

# Fair Observer

Monthly



April 2021

Fair Observer<sup>o</sup>

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# Fair Observer Monthly



April 2021

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

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# Escaping Thucydides' Trap: Keeping the Peace Between Rising and Reigning Powers

Kevin Johnston  
April 5, 2021

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**By learning lessons from history, the United States and China can concentrate on shared goals and projects for mutual benefit.**

A conflict between the United States and China seems increasingly likely. A trade war that began several years ago has had economic repercussions for both sides. In the South China Sea, Chinese aggression against Taiwan is checked by the US military. In cyberspace, the war has already begun, as American and Chinese hackers attempt to exploit weaknesses in each other's online defenses for military, political and economic information.

With this ever-increasing antagonism between China and the US playing out on the world stage, little imagination is required to appreciate the catastrophic result of a conflict between the world's two largest economies with nuclear triads.

Several years ago, Dr. Graham Allison of Harvard University unveiled a historical pattern where increasing tensions between rising and reigning states led to diplomatic friction and war. Allison dubbed this pattern Thucydides' Trap, in honor of the Athenian strategos who identified "the growth of the Athenian power, which [put] the Lacedaemonians into fear" as a cause of the Peloponnesian War between 431 and 404 BC. Allison identified 16 cases throughout history in which the rise of a rival state provoked a response from an existing hegemonic power. In 12 of those cases, titanic wars followed, while peace prevailed in only four.

So, what lessons do the four cases with a peaceful ending offer when considering the nascent Sino-American rivalry? Close

examination reveals that military, economic and political considerations contributed to a diplomatic decision for peace. In every case, both sides were vulnerable to substantial military losses in terms of personnel and equipment. The winner of the contest would find economic gains that paled in comparison to what they could have achieved in peacetime, and the loser could expect nothing short of economic devastation. Likewise, winning these conflicts could leave the victor weakened politically and almost certainly lead to the deposition of the loser. Victory in each case would have been Pyrrhic in human, economic and political terms. Defeat would have been near annihilation.

Thus, the four cases in which adversaries escaped the trap provide potential avenues for China and the US to do the same.

## Spain vs. Portugal

In the late 15th century, the Iberian Peninsula held two of Europe's economic and military powerhouses: Spain and Portugal. In Portugal, the reign of Henry the Navigator ushered in a period of exploration and colonization in Africa. Through a combination of squeezing out rivals and occupying key positions in the Eastern Atlantic, Portugal was able to utilize important sea lanes to facilitate trade with western Africa. However, the War of Castilian Succession between 1475 and 1479 ended with a unified Castille and Aragon, greatly shifting the balance of power by creating a unified Spain.

After the Reconquista ended with the capture of Granada in 1492, Portugal's trading empire was exposed to a newly united Spain. Flush with captured Muslim treasure and in possession of an experienced military, Ferdinand and Isabella needed only to look west to find targets for future expansion. Later that year, the discovery of the Americas and the potential for economic dominance over two continents made war even more likely. Yet Spain and Portugal were able to negotiate the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. In doing so, they averted a potentially brutal military conflict.

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Subsequently, Spain and Portugal concentrated their militaries and economic might into their colonial empires. Spanish colonies in Latin America and the Pacific created a colonial empire that only crested in the 18th century. Portugal's possessions in Brazil, Africa, India and the Far East allowed it to access spice markets, and it generated a Portuguese-Indian sea trade monopoly. Though both empires eventually faded, their shared peace allowed each of them to experience massive economic growth — albeit at the cost of the indigenous peoples they attacked and enslaved in doing so.

The example illustrates an emphasis on foreign trade and domestic investment instead of escalation to war. As a result of their peaceful settlement of tensions and the ensuing economic boom, Spain and Portugal became more politically stable. The new Spanish monarchy consolidated its power after 1492, making its previously multifaith state into a Catholic stronghold and ensuring that the ties between Aragon and Castile were permanent. Meanwhile, spurred on by strong trade from their colonies, Portugal was able to endeavor its Renaissance.

### **The United States vs. the United Kingdom**

The precipitous rise of American industrialism and the modernization of the US Navy challenged British domination of the seas at the turn of the 20th century. As American factory output, as well as iron and steel production, surged, the US built a formidable modern battle fleet of the latest capital ship designs. Consequently, the British government realized that the cost of a conflict was something it could ill afford. By the early 20th century, the first lord of the Admiralty admitted that the United States could create a larger navy than the British Empire.

A territorial dispute over Venezuela in 1895 threatened to ignite a third Anglo-American war, creating economic panic. By 1901, the British Admiralty realized that the US Navy would soon possess the potential to outstrip the British Grand Fleet. Thanks to the Spanish-American War of

1898 and the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt, American naval tonnage had tripled from 1900 to 1910. Britain's ability to maintain a stronger navy than its allies was threatened by this massive growth.

Meanwhile, Britain was also engaged in a naval race with Germany, its primary antagonist during the era. The rapid construction of the German high seas fleet with the latest armor and guns threatened the British coastline and maritime trade routes in the event of a war. Faced with two bids for naval supremacy, the UK concentrated on the German threat and ignored American naval competition. By exempting the US from the two-power standard (to have as many battleships as its next two great competitors, plus 10%), and by leaving the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine unchallenged, Britain was able to deescalate the potential conflict between the two countries.

As a result of this diplomatic and military resolution, Britain's prudence soon netted extensive economic and national security gains. As the Great War commenced, Britain's war economy relied increasingly on raw materials, munitions production and food supplies from the United States. This ongoing trade, coupled with Imperial Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare and the revelation of the Zimmerman Telegram, helped propel the US into declaring war on Germany in April 1917 and thus into becoming an ally to its onetime rival. By averting a war, Britain was able to win another, one with truly disastrous consequences for European liberty had it lost.

Although its enemies were dismembered or subjected to humiliating terms that sowed the seeds of political violence and the Second World War, the UK enjoyed a period of political continuity, which helped its victory against Nazi Germany in 1945 and led to a more gradual dissolution of the British Empire by the 1960s.

### **The Soviet Union vs. the United States**

Following a joint victory in World War II, tensions rose rapidly between the United States



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and the Soviet Union. A 40-year rivalry and a nuclear arms race threatened the world with a mutually annihilating conflict. But despite multiple flashpoints, such as the Berlin Blockade of 1948-49 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the Cold War never fully went hot.

Though the phrase “mutually assured destruction” is typically used to refer to destruction by nuclear weapons, a conflict even before both sides wielded large arsenals could have been catastrophic. The Soviet Union was savaged by the Second World War with an estimated 24 to 27 million deaths and could not afford another conflict in the immediate aftermath. Though the United States held a stronger economic position, it realized that an invasion of the Soviet Union was likely to end the same way it did for the Germans in the summer of 1941. Thus, for both sides, victory would have come at too great a cost.

