

Make Sense

of 2023



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Fair Observer

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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British Genocide in Kenya: Time for a Reckoning

Mehdi Alavi
January 02, 2023

During the colonial era, Britain routinely committed ethnic cleansing and applied genocidal policies in Kenya. It is time Britain apologized and paid reparations to millions of Kenyans who suffered under British rule.

On August 20, a group of Kenyans filed a case against Britain at the European Court of Human Rights. They were seeking justice for the atrocities the British committed against them during the colonial era. They are seeking \$200 billion in reparations for the crimes perpetrated in the tea-growing regions in the Kenyan Highlands. Unsurprisingly, Britain has failed to address, let alone apologize for, these atrocities in Kenya.

To be fair, the British have apologized for one of their darkest acts in Kenya. In 2013, the government “finalized an out-of-court settlement with thousands of Kenyans who were tortured in detention camps during the end of the British colonial reign.” The British were crushing the Mau Mau — Kenyan rebels from the Kikuyu tribe — who fought in the 1950s and 1960s. It took years before the historic apology and the unprecedented settlement was finalized in 2013.

In 2022, Kenya is back in the news for seeking justice for another brutal British act. With nearly 56 million, Kenya is a dynamic East African country. It now has a literacy rate of 78% but its per capita income is barely \$1,879, ranking lowly

144 in the world. Many argue that many of Kenya’s current problems are a legacy of British colonialism.

British Colonization

For millennia before British colonization, the people we now call Kenyans comprised many tribes. There was sporadic violence but these tribes lived in relative peace and harmony. Some communities farmed, others raised livestock, while others practiced a combination of both activities. Some were hunters and those by Lake Victoria fished. Production served the needs of communal survival. Family and clans shared ownership and cooperated in production as well as distribution. These communitarian societies ensured that no one fell into abject poverty. Boundaries between different ethnic groups were fluid. Trade and intermarriage were prevalent. Notably, communities generally operated without the modern version of the chief.

British colonization ripped apart the social fabric of the communities who now live in Kenya. British rule kicked off with the 1884/85 Berlin Conference, which deprived Kenyans of their natural, territorial, and political rights. In 1894, Britain declared Kenya a protectorate of the Crown. Its officials created Kenya and drew the nation’s boundaries without ever consulting the Kenyans themselves. These new boundaries divided existing communities and brought disparate ethnic groups into a new country. The British created an atmosphere in which communities had to compete for resources and survival. They ruled over the communities with an iron hand. Their military expeditions stole people’s lands and forced many to migrate in a genocidal campaign.

The British confiscated the land they coveted. They instituted forced labor, turning Kenyans into

the property of the British settlers. In 1902, they inaugurated the hut tax, which forced the natives to work for the British to pay the tax or be forced to serve the British settlers. In 1913, they introduced the land bill. This gave British settlers a 999-year lease and effectively confiscated nearly all Kenyan land. In 1919, they required all native men to wear identity discs, more than a decade before the Nazis adopted the same policy with the Jews. In the 1920s, natives were forced to live on reservations and subjected to flogging, much as the British had done to the indigenous peoples from North America to Australia.

Mau Mau Uprising

After World War II, India gained independence in 1947. This inspired the African independence movements. In 1952, the Mau Mau movement for self-determination began. When Princess Elizabeth and her husband Prince Philip visited Kenya that year, Elizabeth reportedly went up into a treehouse as a princess and came down as Queen Elizabeth II.

Whilst the royals were putting up a pretty face, British forces were planning one of the world's worst ethnic cleansing operations. They went on to smash the Mau Mau through brutal methods. When Kenya achieved independence in 1963, the British destroyed all their official records. In this Cold War era, the US was aware of British atrocities but looked the other way.

Supported at the "highest levels", the British purged the capital city Nairobi of Kikuyu people, placing them in "barbed-wire enclosures". They interrogated thousands of detainees. Their interrogators resorted to all types of torture, including forced labor, beatings, starvation, and sexual abuse. Records show that one of those "tortured was the grandfather of former US President Barack Obama".

In a span of 18 months, the British dropped "6 million bombs into Kenya's forests to disrupt guerrilla activity." Then, the British "dusted Kikuyu areas with photographs of mutilated women to intimidate the populace."

In her book, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, Caroline Elkins observes that thousands of Kenyans fought alongside British forces against Germany in World War II. The British repaid the Kenyans with barbarism, not gratitude. They locked up around 1.5 million Kenyans in detention camps and barbed-wired townships in response and killed thousands.

In her 70-year reign, Elizabeth never acknowledged or apologized for British atrocities. Neither did any prime minister. Winston Churchill was then prime minister. Lionized in the UK even today for taking on Adolf Hitler, Churchill escapes scrutiny for his racist, imperialist and ruthless actions in the colonies. In 1919, he wrote that he was "strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes." He ordered that British forces put down the 1920 Iraqi rebellion with an iron hand. Churchill advocated spreading "a lively terror" among the natives so that they would come to heel. In Iraq, the Royal Air Force flew missions for 4,008 hours, dropped 97 tons of bombs and fired 183,861 rounds. They used chemical weapons on Iraqis, over 60 years before Saddam Hussein who targeted Iranians, Shia Arabs and Iraqi Kurds. Under Churchill, the British government unleashed similar brutality upon the Kenyans.

The British forced the natives away from their ancestral lands and into reservations. Only a few years after the Holocaust, the British locked up 1.5 Kikuyu people in concentration camps, torturing, beating, and starving them to death in large numbers. This was an egregious act amounting to

naked genocide. Their signature on the UN Charter did not hold them back.

An example of British brutality was revealed in court in 2012. Four Kenyan victims appeared before the High Court in London. Jane Mara, one of the victims, was 15-years-old at the time. She was repeatedly beaten by the interrogators. They pinned her down on her back while four guards held her thighs wide open and kicked a heated glass bottle into her vagina. After that excruciating pain, she witnessed the same torture inflicted on three other young women. Men were not spared either. The British designed pliers to squeeze male testicles.

The US Supported the UK

After World War II, the US became top dog. The Cold War began. The UK was now a trusted ally. Therefore, the US overlooked British atrocities in Kenya. Washington was well aware of the British conducting genocide in Kenya. Just as in the Congo and in Vietnam, the US sided with the white imperial powers against the colored peoples of the colonies. Remember this was still a time when the US itself was segregated along racial lines. The US wanted to free Eastern Europe from Soviet rule but it wanted to perpetuate British, French or Belgian rule elsewhere.

In the first half of the 20th century, Vanderbilt University scholar Juan M. Floyd-Thomas observed in the *Journal of American History* that Americans thought of East Africa as “a real white man’s country.” They believed that Kenya deserved Western imperialism and white supremacy. Over centuries, the US practiced ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, enslaved African Americans and subjugated ethnic minorities. These races were deemed biologically and intellectually inferior to the white race.

As is their habit, the US mainstream media, including *The New York Times*, followed the official US narrative. They painted a picture of the African continent described as “synonymous with terror, hopelessness, and conflict.” The media represented the Mau Mau fighters as terrorists and criminals with communist connections. They failed to recognize that Kenyans were involved in a liberation movement. Just like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, they too were fighting for independence.

UN Failure and Case for Reparations

After World War II, the UN has consistently failed to stop genocide, prevent ethnic cleansing or rescue victims. It has been unable to bring the guilty to justice. The UN has failed all around the world from Cambodia to Sudan.

The UN represents the interests of powerful nations. Five of them have veto power in the Security Council. Naturally, the Peace Worldwide Organization considers the UN a failed institution, and gives it a mere 12 out of 100.

The UN has failed to deliver justice to the Kenyans too. Despite British denials and cover-ups, evidence of their atrocities is overwhelming. So, an International Court of Tribunal for Kenya (ICTK) would be a good first start. Just as Holocaust victims have been compensated, their properties restituted, Kenyans must also get compensation and restitution.

The British must acknowledge, apologize and make reparations for the genocide and atrocities they committed during colonial times. Importantly, reparation payments should go directly to victims and their descendants, not into the coffers of Kenya’s corrupt government. A sum must be set aside for education and infrastructure to compensate for the ravages of colonization.

No sum can ever wipe out the suffering of the Keynan people. However, reparations are important for three reasons. First, victims get justice. Second, poor countries and poor victims get valuable financial support. Third, they set an important precedent of imperial masters being held accountable. Germany paid compensation to Jews who suffered unspeakable tragedy during the Holocaust, This has made the country less likely to repeat the atrocities of the past. The UK must be held to account so that the British do not repeat the colonial misadventures of Kenya and India in places like Iraq and Libya.

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Morocco Make up Causes Spain Economic Loss in Algeria

Youssef Igrouane
May 26, 2023

Spain's decision to recognize Morocco's "autonomy plan" for Western Sahara has caused tensions and a trade war with Algeria. Spain is seeking to strengthen ties with Morocco while maintaining good relations with Algeria, which is a tricky balancing act.

Trade between Spain and Algeria has been seriously jeopardized since June 2022. This has occurred because Algeria suspended a 20-year-long friendship and cooperation treaty with Spain. This suspension came as a response to Spain's decision to formally recognize Morocco's "autonomy plan" for Western Sahara.

What is the Backstory of Western Sahara?

Western Sahara is a stretch of desert territory along the Atlantic coast. It borders Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. From 1884 to 1976, Spain was the colonial ruler of Western Sahara, which was then known as Spanish Sahara. During the great wave of decolonization in the second half of the 20th century, the Polisario Front—a Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement—waged guerrilla war against Spain.

Following the campaign of pressure that the UN, Morocco, and the Polisario Front launched against Spain in the late 1960s prompted Madrid to consider withdrawing from the region, given that it no longer anticipated a future in the area. Subsequently, in 1974, Spain signaled its withdrawal by announcing plans for a referendum in which the Sahrawi people could determine the future of the territory, whether to be a part of Morocco or Mauritania or to obtain their independence. Morocco and Mauritania welcomed Spain's decision. However, the UNSG adopted Resolution 3292 suspending the referendum until a formal process for this could be determined.

On October 16, 1975, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague found that while there were legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and certain tribes in Western Sahara during the time of Spanish colonization, and there were rights connecting the Mauritanian entity to the territory of Western Sahara, there was no

evidence of a territorial sovereignty link between the territory of Western Sahara and either the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity. In response to the ruling, in 1975 King Hassan II of Morocco called for a peaceful mass demonstration in the form of a march into Western Sahara. The King sought to reaffirm Morocco's claim of sovereignty over the territory and called upon the Moroccan people to participate in the march. He emphasized that the march was the only way to regain control of Western Sahara.

Western Sahara is important for Morocco not only for sovereignty reasons but also for economic ones. It is rich in rock phosphate, a valuable fertilizer that secures the world's food supply. This mineral is Morocco's third largest export and brought the country \$850 million in 2021. As a region along the Atlantic coast, Western Sahara is important for fishing, providing 75% of Morocco's catches. Clearly, this region is of paramount importance to Rabat.

What Is Going on Now with Spain, Morocco and Algeria?

Therefore, Moroccan-Spanish ties turned glacial when Spain admitted Polisario leader Brahim Ghali in April 2021 for medical treatment without officially telling Rabat. In 2022, Madrid agreed to support Rabat's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, ending a year-long diplomatic crisis.

Spain's change in policy has improved ties with Morocco after a year-long diplomatic spat. However, this move has infuriated Algeria, which imposed an economic blockade on Spain in June 2022. This resulted in significant losses estimated at around \$1 billion (€930 million) in the following seven months alone. Spanish Secretary of State for Trade Xiana Méndez Bértolo recently announced that, between June and November 2022, Spain's exports were a mere \$189.1 million (€176.2 million) to Algeria. In December 2022, Spanish

exports to Algeria amounted to \$11.81 million (€10.8 million), a fall of 84%. Spain's position as an exporter to Algeria fell from second in 2021 to ninth in 2022.

This has hurt Spanish companies and businesses exporting to Algeria, especially in Valencia and Catalonia. These regions account for over 50% of Spain's exports to Algeria. In terms of sectors, enamellers and ceramic machinery manufacturers are facing significant negative impacts. The economic pain of this blockade has led the Spanish Ministry of Trade to seek the support of the European Commission. It has come up with a financial plan to support Spanish companies suffering from the blockade. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell traveled to Algeria in March to resolve this crisis but the visit was unsuccessful.

Algeria Is Still Supplying Gas to Spain

Spain depends on Algeria for gas. Therefore, it is important for Madrid to maintain good relations with Algiers. Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune commented that "among all the Algerian statements, what matters to the Spanish state is the full guarantee of Spain's supply of Algerian gas and the strict respect of the international contracts." Algeria has assured Spain that it will continue to supply gas under any circumstances.

Spain gets much of its gas through the Medgaz pipeline from Algeria. According to Spanish reports, Madrid has recently turned to the US for gas. Many analysts speculate that Spain might be moving away from Algerian gas. Hence, Algeria decided not to escalate matters with Spain when it comes to supply of gas. Losing a lucrative export market would not be in Algerian economic interest.

Tensions between Spain and Algeria have occurred in the past but the two countries have always been able to achieve an accommodation.

This time, things are different. Spain's change of policy has touched a raw nerve and only a change in government might lead to the calming of the waters.

Algeria Strengthens Ties with Other Countries

As Spanish exports to Algeria have crashed, other countries such as Portugal and Italy have stepped in. In 2021, Portugal exports to Algeria totaled \$241 million. The main products were uncoated paper, heating machinery, and acrylic hydrocarbons. Between February 2022 and February 2023, Portugal's exports have increased by \$384.6 million. The top exports to Algeria in February 2023 were vegetables, wood pulp, paper products, plastics and plastic goods, machinery, mechanical appliances and parts.

Before the rupture in relations, Algeria preferred Spanish products. Sociedad Española Automóviles de Turismo (SEAT), a Spanish car manufacturer was active in Algeria. In 2018, SEAT expanded strategic operations in Algeria. Now, Italian car company FIAT seems to be replacing SEAT. In March 2023, six FIAT carlines were launched in Algeria. In contrast, SEAT's growth has suffered.

Italy and Algeria have good neighborly agreements. They are now deepening their strategic partnership. In January 2023, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited Algeria to launch her new Mediterranean policy in Algiers. It is well known that Italy wants to become an energy hub between Europe and the southern Mediterranean. The Russia-Ukraine War is causing an energy crisis in Europe, which is looking for alternative sources. This offers a great economic opportunity for both Italy and Algeria.

Both countries also signed agreements relating to aerospace and pharmaceutical sectors. These agreements were not only about economics but also geopolitics. Italy sees Algeria as a vital actor

in the Mediterranean region that can underpin regional stability. Algeria's neighbors are facing turmoil. Libya is going through a civil war. Al Jazeera has called Tunisia a "ticking time bomb." The unsettled situation in North Africa makes Algeria critically important not only for Italy but also the European Union.

Is Morocco a Springboard for Spain Into Africa?

Spain has a growing interest in the Moroccan market. In 2022, Spanish exports to Morocco amounted to \$12.9 billion (€11.748 billion) while Moroccan imports to Spain were \$9.4 million (€8.6 million). Morocco lies just across the Strait of Gibraltar to the south of Spain. It is Spain's closest neighbor in North Africa. Morocco is a natural trading partner where demand for Spanish goods and services is growing. Therefore, it makes sense for Spain to invest in closer relations with its southern neighbor.

Spanish President Pedro Sánchez visited Morocco in February. The two governments reached agreements on migration, tourism, trade and investment. Just as Italy is developing a strategic relationship with Algeria, Spain is betting on Morocco. Spanish companies are looking to expand in North Africa. Morocco could be a good base of operations for Spain. Given the fact that Spain's relations with Algeria have taken a hit and other European rivals are stepping in, it makes sense for Madrid to cultivate Rabat. A closer relationship with Morocco makes both economic and geopolitical sense for Spain.

[[Stephanie Verroya](#) edited this piece.]

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Morocco. Youssef reports on a wide range of topics, including politics, economics, culture and society. He is also a social activist and a spoken word poet.

The Tigray War Was Tragic, Can Peace Prevail Now?

Martin Plaut
January 09, 2023

On 28 December 2022, flights by Ethiopian Airlines resumed to the wartorn northern region of Tigray. A plane landed at Mekelle, Tigray’s regional capital. There were emotional scenes. Families who had not seen each other since the war began in November 2020 were hugging each other and crying. Social media showed passengers kissing the ground at the foot of the aircraft steps.

It was a dramatic indication that the war might be coming to an end. Two years of fighting between the Tigrayans and government forces from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, supported by regional militia have taken a terrible toll. The conflict is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of 250,000 troops. An estimated 383,000 to 600,000 civilians have died. Since it erupted the Tigray War has been the scene of the bloodiest, and one of the least reported, conflicts. Unlike Ukraine or Afghanistan, journalists have been forbidden from traveling to the front lines. So, no news has got out.

Peace in our time?

The peace deal was brokered in November 2022 in Pretoria and Nairobi. These agreements allowed for a ceasefire, aid flows and the deployment of African Union-led monitors who would oversee the re-establishment of Ethiopian government authority over Tigray.

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the party that dominates the region, promised to disarm its fighters within 30 days under the agreement. That was signed on November 2. It has still not been completed, at least in part, because the text contained the provision that this would “depend on the security situation on the ground.”

As Patrick Wight wrote, the subsequent Nairobi agreement “states that disarmament of the Tigray Defence Forces’s heavy weapons will be “done concurrently with the withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF (Ethiopian National Defence Forces) from the region.” What a “concurrent” disarmament of TDF and withdrawal of Eritrean troops looks like in practice is anyone’s guess. It would be positive if this means the alarmingly rapid disarmament provisions agreed to in Pretoria will be delayed.

It has been the Eritreans that have been holding up progress. At the end of December there were eyewitness reports of Eritrean forces leaving Tigrayan towns. “Eritrean soldiers, who fought in support of Ethiopia's federal government during its two-year civil war in the northern Tigray region, are pulling out of two major towns and heading toward the border, witnesses and an Ethiopian official,” Reuters reported.

Others are less certain. Tigrayan refugees fear that the Eritreans remain in parts of the region. Tigrayans have posted photographs of Eritreans in Tigrayan cities on Twitter, including Adwa.

Meanwhile, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has been claiming “victory” for his forces over the Tigrayans. “My pride has no bounds”, he said in his New Year message. But the Eritrean leader is taking no chances. He is reported to be training dissident Ethiopians in case his relationship with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed goes sour.

Afwerki previously used foreign troops to threaten neighboring leaders with the use of force. In 2011, the United Nations reported that Eritrea was behind a planned “massive” attack on an African Union summit in Addis Ababa, using Ethiopian rebels. It would be wrong to assume that a similar attack is now on the cards, but training dissidents could be a tactic to maintain pressure on Ahmed.

Maintaining tension and instability across the Horn of Africa has been a tactic the Eritrean leader has used consistently since capturing Asmara, the Eritrean capital, in 1991. Since then, Afwerki has led his country into no fewer than eight different conflicts – from Somalia to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

How will Europe and the US respond?

US President Joe Biden has been assiduous in attempting to end the fighting in Tigray. Biden appointed special envoys to the Horn of Africa as soon as he came to office. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken went out of his way to meet Ahmed during the US-Africa summit in December. He raised the question of peace with Ahmed as well as the ending of the Eritrean troop presence in Tigray. Some wags have suggested that the peace agreements signed in Pretoria and Nairobi were so closely linked to Washington’s efforts they should be termed “US solutions to African problems” – clearly, a play on the phrase “African solutions to African problems.”

The key question now is whether sufficient progress has been made to lift the American and European sanctions against Ethiopia. They were introduced to try to end the war. In the words of Jeffrey Feltman, the former US special envoy to the Horn: “The United States and the European Union hoped that, combined with emergency humanitarian assistance, punitive measures such as the threat of sanctions and the withholding of development aid would halt the atrocities and move the parties from the battlefield to the negotiating table.” While the two parties did come to the negotiating table, it is unclear if the peace in Tigray is sustainable.

After two years of war, Ethiopia's economy is said to be on the verge of collapse. The country needs nearly \$20bn for its reconstruction. The EU Foreign Affairs Council is due to meet Brussels on January 23 and one of the issues on their agenda is the possible unfreezing of hundreds of millions of euros pledged in aid to Addis Ababa. Since 2021, the EU froze nearly \$210m in aid to Ethiopia, following the draconian blockade Addis Ababa imposed on the Tigray region. The money is badly needed and it is not yet clear what strings the Europeans may attach to the lifting of sanctions.

For Eritrea, the picture is clearer: Washington has no time for Afwerki and is likely to keep the president under pressure. Afwerki is already so isolated that it is unlikely that he cares greatly about western attitudes. He prefers to rely on his Arab neighbors, China and possibly Russia for international support. Eritrea will keep playing its game of promoting Ethiopian rebels to retain relevance in the region. This is bad news for Ethiopia and prospects of peace.

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Sudan Is on the Brink of a New Catastrophe

Martin Plaut
December 23, 2023

Rebels have taken over Sudan's second-largest city. The latest fighting is exacerbating a terrible humanitarian crisis and 6.7 million have fled their homes. Foreign actors are backing their respective horses in this civil war, which has major implications for the entire region.

On Tuesday, December 19, Sudan's second largest city, Wad Madani, fell to one of the most brutal armed groups worldwide. This made few headlines in a world obsessed with the fighting in Gaza.

The Sudanese war — which erupted in April this year — has pitted the Sudanese Armed Forces against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). On the surface, it was no more than a quarrel between two generals. However, behind the military men are a range of outside forces. While the army has been the traditional bastion of the state, the RSF grew out of the notorious Janjaweed, a notorious

Sudanese Arab militia charged with genocide for its activities in Sudan's western region of Darfur.

As Kate Ferguson of Protection Approaches wrote:

“The RSF is the Janjaweed rebranded, the “devils on horseback” used by the Sudanese government from 2003 to implement widespread and systematic crimes against non-Arab communities across Darfur. The RSF was, and still is, commanded by Gen Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo.”

The war is a tragedy for the Sudanese people. It has forced an estimated 6.7 million people to flee from their homes. According to aid agencies, this is “the largest displacement crisis globally.” Although apparently no more than a regional issue, Sudan's conflict has the potential to reshape the politics of the region, with implications for the entire Middle East.

That reshaping might come later. At the moment, the humanitarian crisis is dire and can be grasped from two maps. The first map, by the International Organisation for Migration, shows where the population has fled.

The second map, by the Famine Early Warning System, shows just how close many Sudanese are to famine, having been forced off their lands. Over half the population — 25 million people (including 13 million children) — urgently need humanitarian assistance.

The fall of Wad Madani after three days of fighting left the RSF with a precious resource. Not only did it capture a city that was home to the army's first infantry division, the RSF now holds the urban area to which most aid agencies decamped after the fighting erupted in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. Now, the rebel RSF holds most of Khartoum and large parts of Darfur, while the Sudanese army, under General Abdel Fattah al-

Burhan, has had to decamp to the relative safety of Port Sudan.

Chatham House analysts neatly summed up the situation: “An effective partition has emerged in Sudan, with the army controlling the east and northeast and the RSF controlling much of the capital and west of the country.”

International forces fueling the conflict

The African Union (AU) and its regional body — the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) — have made little headway in attempting to end the fighting. South Sudan, Djibouti and Ethiopia are attempting to appoint a special envoy, but even if they manage to select an appropriate mediator, it is hard to see how this envoy will make progress. The much vaunted African Standby Force, on which the AU and the international community have spent vast sums of money, is yet to be deployed. Instead, the only viable peace talks have taken place in Jeddah, which indicates that the Arab world, not the AU, is playing a more significant role in Sudan.

The fighting between the Sudanese army and the RSF is backed by external supporters. Burhan and the army look north for support. Historically, most Sudanese have looked to Egypt for support. Burhan was trained in Egypt and is a regular guest of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has just won a third term in office. The Sudanese general can also rely on the Saudis for some backing. Also, the US gives Burhan and the army lukewarm support.

The reason US support is lukewarm is simple. President Joe Biden is bogged down by the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza. With his reelection bid kicking off, Biden has little time to concentrate on Sudan. This apparent indifference is a mistake. Alex de Waal argues that benign neglect does not serve Washington’s interests. The Sudanese crisis will only end when the US engages more robustly.

Note that Burhan and the army have a poor support base. The RSF is much better resourced. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, generally referred to mononymously as Hemedti, leads the RSF. He is a former Janjaweed leader who was the deputy head of the Transitional Military Council following the 2019 Sudanese coup d’état. Hemedti has backers and the RSF has more money, men and motivation than the army.

Hemedti has links across the border in Chad, which he has exploited to the full. In fact, the RSF, is a revamped version of the Janjaweed and has terrorized Sudan. Its Arab fighters have attacked and killed African populations in Darfur.

Hemedti has also taken control of the resources of the region in general, and its gold mines in particular. He was encouraged and supported by Russia’s Wagner Group, which has taken a share of the spoils in return for supplying weapons to the RSF. This supply was tracked and traced by CNN. There is now clear evidence that the Wagner Group has been providing the RSF with missiles. Sudanese gold, flown out of Libya and on to the Russian base at Latakia paid for the weapons. This gold has not only funded Wagner, but also President Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine.

Apart from Russia’s Wagner Group, the UAE is the RSF’s other major backer. The Sudanese army says it has “information from intelligence, military intelligence, and the diplomatic circuit that the UAE sends planes to support the Janjaweed.” The UAE has established hospitals in Chad to provide treatment for refugees fleeing from the fighting. Although the UAE denies it, there is a widespread belief that the aid is little more than a front for weapons supplies for the RSF.

Uganda is seen as an alternative route for the UAE’s support for Hemedti’s operations. Reportedly, when a plane landed at Uganda’s main airport Entebbe in June this year, its flight

documents said it was carrying humanitarian aid sent by the UAE for Sudanese refugees. Instead, “Ugandan officials said they found dozens of green plastic crates in the plane’s cargo hold filled with ammunition, assault rifles and other small arms.”

Little surprise then that the Sudanese army declared 15 members of the UAE embassy persona non grata on December 11. But outgunned and with limited diplomatic support, Burhan’s position appears to be weakening. At this moment there seems little chance of his allies providing the Sudanese army with the backing they require to hold off the Hemedti-led RSF. If Hemedti was to succeed in his campaign to oust the Sudanese military (and he is still some way from that objective) it would be a huge boost for his backers. The UAE would have extended its influence deep into Africa. The Wagner Group would have enhanced its operations across a vast swathe the Sahel. Hemedti’s victory would strengthen Putin’s influence and finances. It would also be a major blow to the US and the West. Already the Wagner Group has effectively chased the French out of Mali. Needless to say, a great deal is riding on the outcome of the Sudanese civil war. The future not only of a country but also of an entire region is at stake.

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EAST ASIA

Sending Blinken to China Won’t Interrupt the Slide Toward War

William H. Overholt
July 09, 2023

The last few US presidents have undone the work of decades with their failure to understand China. Mechanisms of dialogue have fallen into disuse while experts on China have been pushed out of the administration. If the US doesn’t correct its course soon, the escalating war of words and sanctions can spiral out of control into a deadly global conflict.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s trip to Beijing is a ripple on the tide of President Joe Biden’s decisions not to promote dialogue or expert understanding. It has not interrupted the push toward war.

Breakdown of the US’s ability to talk to and think about China

Under Presidents George W Bush, Barack Obama and, partly, Donald Trump, the US had institutionalized large-scale communications with China, especially through the strategic economic dialogue (Bush), strategic and economic dialogue (Obama), and comprehensive economic dialogue (Trump). Dozens of senior officials regularly met. Those dialogues could not resolve the great issues like Taiwan or intellectual property, but officials came to understand each other and render differences manageable.

When Donald Trump became President, Xi Jinping was determined to keep communications open and relations constructive. Chinese scholars say the lavish welcome Trump was given was historically exceptional.

As with other relationships, Trump responded initially with admiration: “President Xi is a brilliant man. If you went all over Hollywood to look for somebody to play the role of President Xi, you couldn’t find it. There’s nobody like that. The look, the brain, the whole thing.” Likewise, at Davos in 2020: “Our relationship with China has now probably never, ever been better ... He’s for China, I’m for the US but, other than that, we love each other.” But Trump’s mood changed and the dialogue lapsed. Biden chose to permanently abandon institutionalized dialogue permanently. Blinken’s trip marginally walks back that decision and marginally walks back the coldness Blinken deliberately instilled at his initial meeting with the Chinese in Anchorage.

US Presidents traditionally ensure the presence of some cabinet-level officials with expertise and experience on the most vital national security issue of the time, once the Soviet Union and now China. No Cold War president would have been without the top-level expertise brought to the task by a Kissinger, Brzezinski or Scowcroft.

George W. Bush was a foreign policy failure in many respects but, guided by Hank Paulsen in the Treasury and brilliant CIA China expert Dennis Wilder in the National Security Council (NSC), he balanced his strong support for Taiwan’s security with strong support for the 1970s peace agreements and ended up admired by both Taipei and Beijing.

Obama ended the tradition of having cabinet-level China expertise. Trump followed suit. Biden has been exceptionally striking in declaring that China is America’s ultimate foreign policy threat

but hiring no top-level expertise on China. His Secretary of State, National Security Advisor and CIA Director spent their careers on the Middle East and Europe; his Secretary of Defense on the Middle East. Even Biden’s ambassador to China is a career Middle East and Europe official. His NSC Asia czar has no direct experience with China and became famous for demanding disengagement based on the false assertion that US engagement with China presumed engagement would democratize China.

Some of these officials, like CIA Director William J Burns, are outstanding and have deployed their European expertise to resist Russian aggression. Regarding China, though, it is another story. Imagine the CEO of a giant food company announcing that cereals constitute the greatest opportunity and the greatest competitive threat, then announcing that the heads of the Wheaties division, the Cheerios division, the oatmeal division and all others would be hamburger experts.

Below the leadership level, things are even worse. Intelligence and Defense Department officials say that it has become so difficult for anyone with China expertise and experience to get security clearance that the US has partially blinded itself. Scholars and business executives who bridge the two countries are frightened, and vast numbers are considering departure to China. Some visiting Chinese professors, including two of the most pro-American international relations scholars and one invited personally by Jimmy Carter, have been treated very badly by US immigration authorities.

In short, Biden has continued and worsened the Trump disjunction between strategic imperatives and leadership skills, the Trump contempt for expertise and the Trump (late, partial, possibly temporary) dismissal of institutionalized dialogue. No weekend trip can ameliorate these fundamental realities.

The US fumes against China because it no longer understands it

Magnifying the consequences is a vital difference between Trump and Biden. Trump always sought the deal, albeit a misconceived deal: The trade war was about trade disparities, and if Beijing took specific actions, the trade war would proportionately ease. Biden proposes no deal, just escalated sanctions.

Given the overwhelming evidence that steel and aluminum tariffs hurt the US more than China, raise prices and cost many tens of thousands of US jobs, most economists assumed that the President whose slogan is “a foreign policy for the middle class” would lift them. But, no: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai says they are necessary to maintain “leverage” over China. There is of course no leverage from policies that damage America more than China.

The Biden administration has totally repudiated the peace compromise so successfully negotiated by Kissinger and Brzezinski.

Lacking expertise, Washington frequently seems clueless about how the world views its China policies. For instance, Blinken and Biden often broadcast versions of Biden’s June 9 statement that China’s Belt and Road Initiative is a “debt and confiscation program.” Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo characterized Belt & Road similarly. Developing world leaders, who frequently contrast China’s development offers with Washington’s lectures or its omnipresent Special Forces teams, know that is false. Every China specialist knows the study of 1100 Chinese loans that found there was not a single instance of China using debt problems to seize collateral.

