarmists are beginning to backtrack as shifting assessments reveal the fragility of their predictions.

The Germans, it is said, love to be afraid. They fear recessions, inflation, immigration, climate change, pandemics and, of course, war. They celebrate these fears so fervently that the term "German angst" has made its way into the English language.

Currently, war is once again dominating the German media. Hardly a day goes by without a German general, military historian or think tank expert offering their assessment of an impending Russian attack. According to these experts, Russian statements as well as production rates in the Russian arms industry suggest that the country is preparing for a major war. In spring 2025, for example, Germany's most renowned military historian warned that the country might experience its "last summer of peace."

The tendency to exaggerate the threat posed by Russia is not unique to Germany. Other countries have their fair share of doomsayers, too. In the UK, for example, retired General Sir Richard Shirreff has gained notoriety by presenting alarming scenarios to highlight the potential consequences of neglecting one's defense. However, given their proverbial fearsomeness, one might expect the Germans, in particular, to raid supermarkets to stock up on canned food, drinking water, flashlights and batteries. Yet all is quiet. What happened? Has "German angst" been replaced by "German complacency"?

Not at all. The general public is well aware of the deterioration in European security caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Germans are also well aware of the problems caused by US President Donald Trump's dismissive attitude towards allies and alliances. Consequently, a majority of Germans approve of supporting Ukraine, increasing defense spending and even reinstating the draft. If they remain calm nonetheless, it is because they view much of the alarmism from military and academic experts as entertainment rather than serious analysis. And they have every reason to do so.

Why Germans aren't buying the alarmism

The most obvious reason to take the Cassandras' (the German alarmists who predict catastrophe — similar to the ancient Greek seer Cassandra) statements with a grain of salt is their insistence that Russia's war against Ukraine is only the beginning of a much wider conflict fueled by the desire to recreate the Soviet Union. Even if such ambitions exist, Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine makes a subsequent attack on NATO seem highly unlikely. Hybrid actions by Moscow or its proxies are of far greater immediate concern, especially since Germany has become a primary target. However, one cannot conquer

countries merely through sabotage or fake-news campaigns.

Another reason for skepticism is the attack scenario deemed most plausible by many German military experts and think tank analysts. Some whisper that various allied intelligence services have assessed that Russia is preparing for a war against NATO in just a few years (the German government seems to have settled on 2029). However, once the question is raised as to how this attack will unfold, the answers become rather lame.

German experts tend to focus on Russia occupying one or two predominantly Russian-speaking cities in Estonia, seizing the Norwegian island of Svalbard or attacking a Baltic country from Belarus. The narrative is that, faced with a small Russian land grab, NATO allies would be torn between fighting and backing down, and might opt for the latter. Russian President Vladimir Putin would have successfully "tested" NATO and exposed the alliance as a paper tiger.

However, how likely is it that NATO would collectively commit suicide by failing to push back Russian troops who have advanced into its territory? If a lack of political solidarity among its members is NATO's core problem, would adding more military muscle make a difference? And if this scenario is as urgent as the Cassandras claim, why does Germany persist with its notoriously sluggish defense procurement policy? Why does it take so long to deploy a brigade in Lithuania? If 2029 could be the critical year, why is the German government still evading the question of conscription, despite the verdict of most defense experts that the officially favored "voluntary solutions" will not suffice to reach Germany's stated force goals?

In interviews and on talk shows, Germany's military leadership revels in alarmism. However,

Germany's actual defense policy suggests that these dire threat assessments are not so much triggered by fears of Russia as by concerns that Germany's *Zeitenwende* (turning point) in foreign and security policy could lose momentum.

The *Zeitenwende* and the cost of defense

This major shift in German foreign and defense policy was proclaimed immediately after Russia's assault on Ukraine in February 2022. As a result of the *Zeitenwende*, Germany — once among the laggards in allied defense spending — is now investing heavily in defense, with Berlin even stating its ambition to build “the strongest conventional army in Europe”.

However, given Germany's economic troubles, it seems unlikely that current spending levels, largely made possible by borrowing, can be sustained for long. A social welfare state like Germany, with a rapidly aging society, has to cater to too many parochial interests to sustain the current defense spending extravaganza for many years.

When fear becomes a policy tool

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear why large parts of Germany's political and military elite feel the need to peddle fear. As long as the Russian threat looms large, high levels of military spending may be easier to sustain. Given three decades of Germany neglecting its armed forces and the pressure from Washington on its European allies to shoulder a greater share of the transatlantic defense burden, the logic of higher defense spending cannot be dismissed outright.

However, it is also evident that exaggerating the threat posed by Russia while downplaying NATO's existing deterrent capabilities is counterproductive. If NATO were so weak and divided that Moscow could launch an attack within

three years, would investing heavily in defense really still make a difference? And what if a Russian attack does not occur by 2029? Would postponing this ominous date by a year or two be enough to convince one's electorate that defense budgets have to stay so high? Or, to put it bluntly, how many times can one cry wolf before losing all credibility? In short, fearmongering will most likely undermine rather than strengthen the credibility of German defense policy.

When asked this summer about his warning of the previous year that Germany might be enjoying its “last summer in peace”, the aforementioned German military historian backtracked. He stated that he was now “a bit more optimistic,” given Ukraine's improved situation. It seems that even Cassandras can change their minds.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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Cut Doha's Lifeline to Sudan's Islamist War

Cynthia Farahat
September 06, 2026

Sudan's war is not a duel of generals. It's the return of a Muslim Brotherhood project that seized the state in 1989, survived the 2019 revolution and now fights inside the Sudanese Armed Forces. Qatar is the most ideologically aligned and diplomatically insulated patron, which makes Doha the first pressure point to stop the flow of arms and cash.

Sudan's civil war is not a simple clash between rival generals. It is the continuation of an Islamist project that began in 1989, when the Muslim Brotherhood seized power through a military coup and turned Sudan into its first openly ruled "model" state. For more than three decades, the Sudanese Islamic Movement embedded itself in every institution of power. After the 2019 revolution removed Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, these networks adapted rather than disappeared. Today, they remain a central force sustaining the conflict.

Naming those networks is not a strategy, however. This war ends when a greater power — namely, the United States — squeezes their patrons. Washington should start with Qatar, the outside power most aligned with the Islamist current inside the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and most exposed to American pressure.

The Brotherhood never left

Khalid Omer Yousif, former minister of cabinet affairs in Sudan's civilian-led transitional

government, has stated the stakes clearly: "The Muslim Brotherhood's project in Sudan is not merely a domestic struggle for power. It is an Islamist project that strategically converges with Iran's regional ambitions, reinforcing its efforts to expand its influence across the Red Sea and Africa." His assessment is correct. The Brotherhood's restoration of influence inside the SAF has reopened the door to Tehran that the 2019 revolution had begun to close.

We now see undeniable evidence of deep ties between SAF leadership under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Muslim Brotherhood. The US has designated the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood and its armed wing, the Al-Baraa Bin Malik Brigade, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The State Department noted that this brigade has recruited and fielded over 20,000 fighters, many trained with Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps assistance. It operates as a semi-autonomous but integrated components of SAF operations.

Public statements from senior SAF officers, including Lieutenant General Yasser al-Atta, confirm the presence of multiple Brotherhood battalions fighting alongside regular army units. The Brotherhood is not an ally of the army. It is an infiltrator that now holds significant influence over recruitment, financing and strategic decisions.

Why talks keep failing

This ideological infrastructure explains why purely political solutions have repeatedly failed. Where war itself is lucrative through gold, ports, land, weapons contracts and patronage, talks alone cannot succeed. Such wars end when external funding and arms flows are disrupted.

In proxy conflicts, the external donor with the better international reputation usually proves more susceptible to diplomatic and economic pressure.

Blanket moral equivalency is not only analytically flawed. It is strategically counterproductive. It obscures accountability and delays the targeted action required to change behavior on the ground.

Both sides have committed atrocities. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have carried out systematic massacres, ethnic cleansing and sexual violence amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, particularly in the Darfur region and against non-Arab communities. These crimes must be condemned without qualification. We can condemn RSF brutality, however, without ignoring the parallel reality that the SAF has become the primary vehicle for the return of a US-designated terrorist organization and its Iranian partners.

The SAF receives support from multiple actors. Iran supplies critical drones, including the Mohajer-6 and Ababil, that have enabled precision strikes and territorial gains. Turkey provides Bayraktar TB2 and Akinci drones that deliver air superiority. Saudi Arabia offers financial and diplomatic backing. Egypt provides overt political and military coordination. Qatar functions as a key political, financial and discreet military enabler.

Start with Doha

Qatar stands out because it is the patron most aligned with the Islamist current now embedded in the SAF. Doha has given the Port Sudan authorities political cover, received Burhan repeatedly, and — according to reports — funded Chinese-made K-8 jets and facilitated weapons shipments transiting Doha to Port Sudan. European analysts have likewise described Doha as funding weaponry to the SAF while remaining highly receptive to the ascent of Islamists associated with the army. Atta, the SAF chief of staff and the officer most openly associated with Brotherhood battalions inside the army, is the relationship's key node.

Combined with Qatar's long record of sheltering and financing Brotherhood-linked networks, and its deep military relationship with nuclear-armed Pakistan — through which a \$1.5 billion SAF weapons package has been negotiated — Doha is the most leverageable external actor sustaining the SAF's Islamist core. Disrupting those flows, while also addressing Saudi support for the SAF and the United Arab Emirates's backing of the RSF, is essential.

What Washington should do

US policy now reflects that urgency. Trump's senior Africa envoy Massad Boulos has called on the UN Security Council to extend the existing Darfur arms embargo to cover all of Sudan and to “stop external financial and military support to the parties, such as drones and related technologies, from entering Sudan.” Russia and China have obstructed a broader embargo on the claim that it would undermine the SAF. That position aligns with the interests of those supplying weapons to the conflict. The obstruction creates an argument for targeted bilateral pressure on the most leverageable patrons, beginning with Qatar.

Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt also play enabling roles. Targeted pressure on the most ideologically aligned patron, starting with Qatar, offers the clearest route to deescalation. Qatar's value to the SAF is not only matériel, but also diplomatic insulation. Doha still occupies rooms that Abu Dhabi and even Riyadh cannot share with Islamist networks. Only when that cover is priced can civilian-led processes such as the Somoud Alliance's three-track roadmap of humanitarian access, ceasefire and inclusive transition have space to succeed.

Sudan's people have endured enough: more than 150,000 dead, millions displaced and famine threatening entire regions. Those with leverage in Gulf and Turkish capitals have a specific task.

Follow the money. Identify the most leverageable patron. Cut the flows that have held Sudan hostage since 1989. The roadmap exists. The pressure points exist. What has been missing is the will to use them.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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Regime Change: What We Don't Understand About Both Words

Elliot Neaman
September 07, 2026

US President Donald Trump has thus far demonstrated a major lack of understanding of Iran's regime. It's not a small group of powerful leaders, but a deep-rooted network of military, ideological and social institutions. Past interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan illustrate

how authoritarian rule continues if the systems sustaining it aren't destroyed — so how should Trump do it?

As we just passed the six-month milestone of the war against the Islamic Republic of Iran, US President Donald Trump posted a claim on his Truth Social website that the war was “Mission Accomplished.” Paired with an AI-generated image contrasting his alleged success with the widely mocked “Mission Accomplished” banner from the Iraq War era, the post sparked a new wave of derision.

The current conflict against Iran shows no sign of resolution, pointing instead to another Western tombstone in the long historical military cemetery of the Middle East. A photo of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed during initial bombing raids on Iran, accompanied the post. This seemed to imply that Trump's regime change strategy had worked, in contrast to the operation carried out by George W. Bush.

When Trump talks about Iran, he often starts at the top, with the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards' commanders, the clerical inner circle and the so-called moderate politicians who provide soundbites to Western journalists. He assumes that if we apply enough pressure to the apex, through sanctions, airstrikes or threats, we will change the behavior of the regime.

“Our objective,” he said in March, in the first phase of our latest 47-year war against Iran, “is to defend the American people by eliminating imminent threats from the Iranian regime, a vicious group of very hard, terrible people.” Trump then vacillated between praising the leaders in Iran “very rational people,” “smart people” and “nice to deal with,” and not long thereafter

characterized them as “scum” and “sick people.” As Bill Mahter joked, Trump’s book *The Art of the Deal* is now being sold in the Humor section.

Regime is more than its leaders

Trump’s ignorance of Persian history and culture, and tunnel vision about how to navigate the war in general, carries severe real-world consequences, as soldiers stationed in the Middle East today could attest. Trump’s perspective treats authoritarian governments as if they were run-of-the-mill New York businesses he was familiar with, where the CEO decides, subordinates execute and employees follow orders. But the Iranian case and, indeed, most enduring authoritarian systems, does not work like that, to put it mildly.

The Iranian regime is not merely a set of officials at the top, but rather an extension of a culture and society that has engaged in conflict and statecraft with the Western world since the Persian Empire under Darius the Great and Xerxes I invaded Greece in the fifth century BCE. That ancient state, organized around a Royal Road that tied the country together, relied on coercion (including an early intelligence network along trade routes), patronage, patriotism and a sticky, integrative social system.

The Achaemenid Empire, history’s first superpower, was formidable, repressive and culturally integrative. To misunderstand that deep structural history when attempting to dismantle the Iranian regime is to pull the wrong levers, congratulate oneself on pulling hard and simultaneously misread the adversary. As the contemporary conflict theorist Zachary Shore wrote, successful strategy requires strategic empathy: the ability to step out of our own minds and enter the mind of the enemy, which demands a thorough understanding of the antagonist’s history and culture.

The key lesson in the current conflict is straightforward. Few regimes historically or currently can be reduced to the individuals at the apex. They consist of the society that supports the upper layer and the social machinery that keeps the system functioning. If one wishes to alter a regime’s trajectory, one must focus less on forcing a unified “regime” to surrender and more on pitting elites and enforcers against one another so that the system’s internal logic turns against itself.

But that outcome is far more difficult to achieve than it might appear from the outset. Dissidents who risk their lives to fight oppressive rule are heroic and admirable, but historically, moral resistance alone rarely brings down a regime. Figures with the transformative reach of former South African President Nelson Mandela are exceedingly rare in world history. The adhesive problem of collective action usually prevents a Mandela-like figure from breaking through, since all the privileged stakeholders in a coercive system live in constant fear that they will be betrayed by any potential collaborator in a scheme to overthrow the system they themselves built and maintained.

The missing piece in the divided elite strategy is to include the unprivileged inside an oppressive regime pitted against the privileged. Greed, envy and self-preservation prove far more potent accelerants of political change than abstract opposition.

From an external perspective, supporting the disenfranchised within a durable yet fragile system is a far more effective regime-change strategy. Loyalists in a repressive apparatus often represent its weakest link because they possess detailed knowledge of their leadership’s vulnerabilities. Turning insiders into opponents is entirely achievable if they perceive structural weakness at the top. We see this dynamic vividly illustrated by historical shifts in state power, such as the internal

fracturing seen during the recent collapse of the Maduro regime in Venezuela.