Reeling from the cost of total war from 1941 to 1945, the Soviet Union quickly repaired its economy and produced notable growth consistently. Its annual gross national product (GNP) rose by 5.7% from 1950 to 1960 and 5.2% from 1960 to 1970. At the same time, the US experienced unprecedented development. This was due in part to geographic isolation from Europe during World War II, which prevented extensive damage to American industries. The inception of new industries such as television, the rise of suburbia and government investment in infrastructure helped the US economy expand continuously for decades after 1945. The resources for each nation’s respective economic success would not have been available if they had chosen to start a third world war.

Extensive proxy wars led by the US and the Soviet Union offered glimpses of the destruction and economic hardship that would have ensued if NATO combated the Warsaw Pact. From 1955 to 1975, the United States fought a desperate containment war against insurgents in Vietnam that ended with a communist victory and the destabilization of several other countries in Southeast Asia. In Afghanistan, the Soviets spent

10 years trying to suppress the mujahadeen before their ignominious withdrawal in 1989.

Both conflicts resulted in the US and Soviet Union suffering tens of thousands of casualties among military service members, while causing even higher death tolls among the people of Vietnam and Afghanistan. Those wars also cost the US and the Soviet Union large sums of money that could not be regenerated, prompting economic hardship. The price of these proxy wars, terrible as they were in their own right, offered a window to the horror that would have ensued if the two superpowers had gone to war.

Eventually, the nonviolent end of the Cold War brought with it far greater political stability than a military tête-à-tête between the Americans and Soviets would have done. The new government of the Russian Federation was able to take power quickly and without international incident.

### **Germany vs. the United Kingdom and France**

Following the reunification of Germany in 1990, the fear of a third world war was foremost on the mind of the British and French governments, who prepared to make an independent military alliance should Germany rearm. Understanding this fear, and with the horrors of the world wars within living memory, Germany opted against rebuilding its military to the same degree as earlier in the 20th century. The costs of the two world wars further dissuaded Germany from posturing in a way that would invite another total conflict. In this way, the Germans ensured peace for the foreseeable future in Europe.

As a result of decreased military tensions between the UK, France and Germany, Europe focused its energy on opening its borders and harmonizing its economic exploits. The continued expansion of the European Union and the introduction of the euro currency cemented these aims. All three partners benefited economically from this period of stability. In 2019, Germany had the largest national economy in Europe, followed closely by the UK and France, respectively. There is freedom of travel

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and ease of custom that furthers cultural interaction and social development, and Europeans are arguably happier, healthier and freer than they were at any previous point in history.

### **Subverting the Modern Trap**

None of the four cases cited above is an exact clone of current relations between the United States and China. In both the Iberian and the American-British examples, there was a shared cultural background and a similar language between the two sides that doubtlessly contributed toward peace. During the Second World War, the US and the Soviet Union formed a military alliance that defeated Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. By contrast, the US assisted nationalist forces during the Chinese Civil War of 1945-49 and combated Chinese communist soldiers during the Korean War of 1950-53. In the late 1980s, memories of both world wars provided Britain, France and Germany with enough incentive to resolve their issues peacefully.

This does not mean there are no similarities each side can use as a guide to peace. Economic incentives played a role in the reduction of tensions between Spain and Portugal. Similarly, ending the trade war between the US and China and resuming normal economic ties would help fill each nation's coffers. The United States and Great Britain were able to ally before combating a single enemy. If climate change were viewed as a shared problem, the US and China could ally to combat it together.

Finally, the US and China do not share a land border, which was also true of the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War; this reduces the opportunity for an overzealous or nervous service member to inadvertently start a conflict. Both countries, in addition, are important members of the United Nations, which mirrors how Britain, France and Germany were important members of the European Union and NATO.

Graham Allison's analysis of relations between rising and reigning powers paints a grim

future, one in which two powerful nations armed with nuclear weapons fight one another. To avoid such a future, the American and Chinese governments must strive to understand the lessons of the past. They must learn about the instances in which Thucydides' Trap did not spring. Diplomacy between the two powers must always be pragmatic, and each side should understand that they will never get everything they want at the negotiating table. Finally, each side must scale down their military presence, particularly in the South China Sea, before a misstep or negligent discharge can potentially ignite a global war.

By recognizing the devastating harm that would occur in the event of a war, and the potential for economic growth and political stability if peace is sustained, two of the world's largest powers can concentrate on shared goals and projects for mutual benefit. This will not be easy. But, as Benjamin Franklin once observed, "There has never been a good war or a bad peace."

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\***Kevin Johnston** served four years as a Transportation Corps officer at Fort Hood, Texas.

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## **How the End of the Gulf Crisis Affects Sudan**

Julietta Mirghani  
April 9, 2021

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

**S**udan has been at the center of the diverging interests of wealthy Gulf states for many years. Having been close allies of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, Saudi

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Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar had longstanding business, military and political interests in the country prior to the Gulf crisis in 2017. In June of that year, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt — known as the Arab quartet — cut diplomatic and trade relations with Qatar.

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

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

### **Sudan's Attempt to Play All Sides**

Most Arab and sub-Saharan African states tried to resist pressure to join the anti-Qatar coalition and delicately maneuver their way into neutrality. These states were uneasy about their move because they feared that the Arab quartet would use their economic might against them. As a result, some African states cut or downgraded ties with Qatar.

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

\$4 billion, as per the Sudanese Bureau of Statistics.

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

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

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

### **New Transitional Government**

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

In April 2019, Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed a military coup that ended three decades of Bashir's rule and led to the creation of a Transitional Military Council (TMC). The GCC

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duo promptly promised a staggering \$3 billion in aid to support the TMC. However, growing international pressure pushed the TMC to sign a power-sharing agreement with Sudan's pro-democracy movement. The TMC transferred power to a sovereignty council for a transitional period. Elections to usher in a civilian-led government are planned in late 2023 or early 2024.

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

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

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

Sudan's transitional government recently set its priorities for 2021, which include a focus on the economy, peace, security, foreign relations and the ongoing democratic transition. However, the challenges facing the transitional government are dire. Foreign debt has risen to over \$60 billion and inflation has crossed 300%. The country faces massive unemployment and

chronic shortages of bread, fuel and foreign currency. Sudan is in the throes of a complex power struggle between civilians and the military. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) threatens Sudan's water security. Sudanese and Ethiopian troops have clashed at the border. If this was not daunting already, Sudan has registered nearly 32,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, as of April 9.

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

For Sudan, the Gulf crisis served as a minor inconvenience. The revolution and Sudan's removal from the SST list are more significant developments. GCC states are now encountering a growing number of new regional and international players who are looking at Sudan with increased interest. This could very well cause a shift in Gulf-Sudan relations.

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

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\***Julietta Mirghani** is a strategic communications expert and analyst.

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## EU Concern Over Ukraine Is Not Enough

Sebastian Schäffer  
April 13, 2021

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**The European Union needs to send a strong and unified message regarding tensions over Ukraine.**

**H**ostilities between Ukraine and Russia reached an alarming level last week when further Russian troops were deployed on the Ukrainian border.