Does the US President have no idea what he is talking about, or is he systematically spreading disinformation? Either way, developing countries

can dismiss much of US policy. For instance, many give credence to the argument that the problem in both Europe and Asia is US efforts to encircle and destabilize its adversaries. Hence, all of Latin America, Africa and the Middle East align with China regarding US sanctions on Russia.

The big problem is Taiwan. Henry Kissinger warns that we are sliding toward war over Taiwan. The Biden administration has totally repudiated the peace compromise so successfully negotiated by Kissinger and Brzezinski. Washington promised to abstain from official relations or an alliance with Taiwan. But President Biden has promised four times to defend Taiwan; that is an alliance.

Speaker Pelosi was emphatic that her August trip to Taipei was an “official” trip; immediately after her meeting with President Tsai, the presidential spokeswoman went on island-wide TV and proclaimed, “We are a sovereign and independent country.”

Responding to lesser provocations, George W Bush, his secretary of state, and his deputy secretary of state, no panda-hugging liberals, distanced the US and warned Taipei to stop. Instead, Secretary Blinken continues to welcome such official relations and tell the Chinese not to “overreact.”

The angry popular reaction inside China to Xi’s failure to respond decisively to such US initiatives is the one risk that could topple Xi Jinping from power. Concern about that is the one thing that could trigger him to launch a direct attack on Taiwan.

Biden has no senior advisor who understands such things. Blinken and Sullivan act on how they believe theoretically China should react, not on knowledge of actual Chinese politics.

If war comes, it will not be the limited conflict of US war games. China will hit Okinawa immediately or lose. The US will hit mainland Chinese bases immediately or lose. China will respond against the US.

The common denominator of Trump's MAGA policies, Biden's MAGA-plus policies, and Representative Mike Gallagher's ultra-MAGA policies is a repudiation of the promises and norms the US accepted when Nixon, Carter, Mao and Deng compromised to eliminate what had been a terrible risk of conflict over Taiwan.

The cover for that repudiation is an endless repetition of the assertion that China is planning an invasion of Taiwan, an assertion for which the US intelligence community says there is no evidence.

The fact of the matter is that Washington's hard left and the hard right always despised compromise. The pragmatic center has evaporated, for domestic reasons, and the self-righteous ideologues rule Congress. No quick visit, no fog of diplomatic niceties will arrest the resultant reversion to the pre-1972 risk of war.

(China took an equally dangerous turn, also for domestic reasons. Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Canadian hostages, economic war on Australia, and much else are serious issues. But this article is about the US; previous US administrations handled middle-sized issues without sliding toward war.)

Biden was elected by the pragmatic center, but he has no China team, no China policy, no strategic vision. He should be wary of taking even a small risk that history will remember him for the first inadvertent world war of choice. Weekend trips for marginal changes of tone do not address the problem.

[[Asia Times](#) first published this piece.]

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Will Democracy Survive the Rise of China?

Reza Parchizadeh
May 17, 2023

The US is becoming increasingly isolationist as it gradually withdraws from conflicts around the world. With the withdrawal of the US and decline of democratic ideals, China is swooping in to secure the role of global hegemon.

These days, China is trying to play the role of the global peacemaker. However, China's terrible record of human rights and democracy since the 1949 Communist Revolution forebodes the emergence of this leviathan on the world stage.

With Beijing acting more assertively as an international actor and challenging the US-centered world order, questions arise as to what might happen if China becomes the global hegemon and whether democracy will survive worldwide when that happens.

Some experts refer to the 21st century as the “Chinese Century,” because Beijing has shown the material potential, strategic patience and determination to become a hegemon. China has subtleties that its closest allies, namely Iran and Russia, lack. Without firing a shot or starting a war so far, China has projected its power on the world stage through diplomacy, economy and technology, albeit with a lot of political arm-twisting, military muscle, infiltration and espionage behind that conventional façade.

More recently, China has raised its profile by grafting itself into peacemaking efforts within several longstanding conflicts across the globe. Beijing has sponsored a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, and is doing a great deal to resolve the conflict between Riyadh and Tehran over the civil war in Yemen. China’s successes in peacemaking deal a blow to the prestige of the US and the United Nations (UN), whose joint efforts to put an end to the decade-long bloody conflict have proved fruitless so far.

In the absence of a strong American presence in the region, more neutral or Western-friendly nations are likely to lean towards China for security. Since the stability of the Middle East is aligned with the newfound interests of Beijing, we can expect that the China-centered emerging order will calm the turbulent waters in the Arab-Iranian theater of conflict for a while, of course with the obvious exclusion of Israel.

China’s Role in the Russia-Ukraine War

After the end of World War II, the Middle East was primarily an American sphere of influence. However, since the end of the Cold War, the US has been gradually withdrawing from the region. For many in Washington, the Middle East simply does not have the strategic value that it did during the Cold War. That’s why the US has been trying to pivot to Asia to counter the rise of China in the

Far East. Ironically, Beijing looks eager to fill the “vacuum of superpower” in the Middle East.

China has also been trying to broker a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia. So far, Beijing has only been paying lip service to peace. For example, while claiming to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow, China has reportedly been providing Moscow with arms, drones, and economic aid. But if it perceives that playing the role of the peacemaker in the European theater of war will further raise its global profile, China might act accordingly. Especially if the West backs off from the Russia-Ukraine war, as evidence suggests, China’s role as a global peacemaker could further grow.

The peace that Beijing establishes between Russia and Ukraine will naturally be in Moscow’s favor, but it might not be so unfair as to kill any incentive for Kyiv to come to the table. After all, Russian President Vladimir Putin is now relying heavily on Chinese President Xi Jinping. Therefore, Beijing can demand concessions for Ukraine that the Kremlin cannot ignore. It should be noted that China’s intentions here go far beyond appeasing Russia, its long-time ally. Beijing is keen on presenting itself as a fair and reasonable superpower that the West and the rest of the world can trust as the new sheriff in town.

As for a head-on confrontation with America, China is currently trying to avoid that, for the US is the world’s leading military and economic power and still holds a significant edge over China. Currently, the US and China are engaged in a new Cold War, while discussions over Taiwan are also intensifying between the two global superpowers. But, this will not necessarily lead to a military conflict. However, as America’s global engagement continues to dwindle, things might take a different turn in the future.

The Erosion of Democracy

Judging by what we see today, democracy is at risk of deteriorating worldwide. In today's world, authoritarian regimes are willing to invest heavily in their ideological and material war on democracy. On the other hand, democratic countries generally refrain from standing up for their values, and instead resort to the myopic and short-term logic of "cost-benefit" to avoid an imminent conflict. As a result, democratic countries are leaving much less of an assertive mark on global events. If this continues, democracy is bound to decline.

So far, China has restrained itself from explicitly interfering in the internal affairs of the countries under its influence. However, there is no guarantee that China will stick to that policy once it has achieved global hegemony. Indeed, it will likely try to cast its satellite states in the same mold. This can already be seen in Iran, which is already aligned with China. But Beijing will likely try to do the same in many South Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and South American countries as well.

The rise of China and its allies on the world stage is also partly predicated on some of the internal workings of the West. Far-right, populist politics have already contributed to the erosion of democracy in the West. An increase in right-wing, isolationist tendencies in the US and the EU is likely to lead to a power vacuum around the globe that China will race to fill.

Right-wing politicians in the West tend to adopt a conciliatory approach to dictators around the world. This is due to their strong bias in favor of local and national concerns over global matters. As a result, they tend to de-prioritize human rights and democracy elsewhere. As such, the West, both in its conservative and progressive manifestations, is becoming less interventionist and more isolationist with each passing day.

The prospect of an inexorable onslaught of authoritarianism against an entrenched and confused West does not bode well for the future of democracy worldwide. However, the West cannot continue on this regressive trajectory forever. When it becomes apparent that the existential threat of authoritarianism is inescapable, a paradigm shift is likely to occur. This will lead to a recalibration of forces towards an all-out confrontation with China and its allies.

There is also a growing demand for democracy among the oppressed people living under the yoke of despotic regimes. Many people in China, Russia and Iran are now seeking freedom and democracy. The same is true for people living under Chinese and Russian influence in places such as Hong Kong, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Central Asia. The West must organize all-out efforts to counter despots. When these efforts coalesce with the resistance and inevitable revolt of the oppressed against their oppressors, then and only then will it be possible for liberalism and democracy to emerge victorious worldwide.

[[Hannah Gage](#) edited this piece.]

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What You Need to Know About Taiwan and Semiconductors

Atul Singh
February 15, 2023

Taiwan has emerged as the world's semiconductor superpower. Global supply chains rely on Taiwanese industry. However, massive investments by rival producing nations and rising tensions with China threaten its dominance.

In 2020, COVID hit the global economy like a ton of bricks. Lockdowns induced a global slowdown and disrupted supply chains. Not only toilet paper but also semiconductors were in short supply.

A 2021 commentary by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) tells us that the US is the leader in research and development. Thanks to its top-class universities, fantastic talent pool, vast capital, innovative culture and extraordinary ecosystem, the US dominates “electronic design automation (EDA), core intellectual property (IP), chip design, and advanced manufacturing equipment.”

When it comes to manufacturing, which is referred to as fabrication in the industry, East Asia is top dog. Gone are the days of Fairchild when a group of eight brilliant engineers could walk off to launch the modern semiconductor industry in Silicon Valley. Now, manufacturing semiconductors needs massive capital investments. New foundries can “cost between \$10-\$20 billion and can take three to five years to build.”

To run such a capital-intensive industry, government backing helps. So does robust

infrastructure and a skilled workforce. BCG rightly tells us that East Asia has all these ingredients to make its semiconductor industry thrive. China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan have followed strong industrial policies, backing the semiconductor industry as a national priority. The US, where this industry began, now makes a mere 12% of the world's semiconductors.

Taiwan's Extraordinary Success in Semiconductors

In assembly, packaging and testing, China leads because of its cost advantage. Its neighbors make more advanced stuff. As per BCG, “all of the world's most advanced semiconductor manufacturing capacity—in nodes below 10 nanometers—is currently located in South Korea (8%) and Taiwan (92%).” According to some, Taiwan is the Mecca of the semiconductor industry.

The biggest success story in the country is Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC). It is the largest contract chipmaker in the world. In 2021, Kathrin Hille of The Financial Times reported about a TSMC plant that would make 3 nanometer semiconductor chips, which would be 70% faster and more power efficient than the most advanced in production at the time. TSMC has a history of making big investments that take a while to generate returns. In 2021, it budgeted \$25-28 billion for capital investment. Competitors in the US have struggled to keep up because Wall Street forces them to focus on quarterly earnings and, until the 2022 CHIPS Act, the government offered few goodies.

TSMC has also invested wisely. It has plowed money into developing cutting-edge technology. The company has constructed giant fabrication plants, known as “fabs.” Hille's 2021 reportage described a fab that measured 160,000 square meters, the equivalent of 22 football (soccer)

fields. TSMC has not only focused on economy of scale but also efficiency of operations. The company achieves 95% yield in its factories. This means that 19 out of the 20 chips it makes are perfect.

The success of TSMC and other Taiwanese semiconductor companies owes a great deal to the national culture. Taiwan's rigorous education system churns out high-quality electrical engineers and excellent technicians. The proverbial East Asian work ethic also helps. Employees work extraordinarily hard to maintain high production standards.

So far, location has helped too. Since Deng Xiaoping's 1978 economic reforms, China has grown spectacularly. After joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, the Middle Kingdom has become the factory of the world. It is the largest manufacturer of electronics. As China's next door neighbor, Taiwan's location made the country an ideal location for semiconductor manufacturing and a strategic hub for the industry.

Geopolitical Typhoons Threaten Taiwan

Taiwan's location and success are both a blessing and a curse. As mentioned above, location played a part in Taiwanese success. It has played a part in making the country integral to the semiconductor global supply chain. This global reliance on Taiwan might compel the US to support this breakaway island more robustly against China. Yet this threat comes precisely because Taiwan is next door to China and the legacy of a civil war that began in the 1930s divides the two.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged triumphant. Its rival, the Kuomintang (KMT), fled Mainland China and took refuge in Taiwan, which they named as the Republic of China (ROC). The CCP-led People's Republic of China (PRC) believes in the One-China principle

and seeks eventual "unification" with ROC. In Beijing's eyes, Taiwan is a renegade province that must return to the fold just as Hong Kong.

Increasingly, the Taiwanese do not find reunification a palatable idea. The 1992 Consensus that kept tempers under control is now fraying. This agreement allowed the CCP and KMT to kick into the long grass the tricky question of which of their two governments was the legitimate, exclusive representative of "China." Instead, both of them focused on more immediate practical matters.

Unlike China, Taiwan is a rambunctious democracy of 23 million people. In 2016, President Tsai Ing-wen, led her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to victory. She has refused to endorse the 1992 Consensus. This has caused great offense to President Xi Jinping who has brought back a Mao-style personality cult to China. Under him, China has become ultranationalist and hyper-aggressive. In recent years, Beijing's "wolf warrior" diplomacy has unleashed a torrent of online abuse, misinformation and disinformation. The temperature in the Taiwan Strait has been rising.

Top analysts in the US have been worrying about the superpower's reliance on Taiwan. They argue this semiconductor superpower is a single point of failure. Therefore, the US must develop its semiconductor industry again. President Joe Biden and the Congress have taken note. As referred to earlier, the CHIPS Act was enacted last year. In the words of the White House, this legislation will "lower costs, create jobs, strengthen supply chains, and counter China."

It is not only the US that is spending tens of billions of dollars on semiconductor production. The EU is also getting into the act. Japan and South Korea are investing as well. The 800-pound gorilla in the room is China. Beijing is putting in

hundreds of billions of dollars to move up the semiconductor industry value chain—make complex high-value chips, not just simpler low-value ones. Such massive investments by competitor nations could threaten Taiwan’s current top dog status in the semiconductor industry.

There is another wrinkle for Taiwanese industry. The US has instituted a series of measures to choke off China’s access to cutting-edge semiconductor chips, technology and manufacturing equipment. Historians have drawn parallels between this measure to the US 1939-41 sanctions on Japan. As per Niall Ferguson, these “sanctions so boxed in the imperial government that in the end there seemed no better option than to gamble on surprise attack.” Cutting off China from semiconductor capability “is a lot like cutting Japan off from oil in 1941.” Beijing’s incentives to attack its island neighbor for its semiconductor fab plants have just increased and so have Taiwan’s headaches.

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Japan's New LDP Scandal Is Unlikely to Change Much

Atul Singh
December 27, 2023

A number of bigshots have resigned after a party-funding scandal. Unlike previous scandals, the prime minister is not threatened because potential challengers within the party lack support and the opposition still stands discredited. Barring minor reforms, the status quo will persist.

Japan is a democracy, but voters tend to vote for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) almost all the time. As observers wryly remark, there is little liberal or democratic about this party. The LDP is a political machine dispensing patronage with jostling factions.

A day after Christmas, prosecutors questioned the LDP’s former policy chief, Koichi Hagiuda. They have questioned four other top officials, who have all resigned. They are all loyalists of Shinzo Abe, the late Japanese prime minister who was in power from 2006 to 2007 and then again from 2012 to 2020. Abe was Japan’s longest-serving prime minister and was extremely powerful.

A very Japanese-style scandal

It turns out that the LDP made hay when Abe’s sun shone bright. The Abe faction, still the largest in the LDP, “systematically underreported about ¥500 million in ticket sales for fundraising events” over five years. This amounts to \$3.51 million, which is mere piffle by Nigerian or Pakistani standards. However, Japan is a country that prizes

probity, and this financial scandal is turning out to be a big deal.

The Abe faction allegedly gave the excess amount to lawmakers who sold more than their allotted quota of tickets. Kickbacks from fundraising events are not illegal, but failing to report these payments violates the law. That is why so many bigshots are in hot water.

Many in Japan are calling for reform. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has promised “to do everything necessary to regain trust” for the LDP. He will set up a new party body. This will discuss reforms to the political funds law, cashless payments for fundraising party ticket sales and auditing of such fundraising events.

Despite his promises, Kishida is in trouble. Public anger is running high and his approval ratings have fallen to 17%. Analysts are calling this scandal a “once in a generation” political crisis. Yet it is important to remember that the LDP has been through many scandals before. The party has been in power almost all the time since 1955.

As a well-oiled political machine, the LDP needs off-the-books slush funds. Its leaders used these kickbacks to take care of their buddies in their political fiefdoms. This elaborate patronage machine is how the Japanese system works. In some ways, it is no different to the US or India. In both democracies, politicians have to watch out for the interests of their donors and reward loyalists who work on their campaigns. Yet money in politics evokes a whiff of disgust and, in the case of Japan, has led to outrage.

Prosecutors are probing not only the Abe faction but also the Nikai one. They are also investigating the prime minister’s faction, too. Kishida has been in power since October 2021, but scandals have dogged him since. This includes the LDP’s links to

the controversial Unification Church and Kishida’s son’s use of the prime ministerial residence for a house party.

As pointed out earlier, these scandals are minuscule in comparison to most other countries. However, they have already caused heads to roll because they have come at a time of rising discontent.

Times are tough and people are hurting

Like many other first-world countries, Japan is experiencing a cost-of-living crisis. In January, Japan's inflation rate jumped to a fresh 41-year high. Rent, food, fuel and almost everything cost more. Salaries have not risen accordingly. Increased military spending to counter China portends tax increases. A new invoice system is likely to lead to higher taxes for freelancers and self-employed people. Tellingly, the Japanese chose “tax” as the kanji character of the year. The last time they did so was in 2014 when the consumption (sales) tax rose from 5% to 8%.

Japan has long been known for being frightfully expensive. In part, this explains the low birth rate. In addition to many other reasons, young couples find high education costs daunting. Coming during a cost-of-living crisis, the LDP scandal has angered many Japanese who find politicians increasingly removed from their day-to-day realities.

In the past, scandals have damaged prime ministers. In 1974, Kakuei Tanaka resigned as prime minister and was arrested two years later for taking bribes from Lockheed. In 1989, Noboru Takeshita lost his premiership after allegations of insider trading and a succession of prime ministers followed. Thanks to this instability, “the LDP lost its Diet [parliament] majority to a coalition of opposition parties, ending its 38-year rule.” In 2010, the Democratic Party of Japan was in power,

and it turned out that its officials had underreported fundraising proceeds. As a result, Yukio Hatoyama had to resign from the prime ministership.

This time, things might be different. For now, Kishida has little to fear. The LDP leadership contest is only due in September 2024. Taro Kono and Shigeru Ishiba are popular with the public but lack support within the party. Kishida has reshuffled his cabinet twice, and the scandal weakens the Abe faction, strengthening the prime minister's hand.

Kishida is also secure in the knowledge that national elections are only due in October 2025. The opposition Democratic Party of Japan still stands discredited. It was in power from 2009 to 2012, a time when the economy tanked and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant suffered a meltdown.

Given the lack of alternatives and entrenched interest groups, the status quo will continue. Kishida might introduce more stringent reporting measures on party fundraising, but he does not command enough support within the LDP to push through any fundamental reform.

No wonder young voters increasingly shun politics. Only 34% of 18- and 19-year-olds voted in 2022. This low turnout is not healthy for Japanese democracy, and the current scandal might increase political apathy further.

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EUROPE

The Tremendous Legacy of the Late Jacques Delors

Nathalie Barthes
December 30, 2023

On December 27, Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission (1985–1995) passed away. He was the architect of the European single market and of the unity the EU now enjoys. With nationalism rising and European elections on the horizon, Europeans are challenged to carry on his legacy.

On December 27, Jacques Delors passed away at the age of 98. He served as president of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995. With his death, a certain idea of the left and of European integration is in danger of disappearing.

For many French people, Jacques Delors will remain above all the great architect of the European Union, the leader who was at the origin of the Euro and the European Single Market.

They also remember the politician, François Mitterrand's economy minister, whose humility and modern conception of socialism led him to give up the race for the presidential election in 1995. "Either I lied to the country or I lied to the Socialists," he explained, pointing to the gap between his project of reconciling solidarity a market economy and the incantatory, quasi-

revolutionary discourse of the French Socialist Party.

His daughter, Martine Aubry, tried to take up the torch 17 years later, without success.

Delors' realistic vision of socialism

For a generation of European activists who defined themselves as “left-wing,” Jacques Delors was above all one of the architects of European social democracy and of the “second French left” alongside Michel Rocard.

Rooted in Christian trade unionism but also in the legacy of Hannah Arendt and the personalism of Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Delors' socialist thought was marked by a certain conception of reform, social justice and the rejection of ideological posturing. He sought a third way between economic liberalism and totalitarian communism.

The social democracy of this great politician is above all that of dialogue and the social contract between employers and employees' representatives. He combined budgetary rigor with aid to the most deprived. He believed that the best weapon against unemployment was lifelong learning. At both the national and European levels, he advocated negotiation between divergent interests and social contract rather than the myth of a grand soir, or revolution, that would overthrow all inequalities overnight.

What remains of this realist left? In today's France, not much. During the last presidential election, in 2022, its natural candidate, Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris, former advisor to Martine Aubry, barely reached 2% while the radical left embodied by Jean-Luc Mélenchon galloped into 20.3%.

Some see the current French president, Emmanuel Macron, as Delors' heir. Admittedly, the current occupant of the Elysée seeks to make the European Union a real power, but his mantra of following left- and right-inspired policy proposals “at the same time” does not find its source in the vision of a social market economy based on a culture of consensus. Macron's "at the same time" is above all a tactical pragmatism that seeks to occupy the center-right.

Delors' legacy of European integration

What remains of Jacques Delors' vision at the European level?

The very glue that holds the European Union together today is Delors' legacy. As president of the European Commission, Delors created the founding elements of the cohesion of the European Union as it is today. Alongside François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl, his influence was decisive in the adoption of the 1987 Single European Act, which created the European single market, and then with the Maastricht Treaty, which set the eventual adoption of the single currency in motion. Indeed, it was at the European level that Delors was able to put his mantra into practice: “Competition that stimulates, cooperation that strengthens, solidarity that unites.”

In terms of solidarity, Delors was at the origin of the Cohesion Fund, which supports the enlargement of the EU by subsidizing less developed new entrants. He also championed the Erasmus university exchange program and the Fund to Assist the Most Deprived. These concrete achievements have proven wrong the detractors who claimed that the EU would be nothing more than a large liberal market whose policies would run counter to the priorities of European citizens.

Today's EU remains an alliance between market efficiency and solidarity. It has shown this during

the COVID-19 crisis with its major recovery plan and in the face of the climate emergency with its Green Deal. The recent adoption of a new pact on asylum and immigration is also a good example of consensus among divergent visions of welcoming foreigners on European soil. But this European unity is only built in response to crises.

Nationalism and the far right are now threatening the general European interest and its fragile unity. On the eve of the European elections in June 2024, the generation of activists for the European cause is facing this challenge: to keep Delors' humanist legacy alive and renew it, to innovate and to build a more inspiring idea of Europe for future generations.

Renewing this heritage means giving job prospects and social well-being to the working classes tempted by extremes and populist votes. It is only in a new social contract, built sector by sector around a reindustrialization that takes social rights and the environment into account, that this European cohesion can last. This profound economic transformation, along with a new, more assertive European diplomacy based on co-development, can constitute this necessary renewed European social contract dear to Jacques Delors. It is still possible to take this path.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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A Full View of Britain and Ireland a Century Ago

John Bruton
March 03, 2023

Vernon Bogdanor has written a history of Britain before World War I that is pertinent not only to England, Scotland and Wales but also Ireland. Many of the problems we sense as being unique to our era were around more than a century ago. We need to understand the past to make sense of the present and work for a better future.

A century ago, events in Britain influenced Ireland far more than they do today. The destinies of the two countries were intertwined. Unlike today, understanding British politics was fundamental to making sense of Irish politics. Therefore, Vernon Bogdanor's *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain* is most interesting, especially from an Irish point of view.

The subtitle of Bogdanor's book is "Politics and Power Before the First World War," and it is an account of the politics of the British Isles between 1890 and 1914. The book is essential reading for any student of Irish history. Bogdanor is comprehensive, gives a good account of the 1899-1902 Boer War, recounts women's struggle to gain the right to vote, covers the rise of the Labour Party, and examines the introduction of unemployment and sickness insurance. Bogdanor also outlines the evolution of British foreign policy, including the alliance with Japan and the increasing, though not inevitable, rivalry with Germany. It covers the tragic events that led to World War I. In a nutshell, Bogdanor has written a big book in every sense.

The title of the book is misleading, in the sense that the book is about far more than the survival of liberalism. It explores the issue of tariff reform, forgotten today, but politically convulsive for the first 20 years of the 20th Century. In the 1890s, a leading figure in the Conservative and Unionist Party, Joseph Chamberlain, committed his party to what he called “tariff reform.” By this he meant something was quite radical, turning the British Empire, which spanned every continent on the globe, into an economic union, much like the EU today.

The British Empire as One Big Free Trade Union

As with the founders of the EU in the 1950s, Chamberlain envisaged giving trade preference to goods produced within the British Empire over imports from elsewhere (e.g. continental Europe and the US), and thereby strengthening the political unity of the empire.

In the 1890s, note that empires were regarded as progressive concepts. They were seen as vehicles for the promulgation of civilized ideas, such as the rule of law. Other powers, like France, the Netherlands and the US, were also seeking to build their own empires. Empires were seen as efficient. They enjoyed economies of scale that smaller powers could not match. “The Empire” was also important domestically for the United Kingdom: it helped keep England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland united in a shared endeavor.

Hence, Chamberlain’s proposal for imperial trade preference was seen, at least superficially, to be going with, rather than against, the grain of history. As a result of Chamberlain’s advocacy, the Conservatives were to promote tariff reform, on an on-and-off basis, for almost 30 years.

However, this policy proved to be a vote loser. The British Empire could not produce all the food

that Britons wanted to eat, and tariff reform would have required a tax on food coming from outside the Empire. High food prices, then as now, were politically lethal for politicians. Chamberlain’s protectionist ideas also ran against the free trade, laissez-faire ideology that had dominated economic thinking in Britain for much of the 19th century.

Many British thinkers and politicians had a deep belief in free trade. One of them was Winston Churchill. In 1904, he was a young Conservative MP who left the party and joined the Liberal Party because he believed in free trade. Joseph Chamberlain’s son, Neville, would put some of his father’s protectionist ideas into practice, as chancellor of the exchequer in the 1930s.

Now largely forgotten, Joseph Chamberlain was a dynamic force. He was a successful businessman who became the mayor of Birmingham. He was Nonconformist—in those days, a term used for Protestant Christians who did not “conform” to the governance and usages of the Church of England, the established church of England—and was an early advocate of old age pensions and anti-poverty programs. Chamberlain was originally a member of parliament (MP) for the Liberal Party but became a Conservative when Liberals supported Home Rule for Ireland. Truth to be told, Chamberlain was never really a Conservative.

Through sheer force of personality, Chamberlain imported protectionism into the Conservative Party. Tariff reform is just one of the many themes explored in Venon Bogdanor’s comprehensive history of the 30 years preceding World War I. It is a history of policymaking, not just of politics. Bogdanor’s book not only has all the drama of these tumultuous years, but also solid content.

The Story of Ireland in the British Empire

As stated earlier, the book is comprehensive. It covers developments in England, Wales, Scotland and, of course, Ireland. At the time, Ireland was run by 29 different government departments, each with its own board. They were all supervised by a single non-resident chief secretary for Ireland, usually an English or Scottish MP from the governing party in Westminster.

By some measures, Ireland did well during this final period of British rule. The amount the British central exchequer spent in Ireland increased more rapidly than the amount of taxes it collected. In 1893, the Irish Administration (run by the British) ran a surplus on its budget and Ireland was making a net contribution to the overall British budget. In contrast, by 1912, this surplus was turned into a deficit of £1.5 million.

This increase in British expenditure on Ireland was for two reasons. First, old age pensions were introduced in 1909 and a number of Irish people qualified for them. Second, the British exchequer compensated landlords for transferring their land to tenants as per legislation passed in 1903. These two measures made Ireland a loss-making entity for the United Kingdom. Before World War I, the UK was actually losing money to keep Ireland in the union.

At the time, Ireland was seemingly doing well politically as well. It was actually overrepresented in the House of Commons, with one MP for every 44,000 voters in contrast to one MP for every 66,000 voters in England. Yet this Irish representation was not worth that much. Ireland was run entirely out of London by the chief secretary through the 29 departments. Irish MPs could only give inputs through the House of Commons and had little say in running their country. Very few MPs rose to become ministers.

Such a situation was increasingly unsatisfactory for most Irish people. It led to a growing demand for “Home Rule,” a movement to secure internal autonomy for Ireland within the British Empire. The Irish wanted their own parliament and government in Dublin. They wanted their ministers to be responsible to their own parliament, not the overstretched chief secretary for Ireland in London.

The idea of Home Rule was resisted in Britain. It was seen as heralding the beginning of the disintegration of the British Empire. As Lord Salisbury, the prime minister at the beginning of the period, put it: “If Ireland goes, India will go 50 years later.” He was not far off the mark. Ironically, the 1916-18 Indian Home Rule movement was inspired by Ireland. One of its two main leaders was Annie Besant who had an Irish connection. Her father was an Englishman who got his medical degree at Trinity College, Dublin and her mother was an Irish Catholic.

As Bogdonar describes, forces in Britain ranged against Home Rule were substantial and serious. This is why it is truly remarkable that Home Rule for Ireland passed into law, without a shot being fired, in September 1914. This peaceful achievement by Irish politicians in Westminster, like John Redmond, John Dillon and Joe Devlin, was largely ignored by the Irish government at the beginning of the “Decade of Centenaries.” This commemoration “of the centenaries of a number of seminal events in modern Irish history” ignored this peaceful achievement and favored the nationalism of physical force.

In 1909, the Liberal government led by Herbert Henry Asquith depended on the Irish Party and the Labour Party to stay in office. Lloyd George, the charismatic chancellor of the exchequer, introduced a radical budget that set out deliberately to raise money to “wage implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness.” The House of

Lords rejected this famous “People’s Budget,” creating a constitutional crisis. In response the Liberal government introduced a parliamentary bill to curb the power of the House of Lords to veto legislation passed in the House of Commons. It was brinkmanship, but it worked.

If the House of Lords had not rejected the budget in the first place, Irish Home Rule might have been postponed. The Liberal government had only a half-hearted commitment to Irish Home Rule but events forced its hand. In April 1912, the Liberal government introduced the third Home Rule bill in Westminster, which was passed as the Government of Ireland Act 1914 and history was made.

Run up to World War I

Bogdanor’s book also deals with the events leading to World War I. In the 1890s, Chamberlain had favored a Teutonic (Protestant) alliance between the UK, the US and Germany. However, the majority opinion in Britain preferred closer relations with France and Russia.

The British cabinet seems to have had little discussion of foreign and defense policy in the years before the war. It placed an exaggerated reliance on the Royal Navy and neglected the British Army. In general, the cabinet had no agenda, no regular meetings and no minutes in this period. Only Germany’s August 1914 invasion of Belgium enabled Britain to enter the war as a united country on the allied side. If Germany had avoided Belgium, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, as it was known then, would have been deeply split on whether to support France militarily, or stay out of the war.