Lessons taught by regime change failures

These are not just theoretical abstractions; they describe a practical physics of politics, how authoritarian systems survive, how they crack and why Western strategies routinely fail when they assume a regime is a small, centralized target rather than a broad coalition of social and security networks. On both sides of Iran geographically — in Iraq and Afghanistan — the United States demonstrated in real time its failure to grasp this reality. Overthrowing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003 was the easy part, transforming Iraqi society required an understanding how Hussein’s “regime” functioned as a social web, a test Washington failed completely. In Afghanistan, the US removed the Taliban in a rapid campaign, only to depart 20 years later with the Taliban’s social structures and governance intact.

It took eight long years in Iraq for the US military to grasp the core reality of the underlying social, cultural, political and military layers. They then departed in December 2011 by crossing the Kuwait border and left behind a fragile, centralized parliamentary democracy with a domestic security apparatus that lacked external defense capabilities, as well as a society that suffered from deep sectarian fractures. Trump made the same initial mistake as in Iraq by conceiving of the state as if it were merely a leadership compound, an officialdom insulated from the broader population. At the start of the bombing campaign on February 28, in a rambling and incoherent pre-taped 3 AM social media post, he concluded by directly encouraging the population to seize control of their government once the US operation finished, calling it “probably your only chance for generations.”

This admonition encapsulated the fundamental error of seeing the regime as separate from the deep system that underlies the state. One key difference between Iraq and Iran is that the latter boasts a far more stable foundation of true believers. Some ideological fanatics and others cynical opportunists who profit from state patronage, they enforce compliance, whether for the right price or out of true devotion to the Islamic revolution. The Iranian regime offers social mobility and status where options are otherwise scarce. Meanwhile, the alienated, mostly urban middle class, which includes citizens who despise the government’s repression, corruption and economic failures, so far lack the organizational mechanisms to translate that discontent into decisive political power.

The critical question of regime change is what is the viable alternative if the system collapses? Simplistic “decapitation” strategies have repeatedly misled American foreign policy leaders throughout the post-World War II era. The historical record, including interventions in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Syria (1956–1967), Indonesia (1957), Cuba (1959–1961) and Chile (1970–1973), demonstrates that severing the top leadership creates temporary chaos but rarely eliminates the underlying social structures that made the regime possible. Even when leaders are removed, coercive institutions and patronage networks fight to preserve their privileges, often by tightening control and reallocating positions.

This leads to a second, more fundamental question: what alternative does political change offer to the lower and middle strata of society beneath the elite? For instance, if a young man joins Iran’s Basij militia for social mobility, what incentive will persuade him to switch sides? A superpower that plans for regime change in a foreign nation must have a clear answer to those kinds of basic questions.

The regime's coercive ecosystem has deep roots in Iran. The Basij militia, to stay with that core national guard institution, functions as a pervasive auxiliary force enforcing state control through moral policing, protest suppression, and community surveillance. Other military and intelligence formations above the Basij distribute coercive reach across every layer of society.

Authoritarian rule is sustained not by personal charisma, but by human and institutional infrastructure capable of rapidly converting external shocks into internal consolidation. When Western strategists assume that military pressure will automatically yield political transformation, they overlook how authoritarian institutions exploit external threats to enforce internal discipline and rally support.

This dynamic explains the primary strategic error, treating a regime as a single isolated target rather than a complex social coalition. If even 70% to 80% of a population is alienated but the state retains a loyalist minority large enough to staff its coercive apparatus, the regime can persist while becoming increasingly abusive and paranoid. Popular anger becomes a stress signal rather than an automatic engine of collapse. Put simply, a regime can lose all domestic legitimacy while maintaining its coercive capability; it can be widely hated and remain highly durable. This dynamic goes a long way to explain why such a hated regime can nevertheless maintain ruthless control for so long.

Exploit Iran's internal divisions

What is to be done? First, as noted above, if foreign powers seek regime change, they should not bet on confronting a unified enemy, but on exploiting internal fractures. The second major strategic failure is structural. Western analysts tend to view authoritarian leadership as a monolithic actor with uniform preferences. Regimes

dependent on complex security, patronage and ideological networks harbor intense internal rivalries, not only between "hardliners" and "reformers," but among competing institutions and security factions vying for survival under pressure. Those fissures can be exploited with the correct coherent and long-term strategy.

In this context, traditional "negotiation" can represent a category error. Bargaining assumes that the adversary has a stable incentive to compromise and that its internal coalition can absorb concessions without collapsing. In most authoritarian systems, leadership legitimacy rests on coercive identity and ideological purity rather than public welfare. If compromise threatens that core identity or signals vulnerability, bargaining becomes performative rather than substantive.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) came into existence to protect the Islamic Revolution of 1979, but remained a second pillar to the Artesh, the conventional national military with four standard branches: ground, air, navy and air defense. But the US-Israel attack six months ago led the Artesh to shift power significantly to the ideological extremists in the IRGC. Under severe external strain, authoritarian elites face three choices: double down, bargain or defect. After the Iranian regime survived the original onslaught, doubling down made sense since the war shifted from the air to the geopolitics of oil and the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has now demonstrated in real time that a previously hypothetical tactic to control the straits is a potent weapon, perhaps more useful than a nuclear capability, which has self-limiting utility. Both US allies and rivals have certainly taken note.

The true meaning of regime change

Which brings us to the second misunderstood word in "regime change." Change can mean at least three things in a decapitation strategy: an organic

long-term evolution to a new order, a short-term transition to a mixed order of the old and new elites, or a decisive replacement of the old order. In all three scenarios, the internal costs of loyalty to the status quo need to be weighed against the perceived benefits of a future new constellation.

History teaches us that societies first implode, not individual leaders. Internal, not external, factors matter much more. Authoritarian systems usually do not collapse because of external force, but because internal incentive structures collapse or the social base sustaining coercion no longer believes the regime is worth defending. In studies of communist system collapses, scholars highlight the contrast between a regime's formidable facade and its fragile underlying social structure, an "uncivil coalition" that fractured rapidly once internal dynamics shifted. Wars that bring about the collapse of a robust authoritarian regime like Nazi Germany look impressive in World War II films, but such dynamics are quite rare in history.

The case of Nazi Germany validates the argument presented here, since the allied demand for unconditional surrender and the sustained bombing campaign during the last two years of the war solidified, rather than weakened, the German population's resolve to fight to the bitter end. Only when overwhelming force, in the war's final months, demonstrated that the allies would prevail, did capitulation to the inevitable defeat sink in. Even then, the Nazis put up tenacious resistance until the ultimate days of the war.

While Iran's theocratic model differs both from 20th-century communism and fascism significantly, the structural mechanism is similar. Regime survival relies on a social base that executes administration and enforcement. When that base ceases to function, whether through fear, opportunism, ideological exhaustion or fractional rivalry, the pace of collapse can accelerate rapidly.

Recognizing this historical pattern requires a shift in Western policy posture. Viewing a regime as merely a leader and a propaganda machine led to strategies focused on changing the mind of the top strongman — Hussein is Exhibit A in recent regime change history. Viewing a regime as an interconnected web of social networks and institutions, by contrast, leads to strategies focused on altering incentives for those who enforce the rules — the Sunni Awakening in Iraq circa 2006 is Exhibit B.

The principal obstacle to achieving a coherent strategy toward Iran is not primarily military or diplomatic, but cognitive and strategic. Overestimating decapitation and external coercion lead to the mistaken assumption that striking the top will automatically cause society to crumble. Overestimating traditional diplomacy leads to the false assumption that leaders will respond rationally to rising costs through concessions. When a regime functions as a socio-institutional network driven by factional competition, neither decapitation nor traditional negotiation yields predictable outcomes.

A plausible path to structural change combines calibrated external pressure, which increases internal strain without triggering a "rally 'round the flag" effect, with deliberate encouragement of intra-regime competition. This strategy targets the specific incentives of those who staff the apparatus of repression and mediate between the top leadership and its security networks. Achieving such a subtle posture requires a foreign policy apparatus backed by deep expertise and historical understanding. Navigating complex conflicts demands strategic empathy, historical depth and a rigorous understanding of how authoritarian societies operate.

To point out that the current regime in Washington lacks such expertise and foreign policy experience is, unfortunately, stating an

obvious and painful truth. Trump has shown no coherent strategy, exit or otherwise, to end the current conflict with Iran. But at least understanding what the terms “regime” and “change” mean might help some future president or Congress, should it decide to wake up from its pathetic slumber and restore its constitutional prerogatives, to navigate the next Middle East misadventure.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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Can Europe Defend Itself? Rethinking the US Role in NATO

Antoine van Agtmael
September 08, 2026

Under duress, Europe can defend itself even if the US withdraws from NATO. Europe has a strong nuclear deterrence thanks to the over 500 nuclear warheads that France and the UK possess. Furthermore, increased defense spending, technological know-how and the number of military personnel make Europe more than a match for Russia.

US President Donald Trump has long held that NATO was costing the US “too much money.” As a presidential candidate in 2016, he pointed out that “NATO was set up when we were a richer country” and the time had come for Europe to share more of the costs of this longstanding alliance. In his second term, Trump has ratcheted up the pressure on America’s NATO allies. He has announced troop withdrawals, cut off military support for Ukraine and lashed out at leaders of America’s closest allies.

Trump is unique in his capriciousness and brashness, but misgivings about the US carrying the water for Europe predate him. For years, many American strategists have believed that the American focus on Europe was outdated. The rise of China necessitated a new strategy. Barack Obama tried to do so with his Asia Pivot, which never really took off and is now certainly on the back burner. The US is now yet again trapped in the Middle East, and the war with Iran is sharpening tensions with both European and East Asian allies.

Trump called NATO a “paper tiger” that “wasn’t there for us” and threatened to pull out of the alliance. Yet NATO is not going anywhere. Trump did attend the NATO summit in Ankara, where 32 NATO heads of state and key partners gathered for the alliance’s thirty-sixth summit. Trump did a U-turn, called NATO leaders smart

and took credit for NATO countries spending more on defense. In doing so, Trump underscored Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby's concept of NATO 3.0. According to this concept, America's European allies need "to step up and assume primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe."

How big of a burden is NATO to the US?

The US has clearly been the dominant figure in NATO. Its GDP is 50% of the entire GDP of the NATO bloc (vs. 33% for the EU members). Of all NATO countries' defense spending, the US accounts for 60–64% of NATO's total. This is indeed much more than any other single NATO member state pays but far short of Trump's claim that the US once shouldered 100% of the NATO budget. His perception that "we have been treated unfairly, we pay disproportionately" is exaggerated, and the 100% claim is false.

Digging deeper into the numbers reveals clearly that only some of the US defense spending is for Europe: A lot of American spending on NATO has little to do with Europe. Instead, this money funds the role the US plays as a global power. Historically, the cash that flowed into NATO was used for wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc, which were American, not European, wars. If we strip these expenses out, the US pays only 16% of the NATO budget.

Also, the burden America bears for NATO is diminishing with European members stepping, albeit belatedly, to increase their defense spending. In 2014, they promised to spend 2% of their GDP on defense. After dragging their feet for years, virtually all NATO members have achieved this 2% figure. Note that Fred Bakker, my co-author of *The Smartest Places on Earth*, wrote extensively and with some alarm five years ago about European foot dragging on increasing defense spending. He acknowledged that Europeans

needed a "kick in the ass" from Trump to get their act together.

It is indeed true that Europe had become dependent on the US for its security needs. In the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, Europe left too much of the initiative to the US. Europe has also relied too heavily on the US Navy to protect its oil supplies from the Middle East. The US has shouldered the primary burden of keeping sea lanes and chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el-Mandeb open. Furthermore, Europe naively relied on Russian gas for years for the bulk of its energy needs. The argument that Europe outsourced its security to the US and its energy to Russia has a ring of truth.

Who exactly is ungrateful?

Trump specializes in the politics of grievance and claims Europe is ungrateful. The US liberated Europe from the Nazis, protected half the continent from the Soviets and guarantees its security to this day. The argument that European welfare states are funded by American taxpayers is often made in Trump's circle. Yet this narrative ignores an inconvenient fact that Europeans have supported the US in many wars and sacrificed their lives for the American cause. On a per capita basis, many more British, Danes, Swedes and Hungarians have died in combat under NATO command than Americans.

Trump's claim that European troops "stayed a little back" from the frontlines in Afghanistan is blatantly untrue. Europeans were often in combat positions, not in the "second line." British forces deployed to Helmand Province as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) faced some of the fiercest combat the British military had seen since the 1950–53 Korean War. Dutch troops also engaged in heavy combat in Uruzgan Province while serving in ISAF. Going back to the Korean War, nine

European countries and Turkey served in Korea under US/NATO command. The US may have bankrolled European security, but the Europeans have also sacrificed for common causes.

Europe also contributes significantly to the American defense industry. The US has been the major beneficiary of European defense spending. European militaries rely on American military kit, which benefits US companies. European reliance on American equipment helps lower overall costs, especially for jet fighters such as the F-35, missile defense systems, helicopters, long-range artillery, radars and drones. Servicing this equipment, along with demand for spare parts and software updates, is very costly. This spending boosts the American defense establishment, of which Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, General Dynamics and Northrop Grumman are the leading members.

Per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the US further increased its share of global arms exports to 43% for the period 2020–24. SIPRI also reports that arms imports by European NATO members more than doubled between 2015–19 and 2020–24. To be precise, they went up by 105%. Of the total European imports, 64% came from the US, higher than the 52% figure for the 2015–19 period. It is almost a cliché that European militaries are armed by America.

In contrast, the US buys relatively little defense equipment from Europe. The few American purchases from Europe include Airbus's Lakota helicopters, BAE's naval guns, Hellfire and Meteor air-to-air missiles, and some specialized munitions and night-vision equipment, which is preferred for its better quality rather than price.

Even when it comes to Ukraine, Europe has shouldered most of the burden in supporting the country. By June this year, the EU had dispensed "\$226 billion in financial, military, humanitarian,

and refugee assistance" to Ukraine. In contrast, the US had made \$195 billion available to Ukraine by March 31, 2026. Yes, it is true that American intelligence was the first to expose the risk and then reality of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, but Europe has since stepped up. The Kiel Institute rightly points out that while Europe is the largest donor of military aid, American weapons are still critical for Ukraine.

Can Europe alone defend itself without the US?

The Russia–Ukraine War and the US/Israel–Iran War have strained and continue to strain US–Europe relations. The Trump administration's withdrawal of meaningful support for Ukraine and its incoherent war with Iran has caused a loss of trust in Washington. The 2025 National Security Strategy of the US argued that Europe's "economic decline is eclipsed by the real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure," touching a raw nerve in European capitals. In particular, the Greenland Crisis has profoundly shaken Europe's faith in the US.

Europeans did not expect the US to turn on a NATO ally in such a visceral fashion. Greenland became "one of the biggest challenges to US–European diplomatic relations in a generation." In the words of Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, there has been a "rupture" in transatlantic relations. Even after Trump eventually leaves office, the US will take years to regain the trust he lost.

So, the multibillion-dollar question inevitably arises: Can Europe alone defend itself without the US?