Despite a statement from the Kremlin describing the act as “not threatening,” Kyiv accused Moscow of moving thousands of soldiers to its northern and eastern borders and on the Russian-annexed Crimean Peninsula to create an intimidating atmosphere in violation of the Minsk agreements and the ceasefire in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine. The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed it is Kyiv and NATO countries that are increasing their armed forces in Ukraine and the Black Sea close to Russia’s borders.

Nevertheless, the Russian Federation is following its usual scheme and is ready to seize any opportunity that arises. There may be three possible reasons behind these new developments: 1) Moscow wants to send a message to the US administration after recent statements regarding President Vladimir Putin; 2) the Russians are seeking a pretext to install their “peacekeepers” in Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine; or 3) the Kremlin wants to use the water crisis in Crimea to intervene and build a corridor through the Donbass region.

There might be other drivers, such as the ongoing power struggle inside the Russian administration, despite the fact that Putin signed a law that would allow him to stay in office until 2036. A manufactured external threat to Russian citizens — Russian passports have been issued to many Ukrainians living in the two self-declared

people’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk — would help deflect attention from internal economic problems, which have only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky shut down three television channels linked to Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, which may have contributed to the latest tension. Not only does Medvedchuk have personal ties to Putin, but the stations have also broadcast pro-Russian propaganda to the Ukrainian people.

In the end, the cause can be left to Kremlinologists to decipher. Yet what is clear is that Putin has proved to be ready to act whenever there is a chance, and he has plenty of opportunities to create an event to trigger action. Ultimately, it does not matter why. What matters is that other regional actors are now using peaceful means to prevent a further escalation between Russia and Ukraine.

### **Is Dialogue Enough?**

The US and the European Union have declared their support for Kyiv. Josep Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief and vice-president of the European Commission, expressed concern over the latest developments. The European Parliament also released a statement in which it reiterates that Moscow must reduce tensions by ending its military buildup in and close to Ukrainian territory. This is certainly not enough, but what are the options?

Engaging in dialogue is fine, but it seems the meaning of it has been forgotten — that is, to listen to each other and try to understand. When there is an argument between parties, there should be a general assumption that the other person could be right. It is not sufficient to only listen in order to respond and get one’s own points across. It should also not be disregarded that there is a civil society in Russia. When there is a dispute with the Kremlin, it does not entail the whole population.

What is important is that language matters, words become actions, and actions have consequences — and this could lead to a

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dangerous downward spiral. Nevertheless, there must also be some clear lines established.

This tit-for-tat blame game that has dominated the discourse for decades has to stop. This is not a reasonable discussion. The demands by Zelensky to accelerate Ukraine's membership in NATO are not helpful, but nor is a meeting between Russia, Germany and France on the situation in Ukraine without including representatives from Kyiv.

Diplomatic relations among regional actors have been strained for years but deteriorated further over recent months. In February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated in an interview about relations between Russia and the European Union that "if you want peace, be prepared for war."

In the current political climate, this sounds far more threatening than it might have a few months ago. At that time, the German Foreign Ministry rightly called the comments "disconcerting and incomprehensible," though Lavrov is known for his controversial statements.

Nevertheless, this has marked a new low in the EU–Russia relations, and it seems that things could get worse. Expelling diplomats of EU member states while Borrell, the top European diplomat, was in Moscow is just power play. Despite Lavrov being in office for 17 years, the European Union has never found a way to reach a consensus on how to respond to his actions. In 2004, Central and Eastern European countries had just joined the EU, which was and still is a big success, but the necessary reforms in the institutional setup to be able to handle Lavrov have still not been implemented.

What is even worse, the lack of capabilities to anticipate consequences has forever been a weak point in Brussels. Negotiations for an association agreement between the EU and Ukraine effectively led to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Politics is much more complicated and one action does not necessarily lead to a specific outcome, but there is certainly a possibility of a butterfly effect.

## **Better Preparation**

In order to be better prepared, member states need to pool resources together and ultimately transfer sovereignty to the EU when it comes to foreign policy. Otherwise, the divide-and-conquer approach by Russia will continue. After a rather humiliating meeting with Lavrov in February, Borrell said, "As ever, it will be for member states to decide the next steps, and yes, these could include sanctions." This is not a language that the Kremlin understands.

The German government, for instance, has been reluctant when it comes to imposing sanctions. On the one hand, this is due to Berlin's history with the Russian Federation, but to a lesser extent, it is because of the Nord Stream 2, a gas pipeline linking Russia and Germany via the Baltic Sea. Nevertheless, this would be an opportunity to act as the pipeline also threatens Ukraine's energy supply and might open another opportunity to act for the Kremlin. Yet there is a very good argument against sanctions: They would hurt the general population in Russia, which would further alienate the people who, in turn, would rally around the flag.

Nevertheless, there are other ways to respond, ideally targeting the circles close to the Kremlin. Suspending Russia from the SWIFT global financial network could also be an option; calls to do so first emerged in 2014 after Russia's actions in Ukraine. Yet this might lead to a fragmentation of the international financial system; Russian authorities have already backed international use of its alternative payment network.

The biggest danger for the Putin regime would be if the majority of Russians understood that it is possible to live in a liberal democracy. This is why a closer relationship between Ukraine and the EU is so dangerous for the Kremlin. The current escalation is not about the expansion of Russia's borders or preserving traditional values, as often spun by Russian media and Moscow. This is a facade that masks the fact that if people were given the possibility of improving their lives without the strongman in the Kremlin, the Putin system would become irrelevant.

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Sanctions on Russia will most likely not lead to this outcome. There will not be a democratic revolution on the streets — this can only be through a gradual process. The question is: Will Western democracy survive long enough to see that change coming in order to still be a model?

Therefore, the EU has to send a clear and unified message to prevent further escalation and not only react or be taken by surprise, as was the case in 2014. Ideally, this would also strengthen transatlantic relations by finding a common approach to the evolving situation. After the EU's top representatives suffered political embarrassment in Moscow and Ankara, it would be even more necessary to send a strong signal to Russia.

Being concerned is not enough — neither by institutions in Brussels, nor by EU member states. There is a need to be better prepared for certain scenarios. Repeating the same mistakes will be unforgivable for the region and the future of the European Union itself.

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**\*Sebastian Schäffer** is the managing director of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) in Vienna, Austria.

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## **Why Joe Biden Must Act on Myanmar**

Pratap Heblkar  
April 14, 2021

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**China is on the ascendant in a post-coup Myanmar, which threatens to become the new Afghanistan unless the US and its allies act.**

**B**urma, as Myanmar was known then, won its independence from the British in 1948. Since then, bilateral relations between the US and Myanmar can at best be described as lackluster. They have lacked what experts would

call “strategic compulsions.” Western allies of the US lack strategic calculus in dealing with Myanmar. They have viewed it from the narrow prism of moralistic Western standards of democracy, human rights, rule of law, corruption and the trafficking of humans, drugs and weapons.

To be fair, the US has not always or entirely been sanctimonious. The historic Kissinger Doctrine integrated China into the liberal postwar order. It facilitated investments into, transferred technology to and trained manpower in China. Under Deng Xiaoping and his successors, China continued its peaceful rise. Xi Jinping, the current Chinese president, has ended that peaceful rise and destabilized the world order.