When it comes to the tricky question of war guilt, it was the belligerent and irresponsible demands of Austria on Serbia that dragged Russia and Germany into war with one another. In

retrospect, the war seems unnecessary and avoidable. At the time, a chain of events kicked off a tragic four years of bloodshed.

I strongly recommend this book. The reader will find that many of the problems we sense as being unique to our era were around at the time of my grandparents as well.

***John Bruton** is a former Irish prime minister and an international business leader. He has held a number of posts in the Irish government, including minister for finance; minister for industry and energy; minister for trade, commerce and tourism; and minister for the public service.

France Grapples With the Painful Legacy Of Marshal Pétain

John Bruton
August 17, 2023

Philippe Pétain’s heroic leadership in the Battle of Verdun during World War I made him a French idol. Later he fell from grace for leading the Vichy regime that collaborated with the Nazis and was convicted of treason. A new book explores how the French, then and now, have interpreted their country’s actions during World War II.

I have just finished reading a truly excellent book, which I recommend to anyone who is interested in the history of modern France.

Penguin Books published Julian Jackson's *France on Trial: The Case of Marshal Pétain* this year.

The book describes the trial of Marshal Philippe Pétain, which took place only a few weeks after the war ended, and uses it to do two things: look back at the events that led to France's humiliating defeat in 1940, and look forward to the present day to see how France remembers, and commemorates, its behavior between 1940 and 1945, especially vis-à-vis Jewish people.

Pétain was the great French war hero of World War I, especially due to his leadership in the crucial Battle of Verdun in 1916. Through this, he had acquired a godlike status. By the 1930s, Pétain had long been retired from the army, and thus he had no responsibility for the strategic error of the French High Command that led to the defeat of May 1940. This error was sending the French Army deep into Belgium when Germany attacked that country, which created a gap in French defenses that allowed the Germans to encircle a large portion of the Allied armies from the rear in the vicinity of Dunkirk.

The consequences of this mistake discredited those who held office in France in the period immediately before the war. This included former prime ministers Édouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud. Both of these ex-prime ministers gave evidence in Pétain's trial.

So did another ex-prime minister, Pierre Laval, who was later to be tried and executed for treason in 1945.

The author says that, for Laval, "no cause, however noble, could justify a war." He had been prime minister in the 1930s and wanted reconciliation with Italy. During World War II, he said that he favored German victory, a matter on which Pétain wisely offered no opinion.

When the Germans surrendered in 1945, Laval escaped to Spain, but Franco did not want him. According to the author, Laval was then offered asylum by the Irish government, presumably on the Taoiseach Éamon de Valera's instructions.

I have never read any exploration of this issue in books about de Valera. Laval could have proved an embarrassing guest for Ireland. In the event, Laval opted to return to France and face a trial which he must have known would sentence him to death rather than live peacefully in Ireland.

Pétain's emergency leadership

Coming back to the dilemma faced by the French government in 1940, after the shock of the encirclement had worn off, the French army resisted the Germans bravely and effectively in central France. But the damage to public morale, caused by the initial defeat, was too deep.

Could the French Army have resisted long enough to retreat with their government to Algeria (technically part of France)?

Some of Pétain's accusers argued that he should have taken this option and ordered the army to fight on rather than seek an armistice from the Germans. Others criticized him for not joining the Americans when they landed in North Africa in 1942. Instead, he authorized the French Army in North Africa to resist the Americans. Many interpreted this as treason.

How did Pétain come to be in charge in late 1940 and thus be in a position to make these choices?

The previous French government, headed by Reynaud, had retreated from Paris to Bordeaux after the initial defeat in May 1940. But it needed a new leader. It turned to Pétain, as an untainted national leader, to head a new government.

It was almost as if the politicians gathered in Bordeaux felt they needed the “Pétain magic” to restore France. This was the hope on the basis of which the National Assembly made Pétain head of state, soon with unlimited powers. It was never a viable project.

If Pétain had thought things through, he would never have lent himself to such a dubious and hopeless endeavor. His vanity got the better of him.

Even if Germany had won the war, and had come to terms with Britain, the prestige of Pétain would not have sufficed to wipe France’s humiliation away.

Trial of a once-hero

How informative were the proceedings at the trial?

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that some issues were explored too much in the trial and that others deserved more attention.

A big part of the prosecution’s case was that Pétain had long been preparing himself for a French military defeat and plotting how to exploit defeat to grasp supreme power. There was no evidence to back this.

The issue that got too little attention in the trial, in light of what we now know, was the active involvement of the French police, and of the Vichy government, in the transportation of the Jews to the gas chambers.

Pétain’s defense team argued that the regime had spared many French people, including French Jews, from the horrors of direct German occupation by taking over the administration of a large portion of the interior of the country from 1940 to 1943 and that this saved lives.

There is statistical evidence to back this up. The survival rate of Jews in France, at the end of the war, was much higher than that of Jews in Poland and the Netherlands, which were directly occupied by the Germans and where virtually every Jew was wiped out.

Another issue that could have gotten more attention was the Munich Agreement with Hitler which sapped French morale.

Many of the themes evoked in this book are current today.

Grappling with the past

What is treason?

Is it treasonable to make the mistake of backing the loser?

Where is the line to be drawn between bad political judgment and treason? Where is the boundary between making a legitimate political judgment, and betraying a cause that is, or appears, lost?

What constitutes a war crime? That had not been defined at the time.

Who should be the jury in a trial like this? Pétain’s jury consisted of two halves: sitting National Assembly deputies and recently active members of the Resistance. This politicized the judicial system in a way that would not be allowed today.

Jackson’s book also explores the emotions of the French people in the aftermath of an acute crisis. France has emerged as a strong democracy despite the trauma.

For the record, Pétain was condemned to death at the end of the trial. But the jury anticipated, correctly, that Charles de Gaulle would commute

the sentence. Pétain died peacefully some years later.

The great merit of the book is the human stories it tells so well, prompting the reader to ask how he or she would have reacted if faced with the same dilemmas.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***John Bruton** is a former Irish prime minister and an international business leader. He has held a number of posts in the Irish government, including minister for finance; minister for industry and energy; minister for trade, commerce and tourism; and minister for the public service.

Must Spain Cobble Together Another Frankenstein Government?

Josep M. Colomer
July 29, 2023

Spain's general election, held on July 23, returned a result in which no party has a clear majority. The country may be heading towards another tumultuous minority coalition government.

Spaniards wanted to be “a normal country,” and they have almost achieved it—but at the worst possible time.

Like many other European countries, Spain's party system is fragmented and polarized, which renders the country ungovernable. And as in other countries, when it is able to form governments, they will be governments of the Frankenstein type, formed by stitching together multiple heterogeneous parties into an improbable and lackluster unity.

For one thing, votes are now more dispersed across parties. In the nine elections from 1982 to 2011, the two largest parties, the Socialist Party and the People's Party, averaged a total of 75% of the votes. In the most recent four elections, from 2015 to 2019, however, the main parties' combined average was only 50%. In last week's election, it was 65%, which is not a clear indication of any return to solid bipartisanship; both the Socialists and the People's Party will need the support of other parties if they hope to govern. This seems to be becoming something of a new normal for Spain.

As a consequence of the parties' inability to form parliamentary majorities, snap elections were called in 2016 and 2019, leaving the country without a government for many months. If Spain holds one more snap election, its record of misgovernment will approach those of that Bulgaria, Romania and Israel which have likewise undergone repeated elections.

Disintegration of political norms

Since the country's modern democratic constitution came into force in 1978, Spain did not have a successful vote of no confidence for 39 years. This streak was broken in 2018 with the confidence motion that brought down Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. This development signified instability and dissatisfaction with the system.

The second election in 2019 ruptured another Spanish political tradition. For 37 years, Spain had avoided the need for a coalition government. Each ruling party governed alone until Pedro Sánchez's Socialists found themselves constrained to form a coalition with the leftist Podemos party in 2020. Spain thus lost its distinction as the only country in Europe where a coalition government had never been formed.

What's worse, it was a minority coalition; on top of the difficulties of negotiating and agreeing between government partners, it needed to transact with other parties in Parliament that lacked a general commitment to cooperate. There were opportunities to form a grand coalition government in both 2015 and 2019, but cowardice prevented it. The evaporation of the centrist party Citizens, which would have been the bridge, sealed the possibility altogether.

Another tradition that fell by the wayside in recent years was the absence of far-right parties, a trait due to the memory of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship. In other European countries, the engine of the populist reaction was the financial crisis, austerity policies, and massive immigration. But the Spanish far-right did not gain a voice when those parties jumped on the stage, but later, immediately after the referendum for the independence of Catalonia in 2017. The Vox party—the “Voice” of the nation, which jumps, exasperated, like an automatic spring at any sign of territorial tension—was, above all, a jingoistic overreaction to Catalan nationalist provocations.

Now, it has backfired. As a counter-reaction to Vox, the Catalan independentists have become a pivot to form a majority in the Spanish Parliament. The incumbent prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, needs the votes or at least the abstention of the Catalan pro-independence parties to govern again. They will ask for the moon in return.

Spain is at an impasse

The People's Party and the Socialist Party may be tempted to hold another catastrophic snap election because they can expect that, as occurred on both previous occasions, both abstention and the percentage of votes for the two larger parties would increase.

Given this situation of Frankensteinian normality, some of the democratic reforms that many Spaniards have desired for years may no longer be a priority and could even become counterproductive. A more proportional electoral system, which has been long demanded, would allow even more parties to enter Parliament and make it even more difficult to form a majority, aggravating the governance problem.

Any complex, open and pluralistic political system entails high transaction costs. That is to say, it tends to reproduce the problems of information, coordination, negotiation and implementation of collective decisions that society cannot solve for itself and that, precisely for this reason, it transfers to the institutional sphere.

In today's Europe and today's world, with large scale and very high transaction costs, the most effective way to improve governance would be more transfers to other levels of government, especially the European Union and global institutions. As we are faced with problems of the magnitude of financial fragility, energy and food interdependence, vulnerability to epidemics, transcontinental migrations, the deployment of artificial intelligence, climate change, and new border conflicts, our highest priority is to execute competent decisions and recommendations in a way that is accountable to the public for their results.

In this context, citizens' relatively high electoral abstention may be inevitable and not very hurting.

More necessary and beneficial would be higher abstention from superfluous and conflict-prone legislation on the part of a Frankenstein government.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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The Truth about Western Values in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Davor Džalto
July 26, 2023

Bosnia continues to spiral into disintegration under the guise of a Western-led pursuit of stabilitocracy. Western leadership has systemically undermined the democratization of the country, causing an ongoing and underreported crisis.

Today, the war in Ukraine, the attempted coup in Russia and the unrest in France are making the headlines. Still, there is another crisis in Europe happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Known for its chronic political instability and dysfunctional institutions, the

country is showing more signs of disintegration, encouraged by the West.

Similarly to the situation that emerged in 2021 when then High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Valentin Inzko imposed amendments to the criminal code, the present crisis is due to the decisions of the current High Representative in this Balkan country.

Why we should care what happens in Bosnia

There are at least two reasons why we should pay attention to this crisis. First, it can potentially escalate, with unpredictable consequences for the region and the continent.

Second, it confirms that the proclaimed commitment of many Western governments to democracy, human rights and the rule of law is nothing but propaganda. This propaganda campaign hides the adherence to non-democratic procedures whenever these better serve imperial interests and political-economic goals.

On July 1, 2023, High Representative Christian Schmidt issued a series of legally binding decisions. Schmidt imposed amendments to the criminal code and declared that everyone who does not “apply, implement, enforce or otherwise comply with a decision of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or who prevents or otherwise obstructs its application, implementation or enforcement, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term between six months and five years.”

In addition, Schmidt issued decisions aimed at nullifying the previously approved laws by the parliament of Republika Srpska, one of the constitutive entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The parliament had determined not to implement the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the territory of Republika

Srpska until the federal parliament approves new legislation regarding the constitutional court. This would prevent foreigners from illegitimately serving as constitutional court justices in the country—which has been the practice since the end of the war in 1995.

The perception of the parliament majority and the leadership of Republika Srpska is that the constitutional court lacks legitimacy. They believe that this court has been making unconstitutional decisions that merely reflect the interests of Western political elites, disregarding the vital interests of the Bosnian constitutive entity.

A corrupt system without supervision

The Western press is rightfully reporting on authoritarian leadership in countries like Russia. However, there is a lack of coverage on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the High Representative, who holds no democratic legitimacy, can overrule decisions made by the parliament, whose members are democratically elected. This power structure is the sad reality of the Western-backed neocolonial rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The complicated institutional arrangement of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily the result of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war in the former Yugoslav Republic. Annex 10 of this agreement calls for the establishment of the office of the high representative. As designated by Annex 10, the high representative coordinates organizations involved in the civilian aspects of a peace settlement, monitoring and resolving difficulties. The high representative also participates in donor meetings for rehabilitation and reconstruction.

However, the procedure for appointing the high representative was never clearly defined and lacked transparency from the beginning. The Peace Implementation Conference held in London in

December 1995 only “approved the designation of Mr. Carl Bildt as High Representative,” inviting “the United Nations Security Council to agree to Mr. Bildt’s designation as High Representative.”

The Conference established the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), where the US-led coalition was the decisive voice that would appoint future high representatives and influence peace implementations. Originally, the steering board of the PIC was supposed to give political guidance on peace implementation to the high representative. There was an initial attempt to provide newly appointed high representatives a semblance of legitimacy by submitting the decision to the UN Security Council for approval. However, even this procedure has gone by the wayside.

Significant problems started with the “Bonn Powers,” referring to the process of PIC granting more authority to the high representative. In December 1997, at the PIC meeting in Bonn, the High Representative was authorized to make binding decisions on implementing the peace agreement, including measures against officials who “are absent from meetings without good cause” or who are “found by the High Representative to be in violation of legal commitments made under the Peace Agreement or the terms for its implementation.”

This vague formula allows for virtually unlimited powers over institutions and procedures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The high representative became the supreme legislator and the judge, responsible only to his imperial masters and financiers. The rest of the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are supposed to serve as obedient executors and do whatever the neocolonial governor tells them.

Based on these extraordinary powers, High Representatives started to overrule the decisions of elected representatives. They also began to annul

and change state legislation and decisions made by local authorities, remove democratically elected officials and change state legislation as they found fit.

Success or failure is a matter of perspective

The power of unelected governors, without any democratic legitimacy, undermines the authority of the law approved by legitimate, elected state authorities. Western democracies, of course, do not see a problem, and the mainstream Western media do not report on such abominations within a political system of a European country. Authoritarianism is fine, as long as the autocrats are "our" guys.

Some call Bosnia and Herzegovina an epic failure of the West and the US-led coalition to build a sustainable and democratic country after the bloody war of the 1990s. Others see it as a successful case of preventing democratic development, reasoning that the policies and post-war design of Bosnia and Herzegovina were intended to prevent the country from being a functioning state and a meaningful democracy.

The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains unstable and is a stage for implementing neo-liberal policies in agreement with corrupt local elites. When there is a crisis initiated or enhanced by imperial policies, the Western empire will act as if they are rescuing people from their tribal leaders who lack sophisticated democratic culture. The lesson that the native population in every colony is supposed to learn is that only (neo)colonial masters can set you free.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

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A Secure Eastern Border Depends on the Stability of NATO Member States

Cristian Gherasim
July 18, 2023

Internal stability is key in securing NATO's eastern border. As we look at how each nation on NATO's eastern flank is doing we notice some are faring better than others. But only with a few success stories, the situation might not be enough for NATO and its allies in the current geopolitical climate.

The recent NATO summit in Vilnius was all about defending the alliance's eastern border. From Estonia in the north all the way to Bulgaria in the south, NATO's most tested and heavily militarized region could also prove the most fragile. It all comes down to politics.

The eight nations that make up NATO's eastern flank are the most exposed to potential Russian aggression and to the effects of the war in Ukraine. They are also amongst NATO's most diverse, from the stable and predictable north to the more politically chaotic south. Making sure these nations are in lockstep without politics getting in the way of regional security is a matter of survival.

Europe's vulnerable frontiers

Ever since gaining independence from the former Soviet Union, the Baltic nations have been a model of democratic stability. Estonia, which is at the forefront of the region's democratic accomplishments, shares a 183-mile border with Russia. On the southern side, Lithuania has a 171-mile border with Russia's exclave Kaliningrad, which mostly cuts the Baltics off from the rest of NATO. These geographically vulnerable democracies know what's at stake given the current crisis in Ukraine.

For Eastern Europe, the Ukrainian tragedy strikes a deep chord not only because of its proximity but because stories of Soviet occupation are still entrenched in the public mindset. Eastern Europeans have rightly won plaudits for welcoming Ukrainians fleeing war and offering continued assistance to Ukraine.

According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Eastern European nations top the list of countries committing aid to Ukraine as a share of their own gross domestic product (GDP). The small Baltic nation of Estonia has offered the most to Ukraine by GDP share; Latvia ranks second.

It is this very push that is slowly changing the face of the European Union, with Eastern Europe at its vanguard. In short, Eastern Europe has proven to be a moral leader in this crisis. But goodwill, favorable public opinion and military assistance are not enough. Internal politics needs to deliver, too.

Corruption is widespread and getting worse

Unfortunately, the farther south you go in Eastern Europe, the less stable internal affairs get.

According to Freedom House, Poland's democracy has been backsliding due to partisan

influence over state institutions. A key NATO ally, Poland has been criticized over the last few years for its policies that undermine the rule of law. A country's defense is only as strong as its institutions, and creeping authoritarian tendencies are not reassuring for NATO's strongest eastern partner in a time of great need.

Hungary follows suit. Viktor Orbán's cabinet has been pounding the country's democratic institutions for years now. The populist government in Budapest has been pushing for chummy relations with Putin. Its potential to disrupt EU and NATO affairs is significant. Since both systems require unanimity, via Hungary, Russia and China nearly have a seat at the decision-making table in Brussels.

Move further southeast and things continue to get dicey. Romania shares the longest border with Ukraine of any EU or NATO member state. The country has had its fair of internal woes, from the government backtracking on its pledge to curb corruption, to declining press freedom.

Romania has tried and failed to join the Schengen Area, the borderless free movement zone of the EU. Schengen is crucial because it not only provides freedom of movement but also security. Schengen regulations help curb everything from organized crime to smuggling and terrorism.

Romania may get even further away from joining Schengen if it fails to secure its border with Ukraine. This border has proven to be the most lucrative in terms of smuggling and illicit trade in the entire EU as Romania remains the country worst hit by cigarette smuggling in the European Union.

Stop Contrabanda, a website monitoring contraband cigarette busts, reported that 110 million contraband cigarettes were seized by the

Romanian authorities in 2022 alone. But this is just the tip of the iceberg; many more hundreds of millions of euros worth of fake cigarettes evade being seized by authorities, as recent investigations show.

Bucharest recently announced its intent to suddenly raise taxes and prices, for the third time this year, on various sectors including the tobacco industry most prone to contraband. This will only lead to an increase in the smuggling of cheaper, more harmful fake cigarettes and other illicit goods. The European Anti-Fraud Office has been sounding the alarm on the manifold risks of illicit trade.

A surge in contraband will lead to new smuggling routes being opened, routes which end up being used not only by smugglers but also by organized crime, weakening the EU and NATO's border during a time of conflict.

Mixed news from Bulgaria

Things are currently beginning to look up for Bulgaria, Romania's southern neighbor, which has seen no fewer than five parliamentary elections held over the last two years. The country has been on a political rollercoaster, and its security approach has been following suit. From a rather shy supporter of Ukraine to one of its most important allies. Bulgaria has internally fluctuated between pro-Western and pro-Kremlin politicians, which is a liability.

Given these sensitivities and the many elections over a short period of time, there has been a lot of uncertainty as to where Bulgaria really stands regarding the war in Ukraine. Fortunately, a recent investigation by the German daily Die Welt revealed that Bulgaria, although the poorest country in the EU, has punched well above its weight when it comes to helping out Ukraine and has proven amongst its most reliable partners.

For NATO to prevail in securing its member states and allies, unity and predictability need to be more than an encouraging slogan. Governments need to act to ensure internal stability and rule of law. Some do indeed a better job than others, but with a war raging next door, that may not suffice.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Late Cardinal Pell Wrong, Pope Francis Plans New Future

Gary Grappo
January 21, 2023

Decades-long sexual abuse of children, lack of financial transparency and Catholics abandoning the church challenge the world's oldest institution. The late Cardinal George Pell's reported accusation that Pope Francis was a "catastrophe" is misplaced. Francis is merely responding to the challenges of our times and preparing the church for the future.

There was a time not so long ago when the passing of a notable, even if controversial, personality elicited at the very least muted praise for achievements and restraint on shortcomings.

That was most definitely not the case with the recent passing of controversial Australian Cardinal George Pell, who was removed from the Vatican's number three position managing church finances on charges of child sexual abuse earlier in his career. Though convicted in an Australian court for child sex abuse, he was later acquitted on appeal. Nevertheless, Pell remained a monumental symbol of the church's decades-long struggle with clerical child abuse and the leadership's failures to effectively address it. This controversy still hangs heavy over the church.

Francis Under Attack... Again

Pell's death wasn't just one more opportunity to point out the church's continuing struggles with its child abuse scandal. It was also an opportunity to lambast Pope Francis' leadership of the planet's oldest continuing institution. (Though Judaism predates Christianity by some 1,500-2,000 years, it does not have the institutional structure or leadership framework of the Catholic Church.) That Francis has critics is certainly not news, however. From the time of his installation in 2013, the Pope has been a target for his liberal or progressive views.

The press is awash with pieces about Pell's anonymous memo that criticized the Pope's leadership as a "catastrophe." It seems this memo was written by said deceased and cashiered cardinal. Setting aside the matter of sour grapes, Pell's assertion that, after Francis, the church "must restore normality, doctrinal clarity in faith and morals, a proper respect for the law and ensure that the first criterion for the nomination of bishops is acceptance of the apostolic tradition." Pell also

lays at Francis' feet the Catholic Church's loss of prestige. Lastly, it seems, Francis' statements on issues such as Russia's brutal and wholly unjustified invasion of Ukraine and China's vicious crushing of human rights in Hong Kong and China merely illustrate the prelate's lack of focus and redirection from the church's true course.

These are unquestionably tough times for the church and for Francis himself. Left unsaid in Pell's screed, however, is the huge dark cloud that still hangs over the church in the minds of many Catholics (including this writer): the still-unresolved matter of the church's complicity in the decades-long sexual abuse of children. Efforts in state-level civil courts in the US have begun to address the many unspeakable crimes visited on mostly young boys by predatory priests and the church's now documented attempts to cover up those crimes. As was the case with Pell in Australia before his acquittal, the UK and elsewhere in Europe, it is civil courts rather than the church that are taking action. As much as the church would like, it has failed to fully address the "tools of Satan" that have infested it.

Catholicism In Decline

The child sex abuse scandal and the storm over Francis' papacy are only side shows to what is really happening in the church. With the possible exception of Africa, Catholics are abandoning the church. The decline in numbers of American Catholics is in keeping with the overall decline in church membership throughout the US. In 2020, according to Gallup, 47% of US adults belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down more than 20 points from the turn of the century. It marks the first time that church membership in America has fallen below 50%. It had remained steady at around 70% as recently as the 1990s.

What is especially noteworthy is that while membership remains over 65% among so-called traditionalists and baby boomers, it's fallen precipitously among Gen Xers, millennials and Gen Zers. Data is unavailable for the upcoming Gen Alphas, but the trends have to be disturbing for all churches in the country. It seemed that Catholics may have been bucking this trend. Nationwide Catholic membership increased between 2000 and 2017, but the number of churches declined by nearly 11% and, by 2019, the number of Catholics decreased by two million people.

As baby boomer members decline, younger members are not making up for the loss. The percentage of Catholics who say they are a "member" of a church, as opposed to just acknowledging their Catholic faith, has dropped by nearly 20 points since the year 2000. So, even if they may accept their faith, Catholics are not joining churches. The decline in Catholic figures mirrors that of Protestants. The fastest rising group in terms of religious faith is actually the "unaffiliated," people of no religious persuasion.

Also left unsaid is what the fall in these numbers means financially for the Catholic Church. Firm figures on the church's finances are hard to come by given the Holy See's lack of transparency, even with its own members. However, among those Catholics worldwide who give to their church, it is generally believed that Americans rate the highest. Moreover, the Vatican invests its funds heavily in the US. American Catholics wield little to no influence within their church, except through their donations, which are likely to fall with declining membership. And even among those who stick with the church, their disgust with the child sex abuse scandal and the millions in payments the church is now being forced to make to victims across the country have led them to reduce or even discontinue their donations. Loss of US income would be devastating to the church and its ability

to carry out its worldwide mission, one more reason perhaps that churches and Catholic schools are closing across the country.

The decline in Church membership and even religiosity, especially among Catholics, in the US is not a unique phenomenon. Similar figures have been registered throughout the West, though the fall was presaged in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. Even Catholic stalwarts like Ireland, Spain and Italy, the ultimate bastion of Catholicism, have seen declines. Declines in Latin America, from whence Francis hails, is moving in the same direction. Notably, Evangelical Christianity is on the rise and seems poised to take the Catholic Church's place.

The "why" of that decline has as many answers as there are people. Certainly, among many Catholics of my age, the baby boomers, and countless generations before, guilt had been a driving force in their faith. And the church of that day masterfully wielded the baton of guilt, most especially against women. While newer priests have recognized that the "guilt them till they give" strategy was no longer tenable, the label lingers, especially as traditionalists still prevail even within Francis' church.

Progressivism + Demography, the Way of the Future?

However, here's one person's data point. In a world where inclusivity, tolerance and caring are gaining increasing traction, especially among Millennials, Gen Xers and Zers, and even many Boomers, Pell's call for "normality" — whose normality? — and "doctrinal clarity in faith and morals, proper respect for the law" is distinctly unappealing and even unchristian. The evolution of progressivism — a word that would undoubtedly rile Pell and his traditionalists — and especially demography make that approach a nonstarter and prescription for continued declines.

What may truly gall Pell and others of his stripe is that Francis may actually recognize this. Standing up for human rights, protecting and responsibly managing our environment, condemning patently unjust and murderous wars, and even extending a welcoming hand to gays and divorced couples actually sound more, well, Christ-like. (Though Francis could certainly be more assertive on these and on other issues.)

If Pell's desire for the return of normality and doctrinal clarity means continuing to exclude women from the priesthood and demean their role in the church, prohibit divorce and contraception, and bar LGBTQ couples from marriage and membership, then expect to see more declining numbers and closing churches. The church envisioned by the recently deceased Pope Benedict XVI will most certainly come to pass, much smaller though perhaps stronger. And it must be said, much older.

Pell's church is the Catholic Church of the past. Francis would seem to have his eye on something different. The future, maybe?

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Finland's New Laws to Boost Security Erode Rule of Law

Joy Hyvarinen
March 07, 2023

Finland's response to Russia's war on Ukraine could be weakening the rule of law within its own borders.

In Finland, which shares a border of more than 800 miles with its much larger neighbor, Russia, national security has always been a high priority. Central elements of this national security have included maintaining a strong defense capability while avoiding the provocation of Russia.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 changed the security context. As a consequence, in May 2022 Finland applied for membership of NATO, as did its Nordic neighbor Sweden.

In another historical change, Finland broke with its policy of not exporting weapons to countries at war and has repeatedly sent arms to Ukraine, including heavy artillery and munitions. Most recently, Finland also agreed to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine.

It is against this background that parliament, in July 2022, adopted changes to the Emergency Powers Act and the Border Guard Act, and these actions should set warning bells ringing across Europe.

While Finland needed to respond to a radically changed security context, the hasty legislative changes hollowed out the constitution and raised questions about Finland's commitment to the rule of law and its human rights obligations.

Hybrid threats among Finland's top priorities

Hybrid threats are among Finland's priorities relating to its security concerns.

The Helsinki-based European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats describes hybrid threats as actions by state or non-state actors that aim to undermine or harm a country by influencing decision-making at the local, regional, state, or institutional level. These actions deliberately target democratic states' and institutions' vulnerabilities.

Hybrid threats can, for example, involve influencing campaigns, cyber attacks, various forms of sabotage, or instrumentalizing migrant and refugee flows, which is an egregious way of using people in often desperate situations.

In 2015 Finland received 32,476 asylum seekers, a record number for the country. That year large numbers of refugees arrived in European countries, in particular from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Their arrival in Finland sparked heated debates about multiculturalism, integration, and values perceived as non-Finnish.

Emergency Powers Act no longer protects constitutional or human rights

The legislative changes to the Emergency Powers Act adopted in July 2022 focus on these hybrid threats, in particular the possibility of large flows of asylum seekers or immigrants being directed to Finland's border by Russia.

To be able to respond to such a situation, parliament chose in haste to amend the Emergency Powers Act instead of addressing the issue through the section of the constitution that deals with fundamental rights during states of emergency and that defines the circumstances in which exceptions can be made.

The changes to the Act were adopted in a hurried package deal that required a compromise with the opposition parties. This included controversial and legally questionable changes to the Border Security Act such as allowing the closing of border crossing points in unclearly defined circumstances.

Writing in *Verfassungsblog*, leading constitutional and human rights expert Martin Scheinin argued persuasively that following the changes to the Emergency Powers Act the constitution no longer provides protection for constitutional rights or human rights against a supermajority in parliament.

In Scheinin's words, section 23 of the constitution, which addresses rights during states of emergency, "... was in fact deconstitutionalized" because of the manner in which parliament chose to make changes to the Act.

Border Guard Act changes put in question international human rights obligations

As part of the package deal that allowed the government to obtain the majority required to push through its changes, the Border Guard Act was amended in a way that appeased the anti-immigration opposition.

These changes raise serious questions about Finland's ability and willingness to comply with its international human rights obligations.

The amended Border Guard Act allows the government to centralize applications for international protection to one or more border crossing points. Expecting asylum seekers who arrive at Finland's more than 800-mile-long border to make their way to one designated location to apply for international protection could easily make an application impossible.

The circumstances in which the government can decide to centralize applications for asylum are not clearly defined. Scheinin points out that according to the wording of section 16 of the Border Guard Act, the provision could be triggered by, for example, a large sporting event in Finland that attracts many foreign visitors just as it could be triggered, for another example, by a future genocide in Russia.

Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner, expressed several concerns about the changes in a letter to Finland's Minister of the Interior, including concerns that the changes could prevent individuals from applying for asylum.

Mijatović also highlighted the situation of people fleeing Russia via the Finnish border, and this includes people who might be persecuted on grounds related to their opposition to the war in Ukraine, their sexual orientation or gender identity, or their work on human rights. She emphasized the need to pay specific attention to these groups, which she pointed out could be particularly affected.

New 2023 parliament should review the Emergency Powers Act

Parliamentary elections will take place in Finland in early April. The new parliament could choose to continue to review the entire Emergency Powers Act, currently under way and expected to conclude in 2025, to begin repairing the damage caused by the changes made in 2022. The new parliament should not allow the changes from 2022 to remain in their current form and should ensure that future changes comply fully with Finland's international human rights obligations.

As Scheinin points out in his article for Verfassungsblog, part of the aim of the legislative changes in 2022 was to signal Finland's

determination to protect its population against external threats.

It could be argued that the way in which the changes were made sent another signal: It takes very little to weaken the rule of law in Finland. It will be up to the new parliament and government to decide if that is to be a lasting message.

[[Erica Beinlich](#) edited this piece.]