The answer is potentially fast but under duress. Ukraine has demonstrated that an existential threat can focus the mind. Ukrainians have built a new defense industry, involving cutting-edge drones and munitions, and adapted to a radically changed

nature of warfare speedily. As both Ukraine and Iran have demonstrated, the new nature of warfare involving satellites, drones and missiles makes tanks, jet fighters, armored personnel carriers and man-to-man fighting essentially outdated in many types of war situations. Europe could learn from Ukraine and Iran to adapt fast. There are historical precedents for fast adaptations. During World War II, American manufacturing transformed within record time to a war economy.

Note that Europe has most of the technology but lacks scale and reserves. It would also need to improve unified command. With greater focus and larger defense budgets, many analysts estimate that a European NATO could build sufficient drone, missile, armored cars and munitions capacity within two years. Note that NATO estimates that “Russia could have the ability to invade a NATO partner country in 2029.” European leaders are preparing for that eventuality

Despite its military buildup, Europe would not be a match for Russia for nearly a decade when it comes to nuclear weapons. The British and French nuclear capabilities fall well short of Russian ones. However, the 500 warheads that the UK and France possess are already a significant deterrent and adequate shield. Notably, both countries came up with the Northwood Declaration in July 2025. It marks “the most far-reaching step yet in UK–France nuclear cooperation, committing both states to coordinating nuclear policy, capabilities and operations.” Importantly, this declaration also “strengthens NATO’s deterrence posture, reassures European allies and offers a fallback should the United States’ nuclear umbrella over Europe come into question.” In a nutshell, Russia cannot bully NATO with nuclear weapons even if the US were to stay out of a potential conflict.

When it comes to troop levels, the EU and the UK together have 1.5 million active military personnel, matching Russia’s estimated 1.3 million

active military personnel and 2 million reservists. Russians may have more large-scale artillery and drone warfare experience, but Europeans have watched Ukraine closely. Even though training and combat experience remain a problem, they can be addressed. Russia can certainly mobilize its reserves faster, but the Russian military is much more extended given the humongous size of the world’s largest nation.

The US has an estimated 80,000 active military personnel in Europe, including about 68,000 on a permanent basis according to the US Defense Manpower Data Center. It could potentially add another 200,000–300,000 within two to four months. Yet the main loss for Europe if the US were to pull out would not be troops but strategic airlift, space and cyber integration, missile defense, and precise long-range strikes. However, each of these can be addressed by “work-around” measures. If the US turned off its Global Positioning System (GPS), European militaries would still function fine because of Galileo, the EU’s global navigation satellite system. In certain locations, the Galileo system has a greater horizontal accuracy than GPS. Europeans can also call upon the EU’s Copernicus Programme as a core asset for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations. The Europeans also have Ariane, which provides vital technologies for Europe’s missile early warning, space surveillance, and secure launch capabilities.

Major gaps and challenges remain. Despite advanced encryption, EU military and satellite communications face significant security challenges and fragmentation, leaving parts of their infrastructure vulnerable to Russian electronic warfare and orbital interception. Yet Europeans could overcome this challenge. Their technology is superior to Russia’s and member states could overcome structural fragmentation, integrating their patchwork of diverse radios, cryptographic gear and battlefield systems speedily

in a crisis. Once the different EU national systems achieve full interoperability, they can more than match the Russians.

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



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US vs. Iran: Battle of Wills in the Gulf

Gary Grappo
September 10, 2026

The Iran War has inflicted severe economic pain on Iran and political strain on the United States after six months. While the US relies on sanctions and a naval blockade, Iran’s leadership remains defiant, prioritizing retaliation over economic relief for its people. The conflict’s stalemate suggests no imminent

resolution, prolonging the suffering in Iran and political angst in the US.

It started as an intense military battle, costing over a thousand Iranian lives and billions of dollars in damage to Iran’s economy, military and internal infrastructure, as well as to the infrastructure of the Gulf’s Arab countries. The US has lost 18 servicemen and women, with an additional 600–750 wounded and extensive damage to or destruction of its military facilities throughout the Gulf region and Jordan. But after six months, the Iran War has become a war of wills between the war’s two principal antagonists, America and Iran.

Who suffers?

For the US, the strain is largely political. The budgetary costs and a modest rise in gasoline prices are about the only economic penalties. The political cost to President Donald Trump and his party may be more severe, with polling showing his approval sliding to a mere 26%. How that will translate exactly in the November midterm election is uncertain, but many in his party are plenty worried with Republican control of both the House and Senate on the line. Americans are notorious for voting out the party that leads the country into an unpopular war. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs reports that disapproval of the war is now 70%.

With respect to Iran, however, the pain is all economic. There is no debate over the level of damage to that nation’s economy, which suffered a devastating pummeling from both American and Israeli aircraft and missile attacks. Due to infrastructure damage and the ongoing US blockade, Iranian oil exports have fallen to a trickle, 65,000 barrels per day according to one estimate. Its GDP is expected to decline by 5.5%

this year, a recession for sure but still only half of what most economists would define as a depression. The US dollar is now worth two million rials, with further declines expected as the overall economy deteriorates. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is projecting that the country's inflation this year will exceed 70%. The nation's Misery Index, which is inflation plus unemployment, will top 90%.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian recently warned Iranians that the cumulative toll of the war, continuing US sanctions and the naval blockade are costing the nation dearly. Imports and exports have fallen by 35%, with no relief in sight. Iranians did not need to hear that to know the war's cost to them. Food prices have skyrocketed, with meats and dairy up by 90%, putting these goods and others out of reach for most of the population. Poverty in Iran has now reached 36%.

In America's wars in the region over the last 30 years, the American clock has always run faster than those of its adversaries; i.e., political pressure on the US for a resolution was much greater than that of its adversaries. This war may prove to be the exception, assuming Donald Trump has the patience to wait it out.

The war's balance sheet after six months appears heavily weighted toward the US. Nevertheless, Iran's leadership remains ever committed to achieving its war goals: imposing tolls for vessel passage through the Strait of Hormuz, payment of war reparations by the US (at least \$300 billion-plus), removal of all US bases from the region, an immediate and permanent end to all military operations including in Lebanon, and an immediate end to the American blockade.

Latest US sanctions hurt but not enough

America upped the economic pain in late August with US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent's

announcement of "Operation Economic Outcast." He equated it to an "economic D-Day," ignoring the fact that the historic allies' invasion of Normandy in 1944 included dozens of America's allies. Bessent made no mention of other nations joining the US's stepped-up Iran sanctions. That is a major shortcoming of the plan and will make its impact much less than touted by Trump and Bessent.

Sanctions work most effectively when many nations sign on, as was the case with UN Security Council sanctions imposed on apartheid South Africa, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and pre-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iran. The US administration's additional sanctions will apply greater pressure on Iran, but the Islamic Republic has become a master at dodging them, having devised multiple evasion schemes since 1979.

Moreover, Bessent's announcement stopped short of imposing comprehensive secondary sanctions. These are sanctions imposed on businesses, individuals and entities that do business with sanctioned countries or businesses, even if they have no ties to the US. The most effective of those would be on Chinese operators importing sanctioned Iranian oil and the third-party banks that manage their financial transactions. In fact, those businesses were responsible for purchasing 90% of Iran's oil exports before the imposition of the US blockade. Bessent seems reluctant to upset the US-China economic détente now in place. So, without those comprehensive secondary sanctions, don't expect the Iranians to suffer much more than they do already.

This suggests that America's economic arsenal, while formidable, may be facing the same challenges as its military in Iran. The country's depleted munitions stockpile has become an impediment to continued military action against Iran. In effect, the US is running out of options. Trump has chosen the only course open to him:

continue with economic sanctions as they stand and with the naval blockade, which may be more damaging in the long run.

Iran believing its own rhetoric

This does not necessarily translate into victory for Iran. It still must rebuild the nation's infrastructure and right its economy. For that, it needs a major infusion of foreign capital. Under the current sanctions, that is impossible. It will need America and other major sanctioning nations like the EU to relax these sanctions.

Except for episodic flare-ups in military tensions, pressure on global oil markets seems to be abating. With each week, more of the Gulf's Arab oil producers are exporting more of their oil, now exceeding 40% of pre-war levels, using alternative routes, running the Iranian blockade or sailing under cover of US naval escort. Moreover, consumers and producers are adjusting to the new set of conditions. Other producers are stepping up their production, and consumers are adjusting their consumption habits and turning to alternative fuels. The longer Iran delays coming to an understanding with the US, the less effective the oil leverage it currently wields. It may already be near the point of making the Strait of Hormuz a soft cudgel at best.

Things cannot genuinely improve for Iran and its economy, and most importantly for its people, without sanctions relief and the lifting of the US blockade. That can only happen if Iran and the US return to serious negotiations. The Memorandum of Understanding agreed in June offered Iran all that and access to some of the \$100 billion in frozen assets held in foreign banks. But to get that back on track, Iran will have to forgo its toll scheme for the Strait of Hormuz and accept serious negotiations on constraining its nuclear weapons program.

The Islamic Republic remains resistant to doing that. It doesn't want to do Donald Trump any favors by caving into his demands, especially with the US midterm elections now less than two months away.

A pattern of obsession

This follows an apparent pattern of vendetta obsession on Iran's part dating to 1953. Then Iranian Prime Minister Mohhamed Mossadegh was unable to reach a compromise with the British government over his nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Repeated efforts by the US and others, including the IMF/World Bank, also came to naught. US President Harry Truman, in his outgoing brief of the incoming American president, Dwight Eisenhower, told him, "The Iranians seem more obsessed with embarrassing the British than resolving their nation's mounting economic crisis." Eisenhower also failed to bring the British and Iranians to the table, and the economic situation further spiraled. The Americans, prodded by Britain and fearful of a collapse of the government and political chaos in the Middle East's most important nation at the time, opted to take matters into their own hands. They launched Operation TPAJAX to topple the Mossadegh government, replace him with a more cooperative prime minister, and reassert the Shah's authority.

Then, amid the Islamic Revolution, Iran's leadership seemed to lapse again into vendetta-seeking, this time against the deposed Shah and then US President Jimmy Carter. Defying the international community's insistence to release the 52 Americans illegally held hostage and suffering international condemnation and sanctions and plummeting oil exports, the revolutionary leadership refused the hostages' release out of apparent spite for Carter's decision to admit the Shah into the US for medical treatment. Myriad diplomatic and back-channel efforts by the Carter

administration and other nations' envoys failed to sway the obstinate Iranian leadership. The Iranians held the hostages until after Carter had lost the 1980 presidential election and his victorious opponent, Ronald Reagan, was sworn into office.

More than two years into the bloody Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the UN Security Council (UNSC) proposed Resolution 540 to end the war, which Iraq accepted. Iran refused, insisting that Iraq be blamed for the invasion. The war lasted almost another six years, costing the lives of an estimated 1.2 million (and likely more) Iranians and Iraqi lives, and causing unaccounted damage to the economies of both nations. Following severe military setbacks and greater economic devastation, Iran finally accepted UNSC 598 in 1988, on largely the same terms offered in 1983.

Now it would seem, Iran's leadership is again obsessed with appearing to compromise even in the interests of its own economy and people. It has a chip on its shoulder; its name is Donald Trump. The resentment this time stems from America's launching the war in the first place, its killing of the previous Supreme Leader and its wiping out many of the family members of his successor. Iran's current hardline leadership appears possessed with exacting revenge.

Trump does not leave office until January of 2029, an impossibly long time for Iran to endure its current economic plight and its people's suffering. In the upcoming election, Trump is suggesting the election is about him, though he is not on the ballot. Voters may indeed oblige him and reject candidates of the president's party. Would that be enough to assuage the Iranian leadership?

Donald Trump is demonstrating exceedingly rare patience, seemingly content to wait out the Iranians using sanctions and the blockade. Iran's

leaders remain intractable, unwilling to amend their "demands" on the US.

One leader's uncharacteristic patience and the other's apparent obsession with vindication will mean Iranians and Americans are unlikely to see an end to this conflict soon.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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Brazil's 2026 Election Is Becoming a Competition for the Algorithm

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
September 11, 2026

Brazil's 2026 election has pitted incumbent President Lula da Silva, Federal Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, and social media powerhouses Renan Santos and Augusto Cury against one another. Amid the election, institutional disputes and questions about court legitimacy burn brightly. But political power may begin somewhere other than the ballot box: in the machinery that decides what millions of citizens see.

There are moments in Brazil's history when the country's affairs become almost impossible to explain to a foreigner without sounding as if you had invented part of it. This is one of them.

We are less than a month away from the first round of a presidential election that will also renew the Chamber of Deputies and part of the Senate. The country has spent the last few years arguing about whether democracy survived the last election; whether the institutions that defended it have gone too far in doing so; whether Former President Jair Bolsonaro should be in prison; whether incumbent President Lula da Silva should serve another term; whether the Supreme Court has accumulated too much power; whether social media is destroying political debate and, increasingly, whether anyone can still tell the difference between an authentic political movement and a highly efficient digital operation.

Now add a failed bank, a Supreme Court fight, a former president's son running, a self-help writer suddenly climbing the polls and a young political operator whose career was built almost entirely on the Internet. That is roughly where we are.

The Brazilian presidential election will take place on October 4, with a runoff scheduled for October 25 if no candidate receives more than half of the valid votes. Brazilians will also choose all 513 members of the Chamber of Deputies, 27 senators and the governors of the states and the Federal District.

It is difficult to think of a more consequential election since the country returned to democracy in 1985. And yet the strangest thing about the 2026 campaign may be that the candidates are not the most interesting part of it — the distribution is.

For someone watching Brazil from London, New York or Lisbon, a little historical context is necessary. The country spent 21 years under military dictatorship after the 1964 coup. Democracy returned gradually, with the first civilian president taking office in 1985 and the first direct presidential election in almost three decades taking place in 1989. Since then, Brazilian democracy has survived impeachment, corruption scandals, economic crises, political realignments and a remarkable number of television debates in which candidates promise to fix everything by Monday.

The 2022 election was different. Lula defeated Bolsonaro by a margin of just over two million votes, the narrowest presidential victory in Brazilian history at the time. Bolsonaro refused to concede in the conventional political language expected of a defeated candidate, and his supporters spent weeks questioning the voting system. On January 8, 2023, thousands of his followers invaded the Congress, the Supreme Court and the presidential palace in Brasília.

It was Brazil's version of the post-election assault on democratic institutions, with its own characters, its own history and, inevitably, its own tropical absurdity. The institutions survived. The argument over what they did to survive has not ended. And now Brazil is preparing to vote again.

The bank in the middle of the election

The most extraordinary political story of the moment may have begun with something that sounds entirely unrelated to an election: Banco Master, a private bank based in São Paulo.

Its former owner, Daniel Vorcaro, became the central figure in an investigation involving alleged financial crimes and a web of relationships reaching into politics and the country's institutions. Among the people whose names have appeared in the material surrounding the case is Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, Jair Bolsonaro's eldest son and now a presidential candidate. Flávio has acknowledged receiving money from Vorcaro in connection with a film about his father.