### **Missing Out on Myanmar**

The US approach to Myanmar has been muddled and inconsistent. During the Cold War, Washington was happy to deal with allies in Asia that were military dictatorships. Under President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the US was happy to deal with a communist regime.

In contrast, Burma was a parliamentary democracy from 1948 to 1962 when Ne Win led a military coup. For the next 26 years, the country was ruled by the Tatmadaw, the official name of the country's armed forces. In 1988, nationwide protests broke out. Aung San Suu Kyi, the Oxford-educated daughter of Burmese independence leader Aung San, emerged as the leader of a pro-democracy movement. The National League of Democracy (NLD) went on to win the 1990, 2015 and 2020 parliamentary elections.

In comparison with China, Myanmar's regime has been far less oppressive. There is no counterpart to the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution. The Tatmadaw has yielded to public pressure and held largely free and fair elections. In elections, even members of the Tatmadaw have voted for Suu Kyi's NLD. Yet the US and its Western allies have ignored the strategic importance of Myanmar in the Indian

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Ocean region in general and the Bay of Bengal in particular.

### **Chinese Influence Wanes and Waxes**

In the past, the US and its allies put pressure on the Tatmadaw by imposing sanctions on Myanmar. Instead of weakening the Tatmadaw, sanctions hurt the people and pushed the country into the arms of China. Between 2004 and 2007, a generational change in the Tatmadaw caused a rethink in Myanmar's relationship with China.

The younger officers of the Tatmadaw decided to decrease dependence on Beijing. They tried to reduce Chinese influence in political and military governance. They attempted to transition to some form of democracy and improve relations with the West and neighbors like India. In 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton swung by Myanmar. President Barack Obama visited twice in 2012 and 2014. By 2016-17, the persecution of Rohingya Muslims, an ethnic minority in the country's Rakhine state, was in the news and relations between the US and Myanmar were already souring.

Yet this was a relatively good time for the country. Even financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank opened their purse strings. During this brief honeymoon period with the West, China found itself on the back foot for the first time since 1988.

In 2011, Myanmar suspended the construction of the Myitsone dam, a controversial hydroelectric project financed and led by a state-owned Chinese company. In 2015, Myanmar's general elections led to yet another victory for Suu Kyi's NLD. This was an opportune moment for the West to build relations with Myanmar and counter China. The Tatmadaw had ceded ground to elected officials. Washington could have cultivated both of Myanmar's centers of power: the NLD and the Tatmadaw.

But the US missed this opportunity. From 2017, the Rohingya issue clouded Myanmar's relationship with the West and allowed China to regain its clout in the country. The military coup

in February this year strengthens China's hand further.

China has already been strengthening its hand by following its tried and tested policy of investing in infrastructure. The China-Myanmar Transport Corridor is connecting the Chinese province of Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal. Roads, railways, river navigation, oil and gas pipelines are deepening economic ties between Myanmar and China. It is part of the Middle Kingdom's "Look South" policy that seeks to draw Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan into the Chinese arc of influence.

The military coup in Myanmar presents a great opportunity to China and represents the first major foreign policy challenge to President Joe Biden's administration as well as the Quadrilateral Security Alliance, the informal strategic dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia and India known as the Quad.

### **The US Still Has Some Cards**

China may be in the ascendant right now, but the West still has clout in Myanmar. Suu Kyi studied at Oxford, lived in the UK for decades and married an Englishman. People from Myanmar have immigrated to Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US. So, the West commands what Joseph Nye has calls "soft power" in the country. Burmese people want to immigrate not to China but to the US.

Yet American foreign policy to Myanmar has squandered this soft power prodigally. Obama is the only American president who gave Myanmar the attention it deserved. His foreign policy pivot to Asia was a strategic masterstroke, but Donald Trump abandoned Obama's outreach not only to Myanmar but the rest of Asia.

The military coup is a wake-up call for the US to act. China is now firmly in the saddle in Myanmar. The Tatmadaw is finding ferocious resistance on the streets. There is another overlooked problem. Like many postcolonial states, Myanmar is a bewildering patchwork of cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups. Many of



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them have been fighting for independence or autonomy for years.

Few in the West realize that a savage conflict might be about to break out. About 20 rebel groups, including the United Wa State Army, Karen National Union, Kachin Independence Army and Arakan Army, control 33% of Myanmar's territory. Many of them have condemned the coup. In response, the Tatmadaw has launched airstrikes in Karen state. With drugs and arms flush in rebel areas, Myanmar might be about to become the new Afghanistan.

The Quad leaders' joint statement on the White House website emphasizes "the urgent need to restore democracy and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience" in Myanmar. This mention is heartening, but the Quad and the US need to do more. Opening dialogue with the Tatmadaw would be a good start. Intelligence sources report that most young officers favor multi-party democracy and are wary of Myanmar turning into a Chinese tributary.

A carrot-and-stick approach by Washington could still work. The World Bank has halted payments to projects after the military coup. International condemnation has rattled the Tatmadaw. Pressure to reach a political reconciliation might bear fruit. Carrots in the form of infrastructure funding and development assistance could prove attractive. Involving Asian nations such as India, Japan, South Korea and Bangladesh, as well as member states of ASEAN, could pave the path to Myanmar's transition away from military rule. Despite foreign policy blunders, economic woes and internal division, the US is still the undisputed top dog in the world. With the help of its Asian and European allies, Washington can counter China, prevent civil war and restore democracy in Myanmar. The time has come for Biden to act.

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**\*Pratap Heblkar** retired as the special secretary of the Indian government in 2010.

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## What Led to Europe's Vaccine Disaster?

Hans-Georg Betz  
April 15, 2021

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

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

Given my age and the fact that I suffer from pollen allergies in the spring, I filled out an online form and was informed I was eligible for a jab. So, I went through to the registration page only to be told that there were no appointments available. Two months have since passed and there are still no openings. The way things are going, I probably won't get vaccinated before the end of summer — or perhaps by fall or Christmas.

### **"Unacceptably Slow"**

Switzerland is not alone. The pace of vaccination is proceeding at a snail's pace throughout the European Union. Just weeks ago, Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization's director for Europe, vented his frustration, charging that the vaccine rollout in Europe was "unacceptably slow." Germany is a key example. By the first week of April, 13% of the population had received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and 5.6% had received the second dose. In comparison, around the same time, more than a third of the US adult population had received at least one dose and 20% were fully vaccinated. In the UK, which is no longer a member of the

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European Union, the vaccination rate was even higher.

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

France's premier conservative daily *Le Figaro* was not the least impressed. In a biting response, it characterized the EU's vaccine procurement strategy as nothing short of a "fiasco" and frontally attacked Breton and, with him, the European Commission. Not only had Breton refused to admit "the slightest error," continuing instead to defend his vaccine policy, but he also took French citizens for fools. Clearly, Breton's statements had hit a raw nerve, at least in France.