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Hostile Information Campaigns, Democracy and Free Expression in Finland

Joy Hyvarinen
August 25, 2023

Finland, now a NATO member, is a target for hostile Russian influence campaigns. Finnish authorities are looking for ways to combat foreign disinformation. While they do this, however, they must not lose sight of freedom of expression, a precious democratic right.

Finland's national security outlook has drastically changed following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The two countries share a long border, and Finland has now become NATO's newest member. Russian interference within Finland is a present danger. Finland is wary of hybrid threats coming from Russia, which may include cyberattacks, economic pressure, sabotage, political interference and hostile information campaigns.

Finland must protect itself against hostile information campaigns by combatting misleading narratives. At the same time, it must also do so in a way that does not infringe on Finnish citizens' legitimate right to freedom of expression.

Hostile information campaigns and free expression

Hostile information activities, such as deliberate spreading of false information and conspiracy theories, aim to destabilize and weaken states. Campaigns target democratic institutions and processes through activities such as election interference and messages that aim to reduce trust in government.

The term "disinformation" describes deliberately shared false or misleading information, while misinformation is used to refer to false or misleading information that is shared without harmful intent. As Global Disinformation Index explains, even technically true information can easily be presented in a way that conveys messages that are false and harmful.

The threat is well-known. The Finnish Security and Intelligence Service has identified Russia and China as currently posing the most significant threat when it comes to state-sponsored influencing operations. Finnish authorities are preparing themselves. The country hosts the European Centre of Excellence for Countering

Hybrid Threats, created in 2017 by the European Union, NATO and nine states including the US and Finland.

The threat is greater now than ever. The growing capabilities and availability of artificial intelligence tools have opened up new possibilities on an entirely new scale for hostile actors.

Responding to hostile information campaigns is challenging and includes the risk of response measures impacting freedom of expression. For example, the EU's decisions to stop Russia Today, Sputnik and later other Russian media outlets from distributing content within the EU raised widespread concerns about state censorship of media.

A new government in crisis creates more risks

Finland's April 2023 elections led to the formation of a new government. It has been facing difficulties that could provide more opportunities for hostile influencing activities.

The new government includes the anti-immigrant Finns Party, which successfully captured 20.1% of the vote. The Finns Party has been beset by racism scandals. The party's leader, Minister of Finance Riikka Purra, has been embroiled in trying to explain why her blog contains extraordinarily racist and violent statements. Economic Affairs Minister Vilhem Junnila had to resign following revelations about questionable "jokes" and his 2019 speech at a rally that included neo-Nazi organizations. Wille Rydman, his replacement, has had to defend his own extremely racist private messages.

The situation has led to calls for resignations and criticism of the prime minister and the parties that were willing to join the coalition with the Finns Party as a partner. It has sparked much-

needed debate about overt and covert racism in politics.

The Finns Party often presents itself as a defender of free speech. As a consequence, some voters have begun to think of free speech as a right-wing, anti-immigrant agenda, rather than a constitutionally protected right that belongs equally to all Finns. The debacle may provide fertile ground for bad actors interested in deepening societal conflicts and undermining trust in democratic institutions.

The framing of debates about free expression

Public debates tend to be dominated by headline-grabbing media stories about opposing views and opinions from extreme ends of the spectrum. Stories and debates focus on issues such as hateful speech, provocative statements, victims and villains. Strong disagreements feature heavily. This environment makes it easy for hostile actors, agents provocateurs and useful idiots to drive disagreement and deepen divisions in society. Well-meaning ordinary citizens may end up playing along with a hostile influencing agenda that hides behind a debate about free expression.

What gets lost in the debate is that freedom of expression is itself an essential component of national security. We must not attack freedom of expression out of a desire to attack disinformation. Free speech is a democratic right and benefits all citizens, not just those on the extremes who tend to dominate public attention.

The right to freedom of expression is fundamental for democracy. It protects the public debates and expressions of diverse opinions that are essential for democracies to function. But it also provides opportunities for hostile actors to influence and distort societal debates.

Finland is party to the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects freedom of expression. The convention allows states to restrict free expression only if certain conditions are met. The restrictions need to be based on law, and they must be for one of the purposes mentioned in the convention—for example, national security or protecting the rights of others. The restrictions must be “necessary in a democratic society” (Article 10).

In 1976 the European Court of Human Rights considered the right to freedom of expression in the case of *Handyside v. the United Kingdom*. The court found that the “necessary in a democratic society” requirement implies that freedom of expression applies not only to expressions “regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population.” The court added, “Such are the demands of that pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness without which there is no ‘democratic society’.”

The case is a reminder of how essential freedom of expression is for democracy. Safeguarding freedom of expression is part of national security, not opposed to it.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Ukrainian Refugees in Pro-Russian Transnistria Come to Moldova for Help

Tiina Kaukvere, Marian Männi
December 12, 2023

Transnistria, a breakaway region of Moldova, shares a land border with Ukraine. Up to 10,000 Ukrainian refugees have fled there. Because they are outside the reach of Moldova's official government, it is difficult for them to access basic services and aid.

Transnistria is a region of Moldova sandwiched between the Dniester River and the Ukrainian border. In 1990, pro-Russian separatists declared Transnistria's independence from Moldova. They operate their own government and border controls. But Transnistria is internationally recognized as part of Moldova.

Since the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, 8,000–10,000 Ukrainians have fled to Transnistria. From time to time, when aid is available in government-controlled Moldovan territory, hundreds of them cross the boundary to access it. So, we traveled to Moldova on one of those days to learn why.

Ukrainian refugees cross the Dniester to collect basic needs

On a warm September day, we drive through a checkpoint out of Transnistria. We arrive at the Moldovan village of Varnita. Transnistria is just across the Dniester from here.

Transnistria's "capital," Tiraspol, is about a 30-minute drive from here, and Moldova's official capital, Chisinau, is roughly an hour away. The Ukrainian border is also nearby. Tiny Varnita serves as a gateway to three distinct worlds. Here, you can hear Ukrainian, Romanian and Russian being spoken.

Volunteers from the Moldovan non-governmental organization (NGO) Katalyst Kitchen and the Norwegian Refugee Council assemble food and hygiene packages for Ukrainian refugees living in the breakaway region. Many of the charity workers are Ukrainians themselves. Today, at least 300 people are expected to collect help. These are the lucky ones. Not everyone made it on the list.

A diverse crowd forms a long queue — babies, children, elderly and young people. An old Moldovan gas station swiftly transforms into a logistics center.

Those in need present their Ukrainian passports to receive packages tailored for babies, kids, men and women. Broad smiles appear on children's faces when they reach for their white paper bags. There are little juice boxes, fruit, and puffed snacks for them. The kids also get mini tennis rackets and balls.

The bags for adults are filled with detergents, sponges and soaps. Most of them have basic food. The people thank the donors and quickly drag the heavy bags to their cars or walk to the bus station — only a few stay to chat. Everything is done quietly, with many unspoken words lingering in the air.

Viola Mozhaieva, a Ukrainian refugee from Transnistria, is a coordinator here. She tells us that finding aid as a refugee in Transnistria has become increasingly rare.

According to Freedom House, a democracy watchdog group, NGOs and civic activists in Transnistria operate in a repressive environment. The Transnistrian authorities monitor and harass groups that work on human rights issues. They also control the public media. Fundamental rights, like freedom of expression, are lacking.

The link to Russia is strong. About 1,500 Russian soldiers still live in Transnistria. The territory solely relies on Russian gas that is then partly converted into electricity. In this context, economic opportunity remains very limited.

“It's very tough for people in Transnistria,” Viola explains. “Unfortunately, there's virtually no assistance, mainly due to lack of funding. We're fortunate if we receive food aid once a month or every other month. But people need to eat daily!”

Some refugees are already feeling desperate. “They're becoming aggressive, realizing there's no more hope. The war continues, and the conditions worsen,” said Viola.

Considering all this — why stay in a Russia-friendly place with so little support or even freedom?

“We simply didn't know where else to go,” 82-year-old Tamara, a native of Crimea, tells us. She traveled to Transnistria with her daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, two cats and a dog. When they arrived, they didn't know anyone. “We just gathered our family and came here, unsure of our destination,” Tamara explained. “But kind-hearted people took us in.”

An Odesa family with three children wanted to settle in Chisinau, but the father feared he wouldn't find work there without speaking the local Romanian language. They chose Russian-speaking Transnistria instead. Their baby girl was born there after the war had started. Salaries are lower in

Transnistria, but so are the rent and everything else, they explain. Now, they are just waiting for the fighting to be over so they can return to Ukraine. “The birth of our child made us hopeful,” adds the mother.

Ukraine has been a significant trading partner for Transnistria, and Ukrainians comprise about one-fifth of its population. Naturally, many refugees came here to stay with family and friends. But others simply could go no further, Viola explains, as many have disabilities.

Nearly a million border crossings

According to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, low living costs, family ties and previous residence are some of the main reasons for choosing Transnistria as a refuge. The problem is that they usually do not register themselves. As of this summer, only 76 refugees — out of possibly 10,000 — had officially filed for protection.

Since the official Moldovan government does not operate in Transnistria, officially registering as a refugee was daunting. According to the UNHCR, obtaining the necessary residency documents was difficult. The refugees also needed a Moldovan mobile number for registration, posing another obstacle. Even the absence of a Moldovan entry stamp on their passports made the registration harder.

The requirements were eased in September this year, said Monica Vazquez, the UNHCR external relations officer in Moldova. Now, refugees only need to submit a self-declaration form, accessible online.

The UNHCR operates through local partnerships across Moldova, including the Transnistrian region. They see that people get tired of helping. Many refugees have been in Moldova

for at least a year. "It's natural for them to start working and become self-reliant," said Vazquez. "But the humanitarian need persists, and it's crucial to keep supporting at all levels."

Moldova hosts some of the region's most vulnerable refugee populations. "18% are older persons, 7–10% are persons with disabilities and over 60% are children and women," Vazquez specified.

Moldova has been instrumental in assisting Ukrainian refugees. As of November, over 113,000 Ukrainian refugees have settled in Moldova, with nearly a million crossing the Moldovan border since the war started in February 2022. Additionally, almost 700,000 Ukrainians have returned to their war-torn homeland through Moldova since then.

"What Moldova has achieved is extraordinary on every level," concluded Vazquez. "It's remarkable how they've stepped up, opened their doors and rushed to assist! Moldova's response has been incredibly forward-thinking."

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Robert Fico Returns: Will Slovakia Become the New Hungary?

Daniel Martinek, Peter Techet
October 24, 2023

Robert Fico's return to power is because of the instability of the previous governments and a canny populist campaign. Under his rule key Slovakian institutions, especially the police and the prosecution, may once again be filled with Fico-loyalists, benefiting corruption, clientelism and oligarchy. He is also protectionist and pro-Russia, offering a big challenge to the EU.

In Slovakia, the left-wing populist Robert Fico will return to power and form a coalition with leftist and nationalist parties. Fico was removed from power by the Slovak people in 2018. However, from 2020 to 2023, Slovakia experienced a high level of chaos. There were frequent government crises and prime ministers changed frequently. After so much instability, many Slovak voters now yearn for some stability.

As a result, Fico's corruption scandals seem to have been pushed into the background. The return of a politician like Fico in Bratislava, who maintains strong ties with the Hungarian Viktor

Orbán, can have significant implications for Central Europe and the European Union (EU).

To understand the importance of Fico, we have to go back to 2018. In the wake of the cold-blooded murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, protests are taking place across Slovakia. The public demanded an explanation of and political accountability for the cases revealed by Ján Kuciak. These involved the network between the members of the ruling party SMER — slovenská sociálna demokracia (DIRECTION – Slovak Social Democracy) and controversial businessmen considered to be part of organized crime that has conducted massive financial frauds.

Protests led Fico to resign. There were other personnel reshuffles in the government coalition. Fresh parliamentary elections followed in 2020. Capitalizing on a strong anti-SMER political agenda and establishing his election campaign as a fight against Fico and his network, Igor Matovič led his Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO) party to a decisive victory. Considered the gravedigger of Fico's political career in 2020, the former prime minister Matovič has now become its resurrector.

Resurrection of Robert Fico

October 1 turned out to be a sobering morning for liberal Slovaks. With a relatively strong mandate of 23%, the SMER party won the early elections, consequently forming a government coalition. The party has partnered with SMER-defectors who formed the HLAS party led by Peter Pellegrini. He replaced Fico as prime minister and was prime minister from 2018 to 2020. The right-wing Slovak National Party (SNS) is also a coalition partner

Despite both Fico and Pellegrini categorizing their parties as “social democratic”, their memberships in the European Socialist Party were

suspended. This happened due not only to the recent radical rhetoric and political positions of SMER, but also to the party's willingness to form a coalition with the SNS. Many EU Social Democrats consider the SNS to be a far-right entity with an extremist ideology.

For the past three years, Fico or Pellegrini have been in opposition. They harshly criticized not only Matovič's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the inter-coalition conflicts that ultimately led to the fall of Matovič's government.

Fico's and Pellegrini's criticism and the promise of “stability and order” after years of political turmoil ultimately materialized in an electoral victory. Paradoxically, Fico can thank Matovič for his political comeback. Matovič built his political program on the anti-Fico premise but failed to deliver.

Despite losing more than half of his supporters, Matovič managed to retain his place in the parliament. Throughout the campaign, Matovič was the most radical critic of the “mafia,” a term he used to describe Fico's people. He went so far as to getting into physical confrontations with politicians from the SMER-party. Yet Fico's populism trumped Matovič's anti-Fico populism.

The promise of stability to those suffering from poverty

How is it possible that Fico is coming back? Did everyone forget the 2018 protests?

The election results have put influential groups of controversial businessmen that run clientelistic networks involving government officials and the police, prosecutors, judiciary, financial administration and secret services back into focus. The connection of SMER members to persons involved in organized crime, which was revealed five years ago, seems to play no role anymore.

Instead of criminal prosecution, Fico and his party fellows now will be protected with political immunity. Promising professionalism, expertise, experience and stability, Fico has risen to the top of the political ladder once again. Slovak voters dissatisfied with the previous government and declining living standards have helped Fico to climb this ladder.

Slovakia has one of the worst public finances in the EU. It is also the second poorest country in the EU. Segments of Slovak society are currently on the verge of extreme poverty. They were fed up with the chaotic government of the past years and yearned for strong leadership.

Fico's political narrative about the struggle between liberalism and conservatism, gender ideology and traditional values was another clever political tool to win the support of overwhelmingly conservative Slovak voters. Using pro-Russian disinformation tactics and blaming the war in Ukraine for declining living standards helped Fico win as well. Fico made the argument that the role of his government is to place the interests of Slovakia and Slovaks first, which is not what many European countries are doing.

Fico has declared: "The protection of the sovereignty and national-state interests of the Slovak Republic will be the government's priority." This declaration during the signing of a memorandum of understanding with future coalition partners resonates with voters.

Will Slovakia become the second Hungary and will Central Europe turn illiberal?

Slovakia will now follow a "policy of many azimuths." Simply put, Fico will prioritize nationalism and protectionism. His thesis is that this would improve living conditions of Slovakian citizens at home. Hence, Slovak political, military and diplomatic support for Ukraine will no longer

continue. Fico has also been blunt in his criticism of EU sanctions against Russia. Now, the EU will have to deal with another blackmailer like Hungary's Orbán within its institutions.

Fico will emulate Orbán in domestic policy too. He is highly unlikely to build a decent and matter-of-fact political culture or a positive relationship and trust in state institutions. Instead, the erosion of democratic institutions, the continued departure from the rule of law, oppression of minorities and the shrinking of the civil society environment will become the new political reality.

The question on everyone's lips is simple: Will Slovakia become the second Hungary? Fico would like that. However, it is up in the air whether he can establish an "illiberal democracy" as easily as Orbán did in Hungary. Orbán has been in power for 13 years with a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian parliament. This allowed him to rewrite the constitution and the election laws. Institutions are fully controlled by Orbán's Fidesz party, while Fidesz-affiliated oligarchs have taken hold of the economy. The free press is weak, the opposition is divided, and change seems unlikely in Hungary.

Even under Fico, Slovakia presents a different picture. He will govern with a coalition in which Pellegrini will represent a pro-European, values-based approach. Fico's coalition will prove to be unstable. The SNS with many independent MPs is not bound by party discipline. An "illiberal democracy" of the Hungarian variety is not an imminent threat in Slovakia. However, there is a big risk that key institutions, especially the police and the prosecution, may once again be filled with Fico loyalists, benefiting corruption, clientelism and oligarchy.

In the foreign policy debates within the EU, Fico is likely to espouse positions similar to Orbán's. The Slovakian leader will oppose migration, resist further European federalization

and favor a more friendly approach towards Russia. Hungary can also anticipate that potential sanctions against Budapest, related to rule of law violations and corruption, might be blocked by vetoes from Bratislava.

The former unity of the Visegrád-Group states stands shattered. Prague and Warsaw have pro-European and pro-Ukrainian governments, while Budapest and Bratislava are more critical of the EU and lean more towards Russia.

The EU has a new test in preventing how far Fico can go with his illiberal plans in Slovakia. It remains to be seen if Brussels can assert its values and principles in Bratislava. Fico presents an existential challenge for Slovak civil society, which once successfully ousted him from office.

[The Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe produced this piece and is a partner of Fair Observer.]

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Why Putin — Battered, Not Broken — Retains Power for Now

Marko Mocevic
October 07, 2023

President Vladimir Putin has been Russia's de facto tsar for over two decades. Some international observers have predicted that military setbacks in the Russia-Ukraine War and the rebellion of Wagner Group's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin could cause Putin's demise. They are wrong. Russians see things differently. Putin's grip on power remains as strong as ever.

Dramatic scenes of Yevgeny Prigozhin's mad drive to Moscow shocked the world in June. Prigozhin, the leader of Wagner, a Russian private military organization, turned his guns against the government, demanding that Russian President Vladimir Putin fire his political rival, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. With a formidable domestic opponent openly defying Putin, commentators in the international media were ready to say that this was the end. The airwaves filled with early predictions of the regime's collapse. Then, less than 24 hours later, it was over. Fast forward two months, and Prigozhin was dead, with Putin no less firmly in charge than ever. So what happened? Why is Putin so strong, and why did the predictions of his demise turn out to be hopeful thinking?

Why is Putin's grip on power strong?

The basic answer is that Putin is strong because he is popular. Very popular.

Before Wagner's march on Moscow, around 82% of Russians approved of Putin's performance, according to polling by the Levada Center. Throughout his 23-year presidency, his numbers have generally remained well above 50%.

Putin is a charismatic figure. He strives to project a masculine, in-charge image. His successful military action in Crimea reinforced this perception. Russians have largely backed the president's recent invasion of Ukraine, too.

Putin's ability to appear confident and commanding reassured Russians after a decade of instability. The 1990s saw Russia's Soviet empire collapse spectacularly, and its economy along with it. Older generations still harbor the resentment that the economic downturn caused. It dashed their hopes for a prosperous future. President Boris Yeltsin, infamous for his all-too-public drunken antics, was regarded more as a national embarrassment than as a hero of democracy. A series of apartment bombings in 1999, blamed on Chechen terrorists, made Russians feel unsafe in their own homes. Then, Putin took over and restored stability.

Putin's actions generally improved living standards and reaffirmed Russian influence in the near abroad. At the same time, Putin was gradually weakening democratic institutions and basic freedoms under his leadership, but many Russians were willing to accept this trade-off in exchange for relative stability, prosperity and security.

In the minds of many Russians, the end of Putin would mean a return to the chaos of the 1990s, a shift that few are willing to accept.

Why has Putin survived threats?

While recent events have indeed cast doubt on Putin's authority, the recent predictions of his downfall rely, in my opinion, more on subjective

and wishful thinking rather than pragmatic analysis. Despite reversals in Ukraine and the open rebellion of Wagner, Putin's hold on power remains intact.

Putin has shown the ability to recognize and neutralize threats to his regime as they appear. He has survived the political threat of anti-corruption activists, the economic threat of Western sanctions and the military threat of Wagner, coming out strong each time.

Navalny and other political challenges

During his more than two-decade rule, Putin effectively eliminated any democratic alternatives to his leadership. Opposition figures who posed external challenges to his rule have been silenced, imprisoned, or even assassinated.

Alexei Navalny was a charismatic anti-corruption activist and successful political campaigner. He spoke out against embezzlement, cronyism and corruption at the highest levels of government. Navalny garnered widespread support among the Russian population, displaying the ability to mobilize large crowds and weaponize social media effectively. He frightened Putin by taking 27% of the vote in Moscow's mayoral election, where he ran against Putin's ally. The result suggested that his movement was a real political challenge. Losing to Navalny in a future election became a credible possibility for Putin.

In response, Putin attacked him judicially. Navalny soon found himself facing a battery of legal challenges, repeated arrests and trials on trumped-up charges. In 2020, he was poisoned with a nerve agent in Berlin, an incident widely seen as an assassination attempt. He survived, but was arrested as soon as he returned to Russia. He remains in prison to this day.

Navalny's story is not unique in the context of pro-democracy activists in Russia. Other figures like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Boris Nemtsov faced similar treatment due to their outspoken criticism of Putin's government. Khodorkovsky, once one of Russia's wealthiest men, spent over a decade in prison. Boris Nemtsov, a prominent opposition leader, was assassinated in 2015 just steps away from the Kremlin.

In 2020, Putin amended the Russian constitution to allow himself to remain in power legally until 2036. While he is still technically only a democratically elected leader, his authority is absolute and his ability to overcome any legal obstacles to his authority is tried and true.

Sanctions

Since 2014, economic pressure has hurt Russia's economy, but it hasn't made the Kremlin change its stance on Ukraine or stop its aggression. Moscow began sanction-proofing its economy shortly after the Crimean annexation. It did this by reducing reliance on Western imports, saving foreign currency and boosting domestic production of goods. Putin knew that depending too much on imports and foreign capital made Russia vulnerable to external economic pressures. Although he couldn't completely separate Russia from the West economically, he found alternative markets like China and India to make up for expected losses from sanctions.

So, Putin was prepared when the US and its allies launched a new round of sanctions following his 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While sanctions did hurt Russia's economy, their impact is less severe due to years of preparation.

Historically, Western sanctions against smaller economies have often proven to hurt regular people more than they can produce a decided change in the target's policies or leadership. The

ultimate outcome in Moscow is likely similar. Instead of forcing leaders out, sanctions make the population more reliant on the government, leading to more authoritarianism. A little pain in the purse will not create a revolution; people don't take to the streets until their very livelihoods are threatened. As long as there's relative economic stability, Putin's voter base is unlikely to turn against him.

Wagner

In June, as a convoy of mercenary tanks advanced towards the Kremlin, observers predicted that the ensuing rebellion and chaos would spell the end of Putin's government. However, the march on Moscow ran out of steam in just 24 hours. Two months later, the leader of the perilous coup, Prigozhin, met a tragic end as his plane crashed within Russia.

Although the rebellion failed in its stated objective, it did manage to sow some seeds of doubt about Putin's unchallenged rule. But it left Putin's position essentially intact, and with more than enough power to uproot whatever seeds had been planted. Now, Prigozhin's plane has crashed and burned in a field, while Putin still retains his throne.

The Wagner leader's downfall sends a clear message to other potential adversaries: Putin's hold on power remains unassailable, and any direct challenges to his leadership will be met with consequences. Like any good mafia boss, Putin knows how to tie up loose ends, and he has made sure that everyone else knows it, too.

How will Putin respond to mounting pressure in the short and medium term?

The recent missteps on the Ukrainian battlefield and the failed rebellion have undoubtedly exposed chinks in Putin's armor, potentially opening the

door for dissent within Putin's inner circle. This has led many observers to speculate that Putin's reign may be nearing its end. However, predictions of his imminent ousting may be overly hasty. Recent events demonstrate that Putin will not relinquish power easily and that he can make challenges to his authority extremely costly.

Those who anticipated an increase in violence and repression following the rebellion were indeed correct. As Putin strives to maintain and expand his grip on power, we can expect more targeted violence within Russia. However, the law of diminishing returns is at play here. The Kremlin will need to use even greater violence as time goes on to maintain its power. This could become a reason for his eventual downfall, as excessive repression to keep him in power might eventually provoke a public revolt against his leadership.

In the coming years, Putin is likely to face mounting pressure, both internally from his inner circle and the public, as external measures and isolation drain more of Russia's resources. However, it's unlikely that this pressure will lead to an immediate leadership change in the Kremlin.

In response to future challenges to his authority, Putin will likely continue to escalate repressive and security measures to suppress dissent and perceived treason undermining his rule. This will further strain US–Russia relations, leading to more condemnation and a growing divide. While Putin remains at the helm in Russia, Moscow will likely distance itself from Washington and Brussels and build closer ties with their strategic adversaries.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Benedict XVI's Death Ends Rare Era: Pope Francis Now In-Charge

Vas Shenoy
January 13, 2023

Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI shared the stage for one final time. The Argentine pope bowed his head and placed his hand on his German predecessor's casket before it was carried away. With the traditionalist pope dead, the reformist pope has a free hand.

“**B**lessed, faithful friend of the bridegroom, may your joy be perfect in hearing his voice definitively and forever,” thus Pope Francis concluded his homily for his predecessor Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, whose passing on the last day of 2022 brought to a close the historic European-Italian control of the Holy Roman Church. Polish Pope John Paul II was the first non-Italian, European pope since the 16th century, followed by German Cardinal Ratzinger who assumed charge as Pope Benedict XVI.

Pope Francis, who was Cardinal Bergoglio before he assumed charge as pope, is the first Latin American pope in the history of Christianity and the first non-European pope in over 1,300 years since 741 AD. It is also the first time in the history

of the Holy See that a reigning Pope has officiated the funeral of his predecessor. Notably, it has been over 600 years since there have been two popes at the same time.

The two men shared the stage for one final time at Benedict XVI's funeral, with Pope Francis being escorted on a wheelchair 15 feet from Benedict XVI's coffin. Their last image included a final, indelible gesture: Pope Francis bowing his head and placing his hand on the casket of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI before it was carried away, which concluded the uneasy coexistence of the two for over a decade.

A battle for the future of the Catholic Church

Amid repeated crises, leaks, and scandals at the Vatican, Benedict XVI decided to relinquish the position of the Roman pontiff in February 2013. However, he curiously chose to retain the title of "Pope-Emeritus." This move was criticized by traditionalists. A leading light of canon law and former rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Jesuit Gianfranco Ghirlanda refuted the legitimacy of the figure of "pope emeritus" in a long and thoroughly substantiated article. Published on March 2, 2013 in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, this piece was printed after review and authorization by the Vatican secretariat of state as are all articles in this publication.

Benedict XVI's passing now closes this phase of "two popes." However, the funeral has led to fresh attacks on the papacy of Pope Francis and demarcated clear fault lines within the Roman Catholic Church. Traditionalists, who unitedly saw Pope Benedict XVI as their flag bearer, are arrayed against reformists who support Pope Francis. This divide also opens questions about the future of the Vatican and the Catholic faith, which is fragmented in Europe, much like politics in the continent.

The first salvo was fired even before Benedict XVI's funeral by Archbishop Georg Gänswein, head of the Prefecture of the Pontifical Household and possibly Pope Benedict XVI's closest aide. The traditionalists have a list of complaints against Pope Francis, from ignoring Benedict XVI's advice on "gender propaganda" to putting a stop to the traditional Latin mass inside the Vatican.

In 2019, Pope Emeritus wrote a 6,000-word letter devoted to clerical sex abuse in which he attributed the crisis to a breakdown of church and societal moral teaching. The letter lamented the secularization of the West. It pointed to the 1960s sexual revolution as a toxic development following which seminaries filled up with "homosexual cliques." This contradicted Pope Francis's official position, which blamed the power and corruption of the clergy for sexual abuse.

The conflict is not just theological but also cultural. Often it seems that Pope Francis, who continues to behave at times like a simple priest, strongly opposes the traditionalist elitist behavior of the Pontifex Maximus. For instance, he disagrees strongly with the powerful president of the US Conference of Bishops, Monsignor Timothy Broglio, who stands accused of behaving as a "Yankee" in 2016. Apparently, Broglio promoted US political interests in the church and condoned the behavior of the US army in Iraq. Pope Francis has a very different point of view.

Traditionalists v. Reformists

Broglio, like Gänswein, is a traditionalist. He served as the secretary of the legendary Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the second most powerful man in the Vatican during John Paul II's papacy. The US bishops that Broglio represents are uneasy about Pope Francis's treatment of the second Catholic to enter the White House: US President Joe Biden. The president supports abortion and considers himself a practicing Catholic. Yet Biden was asked

to stay away from Benedict XVI's funeral by the Vatican. However, Biden enjoys a warm relationship with Pope Francis despite his political positions on abortion and gender, which oppose the traditionalist dogma of the church.

The US bishops would like Pope Francis to exert his influence on the US President but the pope refuses to do so. Though few in number, US cardinals contribute significantly to the coffers of the Vatican. This venerable institution is now facing a major financial crisis in addition to a political one.

Traditionalists are already discussing the next conclave, which will be conducted after Francis's death or resignation. By the end of 2022, Pope Francis had appointed 113 cardinals. Of these, 83 qualify to elect the next pope. Note that there are a total of 132 cardinals who get to elect the pope..

Now with a free hand at reform with the death of Benedict XVI, it is expected that Pope Francis will pack the College of Cardinals with reformists. They will further his agenda of promoting nuns and women to senior positions, allowing married men into the priesthood in areas that lack priests and opening senior Vatican positions, so far open only to clergy, to lay Catholics. Traditionalists believe this would be a disaster for the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis has also been actively involved in climate change discussions and improving relations with Islam. He has preferred to visit countries where Catholics are a minuscule minority instead of those where the Catholic Church is popular and growing. Traditionalists find this counterproductive at a time when churches are empty and the Vatican's finances are dwindling. They would rather have Pope Francis visit countries in Asia and Latin America where Catholics remain devout and their numbers are increasing.

Power, influence, and transparency

As head of state, the Pope also has the world's most efficient and sophisticated intelligence service at his disposal. While the Vatican has never had a formal intelligence service, it is common knowledge that Pope John Paul II played a key role in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apparently, the Polish pope used the Vatican's network and collaborated with the CIA to undermine godless communism. With its global foothold, from the deepest forests of Africa to the favelas of Latin America, from remote tribal areas in India to the dark jungles of Indonesia, the Vatican has access to hundreds of millions of the faithful as well as priests on the ground living in communities. It has developed strong relationships with intelligence services worldwide due to its access and sources. The Vatican's information sources are trusted, loyal, and local.

Pope Francis's church has striven for economic and political transparency. It has thus weakened the church's power with intelligence agencies. Under the Argentine pope, the Vatican has focused more on its pastoral role rather than its Cold War role of the protector of the faithful.

Pope Francis prefers to use a network of close, trustworthy associates than rely on orders like the Opus Dei. Cardinals and the heads of the orders have always lobbied to have the papal ear and one of the most important currencies is information. This defines the influence they exert in the Holy See. During the papacy of John Paul II and even Benedict XVI, Opus Dei was extremely powerful. Now, the Society of Jesus ("Jesuits") — the order from which Pope Francis comes from — is far more powerful.

Traditionalists also vocally oppose a secretive Vatican-China agreement signed in 2018. The Holy See has not had relations with China since 1951 and recognizes the Republic of China

(Taiwan) instead of the People's Republic of China. However, under Pope Francis, the Vatican signed a two-year agreement with the People's Republic of China in 2018. It was renewed in October 2020 despite US opposition. Last year, this agreement was further renewed for another two years despite the fact that the Vatican had accused China of violating it in November 2022.