The film itself, titled *Dark Horse*, almost perfectly serves as a symbol of Brazilian politics in 2026. A former president is imprisoned after being convicted over a coup plot; his son is running to replace the political leader who defeated him; and a banker connected to the Bolsonaro family becomes one of the protagonists of a financial scandal that is now colliding with the Supreme Court. The Court has not been spared.

Justice Alexandre de Moraes asked Chief Justice Edson Fachin to investigate Justice André Mendonça over allegations connected to the handling of the Banco Master investigations. Mendonça had authorized the disclosure of a Federal Police report containing allegations involving Moraes and people around him. The dispute has become a judicial argument about judicial power itself.

This matters because Brazilians are going into an election in which one of the central questions is institutional credibility. The people who will decide whether the political game was played fairly are themselves being pulled into the game.

That is not necessarily a sign that democracy is collapsing. Democratic institutions are not supposed to be free of conflict. But there is a difference between institutions being contested and institutions losing the capacity to persuade citizens that their decisions are legitimate. Brazil is getting uncomfortably close to that distinction.

Meanwhile, Flávio is trying to turn his father's political inheritance into a presidential campaign. Lula, at 80, is seeking another term after a political life that already contains enough reversals for several biographies. He was imprisoned in 2018 after corruption convictions, released in 2019, he returned to the presidency in 2023 after Fachin annulled his convictions and he defeated Bolsonaro in the 2022 election.

The Brazilian voter, in other words, is being asked to choose between candidates whose political biographies already feel like sequels. Then two new characters walked into the story.

Renan Santos and the politics of provocation

Renan Santos is difficult to understand if you think of Brazilian politics as something that happens mainly inside Congress. His real political career happened online. He became one of the leading figures of the Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement, or MBL), which emerged during the demonstrations that helped impeach President Dilma Rousseff in 2016. The movement began with a liberal agenda, developed an unusually sophisticated communication operation and eventually turned itself into a political party, Missão (Mission Party), registered in 2025. Renan is now its presidential candidate.

The British magazine *The Economist*, prior to editing the piece, called him a “dark horse presidential candidate.” The expression reveals a great deal because Renan does not fit the traditional Brazilian definition of a presidential candidate; he is not a governor, a former minister, a television celebrity or the heir to a political dynasty. He is a creature of the Internet.

His political communication has always understood something that traditional politicians were slow to learn: Attention does not have to be earned by becoming more reasonable. Sometimes the fastest way to become visible is to become impossible to ignore.

Renan’s rhetoric against “wokeism,” his emphasis on masculinity and his proximity to parts of the so-called manosphere place him inside an international digital phenomenon that has found fertile ground among young men who experience cultural change less as liberation than as loss. There is nothing uniquely Brazilian about that. What is Brazilian is the speed with which this imported political language gets mixed with our own culture of spectacle, confrontation and personalism.

Renan also carries controversies that would normally require a candidate to spend quite a lot of time explaining himself. In August, the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office filed a civil action against him and the MBL over publications concerning Indigenous peoples in the Lower Tapajós region. A federal judge ordered the removal of the material on an interim basis.

Then came a wonderfully circular episode. Dias Toffoli, a justice of Brazil’s Supreme Electoral Court, temporarily suspended Renan’s Internet campaign after finding that social-media profiles used by the campaign had not been properly reported to electoral authorities. The decision also affected access to electoral funds and his

participation in debates. Renan’s party argued that the problem was technical and subsequently complied with part of the court’s requirements, leading Toffoli to restore the campaign’s online activity.

There is something almost literary about it. A candidate whose principal political asset is his command of digital communication found himself temporarily unable to campaign because of a dispute over the way his digital communication had been reported to the electoral authorities. It is the sort of story that would sound contrived if it were written as fiction.

But Renan is not the most curious case. That would be Augusto Cury.

From self-help to the presidency

Cury spent decades doing something that Brazilian politics has always admired but never quite known how to classify: He built a personal brand enormous enough to function almost independently of the institutions around him.

He wrote tons of books. He gave lectures. He created courses. He built a vocabulary around anxiety, emotional intelligence, human relationships and personal development. His *Theory of Multifocal Intelligence* became his intellectual signature, although specialists have questioned its scientific basis. Cury rejects those criticisms.

For most of his career, none of this had anything to do with presidential politics. Then, almost overnight, it did. A BTG/Nexus poll showed Cury rising from 2% to 11% of voting intentions. An AtlasIntel/Bloomberg poll showed him moving from 1.6% to 7.8%. That would already be remarkable.

Then came Instagram. Between August 16 and 29, Cury gained roughly 2.5 million followers, reaching around 10.8 million. On Thursday, August 27, he reportedly added approximately 1.2 million. For comparison, Flávio gained a little more than 71,000 followers over the same period. Lula gained around 11,000.

I have spent enough time looking at digital metrics to know that numbers like these deserve curiosity rather than applause. My first reaction was admittedly less scientific. I imagined Cury going to sleep with eight million followers and waking up with nine million, like a Brazilian version of a science-fiction movie in which Instagram has finally discovered cellular reproduction.

The joke, however, hides a serious question. What exactly does “organic” mean anymore?

The word organic has become suspiciously flexible

Cury’s sudden growth coincided with an equally sudden appearance of influencers endorsing him. They came from different areas of the Internet. Some had little apparent relationship to politics. Videos appeared presenting Cury as an alternative to the country’s polarized political establishment. Opponents questioned whether some of this activity could have involved paid influence, which would raise electoral-law issues. Cury’s campaign denied wrongdoing and described the phenomenon as spontaneous support generated by an innovative digital strategy.

There exists a crucial distinction between the two explanations. Suspicion is not evidence. A sudden increase in followers is not proof of manipulation. An influencer supporting a candidate is not proof that the influencer was paid.

But the opposite assumption is equally naive. In 2026, calling something “organic” is not an explanation. It is often the beginning of the question. The Internet has made spontaneity almost impossible to observe directly. We see the result — millions of views, thousands of comments, a sudden rise in followers — but rarely see the architecture that produced it.

That architecture matters. A candidate can appear to be gaining momentum because people are genuinely excited about him. He can also gain momentum because a network of accounts has decided to amplify him. Both things can happen at the same time. One can cause the other. A campaign can provide the spark and the audience can provide the oxygen.

At some point, the distinction between campaign and culture becomes almost impossible to draw. This is precisely where the politics of the algorithm begins.

What happens when attention becomes legitimacy?

There is a line I have been carrying around for years because of my work on digital platforms: The most important thing an algorithm does is not decide what we think. It decides what gets the opportunity to become something we think about.

That sounds like a small distinction, but it isn’t. If a candidate appears in front of you 20 times in a week while another appears twice, the first candidate acquires something that has nothing to do with his political program.

First comes familiarity, then recognition and eventually relevance. Once a candidate becomes relevant, people start talking about him; the conversation becomes news and the news becomes yet another mechanism for distribution. At some point, the candidate begins showing up in polls.

The poll itself becomes news, the news becomes content and the content generates even more visibility. Before long, everyone is looking at the numbers and saying that the candidate has “grown,” when part of that growth may have begun simply with the fact that people started seeing him everywhere.

Of course he grew. We have been feeding him.

This is why the rise of Cury interests me more than the question of whether every new follower is authentic. The deeper change is that a preexisting personal audience can now be converted into political relevance at a speed that traditional political organizations cannot easily reproduce. Cury spent decades building the raw material. The campaign discovered how to reassemble it.

That is a very different form of political power from the one that existed when television was the great political machine.

Brazil’s strange talent for turning embarrassment into narrative

There is a Brazilian trait that becomes especially visible during political crises: our peculiar relationship with transgression. The old malandro — the clever character who knows how to bend the rules and survive the consequences — has always occupied an ambiguous place in Brazilian culture. We disapprove of him and admire him simultaneously. The rule-breaker can become charismatic. The accused can become persecuted. The person who was caught can become the person who “had the courage to do what nobody else would.”

Digital politics has industrialized this ambiguity. A controversy generates attention. Attention creates followers. Followers create the appearance of social proof. Social proof makes the controversy more valuable. The candidate can then

tell his supporters that the establishment is attacking him because he threatens it. The accusation becomes evidence of relevance.

This does not mean that every accusation is true, or that every accused politician is guilty, or that every controversial figure is exploiting the system deliberately. It means that the information environment has changed the economic value of controversy. That is a much more uncomfortable proposition. Because once controversy becomes an asset, avoiding it may actually be a competitive disadvantage.

The candidate as a distribution problem

This is where Santos and Cury unexpectedly meet. Their politics are not the same. Their biographies are not the same. Their audiences are not the same. Their routes into the election are almost opposites. Renan accumulated attention through political confrontation. Cury accumulated it through a decades-long personal brand.

Yet both have arrived at the same contemporary political problem: how to convert attention into legitimacy. That conversion is not automatic. A million followers do not equal a million votes. But neither is the opposite true: followers are not politically irrelevant. They are infrastructure. They provide distribution, recognition, access to audiences, volunteers, donors, influencers, journalists and, perhaps most importantly, a sense that other people are already paying attention.

This is why I find the phrase “social media campaign” increasingly inadequate. For a long time, social media was treated as one channel among many. A television campaign had television, radio, newspapers, rallies and, eventually, social media. That hierarchy is disappearing. The campaign is becoming the distribution network itself. And whoever controls

distribution has an extraordinary political advantage: the ability to make a candidate appear larger than his current electoral support. That can eventually change the electoral support.

This is the loop. Not necessarily manipulation, not necessarily conspiracy. A feedback loop. Visibility produces relevance, relevance produces visibility, and somewhere inside that loop an electorate begins to form.

The danger is not the algorithm

This is where I return to what I have learned from studying platforms. I used to be more interested in what algorithms were doing to us; now I am more interested in what we do once we understand how they work. Once we realize that outrage travels faster than nuance, we become more willing to express outrage; once we see that certainty performs better than doubt, we become more certain of ourselves; and once we understand that personal conflict generates engagement, we start turning politics into personal conflict, often without even noticing that we are adapting ourselves to the logic of the platform.

Politicians eventually learn the same lesson and begin producing, deliberately, the kind of behavior that the algorithm rewards. Journalists respond to the politicians, influencers respond to the journalists, audiences respond to the influencers and politicians respond again to the audiences. What emerges is a feedback loop in which the machine is no longer something operating outside us. We have become part of its operating system, adjusting our language, our behavior and even our political identities to whatever keeps us visible.

That, to me, is the real political transformation. And it is why the 2026 election deserves attention beyond the question of who will eventually occupy the Planalto Palace. Brazil is testing, in real time, a new form of political legitimacy — one in which

being seen often enough can begin to look remarkably similar to being important.

Lula represents the old political architecture at its most resilient: party, unions, government, history, television, personal charisma and an enormous institutional memory. Flávio represents another powerful Brazilian tradition: family, ideological identity, conservative mobilization and the political inheritance of a movement that was itself amplified by digital media. Santos represents politics after the Internet became a political environment rather than a communications channel. Cury represents something newer still: the conversion of a preexisting celebrity, built outside politics, into electoral capital through the same attention economy that transformed influencers into media companies.

Whether any of them wins is almost secondary to what happens next. Because the machine remains. The next candidate will inherit it. The next campaign will understand it a little better. The next controversy will travel a little faster. And the next election will probably begin before anyone has officially announced that it has started.

Brazil is still a democracy. It still has elections, courts, parties, voters and institutions capable of stopping political actors when they cross legal boundaries. But democracy increasingly takes place inside a commercial distribution system whose objective is not democratic deliberation.

Its objective is attention. That distinction is becoming impossible to ignore. And perhaps that is the most important lesson of the Brazilian election of 2026. The political battle is no longer fought only over what people believe. It is increasingly fought over what people get to see often enough to believe that it matters.

Before conquering the country, a candidate may first have to conquer the machine that decides what the country sees.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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Lindsay Clancy Killed Her Own Children. Is She to Blame?

Ellis Cashmore
September 13, 2026

After murdering her three children and attempting suicide by leaping from a second-story window in 2023, Lindsay Clancy has received a mistrial. Did postpartum psychosis so thoroughly reduce her agency that she bears

no criminal responsibility? The next jury will have to look at all the evidence, including the social circumstances beyond this mother's control, to decide that.

Never has a murder case been so dependent on subjective reaction. Whatever anyone says, the facts do not speak for themselves.

Fact: On January 24, 2023, in Duxbury, Massachusetts, Lindsay Clancy strangled her three children — Cora, aged five, Dawson, three and Callan, just eight months old. Fact: She then jumped from a second-story window in an attempt to kill herself. Fact: She survived but was left paralyzed from the waist down. Question: Is Clancy criminally responsible for doing so?

The trial

The defense's position is that Clancy was experiencing postpartum psychosis — a rare psychiatric condition that can cause hallucinations, delusions and a loss of contact with reality after childbirth — and so lacked criminal responsibility.

Prosecutors challenged that diagnosis. One prosecution forensic psychologist, for example, testified that Clancy didn't have acute psychosis at the time she killed the children. Another witness, a psychiatrist, testified that he didn't believe Clancy's account that she heard a voice ordering her to kill the children.

After nearly six weeks of testimony, more than 80 witnesses and 300 exhibits, the jury deliberated for seven days. It reported repeatedly that it could not reach a unanimous verdict until, on September 4, the judge declared a mistrial. The case may go to another trial. The same question will remain.

Mental health changes blameworthiness?

We're accustomed to thinking of criminal acts as behavior for which one or more people is culpable. There are mitigations, of course. Self-defense is an obvious one. Accidents present another. But what happens when an act is unambiguously intentional, yet the person who committed it lacks responsibility because of a mental condition? Does the mental disorder limit a person's blameworthiness?

Postpartum psychosis is a genuinely severe mental condition. But agreeing that the condition exists doesn't establish that Clancy had it at the time of the killings, nor that it lessens her liability.

In recent years, "mental health" has become an extraordinarily capacious category. Anxiety, depression, trauma, addiction and severe psychiatric disorders all appear in the same kaleidoscope of psychological well-being and distress. Obviously, mental health conditions vary significantly in their severity, symptoms and effects. Nor are they commensurate: People can function despite psychological distress, for example; psychosis, by contrast, can erode a person's ability to function and distinguish external reality from perception.

Agency or addiction?

Paradoxically, two perspectives have dominated popular thought over the past several decades. Agency — the ability to act intentionally and produce desired results — has been central to the women's movement, which has argued that, historically, women have been denied a voice in determining their own destinies. The insistence that women not only possess agency but should use it to leverage change in society is evident throughout feminism.

Yet there has been a parallel and contradictory tendency to surrender agency and explain unwelcome behavior as the result of dependencies,

addictions or, to frame it simplistically, "demons." This has become almost a default setting for habits and practices that seem obdurate and impossible to break. Addiction has become a modifier for sex, shopping, exercise, work, social media, coffee and even Netflix.

The problem confronting the jury was, and will be, whether there are circumstances in which a human being's capacity for agency is so diminished that they can no longer exercise meaningful control over their behavior. In other words, was Clancy's agency compromised irredeemably? Unless new revelatory evidence surfaces at the retrial, the next jury will face the same quandary.