### **Why Is Europe Behind?**

There are a number of reasons why the European Union is trailing the US and the UK. One of the most important ones is the union itself. Its sheer size allowed the EU initially to negotiate lower prices for vaccines by buying in bulk for all 27 member states. Reducing costs, however, came at a heavy price in the form of the slow delivery of the vaccines. In addition, the European Commission had to get the green light from EU member states before it could arrive at a decision over which vaccines to purchase. As a result, the EU "ordered too few vaccines too late," wrote Guntram Wolff, director of the Bruegel think tank in Brussels. Hesitation on the part of member states, given "the novelty of the technological approach," led to delays in authorizing the leading vaccines, including the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine that had been developed in Germany.

According to *Le Canard Enchaîné*, a French weekly known for its investigative journalism,

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

Add to that what Spain's premier daily *El País* has called the "AstraZeneca fiasco." The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine was supposed "to power the bulk of the continent's inoculation campaign," according to *El País*. Instead, holdups and delays in the distribution of the vaccine, together with pauses in the vaccination campaign following reports about suspected side-effects from the Oxford-AstraZeneca jab — rare cases of blood clots — seriously jeopardized the EU's strategy. In Germany, at the end of March, it was decided that AstraZeneca would no longer be administered to people under the age of 60. Denmark has ceased administering the vaccine completely.

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

The results of a recent survey are stark. In early March, around 40% of respondents in France, Germany and Italy thought the pandemic had weakened the "case for the EU." When asked

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whether the EU had helped their country to confront the pandemic, a third of respondents in France and Italy and more than half in Germany answered “no.” At the same time, however, member states have not fared much better. In response to the question of whether their country was taking the right measures to combat COVID-19, almost 60% of French respondents, nearly half of Germans and more than 40% of Italians answered in the negative.

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

In late March, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control published a report on the vaccine rollout in the EU. By far, the most important challenge facing most member states was the limited supply of vaccines and frequent changes in the timing of deliveries from suppliers, “which can be unpredictable and can significantly affect the planning and efficiency of the rollout.” Other challenges included problems with logistics, limited personnel to administer the vaccines, shortage of equipment such as syringes and special needles, and issues related to communication such as information about the vaccine and scheduling appointments.

### **Is the EU Goal Realistic?**

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

Some countries appear to be prepared to do so. In Spain, health authorities expect a significant acceleration in the vaccination campaign over the coming weeks. There is growing confidence that the country will meet the 70% mark by the start

of summer. Even in Germany, whose blundering performance during the past several weeks made international headlines, experts are optimistic that the country will reach the target.

More often than not, the problem is not necessarily the supply of vaccines, but difficulties in getting target groups vaccinated. This is, at least in part, a result of communication infrastructure, which in some cases are far behind the technological frontier. Take the case of Switzerland, which is not a member of the EU. In late March, Geneva’s *Le Temps* alerted its readers that when it comes to the digitalization of its health system, Switzerland was in the “Middle Ages.” Instead of using the internet, Swiss health authorities sent faxes to communicate the number of new infections. When it comes to digitalization, the author noted, Switzerland, which prided itself as the world champion in innovation, was “full of fear” if not outright “recalcitrant” to adopt new technologies. The consequences were fatal not only with regard to dealing with the pandemic, but also with respect to the country’s international competitiveness.

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

### **Better Preparation for Crises**

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

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

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

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

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

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## Is the European Super League Such a Terrible Idea?

Ellis Cashmore  
April 19, 2021

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**An expanded European Super League could leave the domestic game in a healthier shape than it is now.**

**W**hen the hysteria dies down, think carefully: Is the proposed breakaway European Super League (ESL) such a terrible idea? Most of the football clubs involved struggle to break even and most are rescued out of a financial mess by a yearly gift from their owners-cum-benefactors.

With the backing of JPMorgan Chase, the merchant bankers, the clubs involved in the ESL could double the income they currently receive from UEFA Champions League or the Europa League. Their profligacy would no doubt mean that they still end up broke, but that’s their problem. The rest of the football world would keep on turning.

### Rebel Alliance

Imagine this: The 12 founding members of the European Super League — England’s Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur, Spain’s Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atlético Madrid and Italy’s Juventus, AC Milan and Inter Milan — recruit a further five or so clubs to form a league of 20+ teams and initiate a self-contained competition, screened via Amazon Prime, Netflix, Facebook, Disney+ or Sky (now owned by US media company Comcast), or possibly shared among them all. UEFA, Europe’s governing federation for association football, is furious, condemns this “rebel” alliance and instructs its affiliated organizations, including England’s Premier League, to expel the relevant clubs from domestic competitions.

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This leaves the Super League clubs to devise a format that will guarantee about 40 or so games per year, every one broadcast or streamed live, with playoffs and a final championship game, possibly in Qatar or somewhere else in the Persian Gulf. Subscription channels are set up and, with advertising and sponsorship, the clubs claw in a total of, say, €4 billion (\$4.8 billion) per season — roughly twice the amount they could expect from the Champions League, provided they get to the knockout stages. You can understand the temptation.

Meanwhile, back in the relative mundanity of the domestic leagues of England, the hitherto garlanded Premier League has lost its luster and is forced to consider an amalgamation with its less distinguished cousins in the English Football League (EFL). In desperation, they cobble together a new competition called the English Premier League and split it into four divisions, each of 20 teams, with three rounds of playoffs similar to the National Football League (NFL) in the US. Broadcasters are not prepared to pay the £1.19 billion (\$1.66 billion) per annum that Sky in the UK currently pays the existing Premier League, but that was declining anyway and the chances were that the top English division was bracing itself for 2022 when the contract concluded.

But the newly-designed EFL has a novel idea: It will revert to a pre-Premier League type of cash distribution and allocate broadcast monies more evenly and in a way that keeps the financially weaker clubs afloat. This is actually how association football began: It wasn't a devil-takes-hindmost affair with the richer clubs striving to enrich themselves while leaving modest clubs with potentially smaller fan bases to run to rack and ruin.

In this scenario, commercial television ventures into the new competition and reaps rewards in the form of surprisingly encouraging viewing figures, which lead to advertising revenues and eventually a virtuous spiral upward. Clubs do not receive as much money as they used to in the old Premier League, but the poorer

relatives get a share of the spoils and are able to survive and, in time, prosper.

### **Barcelona or Wolves?**

Running parallel to this is the European Super League. Fans of the “Big Six,” as England's top clubs from London and the Northwest are known, are more than willing to shell out £100 (\$140) per game at their home stadiums and take out a subscription to watch other games on their screens. They can also treat themselves to a game in Madrid or Milan whenever they fancy.

Do fans of Rochdale or Walsall envy them? Not a bit. The joy of sport is in the competition, true. But it's also in the disappointment, disillusionment and despondency as much as the jubilation, joyfulness and pride. The rivals actually don't matter as much as everything else, including the camaraderie, the arguments and the money won and lost on gambling. In sport, the journey is much more important than the destination.

Does it matter to the Walsall fan that their team is playing Wolves and not Barcelona? Hardly. Wolverhampton is about 30 minutes away and a Black Country derby holds more value than a game against Barcelona, which, after all, is about a thousand miles removed from the West Midlands.