Although this agreement does not recognize communist China, it is seen as a betrayal by Roman Catholics of the underground Catholic churches in Hong Kong and Mainland China. Many see it as capitulation to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As in the case of Tibetan Buddhism, the CCP tries to control Roman Catholicism by appointing bishops and controlling religious activity. In October 2018, CCP officials destroyed Marian shrines in China, just as they have recently demolished Buddhist shrines dedicated to Padmasambhava in China-occupied Tibet.

China is just one political nightmare that the pope, as the head of state, must deal with. Minority Catholics and Christians who feel abandoned by the church in the Middle East, including Palestine, is another nightmare. The spread of Islam in Africa and Southeast Asia at the cost of Christianity is causing the Vatican concern. In Pope Francis's Latin America, the spread of evangelical churches at the cost of the Roman Catholic church is a powerful phenomenon. In India, the government is finally challenging the centuries-old policy of proselytization. Like Jesus, Pope Francis is truly wearing a crown of thorns.

Critics wonder if the 86-year-old Pope Francis, who suffers from a litany of ailments, is up to the challenge of rejuvenating and reforming a nearly 2000-year-old institution rather set in its ways. After Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's passing, the ailing Argentine pope ruled out his resignation.

On January 1, a new papacy of Francis I began without the intrigues of a conclave. His statements reveal that the world is unlikely to see two popes again. With the conservative Benedict XVI gone, Pope Francis will now try to turn the Vatican inside out.

[[Conner Tighe](#) edited this article.]

(In an era of a global pandemic, social media wars and explosively evolving geopolitics, the human spirit and its expression have suffered the most. With apologies to Edward Morgan Forster, "Rome, with a View" is a view of humanity from an interesting perspective. The author, a third culture kid, gathers from his various perches in the eternal city of Rome — Caput Mundi, the capital of the ancient world — the whispers of wisdom through the ages imperfectly and perhaps even unwisely.)

***Vas Shenoy** is a journalist, writer, entrepreneur and student of human thought. He is the founder of Dialogue on Democracy, which aims at bringing together thought leaders and politicians from democracies globally to encourage a new geopolitical dialogue.

Is the German Economy Now Destined to Decline?

Atul Singh
September 20, 2023

The German economy is in crisis and its much-vaunted economic model is in question. The Russia–Ukraine War, a contracting Chinese economy and an increasingly protectionist US have triggered this historic crisis. Germany's

overbearing bureaucracy, declining demography, widespread labor shortages, high tax burden and political paralysis are to blame too.

September has been a month of grim news about the German economy. Inflation, which brings back the specter of the 1920s, remains stubbornly high. The Federal Statistical Office tells us that the inflation rate, “measured as the year-on-year change in the consumer price index (CPI), stood at +6.1% in August 2023.”

It is not just the Russia-Ukraine War that is causing inflation anymore. The Financial Times reports that, even excluding food and energy, inflation remains at 5.5% with higher wage pressures making it sticky, if not structural. Inflation is affecting all industries. In construction, costs are now 38.5% higher than the pre-pandemic early 2020.

An economy in deep crisis

New orders for construction companies have dried up. Note that these orders are canaries in the coal mine and indicate confidence in the future. They are a forward-looking indicator for the economy. In August, the lack of new orders rose to 44.2%, up from 40.3% in July and a lot more than 13.8% in 2022.

Germany’s prestigious ifo Institute informs us that cancellations in residential construction have reached a record high. In August, 20.7% of companies reported canceled projects. The building industry is in trouble. Rising interest rates, soaring costs and weaker demand threaten to force many firms out of business. Several real estate groups are filing for insolvency. Germany is facing a shortage of 700,000 homes, and its housing crisis is bound to intensify. Last year,

295,300 dwellings were built, well short of the 400,000 target, and this year the gap will be worse.

Industrial gloom is deepening too. The Federal Statistical Office’s September 7 press release reveals that industrial production “was down 0.8% in July 2023 month on month after seasonal and calendar adjustment.” Carmaking has declined dramatically. Rising energy prices have hit German industry hard, and Europe’s manufacturing superpower has shrunk or stagnated for the past three quarters.

Even before September, stories about the German economy have been pessimistic. On July 24, Reuters reported that “activity in Germany, Europe’s largest economy, contracted in July.” Investor confidence has been plummeting and foreign direct investment in Germany falling. The OECD expects the German economy to stagnate and be the worst performer among the major economies in 2023.

In August, the ifo Business Climate Index fell for the fourth consecutive time. Sentiment among German managers darkened in manufacturing, services, trade and construction. The index is at its lowest level since August 2020, and companies are increasingly pessimistic about the months ahead.

The Hamburg Commercial Bank’s Purchasing Managers’ Index (HCOB PMI) shows that German factory output has deteriorated at a rate not seen since 2009, the pandemic years excepted. Given that manufacturing accounts for a quarter of the German GDP, the fall in HCOB PMI is rather alarming.

On July 13, Matthew Karnitschnig in Berlin published a piece titled “Rust on the Rhine” in Politico. He described how “German companies are ditching the fatherland.” In Karnitschnig’s words, “Confronted by a toxic cocktail of high energy costs, worker shortages and reams of red

tape, many of Germany's biggest companies — from giants like Volkswagen and Siemens to a host of lesser-known, smaller ones — are experiencing a rude awakening and scrambling for greener pastures in North America and Asia.”

Politico has been grim about the German economy for a while. On November 10, 2022, Johanna Treeck published “Mittel-kaput? German industry stares into the abyss,” asking whether the prolonged energy crisis was causing “the beginning of the end for German industry.”

Not only manufacturing but also services are now declining. High inflation and rising interest rates are taking a toll on consumer confidence. Unemployment is rising. Once, the land of the Mittelstand — the small- and medium-sized industry that arose in the late 19th century and long powered the economy — was a world leader in innovation. That is no longer the case. In the World Intellectual Property Organization's “Global Innovation Index 2022,” Germany only ranks eighth among world economies. Three European economies — Switzerland, the UK and the Netherlands — are ranked above it.

In a nutshell, Germany is in big trouble. Why?

Russia–Ukraine war spikes inflation

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, German industry increasingly relied on cheap Russian gas. Nord Stream 1 was a lifeline for Germany and Nord Stream 2 was set to begin operations too. Then, the Russia–Ukraine War upended German industry. Post-Nazi peacenik Berlin had not expected war to break out in Europe again. Germany had not diversified its energy supplies and was caught with its pants down.

In fact, Gerhard Schröder, Germany's former chancellor, became the head of the supervisory board of Rosneft, a Russian oil giant, and was

nominated to join the board of Gazprom, Russia's state-controlled gas exporter, in his post-political career. Schröder had led the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Chancellor Olaf Scholz's party, and served as chancellor from 1998 to 2005. His reforms in the early 2000s transformed Germany from “the sick man of Europe” into the continent's economic engine.

Schröder refused to support George W. Bush's 2003 Iraq War and, in the words of *The Economist*, was a “vocal advocate of Ostpolitik, a policy of rapprochement with the eastern bloc, including the then Soviet Union, conceived in the late 1960s by Willy Brandt, another SPD chancellor.” Many damn Schröder as Putin's lobbyist today, and it is true that he has made big money from Russian energy giants. However, Schröder and many other Germans genuinely wanted to tie Russia into “an energy partnership of mutual dependence with Europe.”

All of that came to an end on February 24, 2022. Fuel, food, fertilizer and other commodity prices shot up. In particular, this supply-side shock caused inflation to skyrocket in Europe, especially because, unlike Canada and the US, the continent does not have substantial oil and gas reserves.

Germany suffered more than others even in Europe. Postwar Germany has been an idealistic nation where a strong environmentalist movement became politically powerful. After all, the Greens are currently in a coalition government with the SPD. In fact, Germany attempted a green energy transformation, the so-called *Energiewende*. As the war was stopping the supply of Russian gas, Germany was switching off all nuclear power.

Sadly for Germany, this move caused an energy scarcity. Germany simply did not produce enough renewable energy to take up the slack. This exacerbated the inflationary shock, and Germans

ended up paying three times the international average for electricity.

Inflation increased input costs for manufacturing. In parallel, when central banks raised interest rates to combat inflation, the borrowing costs for industry shot up, as did the servicing costs on debt that was not locked in under old rates. For years, German industry had gotten used to low interest rates. Just like the Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank had followed a policy of quantitative easing, which really means printing more money. This meant that the cost of capital was really cheap for companies. That cheap money era is over, and companies are scrambling to adjust to the new higher cost of capital.

Furthermore, the double whammy of increasing inflation and rising interest rates has hit consumer confidence hard. Even in the best of times, culturally Protestant Germans are savers, not spenders. Now, they are spending even less. They have more incentive to keep the money in the bank instead of spending it. Naturally, demand for goods and services is falling, and the economy is stagnating.

Chinese economy crashes, demand for German imports crashes too

In recent years, Germany has profited greatly from trade with China. After Deng Xiaoping opened up the economy in 1978, the Middle Kingdom grew spectacularly. Even as China became the factory of the world, Germany provided the machines that kept this factory running. Naturally, German exports to China boomed.

When this author traveled around the eastern seaboard of China in 2004, he met German businessmen everywhere. Almost all of them were exporting their goods to the Middle Kingdom. By the 20th century, China was Germany's most

important trading partner. Bilateral trade volumes amounted to \$237 billion (€204 billion) in 2018.

On October 24, 2019, DHL published a piece titled, "As China Sneezes, Will Germany Catch a Cold?" It posited that "China's weakening domestic economy and the ongoing trade tensions simmering between Washington and Beijing" would take a toll on the German economy.

DHL's piece turned out to be prescient. As the US-China trade war has heated up, Germany has found itself squeezed in the middle. Increasingly, China sees Germany as a US ally. So, Beijing has been discouraging German imports into China implicitly and explicitly. In the first four months of 2023, German exports fell by 11.3% as compared to last year.

German ardor for China has cooled too. The Bundesbank, Germany's renowned central bank, has warned German companies to cut exposure to China, warning that "the country's business model is in danger." No fewer than 29% of German companies import essential materials and parts from China. Rising US-China geopolitical tensions could disrupt this trade, bringing the German economy to a grinding halt.

Earlier in July, Germany's 64-page "Strategy on China" attempted to chart a new policy towards the Middle Kingdom. It states, "China has changed. As a result of this and China's political decisions, we need to **change our approach to China.**" This document goes on to say, "China is Germany's largest single trading partner, but whereas China's dependencies on Europe are constantly declining, Germany's dependencies on China have taken on greater significance in recent years." The new German strategy deems China a "systemic" rival and "accepts competition with China."

Yet it is not easy for the land of the Mittelstand to decouple from the Middle Kingdom. German

industry is still expanding in China. In July, BASF broke ground on a polyethylene plant at its seventh Verbund site in Zhanjiang, China. Even as this German manufacturing giant is investing \$10 billion (€9.4 billion) in China, it is cutting 2,600 jobs and reducing production in Germany. A slowing Chinese economy has hurt BASF this year, with the company's second-quarter net income falling to \$533.38 million (€499 million) from \$2.24 billion (€2.1 billion) in the same quarter a year earlier. When China sneezes, Germany indeed catches a cold.

Germany's dependence on China made Scholz fly all the way from Berlin to Beijing on a state visit on November 4, 2022. The chancellor took along a gaggle of German CEOs to meet President Xi Jinping and Chinese authorities. Scholz's visit was the first by a G7 leader to China in three years, and the chancellor flew back without even staying the night. Unfortunately for Germany, this visit has not yielded much in the way of results, and its new China policy has undercut Scholz's pilgrimage to Xi. The German economy now faces a China dilemma, and there are no easy choices ahead.

US protectionism hurts Germany's export-oriented economy

Since the 1980s, the champion of global free trade has suffered from deindustrialization. People in the rust belt are angry and hurt by the loss of manufacturing jobs. In part, this resentment fueled Donald Trump to the presidency. In office, Trump adopted protectionism as a means to revive American industry and repeatedly threatened tariffs on German cars. During Trump's time at the White House, trade ties between the US and the EU remained tense.

Joe Biden's presidency was supposed to change that. Instead, Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has upset America's European allies. French President Emmanuel Macron sounded the bugle

against the IRA, arguing that Europe needed an urgent response amounting to a whopping 2% of the EU's GDP. Like China, the US is now subsidizing critical sectors of its economy. After decades, the US now has a full-blown industrial policy that subsidizes semiconductors, green energy and other technologies of the future. Posh think tanks in Washington are now breathlessly trumpeting the idea of GeoTech Wars.

After China, Germany is the country most hurt by the Biden administration's new industrial policy. It has made timid Berlin ally with flamboyant Paris in calling for a joint EU response to the IRA. The Europeans argue that US subsidies tied to locally produced goods are worth \$207 billion. This disadvantages European companies, contravenes World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and further erodes the world trade order.

As a result of the new American industrial policy, German companies are finding it increasingly difficult to export to the US. Note that exports matter a great deal to Germany. They comprise 50.3% of the GDP. In contrast, exports comprise only 10.9% of the US GDP. Last year, a German CEO and a member of the Bundestag, the German parliament, complained bitterly to the author about American protectionism in two separate conversations. Both remarked that the US was kicking Germany when this loyal ally was not on its knees but on its back.

A key reason for German economic troubles is that the post-1991 order is now dead. The US championed free trade and globalization for the last three decades. After the initially painful adjustment after reunification, the German economy boomed. Fueled by cheap Russian energy, Germany became a manufacturing powerhouse and an exporting superpower. In 2012, the BBC celebrated "a country whose inhabitants work fewer hours than almost any others, whose workforce is not particularly productive and whose

children spend less time at school than most of its neighbors.”

What a difference a decade makes. Today, Germany is once again “the sick man of Europe” and The Financial Times reports a German manufacturer complaining, “everything is tired here.” In this post-globalization world, reshoring, nearshoring and friendshoring are the new buzzwords in the US. Washington, the architect of free trade and globalization, is turning its back on those ideas. Germany, which profited immensely from that system, is struggling to adapt.

Germany has its own self-inflicted wounds too

Like India and France, Germany is infamous for its red tape. There are innumerable forms to fill and boxes to tick before starting and while running any business. Approvals take too long. Environmental, labor and governance standards are unrealistically high, making entrepreneurship and business activity in Germany notoriously difficult.

Unlike India and France, the German political leadership is more candid about its economic problems. In an uncharacteristically bold speech, the mild-mannered Scholz declared in the Bundestag, his intention to “shake off the mildew of bureaucracy, risk aversion and despondency that has settled on our country over years and decades.” The trick for Scholz is to emulate Schröder and implement far-reaching reforms.

Unlike Schröder, Scholz does not command a majority in the Bundestag and is in charge of a fractious coalition, comprising the SPD, the Greens and the liberal Free Democrats. This traffic light coalition named after the colors of the three parties — red, green and yellow — has been plagued by infighting and has found it difficult to get anything done.

Meanwhile, Germany has many other problems that need to be addressed quickly. Manufacturers complain taxes and labor costs are too high. They are not only moving production to other EU members and Asia but also to the US and even the Brexit-afflicted UK. High taxation is also the reason talent hesitates from moving to Germany. In 2018, Deutsche Welle, Germany’s reputable state-owned international broadcaster, reported that if “you’re single with no kids and thinking about working in Germany” then “your tax burden will be 15 percentage points higher than the average among rich-income countries.”

In part, labor costs are high because Germany faces an acute shortage of workers. In June, the Federal Labor Agency’s annual analysis found that 200 out of about 1,200 professions surveyed had labor shortages in 2022, up from 148 in 2021. Germany is struggling to fill jobs “in nursing care, child care, the construction industry and automotive technology, along with truck drivers, architects, pharmacists and information technology specialists.” Improving labor immigration is high on the government’s agenda, but little progress has been made so far.

Germans work 1,341 hours per year, the least in the OECD. In contrast, Americans work 1,811 hours annually. Managers complain of a decline in Germany’s fabled work ethic. Many have confided to the author that the quality of candidates for Germany’s impressive apprenticeship programs has fallen significantly from even a decade ago. The Financial Times has also heard similar complaints.

For decades, much of the world has admired Germany’s dual education system. It combines vocational training with apprenticeships. This has made German labor highly skilled and its industry competitive. Now, fewer people are enrolling in vocational training and apprenticeships. In 2022,

469,000 people took up apprenticeships, approximately 100,000 fewer than in 2011.

Germany's declining demography amplifies its labor shortages. As per the Federal Statistical Office, deaths exceeded births by 327,000 in 2022 and there were just 1.53 births per woman in 2020, well short of the replacement level fertility of 2.1 births per woman. This means that Germany's population is shrinking and it simply does not have enough people to work in the various sectors of its economy. In May, Deutsche Welle published a story titled, "Germany's labor crisis is an economic time bomb." The government has admitted that it will lack seven million workers by 2035.

An aging population causes a rising pension burden as well potentially higher taxation on a shrinking labor force to support Germany's rather generous welfare state. This means that most skilled workers are likely to prefer to immigrate to countries like the US, Canada and Australia, which have the English language advantage as well.

Fair Observer's economist author Alex Gloy also points out how Germany has missed the boat in software and digitalization. In an email, he said that "the only German software company to speak of is SAP, which was founded 1972. Germany has no social media company. The only dynamic sector is delivery startups. But you have 30 of them in Berlin, right next to each other. This makes absolutely no sense."

Germany's weakness in the digital economy and digital infrastructure has made it rely on Huawei for 5G. That is an apple of discord with Uncle Sam, which wants Germany to use more expensive American infrastructure instead. The US has also pressured Germany to increase its defense expenditure for years. Germany finally agreed to do so in the light of the Russia-Ukraine War. Yet this increased expenditure will make the tax burden even heavier for Germans unless the

government makes some cuts to its overly generous welfare measures.

The German economy needs to make major reforms and painful decisions. To steal a word from Scholz's February 27, 2022 speech to the Bundestag, the economy faces a *Zeitenwende* — a historic turning point — because business as usual in the post-2022 world simply will not suffice. Sadly, Scholz's weak traffic light coalition has little appetite for tough decisions and the German economy faces a few painful years ahead.

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Elective Dictatorship: The Plot by Britain's Radical Conservatives

Alan Waring, John Broadway
July 01, 2023

Since the middle of the last decade, the British Conservative Party has become increasingly captured by a radical right-wing faction that has taken the party down a path of nationalism and populism. They have resorted to autocratic tactics to protect anti-immigrant and anti-worker policies, eroding the institutions and customs that protect British democracy under the law. Things only seem set to keep getting worse.

The coalition government led by the Conservatives, or Tories, together with the Liberal Democrats from 2010 to 2015 largely continued the traditional “One Nation Tory” style. However, a coalition of radical-right activists, both inside and outside the Conservative Party, was growing. These discontents were implacably opposed to Britain’s continuing membership in the EU and demanded that Britain quit.

Should such activists, in that period and now, be termed “fringe Conservatives,” “ultra-Conservatives,” “radical right,” or “hard right”? The authors prefer “radical right,” since it encompasses the gamut of all such rebels.

Origins of the Neo-Right in the Brexit Debate

In those years, shrill advocacy for the Brexit concept quickly emerged. Tory Members of Parliament (MPs) had founded the European Research Group (ERG) in 1993 to counter, if not eliminate, EU influence on Britain. During the coalition years, the ERG, along with its supporters in business, the media and radical-right advocacy bodies, placed intense pressure on Prime Minister David Cameron to hold a referendum on Brexit. In 2013, Cameron agreed to offer the electorate a non-binding referendum on whether Britain should remain in the EU. Since, out of some 355 Conservative MPs, the ERG’s membership and subscribers in total are never thought to have exceeded 60, the outsize influence demonstrated by their success is evident. The ERG tail has continued to wag the party dog, or try to, ever since.

Campaigning both for and against Brexit was robust. However, the overall pro-Brexit campaign was on the whole better organized, better funded, and used far more advanced digital, online and

social media methods to persuade voters. Crucially, it was also far more ruthless, employing blatantly alarmist “fake facts.” The official Vote Leave campaign also applied large-scale data mining techniques similar to those later used by Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign in the US. This was done under the direction of Dominic Cummings, whom Cameron once reportedly referred to as “a career psychopath” (see later). The 2016 vote delivered a small but clear majority preference to leave the EU.

While Brexit arguably had lofty objectives, its implementation and subsequent realities have witnessed missed targets and major long-term economic damage.

Radical-Right takeover of the Conservative Party

Since 2016, the Brexiteer/ERG agenda has morphed into a generalized radical-right agenda. The insurgents not only espouse uncontrolled free market economic priorities and harbor a revulsion for the EU, but also gleefully and noisily assert a right-wing authoritarian stance on law-and-order issues. They display an unmistakable animus against the welfare state, benefit claimants, those suffering from social and economic deprivation, immigrants, asylum seekers, ethnic and religious minorities, and victims of human rights abuses and other injustices.

Such proclivities, which pander to populist reactionary sympathies, have more in common with those of far-right parties and groups outside the Conservative Party—such as Reform UK, Reclaim, Far Right For Britain, the British National Party, the English Defence League, Britain First and other fringe groups—than with traditional party values.

Although it is somewhat less extreme, this conversion of the traditional Conservative Party is

analogous to the radical-right takeover of the US Republican Party over a similar time frame. The “new” Conservative Party of the 2020s is thus Conservative in name only. Disturbingly, much of the electorate is unlikely to be aware of this radical change from its One Nation heritage.

The authors were both One Nation Conservative supporters for over 30 years until the scale of the Brexit debacle and the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Johnson administration became clear in 2019. There is substantive evidence of a concerted and sustained effort by Britain's ruling Conservative Party since 2019 to impose permanent, illiberal, radical-right governance on the nation. Some of the top-down subversion and coercion (such as proroguing Parliament in 2019) is done openly, as if were perfectly normal and morally acceptable, while other examples involve long-term stealth against the public interest. Although One Nation Conservative MPs still exist, their numbers and influence have been all but obliterated by the dominance of the ERG, its derivatives and its fellow travelers.

Case 1: Imposing Costly Private Healthcare

As we reported in detail last year in Fair Observer, deliberate underfunding of the state National Health Service (NHS) and social care system over 13 years has brought these services into not just a state of chronic dysfunctionality but also virtual collapse. While publicly appearing to champion the NHS, in reality the long-term Conservative policy is to have free market private provision become the only viable alternative in the vast majority of cases. Their ideological imperative appears to be to place the delivery of such services under the primary control of private companies and to ensure that, in effect, state provision withers on the vine.

The NHS and private provision have had a long and largely successful symbiosis since the 1980s,

with the primacy of NHS provision assured by state funding paid for by patients via general taxation and National Insurance. Private provision contracted to the NHS has been a vital contributor. However, with the Health and Care Act 2022, the government appears to be pressing ahead with their new “healthcare salvation” model to replace the current NHS model with a direct pathway for private care companies, many of them foreign-based, to access NHS funds. Far from salvation, the impact is likely to be catastrophic for the level and amount of healthcare the NHS can provide, since NHS post-Covid recovery money and other funds will be diverted to boost the preferential use of private care.

Until now, the limit has always been that private care providers had to be awarded an NHS subcontract in order to access funds for clinical procedures. However, recent reports indicate that NHS patients are now being given a direct choice of where to obtain their clinical procedures: either private hospitals (with weeks to wait) or NHS hospitals with months or even years to wait. This choice decision is now taken at the Integrated Care Board (ICB) level, much lower down the managerial hierarchy than previously and apparently without regard to budgetary limits and fair distribution of funds.

Whilst this sounds like good news for patients, the cost differential between private and NHS is huge, and some ICBs have already spent their annual budget as a result of this new relaxation. The NHS patients budget—worth about £200 billion (around \$250 billion) per year and funded by tax monies and National Insurance contributions—is now unprotected and vulnerable to profiteering by private corporations. Ultimately, the public will pay the price out of their own pockets via additional taxation and private medical insurance premiums. Speed of provision is likely to improve for those who can access it. However, the new system does not guarantee that private

clinical provision itself will be superior to NHS provision, nor does it guarantee that affluent patients or those with private medical insurance will not be given preferential treatment.

The Tories have more or less acknowledged that the high likelihood of electoral defeat in 2024, their long-term rundown of the NHS, their drawn-out reluctance to reach a negotiated pay and conditions settlement with exasperated NHS staff, and an accelerated policy push for private healthcare have all merged into what some argue is a deliberate “scorched earth” mess to hand over to an incoming opposition government.

Case 2: Flagrant Attacks on the Judiciary, Civil Service, and Human Rights

The law is under attack by the radical right, which is trampling over the public interest and human rights. For example, in 2019 the Conservative government tried to prorogue (temporarily close) Parliament for five weeks to facilitate executive processes without scrutiny. The Supreme Court unanimously held that this action was unlawful, as it would have prevented Parliament from supervising the executive. Since then, the Conservative government has vowed to put a stop to what it regards as “judicial interference” in its governing activities.

Determined to push through its political agenda unhindered by judicial scrutiny, the Tories are proceeding in 2023 with legislation to (1) automatically and rapidly deport asylum seekers while denying their access to legal representation or appeal, contrary to international law and UN Convention (more specifically, to deport them to Rwanda—a destination with a highly dubious human rights record—if they cannot be returned rapidly to their country of origin or last known country), and (2) curb the powers of the Supreme Court and the judiciary to intervene in this or other controversies. The Public Order Act 2023, for

example, changes the fundamental right to public protest to one of limited freedom, with police making preemptive arrests on suspicion of a protester’s intent.

In June 2023, the Parliamentary Privileges Committee (with a majority of Conservative MP members) found that former Prime Minister Boris Johnson deliberately lied on several occasions to Parliament—a cardinal sin—and to the Committee. He was disingenuous in his evidence to the Committee by denying that he had many times broken COVID social distancing rules: the so-called Partygate Scandal. The report was scathing in its conclusions. Johnson, adopting a blusteringly Trump-like response, made wild and derogatory allegations about the Committee and individual members, making himself look more like a spoiled, self-absorbed brat than a former prime minister.

The parliamentary vote on the report resulted in a huge majority in favor of its acceptance (354 to 7), with House Leader Penny Mordaunt the only Cabinet minister attending. With dignity and clarity, she justified clearly why the report should be accepted. Many now hope that Johnson’s humiliation may signal an end to his style-over-substance brand of politics in Britain. After years of his buffoonery, charm and dishonesty, the public wants grown-ups as political leaders.

The Cabinet also sought to block certain judicial investigations by Baroness Heather Carol Hallett, a retired Court of Appeal judge. Hallett serves as the chair of the Cabinet’s own official Partygate inquiry into Johnson’s possibly unlawful social distancing conduct and subsequent lying to Parliament. In addition, the government has sought to impose a Cabinet override on the House of Lords (the upper chamber of Parliament) to prevent objections and protective modifications to its illegal Migration Bill. Subjugation of and contempt for the judiciary, as well as Parliament,

has become a cause célèbre for this radical-right regime.

Since 2019, Tory government ministers and MPs have frequently attacked their own civil servants, variously accusing them of disloyalty, laziness and obstruction both of government policies and of the ministers' determination to reform the Civil Service. For example, Jacob Rees-Mogg, the former Cabinet Office Minister and unashamed champion of the radical right, referred to Foreign Office officials as "pampered panjandrums" who "prefer to idle away their hours." Justice Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab also blamed his enforced resignation for bullying on an alleged conspiracy by civil servants.

Conservative anger has been directed at what ministers have called "The Blob," whereby they assert that senior civil servants have closed ranks to obstruct the government's agenda, even accusing them of supporting political opposition parties. What this government wants is to make civil servants its executive subordinates, to be its absolute obedient drones, rather than fulfill their traditional role as "honest brokers" and "devil's advocates" trying to ensure that draft policies and legislation are lawful, feasible and as low-risk as possible, while steering ministers safely towards implementing their policies.

Unlike in some other countries, British civil servants are not political appointees. They are state employees whose work and posts normally transcend each change of political administration and thereby help to ensure governmental continuity and stability. Their overriding allegiance is to the Crown (i.e., the constitutional head of state) and not to any particular political administration; they are to remain politically neutral in their work for ministers of the day. Authoritarian Tories refuse to acknowledge this

inconvenient subtlety and seem determined to remove it permanently.

Case 3: Cancellation of Inconvenient Expert Opinion

The Conservative government's Cabinet Office has been accused of operating a political blacklist introduced in 2022 against acknowledged subject experts whom the Cabinet Office believes do not share the government's views.

The government is now vetting such specialists by, among other things, screening their posts over the past 3-5 years on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn for "criticism of government officials or policy." Such selective politicization and removal of inconvenient expert information and advice may result in the failure of decision-makers failing to improve their work. As a Times leader comment noted, these rules "are scandalously vague and flimsy" and "were never debated in Parliament nor publicly announced."

The former Cabinet Office Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg is credited with introducing the new rules, with the Times article headlined "Rees-Mogg's Blacklist is Positively Soviet." Others liken it to the US McCarthyist political blacklists of the late 1940s and 1950s: "Are you, or have you ever been, disrespectful to British Conservative Party policy or personnel?"

Case 4: National Impoverishment Caused by Tory Recklessness

Demands for pay raises in the UK public sector have risen on an unprecedented scale since 2022, with workers inflamed by domestic energy bills rising by 200% or more and double-digit annual percentage cost of living increases. Some basic foodstuff prices too have more than doubled since early 2022.

NHS doctors are fighting for a 30-35% increase just to neutralize the claimed fall in their salary value over the past decade. Nurses, ambulance drivers and ancillary staff, schoolteachers, and many other sectors have similarly high wage demands with similar justifications. The Royal College of Nursing, the UK's largest nursing union, is on strike for the first time in its 100-year history. Large-scale strikes have escalated in the face of the government's various offers typically capped at some 5-7%.

Government ministers are accused of demanding that public sector workers should, in effect, personally subsidize government coffers, and learn to budget and manage their meager personal finances better. One radical-right Tory MP (formerly of the Labour Party!) and Deputy Party Chairman, Lee Anderson, has even scoffed at the reality of significant numbers of public sector workers now reliant on food banks and charities and suggested that they could easily feed themselves on 30p (or 38¢) per day! Even some armed forces personnel are reportedly using food banks.

Another ERG luminary, Liz Truss, the shortest-lived British Prime Minister in history (44 days in 2022), disgraced and forced to resign by her catastrophic "growth by corporate tax cuts" policy that nearly collapsed the British pound, believes that poor people would somehow benefit quickly from the "trickle-down effect" of corporate tax cuts. Neither she nor her successor Rishi Sunak has ever publicly acknowledged that her ignorance of basic national economics and her ideologically driven certitudes recklessly damaged the immediate and long-term wealth and prosperity of the entire population. Emergency corrective measures alone are estimated to have cost taxpayers over £30 billion (\$38 billion).

Reckless endangerment, resulting from ignorance, incompetence, self-interest above

national interest, and breathtakingly naive ideological certitudes, has been the overriding hallmark of the past 13 years of Conservative rule.

A Collapse of Moral Standards in Public Life

There has been widespread evasion by Tory MPs and ministers of ethical standards in public life, established as a formal code by the Wicks Committee in 2001. The current government has been beset by a culture of sleaze similar to that which engulfed the Tory government in the 1990s, when the term "Tories-and-sleaze" became a national catchphrase. The following examples illustrate the breadth of the scandals since 2019 alone:

— Owen Patterson, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland: improper paid lobbying of government on behalf of a food company; forced to resign).