Victims' loved ones are always understandably angered when mental conditions are invoked. Often the judge spares the killer prison and refers them to a secure psychiatric facility for an indefinite period but with the possibility of review. Valdo Calocane, who killed three people in England in 2023, received an indefinite sentence to a secure hospital near Liverpool, after the court decided to accept a plea of manslaughter by diminished responsibility rather than a murder conviction (diminished responsibility is a concept in British law: The defense must prove that the defendant was suffering from an abnormality of mental functioning at the time of the offense). The victims' families continue to challenge the decision.

Massachusetts uses "lack of criminal responsibility" rather than "diminished responsibility." The legal question is similar — whether, because of mental disease or defect, the defendant lacked substantial capacity to appreciate the wrongfulness of the conduct or to conform their conduct to the law. Could they distinguish right from wrong and retain the capability to conform?

This is why the case has proved so insoluble. The prosecution's argument didn't require the jury to imagine Clancy as some kind of monster. It actually wanted jurors to entertain the unsettling possibility that she acted deliberately, according to motivations that were her own — even if those motivations were shaped, perhaps contorted, by severe mental illness. The jury couldn't decide whether her illness so enfeebled her agency that she could no longer be held responsible for her actions.

Violating nature

There's another way of approaching the problem. What if the behavior is not quite as incomprehensible as it first appears? Mothers killing their children is not as uncommon as many suppose, nor is it confined to one culture or one historical period. Mothers have killed their children in circumstances ranging from abuse, resentment and unwanted pregnancy to poverty, desperation, revenge and the desire to escape an intolerable situation.

Sometimes the mother has been mentally ill, sometimes she hasn't. The circumstances differ, but the underlying fact is stubborn: Motherhood doesn't guarantee maternal devotion. This is difficult to acknowledge because we've invested motherhood with powerful moral and emotional significance. We like to imagine the mother as the person who protects the child for no other reason than her being the mother. We treat maternal love almost as instinctual, something stronger and deeper than culture and society — unconditional. A mother who kills her own child seems to violate not merely the law but nature itself.

Perhaps we need to turn this assumption inside out. Not all mothers experience motherhood in the same way. Some are devoted to their children; some are indifferent; some resent them; some abuse them. Some find motherhood fulfilling;

others experience it as burdensome, isolating or even intolerable. These differences don't make maternal love meaningless. They make it human.

Psychiatric explanations

Once we accept that, Clancy's actions remain abominable but become less metaphysically mysterious. We no longer have to begin with the assumption that a mother could only kill her children if something had gone catastrophically wrong in her mind.

Psychiatry searches inside. Sociology, my own subject, searches elsewhere: in relationships, institutions, culture, history and the circumstances in which people live. The two approaches can produce different, even conflicting, accounts of the same behavior. One asks: What pathology was operating in the individual? The other identifies the social conditions under which the individual acted. Neither cancels the other. Contemporary explanations of troubling or transgressive behavior often seem to move agency away from the person and toward an abstract force inside the person. Addiction is responsible. Trauma is the cause. The "demons" did it. The language can sound compassionate and is sometimes clinically justified. But it can also leave us with an odd inversion: The more completely we explain a person's behavior, the less of the person appears to remain as an agent. This is not an argument for abandoning psychiatric explanations. But we might wonder how much they affect our conception of responsibility.

The Clancy jury had to navigate this territory. Was she a person making choices in terrible circumstances? Or had her mental condition so fundamentally disrupted her capacity for agency that responsibility could no longer properly be attributed to her? And what if the answer to both questions is yes?

No sociologist claims their frame of reference is the only one in which social events can be examined. The botanist viewing a chrysanthemum has no reason to dispute the poet's right to look at the same flower in a completely different way. The Clancy jury had to do something rather more difficult.

So what happens when a jury receives psychiatric evidence that a defendant's mental state may have greatly undermined her agency, while being reminded that she was also a member of a social world that shaped her — in ways most of us find repugnant, perhaps unrecognizable, but grimly real?

Both things can be true. Clancy may have been chronically ill. She may also have been an agent acting in social circumstances beyond her control. The law has to decide how those truths relate to responsibility. That's the question the previous jury couldn't answer and any future jury will somehow have to.

[Ellis Cashmore's "The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson" is published by Bloomsbury.]

[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?

In Trump's Casino, the House Always Wins

Francesca Collu

September 16, 2026

During the first year of his second presidency, Donald Trump's income has more than tripled. Whether that reflects profit from his institutional role or simple coincidence almost doesn't matter. As both player and referee, he holds the power to shape the market his personal fortune depends on. That overlap raises a question about whether it is appropriate for him to keep controlling his personal business, but most of all, whether laws meant to prevent presidential conflicts of interest are adequate at all.

On June 30, the U.S. Office of Government Ethics (OGE) released Donald Trump's 2025 annual financial disclosure. This 927-page report traces how closely his personal business and his institutional role now overlap. Set alongside a string of other actions sitting at the edge of what is legal and what is ethical, the document raises a question: Are the guardrails on presidential power still adequate?

According to Forbes, Trump's current net worth is \$6.5 billion, by far the highest peak net worth among all the US presidents. That figure marks a reversal from his first term, when he left office roughly \$1.2 billion poorer than he entered it. In

January 2017, his net worth was \$3.7 billion. By the time he reluctantly passed the torch to president Joe Biden, in January 2021, he had fallen to \$2.5 billion.

In his second term, it seems like he has found a way to profit from the presidency. He already tripled his inflow: during 2025 his total income was at least \$2.12 billion, while his reported income for 2024 was over \$600 million.

Where the money came from

Most of the figures in the disclosure are reported as ranges rather than exact amounts; unless noted otherwise, this piece uses the floor value of each range. The disclosure reports more than \$1.37 billion in earnings and proceeds connected to Trump's cryptocurrency ventures — more than half of his total 2025 reported income.

The timing is difficult to ignore: Trump's crypto businesses expanded as his administration pursued a markedly crypto-friendly policy agenda. He made more than \$600 million, thanks to the so-called "memecoin" \$TRUMP, launched days before his second inauguration, and NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens, digital collectibles recorded on a blockchain) licensing. More than \$500 million came from the World Liberty Financial. This cryptocurrency venture was co-founded in the middle of the 2024 presidential campaign by, among others, Trump family members and Zach and Alex Witkoff, the sons of White House adviser Steve Witkoff, current Special Envoy for the Peace Missions and to the Middle East. Steve Witkoff is one of the most influential figures in the current US foreign policy.

The profits from crypto and digital assets happened as the administration issued an executive order promoting a pro-innovation approach and appointing crypto-friendly regulators. Through another executive order it also created a

"Strategic" Bitcoin Reserve, and ultimately signed the GENIUS Act (Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for U.S. Stablecoins Act) to regulate stablecoins.

Using floor values from Schedule 1, the section listing outside income, Gulf States were a significant source of Trump's reported foreign revenue in 2025. More than \$38 million came just from investments in the area of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman. But that's modest compared with the last gift Qatar gave the President in May: A heavily modified Boeing 747-8 jet valued at roughly \$400 million, one of the most valuable gifts ever received by the US government. Qatar's Prime Minister said it was just a "government-to-government dealing," but the future plans for the ownership of the luxurious plane are still questioned.

The pattern goes beyond foreign governments. Trump's financial interests also intersect with domestic companies over which his administration can exercise considerable influence. For instance, his disclosure shows an income of \$87 million from five legal settlements with major media and technology companies: ABC, CBS, Meta, YouTube and Twitter. This raises questions about the relationship between companies facing litigation from the president and an administration with substantial regulatory power over the media and technology industries.

Investments dominate the disclosure: three-quarters of it concerns Trump's accounts, which made over 20,000 transactions in the past year. Several trades occurred shortly before government announcements that affected the same companies or sectors. On April 8, the day before Trump announced the tariff pause, his accounts bought 327 individual stocks worth up to \$12.8 million; the next day, S&P 500 posted one of the biggest single-day gains on record. On August 18, the accounts purchased Intel stock four days before

Trump announced a \$9 billion federal equity stake in the company, a week after he met with Intel's CEO Lip-Bu Tan. Throughout the year, his accounts repeatedly bought Palantir Technologies as the administration expanded Palantir's contract portfolio, including with ICE, and bought GEO Group, the private prison operator and major ICE contractor, on at least ten separate dates as the executive branch expanded immigration detention capacity.

Player and referee

Even if every single trade was pure coincidence, the structural fact remains: he has the power to move markets through official acts, and he simultaneously holds a personal financial position that benefits from those same acts.

That overlap raises questions about whether the safeguards governing presidential conflicts of interest are adequate. The Trump Organization states that the accounts are managed by independent financial institutions. But independent management is not the same as a blind trust: Trump can still know what assets he owns and, potentially, what interests may be affected by his decisions. Questions around transparency arise as well. The STOCK (Stop Trading on Congressional Knowledge) Act requires lawmakers and staff to disclose trades exceeding \$1,000 within 30 days. Trump filed the reports covering some of his trades (specifically those executed before the tariff pause announcement) more than one year after the STOCK Act's 30-day deadline. As a result, he will incur a \$200 late filing fee.

In the private sector, insider-trading law and corporate blackout periods are designed to prevent people with non-public information about market-moving decisions from trading on that information. Corporate executives also face mandatory disclosures and pre-scheduled trading plans to limit the risk of conflicts. The President of the

United States, however, is exempt from the conflict-of-interest statute that applies to other executive-branch officials.

The risk of conflicts of interest becomes even more noticeable in Trump's media empire. On August 1, Trump Media & Technology Group launched a subscription to Truth API, a software that allows subscribers to directly have access to high profile Truth social posts (including President Trump's) milliseconds before they are published in the public feed. This service costs up to \$100,000 per month, with a discounted plan of \$60,000 per month if you sign up for a multi-year plan. The service effectively turns the president's public communications into a premium financial product.

The rules that never came

For decades, this intersection between private business and public office was filled by norms rather than statute: presidents voluntarily placed their assets in blind trusts, sold off holdings before taking office, or simply had few enough business interests for the question not to arise. Trump has done none of these.

Congress has had chances to clear this grey area and hasn't. A House bill banning stock trading by members of Congress passed this year, but it defines "covered individuals" as lawmakers and their families only, leaving the President untouched. Moreover, it allows them to continue owning and selling stocks they already have. A narrower bill aimed specifically at the president and vice-president, requiring divestment into a blind trust, was introduced in January and has remained stalled there ever since. And there is the CLARITY Act (Digital Asset Market Clarity Act), a bill designed to establish a market structure for cryptocurrencies. It has stalled in the Senate for months over an ethics agreement that would bar public officials (and their spouses) from issuing or sponsoring digital assets. However, the proposal

doesn't seem to affect Trump's fortune. It would not apply to his children. It would not touch any of his existing crypto ventures. And it would automatically sunset on January 20, 2029, so a future DOJ could not prosecute Trump for potential violations. As they say, the house always wins.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]



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Which Side Are You On? (And Why That's the Wrong Question)

Peter Isackson
September 18, 2026

The media manufacture false binaries — demanding audiences pick a “side” rather than investigate causes — by stripping issues of history and context, converting citizens into

jurors handed pre-selected evidence. This isn't incidental bias but a structural epistemology: complexity is systematically excised so that decisiveness substitutes for understanding, across war, conspiracy and now AI.

In democracies, citizens need to be informed. Luckily for all of us, we have our trusted news media who never fail to breathlessly report the dramatic facts surrounding the great issues of the day. And never has that reporting been more crucial to our sense of wellbeing. Whether it's war, the economy or invasive technology, our media seeks to frame each of these existential issues as a question that, if left unanswered, may imply the collapse of civilization and increasingly the extinction of the human race.

Look at any day's headlines. Take your pick between escalating wars attracting unexpected alliances, the suspicion of imperial and genocidal ambitions on the part of AI, the increasingly obscene wealth gap and an obviously worsening climate crisis. All these trends have been evolving for decades, the vacillating histories about which we all might be legitimately curious. Some of us could even consider it worthwhile taking the time to study in detail the contributing causes buried in a complex tangle of events and relationships.

Given the magnitude of the threat, we obviously need some guidance. So, what do our favorite news sources do to help us out? They do what makes the most sense for themselves. They invite us to listen to the voices of those who are convinced the danger is even greater than what we have been told to expect. Instead of encouraging us to explore and deepen our understanding of the multiple and often hidden dimensions of any of these issues, our media challenge us simply to think about what they see as the only question that

matters: “Which side are you on?” Because there are always two sides.

Are you for Ukraine or Russia? Forget about the history, demography and cultural relations of both countries. Your role is to decide who is the victim and determine which one deserves victory or humiliation.

After the events of October 7, do you believe the dreadful, still unresolved conflict began on that particular day or with the Nakba of 1948? In other words, do you support Israel or Palestine?

And today, concerning events in the Strait of Hormuz, who should control the traffic: the United States or Iran?

On the question of whether we should seek to reign in billionaire wealth or encourage such people to build an ever more productive consumer economy, where do you stand?

And finally, should we mobilize all our resources to achieve AGI and superintelligence, or are you in the camp of those who wish to dismantle data centers and put a halt to AI’s mad progress?

Pick your side.

The duty to be decisive (within binary limits)

On any of these questions, sitting on the fence is not an option. The media have invested heavily in making things easier for you by defining the two competing camps. And they achieved this by removing all unnecessary sources of distraction, such as history, culture and civilizational values.

When it comes to debating issues so conveniently framed as binary choices, the rules of the game make it easy for everyone. Just as in every court case, the accused may be innocent or

guilty. Every consumer of the news understands their task as a member of the jury. The first thing to do is select the issue. Use whatever evidence has been presented to decide who is the single, identifiable culprit. Don’t worry about missing evidence. You can count on the media to provide everything you need — and to ignore everything you don’t need — before making up your mind.

This leaves you with one more thing to do with your friends and acquaintances: Memorize the single prominent reason why the guilty verdict holds. If you want to show off, cite two or even three reasons that make your case. The result is that you will never need to examine facts or events in their detailed context. In the case of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict we have seen this work to perfection. Even supposed “debaters of the issues” such as television personality Piers Morgan could for a long time simply blurt out “October 7” to end any attempt at detailed discussion.

In cases of political conflict such as war, the key institutions, especially national governments, establish the narrative that the media will set as the standard from which one should never deviate. But in other cases where outcomes are unclear and there is no fixed national policy, there exists the possibility of a coexistence between two competing narratives. In such cases, the public will discover that it has a different kind of binary choice: that of believing or doubting. What the news media makes sure the public doesn’t have is the choice of examining the complex reasons for doubting. Why? Because the media has now learned its essential role is defining issues as the two sides of a binary opposition people may decide to align with. If anything, the media’s role is to confirm the idea that there is nothing to investigate.