### **Cricket, Tennis and Boxing**

It's a scenario that is unlikely to materialize. Both cricket and tennis have navigated through similar crises and emerged better off. The so-called “rebels” usually made it impossible for their sport to maintain the status quo and propelled democratizing measures. Boxing has lived with several, often competing governing organizations but still survives. It does so because, like other major sports, it lets television or other media platforms call the shots.

Football's de facto leaders are already the media. Its de jure leader is FIFA, the global governing organization, which has, in recent years, become shorthand for corruption. The rebel alliance of the European Super League is

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not exactly challenging an honorable and robust body that commands the respect of the world. So, in a sense, the breakaway clubs may be pushing at an open door.

There would be complicated legal entanglements. FIFA or UEFA could disqualify those who play for ESL clubs from ever transferring to clubs in the traditional sphere of football. They could also ban them from playing in the World Cup, the European Championship and other international competitions, including perhaps the Olympics. A rebel organization would probably respond by arranging its own equivalents.

If cricket and the other sports that have contended with similar secessions provide precedents, the traditional governing federation typically accommodates the new impulses. This is more difficult to entertain in football's structure. England's Premier League, for example, would find it practically impossible to allow a half-dozen elite clubs to have their own way and play in a league totally separate and outside its jurisdiction. No doubt, JPMorgan and the broadcasters have forewarned the clubs of the possible consequences.

FIFA would be mocked if it stopped ESL players from competing in the World Cup. Imagine a World Cup without the world's best players. Football's governors have a serious predicament.

### **Is the European Super League a Threat?**

So, the question remains: Will the "Big Six" and their European counterparts go it alone? It is a risk, but the pickings are indeed rich, and as they stand — believe it or not — the clubs need the money.

For instance, between 2004 and 2013, Chelsea lost over £670 million and only recorded a profit in one year: £1 million in 2011-12. Chelsea lost £96 million in 2018-19, but while it made a profit the year prior, the club depends on transfer fees and, of course, the benefaction of its owner, Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. If Chelsea and the others were so flushed with cash,

they wouldn't contemplate such a dramatic and potentially hazardous change that could turn them into sporting pariahs (as rebel cricketers were in the early 1980s).

UEFA has agreed to revamp the Champions League's structure into a single league format, with a knockout stage as its climax. Clearly, the sums haven't impressed the breakaway clubs. UEFA can probably table a revised deal, but consider this: Association football, while by far the most popular sport in history, must surely be close to saturation point. Fans can watch football 24/7 — literally. Every game, even those of limited significance, is shown on screens. There has never been a sport that keeps giving like this.

### **Shamed Without Kicking a Ball**

The European Super League clubs have been shamed without kicking a ball. The condemnation is sure to continue. Were the "Big Six" to leave or be expelled from English domestic competitions, it would be in disgrace.

But memories are short in sport and, within a year, we would think of the ESL as we do with cricket's Indian Premier League: a different, slightly more exotic competition that pitches the best players in the world against each other, but poses no threat to the domestic sport. In this case, the exotic competition could leave the domestic game in a healthier shape than it is now.

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## The Matter of Xi's Succession

Eyck Freymann & Ralph Su  
April 21, 2021

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

**A**t the all-important two sessions (lianghui) meetings last month, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials adopted a new and surprisingly unambitious Five-Year Plan, reoriented the country's technology strategy and redoubled the crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong. All of this was documented in the English-language media. But another crucial CCP announcement flew below the media's radar. An innocuous-sounding procedural change gave President Xi Jinping the authority to dismiss vice premiers of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, one of the last potential bastions of elite opposition to his rule. Premier Li Keqiang, nominally the second-most powerful man in China, has now been effectively sidelined. Furthermore, Hu Chunhua, Xi's charismatic potential successor, can now be fired at will.

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

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

### Neutralizing Potential Challengers

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

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

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

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

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

### **Succession Matters**

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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## Seeking Truth and Reconciliation in America

Stephen Day  
April 21, 2021

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**For a truth and reconciliation commission to be credible, it must not only identify problems but also provide solutions.**

**A**fter over 50 years in the US as an immigrant from the UK, of which 40 have been spent in Washington, DC, I thought I had seen it all. Clearly, I was wrong. The mob invasion of the Capitol on January 6 was a historic first. Thankfully, it was followed by President Joe Biden's peaceful inauguration on January 20. Democrats went on to achieve a majority in both houses of the US Congress. With the change in the political wind, America has a unique opportunity to borrow from three previous truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) to bring harmony where there is discord.

The most famous TRC was instituted by South Africa's 1995 Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act. The goal of the new TRC was to uncover the truth about human rights violations during decades of apartheid. The emphasis was on finding the truth from both victims and perpetrators, not on prosecuting individuals for past crimes. In this regard, it

differed from the Nuremberg trials that prosecuted Nazis for their crimes.

### Societal Schism

The events of January 6 have exposed societal schism to the world. Now, the US needs actions, not words, to form a fully representative, multi-party equivalent of the South African TRC to deal with enduring injustices across the nation. The current American social problem is complex, multi-generational and multi-dimensional. As such, it is not likely to be easily or speedily ameliorated. However, admitting the problem in the style of alcoholics anonymous is a necessary first step to avoiding a looming cultural and economic civil war.

The fundamental problem in America is its broken education system. According to Pew Research Center, a large percentage of Americans still reject the theory of evolution. As per the National Center for Educational Statistics, 21% (43 million) of American adults are functionally illiterate — e.g., lacking the basic ability to use reading, writing and calculation skills for their own and the community's development. The US may be the world superpower, but its poorly educated citizens often lack critical thinking and judgment. Seduced by demagogues, they have drifted into warring camps.

Many thoughtful Americans are worried about divisions in society. The December 2019 issue of *The Atlantic* was a special report titled "How to Stop a Civil War." It examined "a nation coming apart." The magazine brought together the nation's best writers to confront questions of American unity and fracture. That issue has proved to be prescient.

Since the 2020 elections, the rhetoric in the US became increasingly toxic. Disinformation was rife, calls for insurrection came right from the top and the pot of anger boiled over on January 6. It may not be 1861, but disunity reigns in the United States. A TRC that digs out the truth might be exactly what America needs in a post-truth world.

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## Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

There have been three significant TRCs since 1990 in South Africa, Chile and Canada. The results of these appear to be mixed. In balance, they seem to have had a positive impact on the arc of the history of their respective societies.

The story of South Africa's TRC is too well known to be told in full here. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, investigated crimes during apartheid to record the truth. The TRC offered amnesty to perpetrators of many crimes and rehabilitation as well as reparations to the victims. It might be fair to say that the work of the TRC allowed South Africa to make a peaceful transition from a horrendously unjust apartheid regime to a plural, democratic society.

Chile's TRC predates the South African one. It operated from May 1990 to February 1991. The mandate of the Rettig Commission, as Chile's TRC has come to be known, was to document human rights abuses that resulted in death or disappearance during the years of military rule from September 11, 1973, to March 11, 1990. Notably, investigating torture and abuses that did not result in death did not form part of the mandate of the Rettig Commission. Nevertheless, there is a strong argument to be made why Chile's TRC was the first step that led to last year's referendum in which Chileans voted to rewrite the military-era constitution.