— Nadhim Zahawi, former Conservative Party Chairman: evasion of millions of pounds in tax liabilities; forced to resign chairmanship and from government.

— Baroness Mone, Conservative Peer: alleged receipt into offshore accounts of £29 million (\$37 million) in bribes for facilitating a contract for major COVID-related supplies with commercial supplier PPE Medpro; forced to suspend herself from House of Lords; under investigation by National Crime Agency.

— Boris Johnson, former Prime Minister: multiple scandals e.g., (1) an £800,000 (\$1 million) loan guarantee for himself while Prime Minister, facilitated by Richard Sharp, shortly before Johnson recommended him for the BBC Chairman post (Sharp failed to declare to the BBC a conflict of interest and resigned his BBC chairmanship); (2) controversy over the scale of costs for internal redecoration of the 10 Downing

Street prime ministerial residence and the source of funds to pay for it; (3) the Partygate scandal involving multiple staff parties hosted or attended by Johnson at Downing Street contrary to strict Covid protection rules, and then whether he lied to or misled Parliament about this.

— Scott Benton: accused of paid lobbying of ministers on behalf of the gambling industry and leaking confidential information.

Other Tory MPs have been accused of sexual harassment, sexual assault or rape, including some convictions and jail sentences: Charlie Elphicke, Julian Knight, Andrew Griffiths, Christopher Pincher and David Warburton, and Imran Khan.

A catalog of bullying cases has included Tory ministers (e.g., Gavin Williamson, Dominic Raab) mistreating civil servants, as confirmed by independent inquiries and forced resignations. Such “right of abuse” prerogatives are positively feudal. This bullying trait even extended to particular ministerial advisers, most notably Dominic Cummings, who was appointed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson as his Chief of Staff. The rise of Cummings is profiled by Parker. Waring’s profile describes Cummings as someone who has undoubted intellectual skills but also presents as “a hyper-authoritarian, driven, fixated, intellectual narcissist ... a great believer in himself, his ideas, and his self-certified superior intelligence and ... very disparaging of those he considers intellectual weaklings or who might attenuate or interfere with his mission.” It should be noted that Cummings was neither an elected MP nor a civil service employee, but rather a contracted consultant. Nevertheless, Cummings adopted a forceful, and by all accounts overbearing and contemptuous, stance towards Cabinet Office staffers, civil servants in ministries and, indeed, MPs and even Cabinet ministers.

Cummings clearly held many in *terrorem* and apparently was not averse to physical violence, such as the reported attack in 1999 on a former senior official of the Confederation of British Industry. As the leading adviser to Prime Minister Johnson, he created a major scandal by appearing to flagrantly ignore Covid protection rules that applied to every citizen and to which he himself contributed as Cabinet adviser. The scandal went from bad to worse as Cummings not only refused to apologize but brazenly argued in effect that he had been a paragon of virtue and had done nothing wrong. The court of British public opinion rejected such obvious sophistry. The damage to public trust and confidence was evident via a huge slump for the Conservatives in the polls. Eventually, after further misconduct, Johnson decided that Cummings had to go.

Boris “BoJo” Johnson, who took over as Prime Minister in 2019, was very much a political opportunist rather than a radical-right zealot. Reliant on buffoonery, photo-op flim-flam and the chutzpah that charmed many people, policy and strategy were never Johnson’s strong points. So, he left to Cummings such matters as “Get Brexit Done,” radical subjugation of the civil service and removal of independent judicial scrutiny of government. To many, it appeared as if Cummings was PM and Johnson was his lapdog.

Cummings did not go quietly in November 2020. True to form, he quickly launched into an ongoing vituperative onslaught against Johnson via online blogs and social media. Cummings’ powerful position is gone, but he remains an isolated and embittered radical-right fanatic.

Radical-Right Fellow Travellers

Some on the radical right exist within the Conservative Party (e.g., the ERG), while others operate externally in a variety of more hard-line nationalist parties and far-right entities, e.g.,

Reform UK, Reclaim, Britain First, Patriotic Alternative, and Far Right For Britain. Some radical-right supporters and agitators transcend the distinction between the Conservative Party and far-right nationalist organizations. The National Conservatism (NC) organization, for example, enjoys vocal support from Conservative Party Cabinet Members and MPs, particularly ERG members, as well as supporters of Reform UK and other parties. NC is in revolt against what it regards as a weak Conservative government, its neo-liberal economic and global markets policies, its “soft” immigration policies, and other “liberal” social policies. Three current or former Cabinet Ministers (Braverman, Gove and Rees-Mogg) spoke at the NC’s two-day conference in May 2023.

The NC identifies closely with the US-based Edmund Burke Foundation, which strongly backs the Republican Party and big business. This foundation exudes authoritarian nationalism, right-wing moralizing certitudes and white Christian supremacy. Its high-profile radical- and far-right nationalist supporters include Giorgia Meloni, the Italian premier, Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian premier, and Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News presenter—all of whom have attained notoriety for their harsh and uncompromising “illiberal democracy” comments.

A number of senior Tories (e.g., MPs Lee Anderson, Priti Patel, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Marco Longhi) have been variously linked to such far-right organizations as the anti-Islam group Turning Point UK. Other Tory MPs also alleged to have far-right sympathies include Bob Blackman, Nadine Dorries, and Dehenna Davison.

The fanatical Lee Anderson, MP, has an abrasive and insulting style, e.g., his conduct towards the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in a parliamentary select committee hearing, and his dismissive let-them-eat-cake rhetoric towards

impoverished public sector workers. Home Secretary Suella Braverman with her florid rhetoric has led the anti-immigrant, anti-asylum, anti-woke “culture war.” There is some irony in the fact that her jibes about “woke political correctness” are themselves a truth-is-what-we-say-it-is expression of political correctness. By constantly blaming all Britain’s problems on a so-called woke culture (i.e., seemingly anyone who dares disagree with her radical ideas and policies), she is in effect blaming the 56.4% of the electorate who did not vote Tory at the last General Election. Sneering and jeering at voters is a bold tactic indeed!

Populist anxieties about thousands of asylum seekers entering the UK by boat have led to such spine-chilling rhetoric as “let them drown” or “send them to Rwanda”—shades of the infamous Madagascar plan, perhaps? Few would disagree that there is indeed a control problem and that organized human trafficking criminals continue to challenge and thwart UK authorities’ efforts to stop them. However, the “solution” proposed by Suella Braverman and her predecessor Home Secretary, Priti Patel, to the problem of cross-Channel small-boat asylum seekers is grotesque: treating them as if they were a priori criminals, locking them up without trial or access to lawyers or the courts, and then swiftly deporting them to Rwanda in Central Africa with no right of appeal and a permanent UK expulsion order against them. These two Home Secretaries have proclaimed loudly that such treatment is inherently humane and compassionate, and that it is compliant with international law and the UN Convention on asylum, despite the UNHCR bluntly challenging that assertion.

Their grinning faces and glinting eyes when advocating the “Rwanda solution” have betrayed a lack of empathy or remorse and an unmistakable glee, almost as if they actually enjoy inflicting as much harm and distress as possible on unfortunate

souls. Understandably, puzzled observers wonder if these particular ministers may be suffering from some form of pathological personality disorder.

Mass Political Brainwashing via Internet and Social Media

Some social media outlets have been criticized as being detrimental to democracy. According to Ronald Deibert, “The world of social media is more conducive to extreme, emotionally charged, and divisive types of content than it is to calm, principled considerations of competing or complex narratives.” Mari K. Eder points to failures of the Fourth Estate that have allowed outrage to be disguised as news, contributed to citizen apathy in confronting falsehoods and engendered further distrust in democratic institutions.

However, as Ethan Zuckerman notes, social media presents the opportunity to inform more people, amplify voices and allow for an array of diverse voices to speak. Social media has allowed vast new sectors of society, especially young people, to be engaged politically.

Politicians of all persuasions are using social media, whether via written statements or, more commonly, direct-to-camera, talking-heads or controlled interviews. These are infrequently shared by other outlets; while they address a choir of faithful supporters and an echo chamber of fellow travelers, such content and messages avoid refutation by others. Among UK parties, the Conservative Party has become relatively expert in this kind of use of social media to garner electoral support.

All such attempts at mass indoctrination and manipulation, in essence, are merely following the acknowledged father of such principles, the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. His strategy was to propagate false reality and false assertions by engaging the mass German public unwittingly

in the process via radio, cinema, newspapers, public meetings, rallies and cultural organizations. He was enthusiastic about the deliberate use of lies for political objectives. The end-justifies-the-means character of the past few years of Tory government is eerily similar. Goebbels would probably have been ecstatic about the way these latter-day disciples put the latest technology to use. Regrettably, opposition parties, notably Labour, are also rapidly moving towards using similar methods.

The Damage is Ongoing

The latest Corruption Perceptions International Index report shows that the UK fell to its lowest-ever position in 2022. The report observes that this sharp fall reflects a recent decline in standards in government and insufficient controls on the abuse of public office.

With its sleaze and corruption and its reckless endangerment of the economy and healthcare, the extant radical Conservative government has imposed an increasingly harsh, intolerant and authoritarian regime on the population and on democratic institutions such as the independent judiciary. Unchecked, such conduct is bound to accelerate. Liberal democracy, already becoming illiberal, will drift into authoritarian diktat. Government propaganda and public brainwashing, seeking to normalize its dreadful abuses, grow apace.

The strident dogma and stealthy maneuverings of Conservative leaders, and the overall radical-right caucus demanding permanent radical-right governance, have already laid the groundwork for what would effectively be a coup establishing an elective dictatorship. The plot appears to be underway, whether the Conservative government and party remain intact and under radical-right domination or the party is rent asunder by infighting and joins the motley bunch of radical-

and far-right fringe parties that are already vying for supremacy.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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LATIN AMERICA

Milei Or Massa: Who Was the Best Choice for Argentina?

Helder Ferreira do Vale
December 30, 2023

The 2023 presidential elections put Argentinean voters before a difficult test: to choose between a radical erratic change or the maintenance of a path that proved nationally harmful. Javier

Milei's ultimate victory came about due to discontent over rampant inflation and government corruption. The ultra-right gained seats in the National Congress as well, rapidly shifting Argentina's political dynamics.

On November 19, Argentineans chose their next president amidst unparalleled political tensions. Javier Milei won with 56% of the vote against Finance Minister Sergio Massa's 44%. The two candidates' views reflect the global trend of extreme political polarization and democratic decline: libertarian capitalism, advocated by Milei, and state interventionism, supported by Massa. It seems Argentina's political future will be based on the former. Though the election has passed, it is worthwhile to discuss the data that led to the final vote. By reviewing it, the nation's future will be better explained.

Massa was the Peronist, centrist candidate. On October 22, he won the first round of presidential elections, as did his Union for the Fatherland coalition. He earned 36% of the votes while Milei, the candidate of the Liberty Advances coalition, secured 30%. Former Minister of Security Patricia Bullrich, from the center-right Together for Change coalition, came in third place with 23.8%.

The October vote included legislative elections as well. Approximately 50% of the lower house's seats (127/257) and 33% of the upper house's (24/72) were up for grabs. In the upper house, Massa's Union for the Fatherland captured ten seats, Milei's Liberty Advances obtained eight, and Bullrich's Together for Change claimed four. Similarly, in the lower house, Massa's coalition won the most seats, 58 altogether, but Milei's coalition followed with 35 and Bullrich's coalition got 32.

With these numbers, the center-right and Peronist coalitions lost several seats to the ultra-right. Union for the Fatherland could not secure the majority in both congressional chambers. However, it remains the coalition with the most seats in the lower house and senate. It has 102 deputies in the former and 33 senators in the latter.

Milei is a disruptive outsider who ran his campaign on unrealistic ideas. He often says that his dead dog gives him political advice and that he is God's emissary. He uses strong language in his political speeches, cursing rivals and even Pope Francis.

Unlike the anti-establishment Milei, Massa kept a conciliatory image. Nonetheless, he was frequently portrayed as an unreliable politician whose political commitments were highly opportunistic. For example, he started his political career in anti-Peronist groups, though he eventually became a Peronist. He served as chief of staff for the leftist President Cristina Kirchner from 2008–2009, despite his hostility toward her. Needless to say, his positions and actions have been inconsistent.

Argentina is following the populist political path towards democratic decline from which it will be difficult to change course. This fate was likely before the final election, and the results have only confirmed the trend.

How the Peronists lost the race

From his position in the ruling Peronist party, Massa used the establishment to mobilize voters. Participation was low with a turnout rate of around 74%. This is the lowest participation in a presidential election since Argentina returned to democracy in 1983. Providing incentives might have helped Massa win the presidency, as he relied on a large group of Peronist voters that feared an ultra-right government.

One of Massa's strategies was increasing public spending to win over more votes. Even though this strategy was likely to worsen an already ailing economy — triple-digit inflation is a serious problem — Argentinean voters have a history of rewarding extravagant governments. On the other hand, Milei's appeal for a considerable number of Argentineans rested on his promise to remove the state from public life.

Despite their radically different visions and proposals on government, both candidates have one commonality: They are both anti-Kirchnerists.

Kirchnerism is a tendency within the establishment Peronist Party. Since the Peronist Party's founding in 1949, it has become Argentina's political motor. The party was born from the populist-left mass movement led by Juan Perón (who served three presidential terms from 1946–55 and 1973–74). Recent Peronist politics has been dominated by Presidents Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015). The Kirchners were famous for their aggressive redistribution policies and for nationalizing businesses. However, they are also connected to economic unorthodoxy and corruption scandals.

Under the Kirchners' leadership, Argentina's economic growth has been unstable. This is because the government chose to halt its international debt payment. This macroeconomic mismanagement produced massive inflation and has been responsible for, among other effects, this year's sharp rise in poverty. More than 40% of Argentineans live below the poverty line.

Contemporary Argentinean politics are defined by the effort to preserve a basic but substantial welfare system, and to reimagine a route for sustainable economic growth. Over the past 20 years, Argentina has achieved these objectives but turned into a nation prone to crises. This is

especially true following the peso's depreciation in 2001, which resulted in a foreign debt default payment.

So, the time was ripe for an anti-Kircherist faction to arise within Peronism. Massa represented this tendency. Yet Kirchnerism also created the possibility for a far-right candidate to exploit voter resentment. Until recently, Argentina was immune to ultra-right ideas, but now Milei has tapped into that potential.

Milei's rise as a popular candidate can be attributed to two factors: an ongoing economic crisis and rampant corruption. Argentina's inflation rate has soared in the last two years and shows no sign of stopping. There are significant social ramifications to this severe economic situation. As for corruption, former president and current vice president Cristina Kirchner has been involved in several corruption probes. She was even sentenced to six years in prison in one of them. Kirchner's scandals damaged the public's faith in her and her fading administration.

How the voting played out on November 19

On November 19, voters decided whether the establishment or anti-establishment strain of anti-Kirchnerism would triumph.

Despite Massa's victory in the first round, most polls suggested Milei would win the electoral round. The predictions, however, were inconsistent. One indicated that Massa had 45.4% of the vote while Milei had 43.1%. In a different poll, Milei led with 48.5% support and Massa appeared behind with 44.7%. Unpredictability was a dominant pattern in this year's race.

Ultimately, the election was not decided by voters who chose Massa or Milei, but by those who voted differently. Many voters supported Patricia Bullrich, Juan Schiaretti and Myriam

Bregmant. Some annulled their votes altogether. There are 9.5 million people who chose these options, most of whom were concentrated in the province and city of Buenos Aires, as well as the Cordoba province.

One of Milei's key assets for winning the race was Bullrich. Only a few days after the first round ended, Bullrich declared her support for Milei, boosting his candidacy considerably. An opinion poll shows that 47% of her voters migrated to Milei; only 9% switched to Massa.

Another candidate who transferred most of his votes to Milei is Schiaretti, who obtained 6.73% of the votes in the first round. He ran his campaign defending the Argentinean judicial system, which was under attack as the corruption probes against Cristina Kirchner advanced. Based on the previously mentioned poll, approximately 35% of Schiaretti's votes were transferred to Milei while 26% went to Massa.

The substantial shift of votes from the center-right parties to Milei may relate to one simple reason: His and Bullrich's voters share an ideological position on the state's economic role and social-moral concerns. One poll shows that 71% of Bullrich's backers support the use of private companies to provide services, and 73% of Milei's agree.

But the parties were not the only factors in the election. In a federal democracy like Argentina, political power is tied to provincial politics. As such, provincial dynamics and preferences matter for the presidential elections.

In the first round, Milei won in ten districts. The province of San Luis yielded him the highest proportion of votes, with almost 43.4% of the ballot. Nevertheless, Milei received most of his votes — approximately 2.5 million — from the city and province of Buenos Aires. Córdoba,

Milei's electoral stronghold, yielded his second-highest vote count from any district. His performance in Santa Cruz — 36.3%, only 1.5% less than Massa — is remarkable, as that province is the third-largest electoral college in the country and has been a Peronist powerhouse.

In the second round, Milei won in 21 of the 23 districts, showing an impressive ability to convert votes across the country. Although he lost in the biggest electoral district, the province of Buenos Aires, he won in districts with great electoral weight. These included Córdoba, Santa Fé, the Federal Capital and Mendoza.

Massa performed better in the first round than the second round and August's primary elections. While he won only three provinces in the second round, he won in 13 of the 24 districts in the first round. His most significant territorial win came from the province of Santiago del Estero. But Buenos Aires, both the province and the city, provided most of Massa's votes.

Argentina's polarized, uncertain future

Now, the dust of the election campaign has settled and Milei is the victor. But the air is still not clear enough to see very far ahead.

One thing that is certain is that Argentina's democratic decline is continuing, slowly but steadily. Beyond the polarization seen in the heated campaign rhetoric and dynamics, the 2023 elections brought about important changes to Argentina's political environment. The far-right rose and gained a significant number of congressional seats, positioning them as a relevant force in the chamber.

The governability of Argentina was at stake this election season. Milei has won the presidency, but he cannot govern alone. An Argentinean president needs the support of both provincial governors and

of the legislature to push policies through. Milei lacks the political and technical ability to carry out his dubious proposals, including policies of dollarization and dismantling the central bank. Still, Massa's promises of expanding the welfare state would also have been difficult to implement, given how persistently insolvent Argentina is.

Milei has taken drastic measures since taking office. He has devalued the Argentinean peso by 50% and fired 5,000 public employees. But these measures were taken by executive decree, without the need for legislative intervention. On December 27, Milei proposed a package of laws that would give the president legislative powers to freely privatize state companies, eliminate taxes, change electoral laws and reduce public pensions, among other measures.

It remains to be seen whether Milei will be successful in pushing the legislation through. Already, unions are organizing and calling for a mass strike in opposition to Milei's proposals. Undoubtedly, there will be changes in Argentina. But we still do not know how significant they will be or how fast they will occur.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]

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Sanctions and Internet Access Will Fail to Promote Regime Change

Ted McCarthy
December 23, 2023

US policymakers have long assumed that sanctions on trade and promoting access to the Internet would lead oppressed people to change their governments. More often than not, they provoke harsh crackdowns and create little substantial benefit.

How does one kill a zombie — especially if the zombie is a stubborn and pernicious idea?

Paul Krugman wrote last year how “Zombie Reaganomics” continues to infect the brains of Republican politicians in the United States. I’d like here to promote two additional policy notions to similar “zombie” status. First, the idea that widespread sanctions can drive regime change under autocratic governments. And second, that expanding Internet access can achieve the same.

Of course, these two levers of political control appear quite different on the surface. The Internet is a positive force in the world allowing for increased communication and information — something I do believe, despite my pessimistic views to follow. Meanwhile, sanctions, as even one conservative-libertarian think tank recently argued, are increasingly seen as both “ineffective and immoral” means of punishing governments deemed unsavory.

But some policymakers and pundits today, especially in the United States, seem to think both

increasing Internet availability and sanctions can still do good for the citizens of their target countries. See for instance, US Senators Marco Rubio and Rick Scott. They recently co-sponsored Senate bills and amendments urging the US to fund expanded Internet access on the island of Cuba. Scott and Rubio carefully positioned this advocacy as coming from a place of care for the wellbeing of the Cuban people. In December 2020, Rubio issued a statement demanding the US work harder “to protect the fundamental rights of Cubans.”

Yet only six months later, the same senator urged the Biden administration to increase sanctions against the Cuban government — in effect, against the very same people whose “fundamental rights” he says he wants to protect.

How is it possible for one person to both wish to expand Cuban sanctions and Cuban Internet access? Presumably, Rubio hopes these things will magically lead to more freedom for Cubans, despite mounting evidence neither can do so. I believe there’s a Cranberries song for that.

These zombie ideas have proven false nearly everywhere in the world, but there’s a great deal of evidence this is especially true for Cuba. So let’s separately examine the impacts of the Internet and sanctions on autocratic governments, and then see how the two have played out together in Cuba over the past several years to disastrous effect.

Comparison shopping

An idea has persisted throughout the politics, media and tech space for decades that the Internet inevitably leads to democracy in places with autocratic regimes. As Thomas Friedman wrote in his 1999 book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*:

On the Internet people are ... uploading and downloading ideologies. In a few years,

every citizen of the world will be able to comparison shop between his country and his own government and the one next door.

Since Friedman wrote these words, the Internet has expanded and changed in too many ways to count. The hope that social media and the Internet might lead to enduring political change has changed with it, as can be seen most prevalently in the hopeful run-up to, and then subsequent disappointment, of the variously named Twitter, Facebook, Arab Spring and WikiLeaks “revolutions.” Entire books have been published examining how the Internet has helped fuel protest movements and then, more often than not, helped repressive regimes crush them — and then allowed these same regimes to strengthen grips on power, tightening government palms over civilian mouths.

In fact, as James Griffiths argues in his book *The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet*, US rhetoric about Internet freedoms has even helped strengthen autocratic governments by validating claims of US imperialism. Griffiths points to a situation in 2010 in which the government of China pointed at US efforts in Iran’s “Twitter Revolution” to justify its own Internet controls. He cites Yu Wanli, an expert on US–China relations, who explained to US diplomats that pro-Internet rhetoric, like that of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “empowered the censors, ‘who could now plausibly argue that the United States was explicitly using the Internet as a tool for regime change.’”

We can see another example of Internet evangelistic backfire in the deployment of ZunZuneo, a Twitter-like app secretly created and deployed in Cuba by the United States Agency for International Development. After the app made headlines, NPR asked, “Was ZunZuneo to Promote Free Speech or Destabilize Cuba?” To some extent, the answer doesn’t matter — either way,

the incident created a credible intervention the Cuban government could point to in making claims of US imperialism. As Jon Lee Anderson wrote, “Episodes like ZunZuneo will only make the Cuban security state more paranoid and more fearful of opening up, and the losers will be the Cuban people.”

As for sanctions, a mounting body of evidence shows they tend to succeed in anything but preserving the “fundamental rights” of citizens. As the Center for Economic and Policy Research documented extensively in a recent paper, 30 separate studies have found sanctions negatively affect “per capita income to poverty, inequality, mortality, and human rights.”

A 2018 UN estimate found the US embargo of Cuba in particular had cost the Cuban economy a phenomenal \$130 billion over the course of nearly sixty years, a figure which has surely risen since. William LeoGrande, professor and former dean of the American University’s School of Public Affairs, writes that the embargo is “the oldest and most comprehensive US economic sanctions regime against any country in the world,” and that it “has never been effective at achieving its principal purpose: forcing Cuba’s revolutionary regime out of power or bending it to Washington’s will.” My co-host and I discussed the ongoing failure of America’s Cuba sanctions on our podcast with policy expert Rob Morris, who also discussed the devastating cruelty and failure of sanctions around the world earlier in the year.

To be clear, I’m no apologist for the Cuban government. But it is evident that, as we approach the 65th year of the island’s US sanctions without any semblance of the regime change they first promised, we should finally find a way to retire them.

A case study of Cuba

Now with the Internet, we can see the reality of the world... before it was just Cuba, but now we see on the Internet, England, France. We think 'what the f---?!' People are unhappy.

I heard this in Havana in May 2023 from Elizabeth, a waitress in her twenties. And I heard similar attitudes from others I met too — sentiments much different from my first visit to Cuba, seven years earlier. When I told a young man, José, that it was my second visit to the island, he replied with a resigned tone. “Oh, so you know. Things were much better then.”

What could have led to such a visible change in Cuban attitudes toward life on the island — a change large enough to allow Cubans to share their negative opinions of the country with me, a visiting stranger, despite their government’s intolerance of dissent?

A few salient events are worth noting:

— In 2017, Donald Trump entered the US White House and promptly reversed much of the economic normalization pursued by Obama. Joe Biden entered the US presidency in 2021 and has maintained most (though not all) of Trump’s Cuba policies.

— In 2019, Cuba’s state-run telecommunications company, ETECSA, finally began allowing the purchase of 4G data. This marked a crucial opening in Internet access for the average Cuban, which until then had primarily been confined to high-cost, low-speed wifi hotspots in public parks.

— In 2020, the Covid pandemic wreaked havoc on Cuba’s tourism industry and economy. This was soon followed by a sharp currency

devaluation, soaring food prices and one of the highest inflation rates in Latin America.

— On July 11, 2021, Cubans staged the largest protest movement on the island in decades — protests which locals say were fueled by social media, an idea corroborated by Freedom House. In response, the Cuban government arrested over 1,000 protesters, killed at least one and “disappeared” and detained hundreds for weeks. Internet access on the island was also completely shut for days after the July 11 protests.

So, we can observe all the elements here of the zombie ideas that some say should lead to protest and regime change under a government traditionally averse to it — strict sanctions, a rapid deterioration of living conditions, and rapid expansion of the Internet and information access.

All the underlying conditions are there. But where’s the change?

It’s not as though Cubans are naïve. I was told by a man working as a Havana tour guide, “Cuba is not like China, where they have the technology to control the Internet. If the Internet cuts out when you’re talking with a friend, the first thing you wonder is, ‘Where is the protest now?’”

But they also see what the government is doing, arresting and otherwise “disappearing” dissenters. And so many I met, rather than endanger their lives and livelihoods by continuing to try to change the government, are opting instead to do what many other rational people would in their same situations: leave.

“I don’t want the same life as my parents,” Elizabeth told me. She said she’d like to go to Mexico first, and then “maybe somewhere else.”

José, who recognized how much worse things had become in the country since 2016, told me he has a grandfather in Spain and would like to get a

“red [European] passport” within the year. Then he’d be gone too.

So we can see in Cuba a seemingly tight and tragic causal circle:

1. Sanctions immiserate a civilian population.
2. Internet access helps the population recognize and share their sense of immiseration, and perhaps even bind together to protest conditions.
3. The civilian government shows an unwillingness to tolerate this shared sense of immiseration and protest and works to quash dissent.
4. Members of the population who are able, rather than risk life and livelihood trying to change a government unwilling to change, give up and decide to leave.

There’s a fifth, and especially tragic, link in this chain. At least in the situation of Cuba, record numbers of refugees have fled to the US in recent years — surely at least in part because of the sanctions that have helped make life untenable there and the Internet that has raised awareness of this general untenability. We can see the same Rubio who has pushed for sanctions and increased Internet in Cuba to “protect the fundamental rights of Cubans” also pushing for their exile and working to block access to Cuban refugee benefits, ultimately pushing the US government to forcibly expel large numbers of the Cuban refugee population back to Cuba — back to the government and country they were trying so hard to leave.

A failed tactic

Does Internet access ever lead to regime change? Sadly, the answer seems to be no. Or at least not yet, and not in the long term.

We can see this in Cuba, as I’ve outlined above. The Internet can perhaps even help protests bond together, but the idea that protest movements will change governments hinges on an assumption of democratic responsiveness. And the places where policymakers and pundits focus their hopes on Internet-driven revolution are almost always countries lacking just this — indeed, a dearth of democratic responsiveness is the very reason for much of the focus on Internet and sanctions in those places to begin with.

This is perhaps no better summed up than by Elizabeth, the waitress I met in Havana this spring. Because of the Internet, she says, “the government has less power over the people.” But when I asked if she thought the government would change as a result, she rolled her eyes, and stifled a laugh. “Change anything? No!”

I, in fact, largely agree with Friedman’s claim over 20 years ago that the Internet will allow “every citizen of the world ... to comparison shop between his country and his own government and the one next door.” But it’s evident from all that’s occurred since that this “comparison shopping” won’t usually lead to new and better governments for those citizens, it only means they’ll either grumble through it or leave that “store”, their country, for another, better one. And then hope that country doesn’t deport them.

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The Secrets Behind Brazil's Military and the January 8 Insurrection

Karin Schmalz
November 18, 2023

On January 8, 2023, rioters stormed Brazil's capital in support of the defeated President Jair Bolsonaro. This was not just a random occurrence. In reality, the riot was driven by Brazil's armed forces, an institution that has held on to power and privilege despite the end of the military dictatorship in 1985.

On October 30, 2022, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro lost a hard-fought bid for reelection. His supporters rioted throughout December and gathered in camps outside army bases. On January 8, 2023, they staged an attempted coup d'état. The world watched, flabbergasted, as 9,000 rioters invaded the Three Powers Plaza, the heart of Brazil's democracy in Brasília. They looted and vandalized buildings representing the three branches of government: Planalto Palace (seat of the presidency), the Senate and the Supreme Federal Court.

For the global audience, it looked like a hastily made copy of the invasion of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. The visibly older, overwhelmingly white crowd sported the shirts of Brazil's national football team. Watching older men behaving in a disorderly and dangerous manner in the largely empty city was surreal.

On the surface, the insurrection looked like a spontaneous movement that started a few months prior and got out of hand, again spontaneously, on that infamous Sunday afternoon. In reality, the January 8 riots marked the culmination of a decade-long process. The rise of the global far right and political distrust caused by inequality drove this process. Also at work was the Brazilian armed forces' century-long ambition to political power, stemming from Brazil's five-century history of exploiting natural resources and human beings. These forces came together with the sole objective of controlling public and natural assets for personal gain.

Several investigations are still ongoing, with the Supreme Court starting trials of alleged civilian ringleaders in September. Until these are completed, we will not have the whole picture. However, we can examine the connections between these forces and pinpoint the main characters of the latest rebellion attempt in Brazil. That is what we will do in this and following articles.

The isolated and privileged military caste

Since the dawn of the First Brazilian Republic in 1889, the armed forces have removed, or at least tried to remove, democratically elected governments several times. So, Brazil has a long history of suffering under military dictatorships.

The last military dictatorship (1964–1985) was a bloody and genocidal regime. It created artificial economic “growth” by putting the country deeply in debt. In the transition to democracy, instead of punishing those responsible — like Argentina did with the Trial of the Juntas and beyond — Brazil decided to give total amnesty to the perpetrators, both for crimes against humanity and for sedition. This encouraged the armed forces to believe that they are above the law.

The infamous torturer Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra — to whom Bolsonaro dedicated his vote for the impeachment of one of Ustra’s victims, President Dilma Rousseff — lived to enjoy his retirement peacefully until he died in 2015, leaving a sizable pension to his daughters.

Consequently, the Brazilian armed forces enjoy unique powers and immunities that no other military enjoys. Lawmakers trod very lightly around the subject, leaving those privileges intact after promulgating the 1988 Federal Constitution. The military justice system has exclusive jurisdiction over violent crimes committed by soldiers against civilians. The military has its own separate set of labor and social security laws. Indeed, the military seems to have Brazilian democracy cowed into maintaining its anachronistic and excessive rights.