The classic historical instance of this is the John F. Kennedy assassination in November, 1963. For more than 60 years the only interest legacy media

has shown in that crime has been in denying the results of every independent investigation that has taken place. Despite a lapse of time that should have erased certain objective reasons for resistance, the media has consistently failed over the decades to show even the slightest curiosity about the release of the evidence known to exist in the government's own archives. Even last year's initiative by the Trump administration tasking Congresswoman Anna Paulina Luna to uncover the truth of the JFK assassination has left the media indifferent, if not hostile. And yet new evidence keeps appearing.

The JFK assassination was a traumatic event. So were the attacks of September 11. In its immediate aftermath the Bush administration claimed uncertainty about the precise identity of the perpetrator. Oddly, the president admitted no ambiguity about the unknown culprit's motives: "They hate our freedoms -- our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."

The prime suspect, Osama bin Laden, explicitly offered as a motive his opposition to the establishment of the US military in his native Saudi Arabia. How many consumers of the media were aware of that or curious to know the history behind that reality? For the media, it made much more sense to repeat the president's claim that "they hate our freedoms." Once we know that, there's no need to wonder about historical, political or even cultural context. Americans understand that the difference between themselves and the rest of the world is that they alone value freedom, to the point, by the way, of possessing a plurality of "freedoms."

Where do you stand on AI?

What's true of dramatic political events, assassinations and wars, is also true of other potentially existential issues. The latest, of course,

concerns AI. The media is challenging us to take a stand. And with good reason, since the stakes are the survival of the human race.

In an interview last week on the podcast *Breaking Points*, AI researcher Nate Soares claims that "The track that we are on is that humanity is handing power over to the AIs as fast as we can."

This sums up a belief about AI generally accepted by our media, including alternative media such as *Breaking Points*. Consistent with the media strategies I've described above, this reduces a complex issue to a simple binary opposition. Who should exercise power, AI or humanity? All reasonable people will "vote for" humanity. But all reasonably informed people should know that their vote will have at best negligible influence.

Just as it was absurd on the part of George W. Bush to claim to know the motives of a person that no one had yet identified, I find it equally extraordinary in Soares's assertion that neither he nor his interlocutors make any effort to define what they mean by "humanity" in terms of real agency. What's important in their minds is to identify the two contestants — AI and humanity — not to understand who they are and how they interact.

As an exercise in the kind of critical thinking our media consistently eschews, let's try to understand what it means to say "humanity is handing power over to the AIs as fast as we can." Are we, the citizens of hundreds of nations, the "humanity" that is handing over power? The fact that even in our most evolved democracies the only power we citizens hold is that of voting — which means choosing between two pre-selected alternatives according to the reigning binary logic — should demonstrate that we are not the ones "handing power over" to AI.

Who then holds the power in the name of humanity? The broadest possible answer is everyone who is directly involved in financing and managing the development of AI. The narrowest answer would be Silicon Valley, Wall Street and the military-industrial complex. They are focused on empowering to the maximum AI to do the kinds of jobs that might eventually threaten humanity as a whole.

So let's attempt to be precise and reformulate Soares's sentence to say what it really means. "The track that we are on is that a complex US politico-economic oligarchy is handing power over to the AIs as fast as it can."

Given the way all the issues have been defined as binary choices, some may legitimately object that China, who is also a leader in AI development, should be included in the "politico-economic oligarchy" just mentioned. That's a case worth investigating. What are China's motives? Do they hate us for our economic reasons, inciting them to threaten humanity in the same way Soares sees the Silicon Valley-led cabal doing it?

These are questions that deserve not just investigation but serious reporting from our media. Is that likely to happen? I think not, because it would take us out of our comfort zone of reducing complexity to a binary choice.

*[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.]



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Empowering the Lost "Guest Workers" of Kerala the Right Way

Rohit Mani Tiwari
September 21, 2026

The Indian state of Kerala has long benefited from migrant labor as its local population grew wealthy. In return, Kerala's official policy treats these migrants merely as a "guest,"

undermining their labor rights and “othering” them. To live up to the title “God’s own country,” Kerala must treat the people who built it with respect.

Kerala’s physical and social infrastructure is world-renowned for its equity, accessibility and effectiveness. The state has effectively eradicated extreme poverty, and a 100% literacy rate for its youth has become a foundational metric of its success. Combined with its remarkable natural beauty, these high-ranking economic and social indicators have truly earned it the title of “God’s Own Country.”

This success can be attributed to the hard work of labor migrants. However, despite their central role in creating “God’s Own Country,” these migrants are seen as nothing more than “guest workers” by the government. This title undermines all the hard work these laborers have put into Kerala, effectively “othering” them, and directly contradicts the state’s values.

Labor migration at core

Malayalis, a major ethnic group of Kerala, traveled to every corner of the world in search of better lives and are the “visible hands” behind this model. This out-migration, fueled by the Gulf Oil Boom, brought higher income and lifestyle aspirations that created demand for “additional hands” to build.

This requirement for “additional hands” was promptly and profusely supplied by the rest of the country, especially the eastern part of India that lags in terms of industrial development but is endowed with a labor surplus. Kerala stands as an exemplary case study of how out-migration fueled in-migration, to the benefit of all.

As official estimates go, there are currently 3.5 million migrant workers in Kerala. Actual figures on the ground can vary greatly, and the pie chart of this in-migration is as varied as the diversity of India. Assam and West Bengal supply 70% of the migrant workers Kerala needs.

Internal migrant workers have left an indelible mark on Kerala’s social, economic and cultural fabric. Whether building roads, highways, hospitals and schools or working in hospitality, retail and sanitation, migrant workers have become a ubiquitous and essential feature of daily life in Kerala.

Justice Devan Ramchandran of the Kerala High Court famously remarked during a hearing on the eviction of workers from agricultural wholesale markets that “Malayalis are unwilling to work due to ego; we are surviving because of migrant workers.” This “unwillingness” often reflects a higher opportunity cost for local workers, who increasingly seek better prospects on foreign shores.

“Guest” workers: the invisible hands

Despite their foundational role, these workers are officially recognized as “guest workers” (Athithi) — a term that implies temporary status, even though many have lived in Kerala for 18–20 years and have become deeply integrated into the local social, cultural and linguistic milieu. However, the various government bodies believed the term was meant to recognize their contributions and the reciprocation they deserve.

The Government also launched an online portal to register and enumerate guest workers working and residing in Kerala. Critics argue that this portal is scaring away migrant workers or forcing employers to push actual numbers employed by them under the carpet. It has led the state government to deploy police to register these

migrant workers in hot pursuit. Ordinarily, migrant workers' registration is the prerogative of the Labour Department.

Moreover, this official treatment seems condescending and transactional, psychologically thwarting migrant workers' right to integrate and assimilate into the local social fabric and cultural milieu, resulting in what migration experts call the institutionalization of an othering process: the systematic social alienation of migrant workers. This social mindset also breeds a kind of mistrust, antipathy and simple hostility towards these "guest workers". Recent events illustrate this.

In contrast to this official approach, people in Kerala remain more considerate, fair and open to these guest workers than people in the rest of the country. It is no wonder that even after recent West Asia wars, the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) crisis and ongoing elections in major labor supply states such as West Bengal and Assam, these migrant workers returned en masse to their favorite destination.

Guest in one's own country?

Moreover, the official usage of the term "guest workers" stands in stark contrast with the constitutional guarantee of "singular citizenship" that has the fundamental right to move, work and reside in any part of the country seamlessly. Many of these workers now bring their families to Kerala, drawn by the state's high-quality, affordable educational and health facilities. The label of "guest" feels increasingly incongruous when these workers are effectively building their lives in the state.

Migrant workers often face occupational vulnerabilities precisely because of their "outsider/guest worker" status. Issues like wage theft, exclusion from social security and the denial of terminal benefits — protections that local

workers often take for granted — are common realities for them. CMID reported wage theft complaints amounting to ₹70 million (\$732,000) in and around Kochi alone, with only ₹2.3 million (\$240,000) recovered.

The most vulnerable are those who work in the construction sector, as work chains now consist of engaging a group of workers (mostly migrants) to complete a project for a locally based company. As these migrant workers are at the lowest rung as subcontractors, they skirt labor rights and entitlements to deliver the project in a cost-effective manner and maintain a margin. What local workers take for granted — their employment rights, minimum wage, Provident Fund/Employee State Insurance Corporation (PF-ESIC) contribution, weekly off, bonus or eight hours of work — becomes a tale of an "other world" to these "guest" workers.

Cases of suffering from cardiac arrests due to working prolonged hours and without a weekly off so that they can deliver a project on time (an inquiry conducted on this issue) or getting washed away in landslides are rampant. In the end, surviving wives and children of the deceased workers kept running from one authority to another as the employer simply refused to pay compensation, terming it a "natural death". These apprehensions drive migrant workers to insist upon daily payment of their wages from their employers.

In 2022, Vital Signs Partnership, working for migrant workers in the Gulf Cooperation Countries, reported in *The Deaths of Migrant Workers in the Gulf* that as many as 10,000 migrant workers from South and South-East Asia die annually in Gulf countries due to "heat stress" and are reported by Gulf Authorities as "natural death"; there was great furor over the plight of international migrant workers, but our internal migrant workers meet the same fate without any comment.

Furthermore, over many years as a registering officer under the Inter-State Migrant Worker Act, 1977, I found that employers deliberately suppress the number of inter-state migrant workers they employ to evade the security deposit, denying displacement and travel allowances by claiming workers are “long-term residents” rather than migrants. As a result, official databases do not reflect actual numbers.

This hypocrisy further complicates their status. While linguistic barriers often prevent workers from approaching labor authorities, a notable social change is the increasing “universalization” of Hindi as a lingua franca between locals and migrants.

The institutional vacuum

Because migrant workers often work in non-standard, informal jobs, they remain largely invisible to state labor inspectors. Authorities like the Employee Compensation Tribunal or the Building and Construction Workers’ Welfare Board, which largely, though indirectly, protect migrant workers’ rights and assure them justice, are also falling short.

The Employee Compensation Tribunal of the State that deals with compensation issues in fatal accidents of construction workers (mostly migrants) is either vacant or run by an additional charge, resulting in delayed or forgotten justice for grieving surviving families of the deceased workers. In the event of workplace fatalities, employers often pressure grieving families to accept small, quick settlements or to perform cremations on-site to avoid the logistical and financial burden of transporting remains back to the workers’ home states.

Similarly, the Building and Construction Workers’ Welfare Board maintains little to no record of these workers, so their status as

beneficiaries cannot be ascertained. Furthermore, Kerala’s trade unions — historically the bedrock of labor rights and collective bargaining in the state — have been slow or reluctant to bring migrant workers into their fold, often prioritizing the interests of the local workforce over the broader labor community.

Devoid of institutional protection, these workers are left to fend for themselves. Sometimes the quest for labor justice and rights becomes a personal battle or an eye-for-an-eye situation, such as destroying an employer’s property to make good on unpaid wages. This lived reality runs counter to the values that define Kerala as a “model state”.

Second home

With shifting sociodemographic trends — characterized by a low fertility rate, the continued outflow of youths and a sustained tendency of older expatriates to return home — Kerala is set to depend on “guest workers” for the foreseeable future. Given the state’s relatively higher minimum wages and world-class social infrastructure, Kerala will likely continue to attract thousands of migrant workers who view the state as a “second home” given its generally peaceful and prosperous milieu. In this sense, the sociopolitical perspective that views these “wealth creators” as “guests” may do a disservice to the “Kerala Model,” which aspires to be a global touchstone for work and living.

To start, these workers may be viewed as “god’s own workers”, builders and stakeholders. Efforts are already underway to assimilate them into Keralayam’s way. These efforts must be calibrated and not contradicted by the belief that these workers are here for a short while.

Bodies like the Welfare Board, Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation, Employees State

Insurance Corporation and Compensation Commissioners must work in tandem to assure them of their due labor rights. This protection should protect migrants from becoming easy prey for employers looking to exploit their vulnerabilities, as well as local workers' rates and rights.

A common saying is *athith dev bhav* (Guest is God), and if Kerala is God's Own Country, the people must strive to live up to this ideal. Kerala must become more than a good host. It must be a good Samaritan.

[Casey Herrmann edited this piece]



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Militarizing the Final Frontier — How Space Became the New Battleground

Joanna Rozpedowski
September 29, 2026

Space is becoming an increasingly contested domain. In this FO Talks, political scientist and international law scholar Dr. Joanna Rozpedowski explains how anti-satellite

weapons, cyberattacks and dual-use technologies create new escalation risks while existing international law struggles to keep pace. She argues that stronger legal rules, diplomacy and accountability are essential to preserve space as a cooperative domain.

Question: When we say “the militarization of space,” what exactly does that mean? What are countries actually doing up there?

Dr. Joanna Rozpedowski: It is important to distinguish between the “militarization” and “weaponization” of space. Space has been militarized almost from the beginning of the Space Age when two rival superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, quickly recognized that satellites could provide enormous strategic advantages, from communications and navigation to intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and missile warning. Much of the infrastructure we now consider indispensable to civilian life depends on space-based systems, from GPS and satellite communications to weather forecasting, financial transactions and disaster response. Much of it also has military applications. Dual-use is therefore a strategic asset and an enormous legal challenge.

The scale and sophistication of these capabilities have changed at an exponential rate. States are developing sophisticated and discrete systems designed not only to operate in space, but also to deny an adversary the use of space. These include anti-satellite weapons, electronic jamming and spoofing, cyber capabilities, directed-energy systems and other counter-space technologies. The objective does not necessarily have to be destructive in nature. Denying, disrupting or degrading a satellite's ability to function can be strategically valuable in its own right.

This is why the US military-industrial complex describes space today as increasingly “congested, contested, and consequential,” with implications that extend far beyond orbit itself. Space is no longer a remote theater disconnected from events in the terrestrial realm. Military operations and civilian communications, navigation, intelligence, financial transactions, transportation, agriculture and global commerce increasingly intermingle and depend upon space-based infrastructure. At the same time, access to space is becoming increasingly globalized. It is no longer the exclusive preserve of the traditional space powers. It is becoming less concentrated and much more democratized as declining costs and technological advances are enabling an increasingly diverse group of states, including emerging space powers in Africa and the Middle East, to develop their own capabilities.

In addition to major space-faring nations, nearly 20 African countries now have satellites in orbit, and the African Union established the African Space Agency in 2025, reflecting a broader shift in which space capabilities are no longer confined to the traditional space powers. African states are using satellites to address very terrestrial and existential challenges such as monitoring weather and natural disasters, improving communication between scattered villages, collecting data on crops, cattle and wars. This expansion makes space simultaneously more accessible and more strategically consequential.

Question: Right from the beginning, the US and the USSR raced to dominate space and to reach the moon. Since 1991, space has been demilitarized and commercialized. Are we now back to an era of “space arms race”?

Joanna: I would be careful about describing the post-Cold War period as one in which space was simply demilitarized. Space was never demilitarized in the sense of becoming exclusively

civilian. What we saw instead was an enormous expansion of commercialization alongside continuing military dependence on space.

Today, we are certainly witnessing a new form of space arms competition, but it is not simply a replay of the Cold War. The strategic environment is much more diverse and complex. It involves the United States, China, Russia, NATO and an expanding group of non-traditional yet space-capable states, as well as powerful commercial actors.