Canada's TRC emulated the Chilean and South African ones. Between 2007 and 2015, it provided those directly or indirectly affected by the legacy of the Indian residential school system with an opportunity to share their stories and experiences. The TRC spent six years traveling to all parts of Canada and recorded experiences of 6,500 witnesses. It recorded the history and legacy of the numerous injustices perpetrated by the residential school system to the indigenous peoples. Its six-volume report with 94 "calls to action" has been accepted by the Canadian government and marks a watershed in the country's history.

## An American TRC

Unlike South Africa, Chile and Canada, America's injustices and even its divisions are messier. There is no equivalent of an apartheid or military regime to investigate. Investigating only the injustices against the indigenous Native Americans or formerly enslaved African Americans would be too narrow a remit to renew the American social fabric.

America's schisms include, but are not limited to, those in education, culture, geography, politics, religious beliefs, skin color and immigration. Just as Catholics and different Protestant sects interpret the Bible in various ways, Americans have radically different interpretations of the Constitution and its amendments. Like many reports, articles and documentaries have now recorded, social media has exacerbated the fractures in American society. Truth itself is in question and distrust in institutions is dangerously high.

The purpose of establishing an American TRC is to slow down, and potentially reverse, the steady rupturing of a fundamentally decent society espousing equal opportunity for all. To avoid the growing risk of a dystopian cultural war, the US needs to identify the problems it faces. If social media is exacerbating divisions, how exactly is it doing so? Is polarization in America based on resentment of the white working class against metropolitan elites, or is it the rural versus urban divide? If so many Americans are functionally illiterate, what exactly is going wrong in the education system? If social mobility is now below that in my home country of the UK, why is that so?

For a truth and reconciliation commission to be credible, it must not only identify problems but also provide solutions. Like its Canadian counterpart, it could come up with "calls to action." Members of an American TRC must come from all walks of life, different political, cultural and religious philosophies, and have a reputation for integrity. In a partisan democracy with tribal political loyalties, they must not belong to any political party. Their core task must

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be to diagnose what ails America and what can heal it. Only then can this nation, which I have made my home, can be restored to its much-hallowed promise.

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**\*Stephen Day** has more than 40 years of rich business experience in American, European and Japanese markets.

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## Is Bitcoin the New Coal?

Steve Westly  
April 22, 2021

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**Energy-intensive crypto mining is no different than coal or oil a century ago.**

In February, Tesla announced it had purchased \$1.5 billion in Bitcoin and would soon accept the cryptocurrency for car purchases. While bolstering Elon Musk's crypto cred on Twitter, the move has a serious climate impact. Tesla prides itself on being the green car company, made starker after its 2016 acquisition of SolarCity. Yet According to Cambridge University analysis, Bitcoin uses around 120 TWh of energy per year, on par with countries like Norway and Argentina, and is estimated to reach as much as 184 TWh, nearly the same consumption as that of London. That comes out to more than 90 million metric annual tons of CO2. Should progressives be thinking twice about greenhouse gas emissions from Bitcoin? Is Bitcoin going to become the new coal?

Bitcoin energy consumption comes down to how it's secured. The currency utilizes a process called proof of work, which requires an arsenal of high-powered computers to solve a cryptic puzzle every 10 minutes to create new currency to add to the blockchain. Achieving enough guesses to solve the puzzle and create transactions requires thousands of computers — or more efficient

GPUs. This demands an enormous amount of energy, which is growing as its price and mining competition increase.

Moreover, 65% of the world's Bitcoin mining comes from one country: China. The US is a distant second with 7.2% and Russia with 6.9%. This is particularly concerning from a global warming standpoint because 58% of China's electric power comes from coal. Even with cheap, renewable energy, Bitcoin would be diverting that clean energy from critical infrastructure, slowing the world's existential race to carbon neutrality.

To make cryptocurrency transactions environmentally viable, policymakers should be embracing greener crypto technologies such as the proof-of-stake and federated consensus systems. While proof of work incentivizes computing power to prevent the double-spending of coins, these alternative technologies work in a different but equally effective way that doesn't use meaningful amounts of energy. Proof-of-stake systems place trust in users with a greater share of coins who have more to lose if the system collapses. Federated consensus systems work by automatically finding a negotiated agreement that no double-spending of coins occurred.

These alternative technologies are faster too. While Bitcoin can create a transaction every 10 minutes — up to an hour for the transaction to be fully validated — proof-of-stake currencies can confirm transactions in seconds. That's why Algorand started as a proof of stake and why Ethereum is proposing a switch to that technology. Ripple's XRP coin uses a federated consensus system of trusted validators that also confirms transactions in seconds and is popular in cross-border payments. And yet Bitcoin's sustained dominance means that while auto companies are getting cleaner, crypto tech is getting dirtier. Energy-intensive crypto mining is no different than coal or oil a century ago.

Unfortunately, Bitcoin's governance is in the hands of powerful miners who have very little incentive to change to greener consensus

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methods. With Chinese Bitcoin miners controlling over 51% of the market, the Chinese government can exhibit climate leadership by forcing their miners to fork to low-energy alternatives, in effect adapting all Bitcoin.

More locally, our policymakers need to find appropriate ways to disincentivize crypto energy hogs by taxing transactions on those coins in US exchanges. Paris Climate Agreement signees must commit to tax or ban proof-of-work coins by the global audit of the 2015 accord scheduled to take place in 2023 at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change conference in Glasgow. Coinbase's recent public offering and Binance's completely siloed US subsidiary have illustrated the Securities and Exchange Commission has the wherewithal to regulate American crypto exchanges.

Cryptocurrencies are here to stay because they provide safer, quicker and less costly ways to transfer value. But people need to understand Bitcoin's enormous pollution implications and that cleaner technology already exists. Addressing coins that burn excessive energy for mining will be the only way to square cryptocurrencies with real-world environmental damage. Just as coal was once supplanted by oil and oil by renewables, leadership requires recognizing innovation in new spaces. As the crypto revolution continues to expand, it's time to find and promote more energy-efficient alternatives. Mr. Musk has shown us how to clean up the auto industry. Maybe it's time he turns his attention to cleaning up crypto.

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## Is MAGA Whistling in the Dark?

Alan Waring  
April 29, 2021

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**The radical right are likely to be in denial about the US decline in global power.**

**T**he nationalist plank of radical-right, populist ideology asserts that the US is — and always will be — the overriding dominant world power on every measure. Yet such a belief flies in the face of the laws of history, a population ecology view of nation-states and power relations, and the life-cycle model that has applied to every empire and hegemonic state.

There is no persuasive argument to suggest that this model will not apply to 21st-century superpowers. On the one hand, the MAGA bluster and noisy and intimidating rhetoric and associated violence that have typified the US radical right in recent years — especially since Donald Trump's election in 2016 — could be regarded simply as the radical right being themselves (conforming to stereotypes). On the other hand, it also suggests fear-based defensive posturing at the dawning realization that US exceptionalism is not guaranteed amidst the inexorable rise of China.