Aside from all these privileges, the military in Brazil lives in its own bubble, disconnected from civilian life. The children of officers study in the 14 military schools spread around the country. These schools serve over 15,000 students. The teachers are military officers and teach children “rituals related to the military culture.” The schools are governed by their own education law and curricula only need to be loosely equivalent to civilian education. They use the Marshall Trompowski Collection books, which teach that the 1964 military coup was a “democratic revolution” necessary to protect Brazil from “subversive terrorists.” The Brazilian Army offers a book blatantly in favor of the dictatorship on its website. Worryingly, Bolsonaro increased the number of “militarized” schools to almost 200, with a total budget of over 128 million reais (\$26.4 million).

The situation gets more complicated at military colleges. To become a general in Brazil, one needs a degree at the Military Academy of Agulhas Negras (AMAN). AMAN’s motto is “House of

Values — Cradle of Traditions.” It teaches students that military personnel are serious, professional, mature, orderly and competent, while civilians (or paisanos) are unprofessional, incompetent, idle and infantile.

AMAN students are isolated from society and go through a regimen of exercise, discipline and reading outdated or plain delusional books. The authors include infamous self-proclaimed philosopher and far-right conspiracy theorist Olavo de Carvalho, who believed that the left is destroying society with progressive ideas, and another by his disciple Flávio Gordon, in which he attacks journalists, university professors, scientists and artists. Another book used in the institution teaches that the Araguaia Guerrilla War ended with the escape of the resistance fighters, omitting the arrest, torture and execution of over 60 of them.

Even more outrageous is a book by Colonel Carlos Menna Barreto, printed by the army’s publishing company, entitled The Yanomami Hoax. The Yanomami are a group of indigenous people that live in the Amazon rainforest in the north of Brazil. Menna Barreto holds that the Yanomami do not exist and are rather part of a plot by NGOs to weaken Brazilian sovereignty in the Amazon. This conspiracy is widely believed in military circles and may be the inspiration for Bolsonaro’s genocidal policies against the Yanomami.

As most high-ranking officers come from military families, they come up through this system and are disconnected from civilian needs and struggles. General Eduardo Villas-Bôas, Commander of the Army from 2015 to 2019, says that he only started socializing with civilians when he was 50 years old and that it was “tough” and “an exercise in patience and intellectual flexibility.” Villas-Bôas was responsible for a threatening tweet addressed to the Supreme

Federal Court on April 3, 2018. The court was about to discuss the release of then-former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, then held at the federal police headquarters in Curitiba. The tweet subtly warned that Lula's release would not go unpunished by the armed forces. Mainstream media underreported the move.

Another infamous example of the disconnect between officers and the general population is General Eduardo Pazuello, Bolsonaro's Minister of Health from September 2020 to March 2021, who said after taking office that he did not know what the Brazilian Unified Health System was at all. The military has its own health system, with total medical, dental, and psychological coverage for personnel and their families. It has over 600 nationwide units, including 11 general hospitals, dozens of clinics and health schools — all taxpayer-funded. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Pazuello pushed ineffective treatments like hydroxychloroquine and allowed an oxygen shortage that led to hundreds of deaths in Manaus. He lied to the Congressional Inquiry Commission on COVID-19 in order to cover up Bolsonaro's responsibility for the mishandling of the pandemic. Pazuello may yet be charged with crimes against public health, malfeasance and perjury.

The armed forces interfere in politics

Since 2002, active-duty military have been forbidden by law to opine on politics without authorization. Nevertheless, generals have been meddling with politics since at least the Rousseff administration.

In 2011, Rousseff, who had been arrested and tortured during the dictatorship, installed the National Truth Commission to investigate human rights violations by military authorities. The 2,000-page report, released in 2014, exposed damning evidence of crimes by more than 377 state agents. Rousseff presented the results during an emotional

and personal speech. This seemed to be the first step toward healing Brazil's decades-old wounds.

Some were not very impressed, however. One was General Sérgio Westphalen Etchegoyen. The Etchegoyens are an old military family that has been involved in army uprisings since the 1920s, when Alcides and Nelson Etchegoyen attempted to prevent the inauguration of President Washington Luís.

Sérgio Etchegoyen vehemently contested the inclusion of his father, a general who commanded a fourth of the whole Brazilian Army during the dictatorship, and his uncle, who participated in the 1964 coup, in the National Truth Commission report. He called the accusations "frivolous," despite abundant proof of criminal orders issued by the two men.

Sérgio Etchegoyen and Villas-Bôas had meetings with Vice President Michel Temer a year before the move to impeach Rousseff in 2016. They were also involved in several crises during Temer's term. In an interview with Celso Castro, Villas-Bôas confessed that the military had wanted to remove the Lula and Rousseff's Workers' Party from power since 2008 and that Rousseff's impeachment was part of a "long coup" to put the military back in power.

The military did not want to remove the leftists from power from the start. Lula's and Rousseff's governments had invested in the military, renewing military equipment and infrastructure. They did not touch the relationship between civilian powers and the armed forces. However, the armed forces began plotting to topple the leftists because they planned to review the military curriculum and allow civilian courts to try military police officers.

The military police is the de facto street policing force in Brazil. Military police have been involved

in countless episodes of brutality and thousands of homicides across the country, but they rarely face charges for crimes against civilians in civilian courts. Conversely, the mere word of a military police officer can, in practice, send a civilian to prison. Rousseff threatened the military by discussing the demilitarization of the police forces.

Another incident involved the Institutional Security Bureau of the Presidency of the Republic (GSI). The GSI is responsible for the personal security of the president and vice-president and their families and the protection of buildings and institutions of the presidency. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso made the GSI a federal ministry in 1999. In 2015, Rousseff dissolved the ministry and incorporated it into the Presidency Office, an action lamented by the military establishment.

As soon as Rousseff was suspended, and before she was impeached, Temer reinstated the GSI as a ministry. He even put the whole Brazilian Intelligence System under military control — with Sérgio Etchegoyen as minister. This effectively put Brazil back under military tutelage.

Recent developments show how ill-advised this idea was. The armed forces hang like a sword over Brazil, just waiting to decapitate democracy, aware of any action they may see as threatening to their power, their privilege or their immunity.

The uncomfortable rise of Bolsonaro

In November 2014, Bolsonaro made a speech to graduating cadets of the Agulhas Negras military academy, where he was received with shouts of “Leader! Leader!” He announced his bid to run for president in 2018 to “bring this country to the right” and reinforce the separation between civilians and the military.

Bolsonaro's relationship with the armed forces is very complicated. After completing the

preparatory army cadet course in 1972, he failed to join the Air Force Academy but managed to enroll at AMAN in 1973. There, he received middling grades and stood out for his excellent athleticism, which earned him the nickname “Big Horse.” He finished the training to become a paratrooper but nearly died after losing control of his parachute and hitting the side of a building in Rio de Janeiro. He broke both arms and legs.

In 1983, Bolsonaro's superiors described him as aggressive, “excessively ambitious and obsessed with personal financial gains.” He admitted his desire to become “a wealthy man.”

In 1986, while posted as a captain at the paratrooper battalion in Rio de Janeiro, he faced disciplinary action after publishing an op-ed without permission. *Veja*, the most popular magazine at the time, published the article. In it, he complained about the earnings of lower-ranking officers and enlisted personnel.

The following year, *Veja* named Bolsonaro as the mastermind of a plot to plant bombs at army barracks to undermine Army Commander Leônidas Pires Gonçalves. The article contained detailed plans drawn by Bolsonaro. After a lengthy secret trial by the Supreme Military Court, Bolsonaro was not discharged. Nine of 13 justices voted in his favor. The evidence connecting him to the plans was “inconclusive,” the court decided. Later, federal police analysts confirmed Bolsonaro's authorship of the plans.

Military dictator General Ernesto Geisel (1974–1979) named Bolsonaro in his autobiography, describing him as “completely out of the normal” and “a bad military man.” Many within the army command — career officers with no interest in politics — saw him as dangerous because his heroes were not moderate generals. Instead, Bolsonaro looked up to torturers like Ustra and

bloody regimes like the worst phases of the dictatorship.

Bolsonaro left the army in 1988 as a captain. He ran a successful campaign for the City Council of Rio de Janeiro, boosted by his appearances in the press. Elected with over 11,000 votes, he was surprised to learn that he got only seven votes at the polling station of the Military Village but got overwhelming support from paramilitary groups and militias. His City Council colleagues described him as “private and uncommunicative.” Bolsonaro made only two speeches, both in favor of the armed forces. He presented projects to improve salaries and military privileges.

Bolsonaro did not complete his term, as he ran for a seat in the Chamber of Deputies in 1990, winning the first of six terms. Though he began as a Christian Democratic Party candidate, he changed his political affiliation seven times. He always, however, joined right-wing parties.

Bolsonaro’s presence in the legislature was marked by outrageous speeches, politically incorrect positions and even blatant defense of the death squads and militias that terrorized the state of Rio de Janeiro for decades. He proposed 171 draft bills, including one to halt the use on official documents of the preferred names of transsexuals and transvestites. Most of Bolsonaro’s proposals were discarded for poor writing. Only two of his proposals became law: a temporary tax reduction for IT products and the legalization of synthetic phosphoethanolamine, a compound falsely purported to be a cure for cancer. Upon advice from scientists and the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency, the Supreme Federal Court later suspended the latter law.

The troublesome relationship between the armed forces and politics led them to support Bolsonaro despite his mediocre record. He increased their privileges, providing a less conspicuous path for

the military to return as the actual rulers of the nation. Anthropologist Piero Leirner called it a “hybrid war to come back to power,” using Bolsonaro as a façade.

While men in uniform were involved in all steps of Bolsonaro’s rise to power, the armed forces tried to distance themselves from their creation every time he overstepped the bounds of decency. Now that Bolsonaro is no longer president, they are still fighting to interfere in the newly elected Lula government and are refusing to step down from politics.

Dictator Ernesto Geisel was right when he said it was effortless for the armed forces to become a political force, but it is challenging to remove them from power. With Rousseff gone after the 2016 impeachment, the military used Bolsonaro to consolidate its power.

[[Madelyn Lambert](#) and [Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Who Will Win Argentina's Presidency After 28 Years of Peronism?

Leonardo Vivas
November 15, 2023

The center-left, big-tent Peronist party has dominated Argentinean politics ever since the country's transition to democracy in the 1980s. The populist, self-described anarcho-capitalist Javier Milei has set out to challenge the status quo of Argentinean politics. But 28 years of Peronism won't give up easily.

All nations grapple with complexities and contradictions, and Argentina is no exception. Argentina's primary paradox lies in its enduring commitment to democracy despite recurring economic challenges. Over many years, Argentina has wrestled with achieving economic stability. Yet, these fluctuations have neither shattered its democratic foundations nor subjected it to the left-right political pendulum that has affected many other countries in the region. In fact, of the forty years since Argentina's return to democracy in 1983, Justicialismo (often referred to as Peronism) has held power for 28 years. This dominance traces its roots back to Juan Perón's entry onto the scene in the late 1940s.

The question arises: will this status quo change? Many experts and pundits are hoping for change after the surprising emergence of Javier Milei, a controversial far-right economist and politician. He garnered the most votes in the August 2023 Argentinean primary elections, challenging the political establishment.

At that time, it appeared that Argentines were weary of the long-standing center-left dominance in the country's political landscape. Both within Argentina and beyond its borders, the climate seemed ripe for a transformation, especially because the country is stuck in a long and deep financial crisis.

Yet Milei has not gone unchallenged. Despite the increasing desire for change, Argentinean citizens might once again be taking the side of Peronism. The party's candidate is Sergio Massa, a moderate Peronist who has been rising through the party's ranks. When the government found itself cornered by the impending economic crisis, the current president, Alberto Fernández, called Massa in as the economic minister. He brought calm to the markets.

Milei may be popular, but it was Massa who garnered the most votes in the first round of the presidential elections. It seems, then, that a majority still supports the continuation of Peronism. Still, we will have to wait for the November 19 runoff election to know for sure.

Why has Peronism prevailed?

Let us look decades back to why the main feature of Argentina's politics has been the dominance of Peronism. One of the main reasons is that Peronism has been a catch-all organization for most of its history, like the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of Mexico. For decades, Peronism has nested in its womb different currents and factions, from urban guerrillas in the 1970s, the populist neoliberal reforms of Menem in the late 90s, to the extreme state-led Leftist policies of the Kirchners in this century.

For decades, Argentina has been the home of one of the most robust trade unions in the continent, with the Peronist trade union, the General Confederation of Labor, being the largest

among many. While the party was never completely identified with the institutions of the state in Argentina, as the PRI was in Mexico, it did capture and express vast sectors of Argentinean society. This has been true to the point that for many years Peronist-like rhetoric has been closely identified with the idiosyncrasies of ordinary Argentines.

There are two main reasons for the survival of Peronism. Firstly, the Peronist party is internally flexible and has a strong federal system, just as the state itself does.

Secondly, it was under the Peronist aegis that Argentina dealt with the crimes of the Dirty War, which occurred in the latest phase of the military dictatorships (late 1970s and early 1980s). It was then that Argentina witnessed some of the worst and more prolonged crimes against humanity in the region.

Despite back-and-forth decisions — well depicted in the 2002 movie *Argentina, 1985* — the Argentinean judiciary prosecuted and imprisoned many high-level perpetrators, most of them military officers. It was no coincidence that, when in July 2002 the International Criminal Court was established in The Hague, the first prosecutor appointed was Luis Moreno Ocampo, who served many years as a fundamental actor in bringing military criminals to prison in his country during the transition to democracy in the 1980s.

Those dark days are over now. While Argentines have suffered economic instability, inflation and limited growth, they credit Peronism with the level of social civility they now enjoy.

Peronism today

Peronism experienced a comeback to stardom in the first decade of the 21st century during the Pink Tide which swept across Latin America led by

Hugo Chávez, Lula da Silva and Evo Morales. During the last two decades, the party has grown in complexity, allowing for the emergence of regional powerhouses and political families. One such case is of the Kirchners (first Ernesto and later his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), who dominated Argentinean politics for twelve years (2003–2015) between them. Cristina, despite being indicted for corruption charges, is currently Vice President since 2019.

After this long dominance, many analysts interpreted the emergence of Javier Milei as a call for change. The Peronist party would finally enter the cemetery of political dinosaurs where it belongs.

However, Milei is not the first openly free-market politician to enter Argentina's political fray. In 2015, Mauricio Macri played a similar role. He ran for president on a ticket promoting a shift in economic policies.

Macri was a businessman who held the helm of Chief of the Government of Buenos Aires. This is a position of considerable importance in a country where the capital region contains roughly 50% of the population. Once elected, Macri devoted most of his efforts to moving the country in a new economic direction. He did that in many respects, like abandoning the fixed exchange rate inherited from the Kirchners, removing high taxes for exports and reducing subsidies on energy to reduce the fiscal deficit.

Macri also launched a tepid anti-corruption campaign with little consequences. However, he failed to deliver the renegotiation of the Argentinean debt, which had been frozen after the country declared a sovereign default in 2001. He left his term in office unable to curb inflation and having increased the national debt.

In 2019, Macri lost reelection to Alberto Fernández, a moderate within Peronism, who included Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as Vice President. But while losing the seat in the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, Macri left behind a strengthened center-right movement that won a host of governorships and an important slice in both chambers of Congress.

Given the economic difficulties of the Fernández administration, two years ago most analysts placed their bets on a change of government led by Cambiemos (Let's Change), the Macri-created coalition. But Macri's conventional center-right politics were not successful enough. It was clear that Argentinean voters were ready for a populist candidate boasting far-right changes.

Milei disrupts mainstream politics

To crush the mainstream articulated around both the Peronist tradition and the center-right alternative that emerged in the last decade, Milei has oriented his rhetoric against the establishment. Like many other populists, he lambasted traditional party politics as the main source of corruption. The two parties were both a political "caste" to be eradicated.

Despite a short career as a legislator, Milei ran as an outsider, which he is in many respects. He has a greater presence in the media than in political circles. He lacked a political organization until he decided to run for president. Secondly, as Trump before him, he ran a high-rated TV show where he sparred with opponents, deploying his extreme economic arguments, and explored the value of emotions in political discourse, even in such aseptic issues as economic policy.

Yet he is different from other populists in the region as he has adopted a style of extreme eccentricity, if not blunt extravagance. Despite creating a political movement, La Libertad Avanza

(Liberty Advances), Milei relishes in centering all his actions around himself as a self-described anarcho-capitalist. Not only does he propose dollarizing Argentina, but he supports eliminating both ministries of education and health. Regarding Peronism, he claims that "We are facing a criminal organization that won't stop committing atrocities to stay in power."

Regarding social issues and cultural wars, Milei is a pioneer "of the modern strain of far-right politics marked by vulgarity, attacks on institutions, discrediting of the news media, distrust of science, a cult of personality and narcissism," according to Federico Finchelstein, an Argentinean professor of history at The New School, New York. Milei called China, Argentina's trade partner, an "assassin." He also claimed that the state of Argentina is a criminal organization.

Last year Milei went to the extreme of lambasting Pope Francis, an Argentinean citizen. He called him an imbecile, "a filthy leftist" and "someone who always stands on the side of evil." Additionally, Milei's rhetoric to chop all state institutions (he actually campaigned with a chainsaw pointing to those ministers he would eliminate) did not play well with a vast majority of state workers, who preferred a well-known don't-rock-the-boat politician. As the Latin American saying goes: "más vale mal conocido que bueno por conocer" (better a well-known bad guy than one that is well-known). Yet, it is unclear whether Milei's extremist actions are enough to overturn Peronism's dominance.

The first round of the presidential election

In the runup to the first round of the presidential election, Milei was the clear favorite in most opinion polls. He scored between a high 36.2% and a low 29.9%. His main competitor, Sergio Massa, scored a low 25–26% and a high 32.33%.

This was very close to the election date. As a result, most analysts and news outlets bet on a relatively close score with Milei dominating. Patricia Bulrich, the third contender representing the Macri movement, had the support of the business community and a long career starting as a Peronist youth member. Despite this, she shifted alliances until she ended as the minister of Security in the Macri administration. She won the primaries in the Cambiemos coalition but failed to become a real contender for either Massa or Milei.

The first-round vote brought about yet another surprise. Unexpectedly, Massa came on top with 37% of the votes, while Milei ended in the 30% level. Several facts account for these results. First, Massa played the safe card. He emphasized the need for stability and alerted the high risk represented by Milei. Secondly, Massa performed better in the presidential debate, showing a greater knowledge of the issues and a more “presidential” demeanor.

Additionally, in the week prior to election day, Massa pulled off a couple of public relations coups directed at Milei’s arguments. One was increasing tax exemptions for workers, and the other was providing two ticket options for train and bus commuters. Out of these two options, one was with the “Massa” low price and another with a higher price (without subsidies), allegedly corresponding to his adversaries.

Milei failed to capture votes from the other portion of the conservative spectrum including Bulrich and her fellow conservatives. Massa’s business-friendly approach opened more doors to that segment of the electorate, once again proving the predominance of the Peronist party.

The ballot leans in favor of Massa

Yet none of the candidates achieved the necessary minimum percentage of votes, 40%, established in

Argentina’s legislation. Bulrich came in third, and is therefore excluded from the runoff election. She simply did not find a clear path in contrast to the other two and babbled regarding policies. Therefore, the two top contenders, Massa and Milei, will dispute the presidency on November 19. It is unclear who will win.

Most experts give the same probability to both, but as the well-known Argentinan journalist Martín Caparrós mentioned recently, the second round has become a choice between two worst candidates. However, judging by several trends already in place, a qualitative analysis gives Massa a better chance than Milei.

Let’s take a look at that. Massa was able to capture an important fraction of voters from other quarters, but Milei’s numbers remained unchanged. It’s clear that Bulrich’s votes will be distributed between the two. However, even if they get 50% each, Massa will have turned the odds in his favor. Of course, this may vary after Bulrich publicly supported Milei’s ticket, as well as former president Macri. But politically, it is easier for Massa to play moderation and capture the interest of the center-right than it is for Milei to make a break with his high-gear anti-establishment rhetoric. This is especially apparent since he has argued that his two adversaries are both culprits of the nation’s economic crisis.

Yet the same political party that has caused these economic crises might strike the balance in favor of Massa’s hyper-traditional politics. Peronism has survived the demise of most traditional parties in Latin America. The federal organization of the Argentinean state is more nurturing of traditional politics, both left and right, than centralized national politics.

Demographics might also help Massa. Milei’s demographic is a majority of above forty-year-old males and an important inroad with young voters.

Massa's demographic is spread across demographic groups, with a stronger impact on the female voter. While Massa won a majority in the large cities, Milei won easily in the periphery. This is essentially because poverty levels there are higher. Those provinces have suffered to a greater extent from the restrictive export policies of Peronism, and they hold an anti-metropolitan grudge.

The main political factors accounting for political instability in most Latin American democracies are polarization, fragmentation, volatility, breaking-up of governing coalitions, rejection of crucial government policies and impeachment of presidents. Compared to the rest of Latin America, Argentina scores low in most unstable political factors, with the exception of polarization and fragmentation, as I observed in a June 2023 article for Science, Technology & Public Policy. So, the probability that unseen factors will push for an abrupt change seems lower than in most other countries. All in all, if I had to place my bets, I would put them in the Massa basket. Of course, I may be wrong. It would be neither the first nor the last time.

[[Cheyenne Torres](#) edited this piece.]

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MIDDLE EAST

A First-Hand Look at Arba'een, the World's Largest Annual Pilgrimage

Mehdi Alavi
August 28, 2023

Arba'een draws millions of people together in a gathering where pilgrims' needs are provided for out of generosity and without payment. I needed to see this with my own eyes and traveled to Iraq to take part. What I saw impressed me forever with the understanding that peace and compassion are possible here on Earth.

Arba'een, the immense annual gathering in Karbala, Iraq, got my attention after I read Sayed M. Modarresi's Huffington Post article, "World's Biggest Pilgrimage Now Underway, and Why You've Never Heard of It!" After researching it, I knew Arba'een was something that I must experience firsthand.

As the founder and president of Peace Worldwide Organization, I could not get the idea off my mind. In the US, we cannot have a concert with a few thousand attendees without some trouble. How in the world was it possible for millions of people to get together so lovingly and peacefully?

Finally, I took the journey. My experience with Arba'een opened my eyes to many possibilities to achieve global peace. I had never encountered such hospitality, love and generosity in my life. Although it was held in Iraq under the threat of

terrorism, I spotted pilgrims from across the world eagerly participating. I was touched by the display of faith in humanity, the likes of which I had never seen anywhere else.

A multicultural gathering

Although it was originally initiated by Shi'a Muslims as a spiritual reawakening, I witnessed that Arba'een brought people together from all walks of life. It was a true representation of all people in the world. The participants included not just Shi'as but Sunnis, Ibadis, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Yazidis and Zoroastrians. There, we were all united in purpose and welcomed with the utmost respect, regardless of religion, culture, ethnicity, gender or race.

Four years earlier, I had participated in the annual Islamic Hajj pilgrimage. In Karbala, I noticed the much greater crowds; Arba'een attracts five or more times more people than the Hajj. In contrast to the Hajj, which is riddled with accidents and troubles, my experience with the Arba'een event was peaceful. While the Hajj consists exclusively of Muslims, Arba'een breaks across identity barriers. Arba'een is truly unique.

As I had read, it was embellished with the longest continuous free dining table with a variety of foods and personal sleep accommodations. Iraqis were stationed throughout the path of pilgrims to wash feet and massage feet, backs, shoulders and necks. Clinics and doctors were available to treat pilgrims. All amenities, down to baby diapers, were furnished free. All services, including the tight security, were provided by volunteers. None of these were paid for by any government or corporation. They were all offered by Iraqis and others who had been saving for a year to serve pilgrims with pure love and compassion. They expected no pay; rather, they felt honored when we accepted their offerings or lodging.

On my journey, I was told that among the servers were the Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and the Chinese Ambassador along with his wife. I wondered why US officials were absent, especially when the US was generally unpopular in the region and had the largest embassy and military presence in the country. It would have been a great PR opportunity.

Arba'een rarely makes headlines, but when it does, it gives hope to humanity that universal peace is realizable.

Arba'een memorializes the end of the 40-day mourning period for the brutal 7th-century killing of al-Husayn (Husayn), the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and third Shia Imam. His murder at the hands of the wicked Umayyad Caliph Yazid made him a martyr standing up against injustice. The event left an indelible mark on Islamic history.

As Modarresi says, Husayn's "legend encourages, inspires, and champions change for the better, and no amount of media blackout can extinguish its light."

For me, Arba'een was a life-changing experience

Starting in 2014, ISIS freely roamed much of Iraq and committed atrocities that shocked the world. Armed with weapons and vehicles of Western manufacture, ISIS tortured suspects, raped women and girls, robbed, enslaved, used child soldiers and carried out genocide.

I read Modarresi's article in 2015 and learned that millions of people from all over the world ignored ISIS to attend Arba'een. ISIS, which takes an extreme anti-Shi'a stance, attempted to menace pilgrims into skipping Arba'een. The threat encouraged even more participation in defiance, a courageous audacity rarely seen anywhere around the world.

To the pilgrims, Husayn typifies the man who is spiritually connected to Allah, the Source of all things, which enables him to stand firmly against despotism and never submit to oppression or persecution. Husayn did so even though it cost him his own life and those of his brothers, sons and other loved ones.

To me, Arba'een appeared to be a truer representation of cross-cultural participation and cohesiveness than even the United Nations. Like other political entities, the UN is riddled with favoritism and corruption. Unlike in the UN, all people are treated with equal respect in Arba'een.

For days, nights, weeks and months, I was preoccupied. Something deep inside me urged me to participate. I wanted to be a part of it. I needed to see it for myself and experience the event known to millions. I felt a strong zeal to take the journey, despite the imminent threat of ISIS against the pilgrims. I became excited and eager knowing there was a purpose.

With ISIS controlling much of Iraq, my family was adamantly against me traveling in the Middle East, especially within Iraq. I was compelled to delay my journey.

Thanks to Qassem Soleimani, Iran's late top general, things have since changed for the better in the region. In mid-2018, Iraq gathered strength with assistance from Iran and Russia to push ISIS out of Iraq. On the ground with Russian air support, Iraqi special forces led by Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis soundly defeated ISIS. That brave action gave me an opportunity to convince my family to let me participate in Arba'een. I assured them that I would be careful traveling there. Knowing how badly I wanted to go there, they reluctantly agreed.

In 2018, Arba'een was at the end of October. I was astonished. The journey exceeded all my

expectations; every moment was breathtaking. I stayed in Iraq for 12 days, and it cost me not even a dime for food. My lodging would also have been totally free, but I chose to stay a few nights in nice hotels to reflect. The hotels were around \$20 a night.

Step by step, side by side, I marched all 50 miles of the way on foot over three days, alongside millions of other pilgrims. The journey began at the mausoleum of Ali in the holy city of Najaf and terminated at Husayn's mausoleum in the holy city of Karbala.

As I looked over my shoulder, I saw children in the arms of their mothers and young men assisting the women and elderly in their quest to make the journey. I saw folks with canes and crutches taking each intentional step forward. I found the weakened, aged or disabled rolling in wheelchairs as persistent and committed as those of us on foot beside them. There were no divides or differences. There, we were all one.

There was only hope in their eyes and love in their heart as the people moved beside me. Often, I would find myself interrupted in thought, taking in each individual, making individual picture frame memories of their faces, with the various Iraqi citizens lining the trail motioning to give us water and food or guiding us along the path. I could feel the energy pulsating throughout my body, my mind, my soul—the frequency around me was vibrating, unconditional, pure, wholehearted love.

It was with this powerful frequency that I then took each individual step. All of this beautiful, loving energy made what could otherwise be characterized as a marathon feel like a walk in the park. I had very little on me except for a backpack of clothes, yet I felt fully abundant.

I had never seen generosity to that extent in my whole life. Various kinds of food and comfortable

lodging were freely available along the path everywhere. I was astonished to see that even the poorest Iraqis traveled on foot for days to get there, simply to offer the pilgrims dates here and there.

Heaven on Earth

I thought to myself: If Iraqis could continue that spirit for the rest of the year by treating one another with the same compassion and love, Iraq would once again be the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8), a place of happiness and peace. Imagine what the world could be if we existed in this nature daily as well.

The instantaneous coming together of millions of people from across the world in Arba'een must be of Heavenly inspiration. It is equally magical how Iraqis work together providing the pilgrims safety and security along with free food, lodging and other services. As Oregon's Southminster Presbyterian Church Pastor John Shuck described it, "... it is a divine interplay of an unchoreographed dance of love."

In my journey, I learned that millions of the pilgrims began their journey on foot from Iran, Kuwait, Syria and Lebanon, along with cities in Iraq and the Gulf Arab States, towards Karbala. For days, young and old traveled miles through mountainous and rocky trails in the burning sun of the day and the freezing cold of the night to reach the holy city. Regardless of where they came from, they all simply wanted to connect to Allah and live in harmony and peace. To accomplish these noble goals, they knew that a level of unrelenting self-will, accountability, good nature, kindness and endurance was required to win over oppression and persecution.

Husayn gave us many examples of courage in his stand against tyranny and injustice. Many of his quotes can be heard across the world, even if few are aware of the source of them. Over 1300

years ago, before he was viciously murdered, he said, "Death with dignity is better than a life in humiliation."

More than ever, I am now convinced that we can all learn a lot from religion in pursuit of harmony and peace. Religion is not inherently good or bad. It can be used as a positive force or abused for personal gain. The event of Arba'een symbolizes a religious occasion that annually brings the largest number of people from across the world together in the hope of promoting compassion, love, harmony and peace.

My journey was exceptional. My life's dream of unity and peace was realized in my travels. I watched people who were amazingly liberated from fear, judgment and the desire for control and power. I saw them all sharing their basic needs with strangers. I learned that the vision of the coming together of people from all walks of life united for the pursuit of compassion, love and peace ALREADY exists. Now, I can imagine an entire world through this vision, where I paint a picture in my mind as I lead the Peace Worldwide Organization and write about history, philosophy, politics, religion and spirituality.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Mehdi Alavi** is an author and also the founder and president of Peace Worldwide Organization, a non-religious, non-partisan charitable organization in the United States that promotes human rights, freedom, and peace for all. Annually, it releases its Civility Report, reporting on all countries that are members of the United Nations.

Why Do You Need to Know About Mohammad Mosaddegh?

Mehdi Alavi, Atul Singh
January 27, 2023

In 1941, the British deposed their lackey Reza Shah for cozying up with the Germans and placed his callow, decadent, opulent and worthless son on the throne. This led to a pro-democracy movement and the rise of Mohammad Mosaddegh, Iran's first-ever democratically elected leader.

In 1941, World War II was in full swing. Thanks to its oil reserves, Iran was a key piece on the geopolitical chessboard. Reza Shah Pahlavi was in-charge as an absolutist ruler. The British had backed his rise but were uncomfortable with his flirtations with Nazi Germany. In 1941, the British decided to get rid of Reza Shah and install his son Mohammad Reza Shah. He was a weak 22-year-old who was putty in British hands. His rise to power had a silver lining though.

From 1941 to 1953, Iran experienced a golden period of freedom. During this era, seven political parties emerged in the Iranian parliament Majles. Mohammad Mosaddegh emerged as the most important leader during this period. He became prime minister in 1951 and initiated significant reforms.