The competition is also no longer primarily about who can put a human being on the Moon or who can launch the most impressive rocket. It is increasingly about who can protect, disrupt, deny or control access to the space-based infrastructure upon which military and economic power depends. There is also growing competition over access to scarce orbital positions and frequencies, as well as the prospect of exploiting valuable resources on the Moon and asteroids. Rare earth elements and other minerals found beyond Earth could eventually have enormous economic and strategic value, raising questions about who will have access to them and under what legal conditions. At the same time, low-Earth orbit is becoming increasingly crowded, making orbital space itself a strategic resource. The ability to secure advantageous orbital positions and operate safely in an increasingly congested environment may become as consequential as the ability to launch satellites in the first place.

That introduces an important new dimension to the space race: The competition is not only over what we put into space, but over access to the physical and economic resources of space itself.

This is a fundamentally different kind of arms race. It is occurring across physical, cyber, electronic, economic and commercial domains simultaneously. And because space systems are

deeply integrated into terrestrial infrastructure, the consequences of that competition are felt here on Earth. The challenge is therefore not simply to prevent weapons from proliferating in orbit, but to establish rules governing access, resource extraction, orbital use, commercial activity, insurance and securitization of assets, and military operations before healthy competition turns into pernicious conflict.

Question: How do you see the strategic competition between the US, China and Russia unfolding?

Joanna: The United States, China and Russia remain the principal strategic space powers, but I don't think the future can be understood as a simple three-way competition. The space environment is becoming increasingly multipolar and alliance-driven.

The United States retains enormous advantages in launch capabilities, satellite infrastructure, military space systems and commercial innovation. China has made extraordinary progress and has demonstrated that it intends to become a major space power, both economically and strategically. Russia retains significant expertise and capabilities inherited from the Soviet space program, although its broader position has been affected by economic and geopolitical constraints.

What is particularly interesting, however, is the emergence of competing networks of space partnerships. The United States has sought to build a coalition of space-faring and space-interested nations around the Artemis Accords, while China and Russia have pursued alternative frameworks for lunar cooperation. These competing approaches have the potential to create not simply technological competition, but competing visions of how the future governance and exploitation of space should be organized.

At the same time, space capabilities are spreading well beyond the traditional space powers. Middle Eastern states are investing heavily in satellite, launch and exploration capabilities, while African nations are increasingly developing their own space programs and forming regional institutions for space cooperation. These states are not necessarily seeking to become military space powers; many are motivated by practical needs such as communications, agriculture, climate monitoring, disaster management and economic development. But the accumulation of these capabilities nevertheless changes the strategic landscape and gives more states a stake in the future rules governing space.

What makes the competition particularly consequential is that these capabilities are increasingly connected to terrestrial military power. Whoever possesses resilient communications, intelligence, navigation, surveillance and space situational awareness has an enormous strategic advantage.

We are therefore moving beyond a traditional arms race between three states toward a complex ecosystem of states, alliances, competing diplomatic frameworks, commercial companies and dual-use technologies. NATO is adapting to space as an operational domain; the United States is building partnerships through the Artemis Accords; China and Russia are developing alternative partnerships; and emerging space-capable states in regions such as the Middle East and Africa are becoming increasingly important participants.

That complexity can create stability through deterrence and cooperation, but it can also create new fault lines, competing spheres of influence and opportunities for miscalculation. The question is whether these emerging partnerships will encourage greater cooperation and interoperability or whether they will produce competing blocs in

space that mirror, and potentially reinforce, the geopolitical divisions we already see on Earth.

That complexity can create stability through deterrence, but it can also create new vulnerabilities and opportunities for miscalculation.

Question: The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibits the placement of weapons of mass destruction in orbit and declares space the “province of all humankind.” How effective is that framework today?

The Outer Space Treaty remains the foundation of international space law, and I would not characterize it, on principle, as obsolete. Its principles — peaceful exploration and use, non-appropriation, state responsibility, international cooperation and the prohibition on weapons of mass destruction in space — remain critically important.

The treaty also establishes some clear red lines. It prohibits placing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit or otherwise stationing them in outer space. It prohibits establishing military bases, installations or fortifications on the Moon and other celestial bodies, as well as testing weapons and conducting military maneuvers there. It also prohibits national appropriation of the Moon and other celestial bodies.

The problem, however, is that the technological environment has changed dramatically since the treaty came into force in 1967. The treaty was negotiated at a time when only two countries — the United States and Soviet Union at the time — had demonstrated the ability to reach space. Today we have a much larger number of state actors, a rapidly expanding commercial sector, sophisticated counter-space capabilities, cyber operations and enormous dependence on privately

operated infrastructure provided by the likes of SpaceX, among many others.

It is important to note that the treaty does not prohibit military activity in orbit generally, nor does it expressly prohibit conventional weapons or anti-satellite capabilities. There is also much less clarity surrounding deliberate interference with satellites, cyberattacks against space systems, electronic jamming and spoofing, and the role of private companies whose infrastructure may become integral to military operations.

That legal ambiguity matters because the treaty’s principles have to be applied to technologies and forms of conflict that its drafters could not have anticipated. The answer is not to discard the existing framework, but to build upon it with clearer norms and legal mechanisms that address contemporary space activities and the growing involvement of both states and private actors and these modern international legal frameworks are now much overdue.

Question: How could an attack in space, like an anti-satellite strike, spiral into conflict?

The most important point to remember is that a conflict in space does not necessarily remain in space.

An attack on a satellite can disrupt communications, navigation, intelligence, missile warning, military command and control, and other capabilities that governments depend upon. It can also affect civilian systems and economic activity. The Global Positioning System (GPS), for example, is not simply about helping someone find their way from point A to point B on their smartphones. Space-based timing and positioning support financial transactions, transportation, logistics, agriculture, communications and other critical systems essential to personal, financial and national security.

That creates an enormous escalation problem. Imagine that a satellite is jammed or disabled. Was it an accident? A cyberattack? Electronic warfare? Espionage? An act of aggression? Space terrorism? Who was responsible? And what constitutes a proportionate response?

Attribution can be particularly difficult in space because an attack does not necessarily involve a visible explosion. A state could potentially interfere with another country's capabilities while maintaining plausible deniability.

This is where the interaction between strategic ambiguity and legal ambiguity becomes very pronounced. A state may not know precisely what happened, who was responsible, or how the other side intends to respond. That uncertainty can produce escalation even when neither side initially intended to begin a larger conflict.

This is precisely where international space law and space diplomacy have a significant role to play. We need clearer understandings of what constitutes harmful interference, an attack, aggression or an act of war, as well as mechanisms through which states can communicate, establish attribution, clarify intentions and resolve incidents before they escalate. Space diplomacy is particularly important because, in an environment where technologies and capabilities are evolving faster than the law, dialogue and confidence-building measures can help prevent suspicion in an environment of heightened ambiguity from becoming conflict.

The danger is therefore not simply an “attack in space.” It is the possibility of cascading consequences between space, cyberspace, and terrestrial military and civilian systems.

Preventing that escalation will require not only technological resilience and deterrence, but also a stronger international legal and diplomatic

framework for managing overlapping spheres of conflict and competition in space.

Question: How does international law define sovereignty in space? Can nations own parts of the Moon, asteroids or orbital pathways through indirect means like exclusive commercial rights?

Joanna: International space law establishes a fundamental principle that makes space very different from terrestrial territory: Outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies, is not subject to national appropriation. Article II of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty makes clear that a state cannot claim sovereignty over the Moon, an asteroid or another celestial body through occupation, use or any other means.

But the Outer Space Treaty is only the foundation of a broader body of international space law. The Rescue Agreement (1968), Liability Convention (1972) and Registration Convention (1976) subsequently developed rules concerning the rescue of astronauts, responsibility for damage caused by space objects, and the registration and jurisdiction of space objects. The Moon Agreement of 1979 went further in addressing the Moon and its natural resources, declaring the Moon and its resources “the common heritage of mankind” and contemplating an international regime for their exploitation. The Moon Agreement, however, has attracted relatively limited participation from the major space powers, which has limited its practical influence on the current development of lunar resource policy.

The central legal question today is therefore not simply whether a state can plant a flag on the Moon and claim territory — it clearly cannot — but how far commercial exploitation can go without becoming de facto appropriation. There is an important distinction between appropriating territory and extracting and using resources, but

international law has not resolved every aspect of that distinction.

This question has become particularly important with the development of the Artemis Accords, which affirm the principle of non-appropriation while recognizing that the extraction and utilization of space resources can be conducted consistently with the Outer Space Treaty. The Accords also contemplate temporary “safety zones” around certain activities to prevent harmful interference. These provisions are intended to facilitate commercial and scientific activity, but they inevitably raise questions about how temporary operational rights can be distinguished from permanent territorial control.

The emergence of commercial space activity makes this issue increasingly important. If a private company receives an exclusive right to operate in a particular location or extract a particular resource, we have to ask whether that arrangement effectively produces a form of appropriation without formally declaring sovereignty. A legal system that prohibits territorial appropriation but permits increasingly exclusive commercial control will eventually have to draw a clearer line between the two.

Orbital pathways raise a somewhat different but related problem. There is no general concept of owning an orbital “lane” in the way a state owns territory or territorial waters. Yet orbital positions and radio-frequency spectrum are scarce resources, and their allocation is governed in significant part through the International Telecommunication Union, rather than through a conventional system of territorial sovereignty. As more satellites and constellations occupy low-Earth orbit, questions of access, priority, congestion, interference, debris and long-term sustainability become increasingly important.

Ultimately, I think the challenge is to prevent commercialization from becoming a backdoor mechanism for territorial appropriation, while still allowing legitimate commercial activity, scientific exploration and resource utilization to develop. International law has already established the foundational principle that no state can own the Moon or other celestial bodies. The next challenge is determining what forms of use, access, extraction and commercial exclusivity are compatible with that principle as space becomes an increasingly important economic and strategic domain.

Question: How significant are dual-use satellites and private space companies? Are SpaceX and Blue Origin blurring the lines between civilian and military assets?

Joanna: They are enormously significant because they are fundamentally changing the traditional distinction between civilian and military space infrastructure.

The war in Ukraine provided a particularly clear illustration. Commercial satellite communications and commercial satellite imagery became important components of a conflict between states. A system can serve millions of civilian customers while simultaneously providing capabilities that are strategically important to a military. In my view, this raises some very difficult questions that international law has not yet adequately resolved.

For example, if a commercial satellite system provides communications that are vital to military operations, does it remain a purely civilian object? If an adversary attacks that system because of its military utility, does the fact that it is privately owned make a difference? And if a private company is providing critical infrastructure to one side in an armed conflict, can it itself be considered to have become a participant in that

conflict? These are not merely theoretical questions. They go directly to the principles of distinction and proportionality under international humanitarian law.

There is also the question of what constitutes a proportionate response if a state attacks commercial space infrastructure. If a privately owned satellite is used for both civilian communications and military purposes, an attack against it could potentially affect millions of civilian users who have nothing to do with the conflict. The same problem applies to commercial satellite imagery: Private companies can provide information that has significant military value while simultaneously serving humanitarian, commercial, scientific and civilian purposes.

This is why the civilian-military nexus in space is so difficult. Commercial does not automatically mean civilian, and civilian does not necessarily mean strategically irrelevant. A privately owned satellite can become a critical component of national security without ever becoming a formally designated military asset.

Companies such as SpaceX and Blue Origin also demonstrate how the center of gravity of space activity is shifting. Governments remain indispensable actors, but private companies now possess launch capabilities, satellite infrastructure, data, technological expertise and communications networks that were once almost exclusively the preserve of states. The rise of the “New Space” economy means that non-state actors can now possess capabilities with direct geopolitical and military consequences.

This is not necessarily a negative development. Commercialization has dramatically expanded access to space, accelerated innovation, reduced costs and created capabilities that can benefit both civilian populations and governments. But it also means that our legal frameworks, which were

largely constructed around states, increasingly have to account for multinational corporations and other non-state actors operating in strategically consequential environments.

This raises a broader question that I think we will increasingly have to confront: If private companies own and operate infrastructure that is essential to a state’s military capabilities, who bears responsibility when that infrastructure becomes a target? And what obligations does a private company have when its technology or data is being used in an active conflict?

These questions demonstrate why we need to apply and clarify existing principles of international humanitarian law, including distinction, proportionality, military necessity, and limitation of the means and methods of warfare, in the space domain. As I have argued elsewhere, the objective should not simply be to determine whether commercial satellites are “civilian” or “military,” because increasingly they are both. The challenge is to develop legal guardrails for a world in which state and private capabilities are deeply intertwined and where the consequences of attacks on space infrastructure can extend to civilians far beyond the battlefield.

Questions: Are there movements, treaties or norms emerging that could preserve space as a cooperative and peaceful domain?

Joanna: There are reasons for optimism, although I would not underestimate the challenge. The international community has already developed an important body of principles governing the peaceful use of outer space, and there are ongoing efforts to establish norms concerning responsible behavior, space debris, space traffic management, transparency, confidence-building and the prevention of dangerous interference.

The Artemis Accords are one example of states attempting to establish principles for responsible exploration and use of the Moon and other celestial bodies. At the same time, the United Nations remains an essential forum for developing broader international norms and for bringing together states with very different political and strategic interests. The fact that the United States, China, Russia and other space-capable states do not always agree on the future of space makes multilateral diplomacy more important, not less.

In addition to bilateral and multilateral agreements, several intergovernmental mechanisms have emerged to enhance technology development, pool expertise, and harmonize regulations among space actors and authorities. The multinational space alliances include the African Space Agency, the Arab Space Coordination Group, the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, the European Space Agency, and the Latin American and Caribbean Space Agency. Each bloc seeks to draw its sphere of influence and stake a claim to space leadership by developing advanced research capabilities and facilitating exploration, coordination and cooperation in outer space.

But I think we need to be careful about one thing: We should not allow geopolitical competition to erode the existing architecture of international law simply because that law has not kept pace with technological developments or is an inconvenient “fiction” — as some would have it — that deters unethical or extralegal behavior. The answer to legal ambiguity should not be to abandon established principles, but to clarify and expand them. The prohibition on national appropriation, the peaceful-use principles of the Outer Space Treaty, state responsibility, liability and the basic principles of international humanitarian law remain important safeguards. Undermining those principles would create a vacuum in which states and private actors could

increasingly establish the rules through technological capability and faits accomplis.

This is where space diplomacy and international law have to develop together. We need diplomatic mechanisms through which states can communicate during incidents, clarify intentions, share information, establish expectations for responsible behavior and manage disputes before they escalate. A new grand strategy for space therefore requires new diplomatic instruments, but those instruments should reinforce — not replace — the existing international legal framework.

I also believe we need to begin thinking much more seriously about international criminal law in space. At present, we have mechanisms governing state responsibility and liability, but the question of state and individual criminal responsibility for serious violations in the space domain is much less developed. What happens, for example, if an individual deliberately orders an attack that destroys a satellite knowing that the consequences will cause widespread civilian harm? What happens if a cyber operation against a space system produces consequences comparable to those of a conventional attack? At what point does conduct move from an internationally wrongful act to an international crime, and who has jurisdiction to prosecute it?