As US global power declines, will radical-right assertions and objectives based on assumptions of US exceptionalism look increasingly absurd and unachievable? Will a wounded and inherently paranoid radical right become even more reactionary and dangerous? Is an ineffectual Republican Party, the "sick man" of American politics, a prime target for a radical-right coup?

### **The US Exceptionalism Belief**

According to researcher Hilde Eliassen Restad — and discussed by this author in "The New Authoritarianism: A Risk Analysis of the Alt-

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Right Phenomenon” — the concept of US exceptionalism that has existed since WWII encompasses three essential elements. First, the United States is both different to and better than the rest of the world, not just Europe and the “Old World.” Second, the US enjoys a unique role in world history as the prime leader of nations. Third, it is the only nation in history that has thwarted, and will continue to thwart, the laws of history in its rise to power, which will never decline.

These elements underscore a belief that US superiority and superpower status are warranted and inevitable in every respect. This supremacist belief is embedded in US radical-right ideology. The US exceptionalism thesis does not allow the US to accept a *primus inter pares* role in relation to Russia and China, for example. Trump’s radical-right version of US exceptionalism involved slogans such as “America First” and “Make America Great Again,” the rejection of diverse and allegedly un-American ideas such as multilateralism and universal health care, the repudiation of ethnoreligious equality in favor of white Christian nationalism, and unilateral actions against other countries. Such action included military strikes against Iranian and Syrian targets, sanctions on Iran, Syria, Russia and China, and ethnoreligious discrimination against citizens of Muslim-majority countries.

Perhaps the most salient element of the US exceptionalism doctrine, as projected by the Trump administration, was that of infinite, undiminished, dominant US power literally forever. However, such a doctrine defies the laws of history, which assume a population ecology model of nation-states in which nations grow, mature and eventually decline. As this author has previously pointed out, implicit in this model is the life-cycle concept and the inevitability of eventual decline. In 1997, William Strauss and Neil Howe applied the concept in their study of US history and its likely future in the 21st century.

Nevertheless, Trump and the US radical right believe that the US will always be the dominant

global power and that no other nation will ever overtake and replace it. Increasingly, this faith-based belief is being challenged by China on all main parameters — economic, military, political, science and technology — and by Trump’s abject mismanagement and absent leadership during the COVID-19 crisis.

In particular, Trump’s anti-Chinese rhetoric and various attempts to challenge an expansionist China clearly demonstrate US anxiety that its perceived exceptional mantle is not guaranteed. Under the Trump administration, the US banned Huawei 5G technology over what it perceived as a national security threat. Washington has also sent naval forces to the Far East to challenge Beijing’s claim to large tracts of the South China Sea, including islands under the sovereignty of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam

### **Exceptionalism vs. Military and Diplomatic Failures**

Both the veracity and validity of US exceptionalism have also been challenged by military and diplomatic failures. For example, the inevitable collapse of the Iranian regime and/or its compliance with US demands never materialized. This is despite the aggressive bombast of Trump and his courtiers, the imposition of additional US sanctions on Iran, the withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018, the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in 2020 by a US drone strike and bellicose statements implying an impending war.

US failures in foreign policy toward the Middle East are encapsulated in a 2020 report for the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. The report argues that US assumptions about its exceptional status and entitlement to dictate a “new world order,” which includes its domination of the region, are both misguided and not fit for purpose. “Preventing hostile hegemony in the Middle East does not mean the United States must play the role of hegemon itself,” the report states.

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The report advocates a new holistic paradigm based on regional security and multilateral relations, in which US bilateral relations with countries in the Middle East are determined by regional security, rather than the latter being a constant casualty of individual bilateral interests. US foreign policy in the Middle East has failed to achieve its purpose. Diplomatically and militarily, the US was pushed out of Syria and marginalized by Russian and Iranian alliances with Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president. Under Trump, Washington could not force Iran to capitulate to its nuclear and other demands. In Yemen, the US-backed Saudi military offensive against the Houthis rebels was unsuccessful. Finally, a US attempt to introduce an imposed solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that would have negated UN resolutions on Palestinian nationhood went nowhere.

The formal opening of diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel in August 2020 is a positive development and one likely to benefit US foreign policy assumptions to some extent. Yet it also underscores the likelihood that the UAE sees mutual defense advantages against Iran as more important than its support for the Palestinians. However, popular support for such a position among Arab nations is not guaranteed, and such negativity may prove troublesome for Arab governments. In addition, the apparent enthusiasm for better relations with Israel may mask an overriding fear in the UAE and Saudi Arabia that without Israeli involvement, the US may embark on a strategic military withdrawal from the region, which would make them vulnerable to any Iranian machinations.

### **A Prognosis**

These collective failures also indicate that US supremacy and purported exceptionalism are in decline. Those countries that have relied heavily on American supremacy for support and protection — whether diplomatic, military, economic or psychological — against enemies or predatory regimes may have to consider new

security-and-defense policies and arrangements in the medium to long term. This applies not just in relation to the Middle East, but also to Southeast Asia that faces Chinese expansionism and European members of NATO that endured repeated threats by Trump about reduced funding for the alliance and even American withdrawal. However, the Biden administration is likely to herald a return to traditional US support for NATO, at least in the short term. Yet the prospect of some future radical-right presidency may see a return to a review of American support for NATO.

Nevertheless, the US decline will be a long-drawn-out process throughout the 21st century, rather than a rapid collapse. The capacity of the US to try to maintain its superpower status should not be underestimated. There will be moments of temporary rally and some periods of hardly noticeable decline, but overall, the downward trend will be inescapable. No nation can defy the laws of history and their underlying life-cycle and population ecology models. While “forever” is a long, long time, in historical terms, nations have a more limited term. Whether, as other declining imperial and quasi-imperial nations have done over the millennia, the US will learn to adapt and find a new role in an evolving world order remains to be seen.

Over the rest of this century, the US radical right are likely to continue with their egregious ideology and activities. On the one hand, they are likely to be in denial about the US decline. Yet on the other, they will probably take advantage where they can by offering themselves as the nation’s only viable savior from, or antidote to, such decline. Ominously, like a terrified dangerous animal trying to avoid being caged and subdued, the radical right are also increasingly likely to engage inside the US in ever more audacious and violent behavior designed to scare and cow moderates or challengers and even to subjugate mainstream political parties and representative democracy.

Expect to see, for example, the GOP turned from a mainstream, one-nation, conservative

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party into a nakedly authoritarian radical-right party akin to the AfD in Germany, Fidesz in Hungary and other populist far-right parties — all courtesy of Trump and his Republican fifth columnists in Congress. Expect to also see an increase in online and social media attacks as well as physical violence against radical-right targets, whether political, institutional, ethnoreligious minorities or other vulnerable groups. The violent insurrection on Capitol Hill in January, and other radical-right plots to abduct or even murder prominent politicians and officials, is part of the “new normal.”

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