These are not merely hypothetical questions. As space becomes increasingly integrated into military and civilian infrastructure, we need to consider whether existing concepts of international criminal law, the law of armed conflict, command responsibility, proportionality, distinction and individual accountability can adequately address conduct in outer space.

One possibility would be to develop mechanisms analogous to those that exist on Earth for serious violations of international law —

including, potentially, new international agreements defining criminal conduct in space, specialized mechanisms for adjudicating violations, or an expanded role for existing international courts and tribunals. We should also consider how state disputes involving space activities can be brought before mechanisms such as the International Court of Justice and whether existing institutions could provide advisory opinions on emerging questions of space law.

At the same time, preserving space as a peaceful domain does not mean pretending that militarization has not occurred. We have to start from the reality that space is now a critical component of national security and the global economy. The objective is not to demilitarize space by decree, but to prevent militarization from becoming unrestrained weaponization and conflict.

That requires responsible behavior, resilience, deterrence, diplomacy and clear rules of the road. It requires confidence-building measures between competing space powers, greater transparency about capabilities and intentions, and mechanisms for managing incidents before they become crises.

Ultimately, the greatest danger is not necessarily that space becomes another battlefield. It is that technology advances faster than our diplomacy and law, leaving states and private actors to determine the rules through action and reaction. If we allow that to happen, we risk normalizing behavior that could gradually undermine the legal principles that have governed space for decades.

The opportunity before us is therefore to build the legal and diplomatic architecture before a major conflict forces us to do so under crisis conditions. Space gives the international community an unusual opportunity: We can see many of these problems developing before they become irreversible. We should use that

opportunity to establish the rules now, while space remains a domain in which cooperation is still possible.

To quote German writer and polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “From this place, and from this day forth, begins a new era in the history of the world, and you can all say that you were present at its birth.”

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]



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Europe's Untapped Financial Power: Completing Financial Union for Growth, Innovation, and Competitiveness

Masaaki Yoshimori
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Europe's fragmented financial system limits investment, innovation and productivity despite abundant private savings. The International Monetary Fund and the Draghi Report argue that completing the Banking Union and Capital Markets Union, strengthening venture capital, harmonizing regulation and mobilizing institutional savings are essential to finance competitiveness, raise long-term growth and enhance Europe's strategic autonomy.

The European Union is one of the world's most ambitious economic integration projects. The Single Market, the euro and decades of regulatory harmonization have created one of the world's largest economies. Yet one crucial element remains unfinished: finance. Unlike trade and monetary integration, Europe's financial markets remain fragmented along national borders, preventing capital from flowing efficiently to the firms and industries that need it most. As technological competition intensifies and geopolitical risks grow, this fragmented financial system has become one of the greatest obstacles to Europe's long-term competitiveness and prosperity.

Both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Staff Discussion Note and former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi's 2024 report on The Future of European Competitiveness reach

remarkably similar conclusions despite approaching the issue from different perspectives. The IMF focuses on financial efficiency and macroeconomic performance, while Draghi examines Europe's long-term competitiveness and strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, both argue that Europe does not suffer from a savings shortage. Instead, its principal weakness is its inability to transform abundant private wealth into productive investment.

European households save enormous amounts of capital every year, yet much of these resources remain concentrated in bank deposits, government securities or domestic financial assets instead of financing innovative businesses capable of driving productivity growth. The challenge is therefore not generating additional savings but mobilizing existing savings more effectively through deeper financial integration.

Europe's investment challenge

Draghi places this issue within a much broader economic context. According to his report, Europe faces an annual investment gap of approximately €750–800 billion if it wishes to remain competitive while financing digital transformation, decarbonization, technological innovation, infrastructure modernization, energy security and defense capabilities.

These investment requirements exceed what national governments can finance through public budgets alone. Private capital must therefore play a substantially larger role in supporting Europe's economic transformation. Yet fragmented financial markets continue to prevent savings from reaching productive investment opportunities efficiently. Capital that could finance innovative firms instead remains locked in national financial systems or flows into relatively low-risk assets that contribute little to long-term productivity.

The consequences extend far beyond financial markets themselves. Europe's relatively weak productivity growth during the past two decades partly reflects insufficient investment in rapidly expanding sectors such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, semiconductors, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy and digital infrastructure. While the United States has developed deep and highly integrated capital markets capable of financing ambitious entrepreneurial ventures, Europe continues to rely primarily upon traditional bank lending.

This financial structure served Europe well during earlier stages of industrial development, when manufacturing firms required relatively stable long-term financing. Today's innovation-driven economy, however, increasingly depends on flexible equity financing that can support firms with uncertain cash flows but enormous growth potential.

Why capital markets matter

One of the most important insights shared by both reports is that financial integration should not be viewed merely as a technical regulatory objective. Rather, it represents a fundamental determinant of economic productivity. Efficient financial systems perform a simple but essential economic function: They allocate scarce capital toward its most productive uses. When financial markets operate efficiently, innovative firms obtain financing regardless of geographic location, while investors diversify risks across sectors and countries. Fragmented markets, by contrast, trap capital within national borders, limiting investment opportunities and reducing economic efficiency.

The IMF demonstrates that Europe continues to exhibit a remarkable degree of financial home bias. Banks overwhelmingly lend to domestic borrowers, institutional investors favor national financial assets and venture capital remains

concentrated within individual member states rather than flowing freely throughout the Union. As a consequence, firms located in countries with relatively underdeveloped financial sectors often encounter higher borrowing costs despite the existence of abundant savings elsewhere in Europe. Capital allocation becomes influenced by geography instead of productivity, reducing overall economic performance. The IMF therefore argues that financial fragmentation represents one of Europe's most significant structural distortions.

The persistence of home bias

Despite the euro and decades of financial integration, Europe's banking market remains surprisingly national. Differences in insolvency law, deposit insurance, taxation, supervision and creditor protection continue to discourage banks and investors from operating across borders. According to the IMF, direct cross-border lending accounts for only about 5% of corporate loans, rising to just 14% when lending through foreign subsidiaries and branches is included — well below the level seen in the United States.

The IMF estimates that establishing a new cross-border banking relationship carries an implicit cost equivalent to almost 99% compared with domestic lending. Once relationships are established, however, this cost falls to only 0.2%, while interest-rate differences narrow to around 25 basis points. The problem, therefore, is not cross-border lending itself but the institutional barriers that prevent banks from entering foreign markets. Europe has integrated banks, but it has yet to create a truly integrated banking market.

Draghi argues that completing the Capital Markets Union and Banking Union is therefore essential to Europe's competitiveness. Instead of operating 27 fragmented financial systems, Europe should develop a genuinely continental capital market where savings can flow freely to the most

productive investments. Such integration would improve capital allocation, strengthen private risk sharing and make the European economy more resilient to future financial shocks.

Financing innovation

While banking integration offers the largest immediate gains, both the IMF and Draghi argue that Europe's long-term competitiveness ultimately depends upon its ability to finance innovation. Modern economies are increasingly driven by firms whose most valuable assets are intellectual property, advanced technology and highly skilled human capital rather than physical collateral. Such firms often generate little revenue during their early years while investing heavily in research, product development and market expansion. Traditional banks, operating under strict prudential regulations and relying on collateral-based lending, are rarely well positioned to finance these high-risk ventures. Consequently, venture capital and equity financing become indispensable components of an innovation-driven economy.

Europe, however, continues to lag significantly behind the United States in developing vibrant venture capital markets. According to the IMF, European venture capital investment amounts to only about one-quarter of US levels. Young European firms are approximately one-fourth as likely to obtain venture capital financing, while successful applicants generally receive only half the funding secured by comparable American firms. Moreover, nearly 60% of investors financing European start-ups originate from the firm's own country, whereas fewer than 20% come from another EU member state.

In contrast, approximately 50% of investors supporting American start-ups come from outside the firm's home state, illustrating the much deeper integration of US capital markets. These differences demonstrate that Europe's challenge

extends beyond the size of its venture capital industry to include its fragmented national structure.

Draghi similarly argues that Europe has relied excessively on banks since the 1960s, while capital markets have remained underdeveloped. Although non-bank finance has gradually expanded, European companies continue to depend primarily on bank loans rather than equity financing. This financial structure places innovative firms at a disadvantage because banks naturally emphasize repayment capacity and collateral rather than technological potential. Draghi therefore concludes that Europe's future growth model must become more equity-based, allowing entrepreneurs to obtain patient, long-term financing capable of supporting innovation throughout the early stages of corporate development.

Unlocking Europe's savings

Perhaps the most striking similarity between the IMF and Draghi reports is their shared diagnosis of Europe's savings paradox. Contrary to conventional assumptions, Europe does not lack financial resources. On the contrary, European households collectively hold enormous financial wealth and maintain relatively high savings rates. The problem lies in the destination of those savings. Rather than financing productive investment, much of Europe's private wealth remains concentrated in bank deposits, government bonds, residential real estate and other relatively low-risk assets. Consequently, innovative firms frequently struggle to obtain financing despite the existence of abundant capital within the European economy.

The IMF estimates that reforms encouraging pension funds and insurance companies to increase their allocation toward long-term risk capital could expand the supply of venture capital by approximately 96%. Although such reforms would

not completely eliminate the gap with the United States, they would substantially improve financing conditions for Europe's most innovative companies.

At the same time, improving research institutions, higher education, business regulation and entrepreneurial ecosystems could increase demand for venture capital by approximately 173%, demonstrating that financial and structural reforms reinforce one another. Efficient financial markets cannot generate innovation unless sufficient investment opportunities exist, while innovative firms cannot grow without access to appropriate sources of finance.

Draghi reaches a remarkably similar conclusion through a different policy lens. He argues that expanding second-pillar occupational pension schemes would provide one of the most effective mechanisms for channeling household savings toward productive investment. Pension funds naturally possess long investment horizons that align closely with the financing requirements of innovative firms. The report also recommends reviewing Solvency II regulations to reduce capital charges on long-term equity investments held by insurance companies, thereby encouraging greater institutional participation in European capital markets. Rather than increasing household saving itself, these reforms would improve the quality of financial intermediation by directing existing savings toward sectors capable of generating higher productivity growth.

Completing the banking union

Despite emphasizing capital markets, neither report suggests reducing the importance of banks. Both recognize that European banks will remain the dominant source of corporate finance for the foreseeable future. Instead, the objective is to create a more balanced financial ecosystem in which banks, capital markets, pension funds,

insurance companies and venture capital complement one another.

The IMF estimates that reducing regulatory fragmentation by approximately 30% could increase cross-border corporate lending from roughly 5% to about 24%. Harmonizing corporate insolvency law, establishing a common European Deposit Insurance Scheme (EDIS), strengthening macroprudential coordination and improving bank resolution mechanisms would significantly reduce home bias in bank lending. These reforms would encourage banks to allocate credit according to commercial opportunities rather than national boundaries, thereby improving productivity throughout the European economy.

Draghi supports these objectives while proposing additional institutional reforms. One of his most ambitious recommendations is transforming the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA) into a regulator comparable to the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Rather than simply coordinating national authorities, ESMA would directly supervise major multinational issuers, cross-border trading platforms and central counterparties.

According to Draghi, stronger centralized supervision would reduce regulatory fragmentation, increase investor confidence and simplify compliance for financial institutions operating across Europe. Although national governments may hesitate to transfer supervisory authority to European institutions, he argues that integrated capital markets ultimately require integrated regulation.

Reform beyond finance

Both the IMF and Draghi stress that financial reform alone cannot deliver stronger growth. Efficient capital markets require a dynamic real economy with productive investment

opportunities. The IMF estimates that reforms to education, research and development, entrepreneurship, labor mobility and the business environment could raise long-run EU GDP by around 7%. Combined with deeper financial integration, these reforms add roughly 1% of additional growth, demonstrating that finance amplifies innovation rather than replaces it.

Draghi reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that Europe's competitiveness depends equally on simpler regulation, stronger industrial policy, faster digital transformation and greater support for innovation. He proposes cutting reporting requirements by 25% for businesses and by up to 50% for small and medium-sized enterprises, creating a more attractive environment for entrepreneurship and investment.

Strategic autonomy through financial integration

For both the IMF and Draghi, financial integration is no longer simply an economic objective but a strategic necessity. As the United States and China compete through technology, industrial policy and deep capital markets, Europe risks falling behind unless it can finance innovation on a comparable scale.

Draghi estimates that preserving Europe's competitiveness requires €750–800 billion in additional annual investment. Since public finances alone cannot meet this need, private capital must become the principal engine of investment. He therefore advocates a genuinely integrated European capital market, supported by harmonized insolvency rules, stronger supervision through a more powerful ESMA, and streamlined clearing and settlement systems. These reforms would allow capital to move more freely across borders while strengthening Europe's capacity to finance globally competitive firms.

A common European safe asset

One of Draghi's boldest proposals is the regular issuance of jointly backed EU bonds to create a common European safe asset. Building on the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) program, common borrowing could finance strategic investments in infrastructure, research, energy security, defense and advanced technologies while deepening European bond markets. A larger, more liquid market for EU securities would strengthen the euro's international role and further integrate European capital markets.

The IMF reaches a similar conclusion from an economic perspective. It estimates that deeper financial integration alone could increase long-run EU GDP by around 3%, with roughly 2% coming from greater banking integration and 1% from stronger venture capital and long-term risk finance. Beyond higher growth, integrated financial markets would improve resilience by allowing risks to be shared more effectively across member states during periods of economic stress.

A critical perspective

Taken together, the IMF and Draghi reports present a compelling case that Europe's fragmented financial system has become a major constraint on long-term growth. The IMF quantifies the economic costs of fragmentation, while Draghi places them within a broader strategy for competitiveness, industrial policy and strategic autonomy. Together, they argue that completing the Banking Union and Capital Markets Union is essential to Europe's future prosperity.

Yet implementation will be far more difficult than the economics suggest. Key reforms — including an EDIS, harmonized insolvency rules, expanded Qualified Majority Voting and common EU debt — require member states to share greater sovereignty and financial risk. Political agreement

may therefore prove more challenging than either report implies.

Moreover, deeper financial integration must be accompanied by strong supervision. While integrated markets improve capital allocation and private risk sharing, they can also transmit financial shocks more rapidly, making robust prudential regulation and effective crisis-management frameworks indispensable.

Finally, financial reform alone will not guarantee technological leadership. Europe must continue investing in education, research, digital infrastructure, human capital and entrepreneurship. Integrated capital markets can finance innovation, but they cannot create it. Sustainable competitiveness ultimately depends on combining financial integration with broader structural reform.

The future of European finance

The challenge facing Europe is no longer identifying the necessary reforms but implementing them. The economic evidence presented by the IMF and the strategic vision articulated by Draghi point toward the same destination: a genuinely integrated European financial system capable of mobilizing private savings, financing innovation and strengthening Europe's competitiveness. Whether this vision becomes reality will depend less on economic theory than on political leadership and member states' willingness to complete a financial union that has remained unfinished for decades.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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