Before 1941, Reza Shah ruled Iran with an iron hand. If people dared to protest, they were shot on the spot or tortured to death or whisked away to a brutal prison. From 1941 to 1953, free speech, democracy and rule of law emerged in Iran. Mosaddegh was a key figure in democratizing Iran.

The Brief Story of Iranian Democracy

Educated in France and Switzerland, Mosaddegh came from a patrician family. However, he was a reformer who believed in democracy. In 1925, Mosaddegh voted against Reza Khan taking over as the Shah. Once in power as Reza Shah, the monarch exiled him from public office. With Reza Shah out of power in 1941, Mosaddegh emerged from the shadows to play a key role in Iranian history.

In 1944, Mosaddegh was re-elected to the Iranian parliament, the Majles. As a patriot, he wanted a strong Iran. Mosaddegh aimed to build an Iran with rule of law, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, parliamentary democracy and a strong economy. Above all, this Iranian leader opposed foreign interference in the internal affairs of Iran. In particular, he did not want the British to exploit Iranian oil for London's imperial benefit. He was also against concessions to the Soviets in northern Iran.

Mohammad Reza, the new Shah, and Iran's comprador elite were beholden to the British for their hold on power. So, they did not take kindly to the rise of Mosaddegh. This corrupt and absolutist elite was also against democracy because they would have lost power. They tried the age old trick of rigging elections.

As a result, protests erupted in 1949. People came out into the streets to rally against voter fraud. Mosaddegh led a group of delegates to the Shah's to protest the "lack of free elections." That forced Mohammad Reza to promise "fair and honest" elections. Mosaddegh and some other leaders founded a party named Jebhe Melli, which literally translates to National Front, to contest the elections.

Once the Majles convened after the elections, Mossaddegh emerged as the most powerful

parliamentarian. As leader of Jebhe Melli, Mossadegh pushed for major reforms. The Majles approved a development plan with agricultural and industrial reforms. The plan required financing, which was only possible through oil revenues. Sadly for Iran, most of these revenues were going to Britain.

Oil Catches Fire

Unsurprisingly, oil revenues were a hot button issue in the 1949 elections. Once the Majles assembled, many of its members were duty bound to renegotiate the patently unfair agreement imperial Britain had forced a subservient Iran to conclude. In the words of the fictional character Michael Corleone, made famous by the 1972 movie *The Godfather*, the British had made the Iranians an offer they couldn't refuse. Led by Mosaddegh, Iranians now mustered the gumption to reject that British offer.

Mosaddegh promised to end the British control of Iran's oil industry. He demanded renegotiation with the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), the British oil giant now known as BP. Note that the AIOC was supposed to pay a mere 17.5% of oil revenues to Iran. In contrast, its American counterpart was paying Saudi Arabia 50% of oil revenues in 1950. To rub salt in Iranian wounds, AIOC practiced creative accounting and did not even pay the 17.5% it owed Iran. In fact, they paid more in taxes to London on their profits from Iranian oil than to Tehran. Led by Mosaddegh, Iranian patriots resolved to get Iran's fair share from AIOC.

Iranian pressure made the British offer slightly better terms in 1950. Mosaddegh was key in rejecting this unfair offer and demanded a 50-50 split, the same enjoyed by Saudi Arabia. Naturally, the British opposed Mosaddegh tooth and nail. They claimed that revision of their agreement with Iran would amount to a breach of contract. The

British very conveniently ignored their own common law idea of duress as grounds for invalidating a contract. Simply put: if Winston puts a gun to Rumi's head to get his signature on a contract, that legal document is null and void. Such legal principles were moot for AIOC, which tried every trick in the book to safeguard its extortionate illegitimate profits.

British intransigence fueled Iranian patriotism on oil revenues. The public swung behind nationalization of AIOC. By the time the British belatedly agreed to a 50-50 split in February 1951, the ship for renegotiation had sailed. In March, the Majles passed legislation to nationalize the oil industry. True to form, the Shah did not sign this bill. This British lackey stayed loyal to his imperial masters, not the Iranian people.

By not signing the nationalization bill, the Shah frustrated the Majles and the Iranian people. In April, the Majles made Mosaddegh prime minister, with around 90% voting for him. A few months earlier, Mosaddegh had turned down the prime ministerial position. This time, he took charge with a single-point agenda: cut out foreign powers from Iran's oil industry.

With Mosaddegh in-charge, the Shah reluctantly signed the nationalization bill. This dramatically changed Britain-Iran dynamics. The AIOC left Iran, dismantling even the massive Abadan Refinery and associated facilities. For the first time in two centuries, Britain was on the backfoot. Unsurprisingly, this mighty imperial power fought back. It went to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to appeal against Iranian nationalization. Mosaddegh cannily disputed the court's jurisdiction. Months later, the ICJ decided in favor of Iran.

The Empire Strikes Back

The British did not just resort to legal measures though. Their fabled intelligence agencies started conspiring to oust Mosaddegh through hook or crook. The British courted American support to do so. Their task was not easy. After World War II, the US had been siding with Iran on the oil issue. It had its own strategic interest to break into the Iranian oil market. Mosaddegh was well aware of the importance of the US. In November 1951, the Iranian prime minister visited Washington to meet President Harry Truman. Mosaddegh had a good reception and returned to Iran positive that the US would act as an honest mediator between Iran and Britain.

Mosaddegh's successful US trip and rising international popularity unsettled the Shah. Vainglorious and insecure, the Shah resented Mosaddegh. When the prime minister appointed a minister of war, the Shah vetoed him. In response, Mosaddegh resigned.

This act in July 1952 led countrywide protests. People poured into the streets, chanting "Give me death or give me Mosaddegh." Hasht Subh, a leading Iranian newspaper, published the headline: "Salaam to Hero Mosaddegh, We Swear That We Stand by You to Our Death." In keeping with the tradition established by his brutal father, the Shah ordered a crackdown. On July 21 — 30 Tir in the Iranian calendar — the Shah's forces killed hundreds of people. This bloody day in 1952 is still remembered as the 30 Tir Uprising.

The very next day, on July 22, the ICJ decided in favor of Iran. This fueled popular support for Mosaddegh. Despite his brutal actions, the Shah was unable to establish control over Iran. He was forced to recall Mosaddegh. The Majles now firmly backed the prime minister. Iranians were euphoric. They believed that they could now move forward towards a new future.

The British had other plans. They refused to accept the ICJ decision. They saw Iranian insubordination as a danger to the British Empire and imposed a worldwide embargo against Iranian oil. They froze Iranian assets and banned exports of all goods to Iran. Britain acted against Iran in much the same way as the US is doing today. Like the US today, Britain planned a regime change in Tehran: Mosaddegh had to go.

British covert operations against Mosaddegh were savage and sophisticated. Misinformation, bribery, blackmail, murder and riots were all part of the toolkit. On April 20, 1953, news broke out that General Mahmood Afshar Tus, Mosaddegh's chief of police, had been kidnapped and killed. Investigations revealed that generals sidelined by Mosaddegh were responsible for this brutal killing.

By now, the British had Americans on their side. The zeitgeist in the US had changed. Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, Richard Nixon was vice president and Joseph McCarthy was the most powerful voice on Capitol Hill. McCarthy saw a communist under every bush and feared the Soviet Union would take over the world. The British found US paranoia against communism fertile ground to sow seeds of doubt about Mosaddegh. Bit by bit, they convinced Washington to join them in their conspiracy to overthrow Mosaddegh.

British and American efforts in weaning support away from Mosaddegh in the Majles forced the prime minister's hand. Mosaddegh asked the Shah to dissolve the Majles. Now both a British and an American lackey, this weak ruler declined. Mosaddegh called for a referendum on the dissolution of the Majles. Over 99% of Iranian voters supported him. On August 15, 1953, Mossaddegh dissolved the Majles.

This proved to be the highpoint of Mossaddegh's power. Events would soon overwhelm him. His political enemies were now conspiring with the

British and the Americans to get rid of him. Yet Mosaddegh had changed history. He had challenged autocratic rule at home and deepened democracy. At the same time, he had taken on imperial powers and won back Iranian sovereignty.

Mosaddegh Matters

Mosaddegh was a great statesman. He was honest, hardworking, idealistic and resolute. He made immense personal sacrifices in his political life. Mosaddegh steered Iran in a new direction despite the odds. In 27 months as prime minister, he achieved more than any other Iranian leader in the last two centuries.

In the land of absolutist Shahs, Mosaddegh championed rule of law, creating an independent judiciary to check the powers of the executive. Mosaddegh also supported freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of religion. An ardent democrat, he tried to increase political participation and organize free elections.

Mosaddegh's economic reforms were significant and are often overlooked. A frugal man, he balanced the budget and focused on increasing Iran's economic output. The tiff with the British was as much about economics as politics. Mosaddegh invested in health, unemployment insurance and infrastructure. Unlike the Shah who believed in ostentatious consumption, Mosaddegh was a believer in long term investments that would have a major multiplier effect.

Mosaddegh curtailed the culture of corruption fostered by the Shahs. He removed corrupt ministers and appointed honest ones. He got rid of generals who served British interests. He redistributed lands illegally seized by Reza Shah.

One of Mosaddegh's last attempts in power was to give women the right to vote in municipal councils. He also wanted to provide women

maternity leaves and give them the same rights as men in social insurance, benefit, and disability allowances. He had little success but that was not for lack of trying.

In 1952, Mosaddegh was named Time Magazine's Man of the Year. As American media often does, they painted this unfamiliar foreign figure as a villain. In contrast, Mosaddegh was hailed in colonies and newly independent colonies. In Yugoslavia, Egypt and India, he was hailed as a liberating hero. Remember, this was a time when almost all of Africa was still under European rule and the US still practiced race segregation. In his far-sighted reforms, Mosaddegh was far ahead of his time. Noted American diplomat Henry F. Grady called Mosaddegh "a man of great intelligence, wit and education—a cultured Persian gentleman." To Grady, the Iranian leader reminded him "of the late Mahatma Gandhi."

***Mehdi Alavi** is an author and also the founder and president of Peace Worldwide Organization, a non-religious, non-partisan charitable organization in the United States that promotes human rights, freedom, and peace for all. Annually, it releases its Civility Report, reporting on all countries that are members of the United Nations.

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Sports Fans Say Qatar Has Now Politicized the World Cup

Ellis Cashmore, Jamie Cleland, Kevin Dixon
January 22, 2023

Qatar was the blueprint for the future, according to a brand new research that asked 1,200 fans how they thought the geopolitically explosive tournament will affect sport. As high as 9 out of 10 believe the World Cup has been politicized for good.

Qatar 2022 was a different World Cup: the tournament was ensnared in a web of geopolitical scandals that almost strangled the competition before it began. The aftermath will be just as scandalous, at least according to football fans, over 90% of whom believe future World Cups and Olympics will be international political events. They are convinced the kind of controversy and polemic generated by Qatar will become the norm. Yet, there is a paradox: almost three-quarters believe this is a lamentable development. “Qatar is just the start and a blueprint for future events to be targeted for political and financial gain,” one research participant predicted.

Why are so many convinced the character of the World Cup and, by implication, the Olympics has changed, and why do so many believe this is bad? Basically, fans balance the benefits and intrinsic rewards offered by global tournaments against the hijacking of such events for partisan purposes. At Qatar, the host’s abundant human rights issues and its questionable labor practices were roundly criticized. There were clichéd complaints of “sportswashing,” though, as one fan concluded: “Sportswashing is not really possible anymore.

Attempts to pull the wool are cut off immediately by the billions of people on social media.”

Galvanizing Effect

Nowhere in the world is likely to be morally flawless in the mind of sports fans. They see sport as bringing climate change, human rights, bigotry and practically any other of the world’s bedeviling social problems into focus. Sports is, as one participant put it, “fair game,” meaning, if there is a problem that needs fixing, the methods are of secondary importance: only the result matters and sports is becoming an effective instrument. Nearly 73% are convinced sport in the 21st century is politically weaponized and will be an effective force in changing society. Sports have a “galvanizing effect,” according to one fan: “Movements for change can use the associated momentum to kick off beneficial activity.”

Qatar has “lit a fire” under sport. “Any future host nations will come under more scrutiny,” suggested a fan, making a point shared by most. And another: “It is a myth that sports and politics are not intertwined. Sport can create positive change in society, and an open stance should be encouraged to drive this change.”

“Athletes like all of us have a right to free speech,” declared one fan, confirming that the role of the World Cup, like it or not, will be to spotlight inequities, injustices and discrimination.

Politics and the World Cup in Future -- What fans think

88.6% Think World Cups and Olympics of the future will be controversial political events

72.3% Think sport has the potential to produce social and political change

73.4% Think political World Cups are a negative development

62.1% Don't think athletes should get involved in nonsporting affairs, like wearing emblems or making gestures

51.8% Don't think being involved in political activism is detrimental to competitive performance

34.1 % Think future World Cups should follow Qatar's example and ban alcohol.

Sample: 1,200. Conducted: Dec. 19, 2022-Jan 19 2023. Teesside University, UK

Who Is In Charge of the Message?

But, while there is near-consensus on the moral destiny of the World Cup — and, according to most fans, the Olympics too — there is division over the desirability of sports becoming political in character. Nearly 74% don't feel that politicization shouldn't be encouraged. It is, they say, not sports' responsibility to be a catalyst of change. Why then do so many think the politicization of sport is an unfavorable prospect?

The answers for this are not straightforward. Some fans believe the remonstrations witnessed over Qatar will soon be forgotten and will have achieved nothing. Sports only appear to be effective, but in the longer term are simply not. Some fans reflected on how sport was often lauded in the fight against apartheid in South Africa. There was a widespread boycott and SA was alienated from world sport for much of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet there is little evidence that the boycott actually served more than a symbolic role.

“Who is in charge of the message?” asked one fan, raising another objection. Is it legitimate for one culture to criticize another because its customs

and practices differ? One of the present authors has argued that much of the attack on Qatar bordered on Islamophobia and several participants in the research were concerned that moral absolutism (the belief in absolute principles in ethical, political or theological matters) could prevail. As most fans recognize, there are few places in the world that are perfect enough to avoid some sort of reproof. (The next World Cup is to be held in Canada, USA and Mexico, which would seem to offer plenty of raw material for political protest.)

One participant extended this argument: “People like to pass judgment on other cultures without acknowledging the problems in their own country.” He continued: “Don't forget homosexuality was illegal in the country that hosted the World Cup last time England won it.” It's a slyly intelligent response: Britain's Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized private consensual homosexual acts between men aged over 21 was not passed until 1967, a year after England's only World Cup win. There was no gay liberation movement; this started in 1969. While Betty Frieden's *The Feminine Mystique* had been published in 1963, women's liberation didn't pick up momentum till the late 1960s/early 1970s. There was no protest in 1966.

Sports Should Be Pure

Host nations have, in the past, largely escaped the kind of audit that would expose unwholesome legislation, customs and cultural practices. Football's World Cup has, over the decades, been held in countries mired in conflict, where dubious pursuits and, often abhorrent operations have been practiced. The 1934 tournament was played in Italy, then under the leadership of Benito Mussolini, the founder of the Italian fascist party, who annexed Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) in the same year and, in 1940, entered World War II on the same side as Germany. “Il Duce,” as he was known, used the World Cup to promote fascism.

In June 1978, General Jorge Rafael Videla, the military dictator of Argentina, presided over the World Cup opening ceremony, and presented the trophy after the final. Three years earlier, he had explained his philosophy of government: “As many people as necessary must die in Argentina so that the country will again be secure.” About 30,000 political opponents of the Videla junta “disappeared,” many feared killed, burned and their remains scattered on some of the pitches used during the tournament. The World Cup itself was a huge success, the Argentinian national team prevailing — though only after suspicions of match fixing. It’s sometimes been speculated that Argentina’s invasion of the Falklands in 1982 was in large part an attempt to regenerate the feelings of nationalism and solidarity sparked off by the World Cup.

“Politics don’t belong in sports,” proclaimed one fan bluntly. The point is shared by nearly three-quarters of fans: They have largely accepted the prescription of Avery Brundage, who was president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from 1952-72: He strongly condemned political interference in sport, which, he maintained, should be “pure.” Only in recent years have sports fans departed from this and taken notice of athletes like Colin Kaepernick and Naomi Osaka, who explicitly used their sports as political platforms.

Social Media’s Exposé

Sports fans have politicized over the past few years. Global movements, in particular Black Lives Matter and MeToo have demonstrated the electrifying power of social media in solidifying opinion and motivating people into action. Even if the majority don’t encourage the politicization of sport, they have become perhaps unwitting participants in the process. Back in 2002, when Qatar was awarded the hosting rights by Fifa, football’s world governing organization, fans were

not concerned with the territory’s culture and politics, nor its moral desirability as a site for one of the world’s two most prestigious global tournaments.

By the time of the Qatar tournament last December, everyone was familiar with the customs and practices of the Sheikdom in the Persian Gulf. Some fans attribute this to a growing awareness, in itself hastened by changes in communications: “Social Media allows [a nation’s suitability as host] to be challenged far more than it ever was and exposes stories that the public would previously be unaware of,” said one fan, underscoring the role of online exchanges. Another participant agreed: “Forthcoming events will be exposed in the same way.”

Tangential to the main inquiry, but an indicator of fans’ expectations of World Cups was the alcohol ban: Qatar, a Muslim territory of course, implemented a ban on the sale of alcohol in stadiums. This appeared to be an unpopular decision that fans would resent and oppose. In the event, they didn’t. Over a third (34%) of fans would now support a similar ban at future World Cup tournaments. A minority, but a significant minority nonetheless.

If their visions are to be accepted, future international sports tournaments will take on a very different and much more political complexion that we’re used to and, while most fans regret this development, the vast majority are expecting the kind of turbulence of the Qatar World Cup to be repeated time and again. As one fan summed up: “We live in a time where politics and sport are inextricably linked.”

[Cashmore, Cleland and Dixon are the authors of [Screen Society](#)]

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Is There a US–Iran “Non-Agreement”?

Gary Grappo
August 31, 2023

After Trump pulled out of Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran, no efforts to revive it have been successful. However, the US and Iran may just

have come to some kind of informal understanding on the matter. Iran is releasing American hostages, and the US is unfreezing Iranian assets. Will the arrangement hold?

Neither side has made an official announcement. There has been no ceremony to commemorate a settlement of issues. Yet, actions by the parties reported by the media suggest that something is up between these long-time enemies, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Searching for a term to explain what may be happening, some media are suggesting a “non-agreement” between the perpetually adversarial governments.

The two countries, as well as the other members of the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members, plus Germany), had reached an agreement in 2015 known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). That agreement called for severe curtailment of Iran’s nuclear weapons program in exchange for gradual suspension of sanctions and the return of billions in funds held in mostly Western financial institutions.

While many in the US hailed the accords as President Barack Obama’s signature foreign policy achievement, others — especially Republicans in Congress — characterized it as capitulation and refused to consider it. In 2018, President Donald Trump formally withdrew the US from the agreement, despite Iran’s having largely met all requirements up to that point.

One year later, Iran restarted its centrifuges and stockpiling large amounts of enriched uranium, though stopping short of weapons-grade levels, which would be 90% highly enriched uranium.

No agreement like a non-agreement

During his presidential campaign and once in office, President Joe Biden committed the US to either reentering the JCPOA or negotiating an alternative that would halt Iran's march to production of nuclear weapons. While slow off the mark, the negotiations did start, albeit indirectly as Iran refused to meet face-to-face with its American counterparts. However, those talks broke down in August of last year, and the JCPOA was seemingly consigned to the shelf, if not the morgue.

Despite even the president's own death pronouncement of the JCPOA as recently as last December, there was still some apparent life in the negotiations. Facilitated by Oman, Qatar and Switzerland, talks continued between the two sides starting earlier this year for several months as Biden seems determined to curtail the Iran nuclear program. Then, earlier this month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the impending release of five US citizens from Iranian prison (they have not yet been allowed to leave Iran). Not long afterwards, the Wall Street Journal reported that Iran was limiting its production of HEU to no more than 60%.

In exchange for the prisoner release, the US has agreed to the gradual release of \$6 billion in Iranian funds held under US sanctions in South Korean banks. It has also allowed Iraq to pay back \$10 billion in debts owed to Iran for electrical power purchases. Perhaps more importantly, Iranian oil exports have begun to creep back up after years of crushing sanctions on such exports. Sanctions, however, have not been lifted.

Why no actual agreement?

There may be more to all of this, but there's no way of knowing for sure. There is no formal agreement, and for good reason. Congressional Republicans, who control the House of

Representatives, have made it clear that they want still more aggressive action against Iran, not a deal.

Moreover, the US presidential election campaign has begun. When Obama made his 2015 deal, he was not up for reelection; Biden is. Biden will not jeopardize his chances in the 2024 election, in which he's likely to face the man who canceled the last agreement, Donald Trump. Introducing the hot-button Iran issue, on which there appears to be no middle ground, would surely distract voters from Biden's campaign messaging.

On the other hand, there is the promise he made in his 2020 campaign of restarting the JCPOA, one which has encountered repeated frustrations, most (but not all) of Iran's doing. The non-agreement format would seem to allow him to have it both ways: no official agreement with Iran, but seeming success in curtailing its weapons production program.

For those unfamiliar with the obscure ways of diplomacy, this might all seem like hookah smoke and mirrors. With no officially approved written agreement signed by both sides, how can there be an agreement? How is it enforced and how can each side be held accountable? And how can anyone not involved in the negotiations know what was actually agreed? That uncertainty, doubt, haziness and mysteriousness are probably just what both parties wanted.

Biden can publicly assert, as members of his administration already have, that there is no agreement. But he can also take credit for having fulfilled (at least so far) his pledge of the 2020 campaign on Iran's nuclear program. Call it deniability without liability.

The Iranians have their reasons as well. Extremists in an already very conservative government, most especially among the powerful

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have been largely opposed to any agreement with their sworn enemy, the US. They miss no opportunity to claim that the US cannot be trusted after having already abrogated the 2015 agreement in 2018. And there is little doubt that they would like to elevate the country to nuclear weapons status.

But the Iranian economy is in deep trouble. Inflation is running around the 40–50% zone and unemployment hovers around 8%, though many suspect it is actually higher, with youth employment over 25%. The latter statistic is especially important, given the widespread demonstrations that followed the murder while in official custody of Mahsa Amini for allegedly failing to abide by Iran’s strict dress code for women to cover their hair. With the first anniversary of her death approaching, Iran is anxious to proffer any economic relief it can to the Iranian people.

An agreement by any other name...

So, for the Americans and Iranians alike, there is no agreement, but each side is apparently taking the very actions that would have been included in one. It’s a “non-agreement.”

Diplomats have long used the device of a “non-paper” to communicate unofficially, in writing, their government’s position on any number of issues to another government. It clarifies a position or expectations without necessarily formally committing. It is understood that such a document is for the internal working use of the receiving government, which might in turn respond with its own non-paper. Usually, the objective is getting to a point at which something more official and formal may be exchanged.

It would appear the Americans and Iranians have employed the same concept for their non-agreement. Presumably, either side may walk away

at any point that it perceives the other as not complying, or it has everything it wants.

Can all of this take on something perhaps of greater consequence? That would not be a good bet, given the decades of bad blood between the two. Hatred is not too strong a word to describe the feelings of many on both sides toward one another. But one could see a second-term Joe Biden pursuing something more official and long-term. Moreover, there could be — though it’s hardly likely — a more amenable leadership in Iran, making agreement somewhat more possible.

And the Iranians, too, might hold out hope that, if the non-agreement holds and Biden returns to the White House in January 2025, something more permanent might be in the offing. All of that is aspirational in the extreme. Barring monumental changes in circumstances, especially in the leadership of the Islamic Republic, settling on anything more permanent and formal does not seem to be in the cards for the foreseeable future.

If there is any hope, it may be in the actions of other countries in the Middle East, particularly the Gulf states, which all want to lower the temperature in the region. The slow rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the improved relations between the UAE and Iran all suggest the countries of the Gulf want to move in that direction. Israel will not publicly endorse and may even criticize a non-agreement, but the US administration has surely shared its details with the Israeli leadership. They too want to see Iran’s nuclear activities at least curtailed, if not eliminated. So, success of the non-agreement in the months ahead will give it more staying power over a longer period of time.

Lastly, tensions throughout the world are not propitious for whatever understanding may now be in place between Tehran and Washington. Iran’s movement into the orbit of the China–Russia

alliance will only exacerbate tensions between Iran and the West. Iran's destabilizing activities elsewhere in the Middle East and its overt support for Russia (e.g., supplying Russia with Iranian drones) in the latter's brutal and unjustified war against Ukraine have increased American and Western enmity toward Iran. And Iran's ongoing crackdown on regime opponents, including doubling down on the outrageous hijab law, further poisons prospects for improved Western-Iranian ties.

Iran's status as a pariah seems unalterable. Therefore, it would be virtually impossible that a US administration could seriously negotiate something more permanent and official with the Islamic Republic.

The world will have to content itself with the uncertainty and mystery of a continuing "non" relationship ... and the fear of another potentially nuclear-armed state. Like any understanding, agreement or treaty, it's only as good as the intention, will and good faith of the parties.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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How the New Israel-Hamas War Threatens the Middle East

Gary Grappo
October 27, 2023

An Israeli victory is Iran's worst case scenario. Therefore, Tehran is likely to activate its allies to undermine Israel without provoking all-out war. However, intensifying conflict in Gaza amplifies chances of miscalculation and a second Arab Uprisings could engulf the Middle East.

Question: Setting aside for a moment the epicenter of the current Israeli-Hamas War — and the colossal battle to come once Israeli ground forces enter Gaza and the real battle is joined — how bad could this conflict really become?

Answer: Very bad. Mostly because of the risk of miscalculation. Emotions are at their peak, judgment is suspended, and the sides are operating on hair-trigger responses. Nonetheless, there are mitigating factors that could potentially mean less involvement of forces outside the immediate conflict.

The proximate cause for this concern is Iran. In addition to Hamas itself, Iran's proxies in the region include Hizballah in Southern Lebanon, a collection of some half dozen Syrian and Iraqi militias, and the Houthis of Yemen, all of which currently view both Israel and the United States as enemies. Ironically, all, including Hamas, are Arab but variously take orders from and are armed, supplied, funded, trained, advised and often directed by Iran, which is not Arab but Persian. At present, no Iranian forces, save for a handful

advising and directing ground forces in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, are seriously threatened by this conflict. Iran is using its Arab proxies, aka pawns, to pursue its decades-long war against Israel.

The Hizballah gamble

Of all the proxies/pawns confronting Israel, none is as threatening as Hizballah. Armed with an estimated 150,000 rockets and missiles, as many as 2,000 drones, and a military force of some 100,000 (per Hezbollah, but fewer than 50,000 according to estimates by Jane's Information Group), it is a potent military force. In 2006, when it last battled Israel, it was armed with 15,000 rockets, or about what Hamas had at the start of the current conflict. And while Hizballah was able to stand its ground and remain in Southern Lebanon, it took a severe beating, brutally devastating Lebanon in the process. Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hizballah, subsequently acknowledged his regret for having started that war, given its horrendous toll on Hizballah and Lebanon.

Nevertheless, Hizballah's engagement in the present war would tax Israel's forces and resources, likely obliging it to redirect forces and assets from Gaza to its northern border. Were Hizballah to launch even a fraction of its missile arsenal against Israeli cities, tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Israelis could perish. Israel would respond with the full force of its much more potent military apparatus. Recently, it threatened to "return Lebanon to the stone age" in the event of a major Hizballah military attack on Israel. Given the level of destruction in the 2006 war, this isn't an idle threat. To add further grist to the argument, unlike in 2006, Hizballah faces the power of two US aircraft carrier battle groups off the Lebanese coast and two air force fighter squadrons deployed to the region, which adds a massively powerful punch in aircraft and cruise missiles to the Israeli onslaught. US President Joe

Biden's cautionary warning to Hizballah, "Don't!", also is no bluff.

Nasrallah's aforementioned admission is important. Would he risk repeating his mistake of 2006, with a much worse ending? It is also worth noting that Lebanon has been in an economic and financial spiral over the last several years propelled in part by continuing political disarray and dysfunction. Hizballah's political stock in the country is at an all-time low. A war in Lebanon, which would be the inevitable consequence of a Hizballah conflict with Israel, would be vehemently opposed by Lebanon's tattered political leadership, the Lebanese army and most of all by the Lebanese people, including a likely majority of the sizeable Shi'a population from whom Hizballah draws its political support.

For Iran, is Hamas worth the risk?

How hard would Iran push Hizballah to enter the fray in the event of a potential Israeli defeat of another important asset, Hamas? Only Tehran can answer. However, Iran likely places the highest priority on the health and survival of Hizballah. It is viewed as an indispensable strategic asset in the event Iran itself is faced with an attack or war. Risking Hizballah and potentially Iran's own defensive capabilities doesn't appear a smart bet.

Iran's outright entry into the war also appears unlikely. Perhaps for Hizballah, Iran might respond, but not Hamas. And pushing Hizballah into a war it would very likely lose would almost certainly prompt Iranian involvement. With all sorts of political, economic and environmental problems at home and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in declining health, Iran would not want a war with Israel and most especially with the United States.

Ultimately, the decision lies with Tehran. Is it willing to risk a truly regional conflagration in its

irrational, perverse pursuit of destroying Israel? Is it willing to stand by as Israel destroys Hamas, an Iranian ally and proxy in Gaza, and lose a major pressure point on Israel directly on its border? A defeat of Hamas would be a humiliating defeat for Iran, almost comparable to the Soviet Union's in 1973 when Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal, surrounded the elite Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai and were headed for Cairo. However, Hamas' defeat, but without Hizballah's destruction, would still leave Iran as a formidable foe. Without Hizballah, Iran is measurably weaker.

Even without overt intervention, Hizballah has the ability to menace and tie down Israeli forces in northern Israel. Importantly, both sides seem to know how far they can push their forces without crossing some unspecified line, which would then require full-scale retaliation by one side. The Hizballah attacks at the current level demonstrate solidarity with Hamas, prove to Iran's other proxies that it supports them in their efforts, but avoid a drawn-out war that risks severely crippling Hizballah and devastating Lebanon.

The major problem with that scenario is unpredictability. War is inherently unpredictable. A slight miscalculation by Iran, Hizballah or Israel could trigger conflict that might quickly spiral out of control. If a Hizballah rocket, for example, were mistakenly to land in a populated Israeli area, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) would be obliged to respond with significant force, to which Hizballah would likely respond in kind. The Middle East's nightmare scenario will have begun.

And then the risk next door

The other Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen present a threat of a significantly lesser degree. They lack the power and numbers to do consequential harm to Israel. Those Syrian and Iraqi militias and the Houthis are a greater threat to American forces in (or near in

the case of Yemen) those countries, though here too the threat risk is minimal. Nevertheless, the Americans will want to avoid the loss of American lives.

Still, Syrian militias elsewhere, several of which are directly advised by Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers, already threaten the Golan and northeastern Israel and cannot be ignored. They present a menacing drain on Israeli forces and resources. Although the risk is lower, an errant rocket on an Israeli town would undoubtedly trigger a strong Israeli response against Syria as well as the militia force that fired it. Bashar al-Assad, who has finally established himself as the leader without peer in Syria, will not be anxious to have Syrian groups of any stripe drag his war-devastated nation into a conflict with Israel, or by extension the US.

One final front that was already heating up is the West Bank. More than 100 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the year, making this the most violent year there since the Second Intifada (2000–2005). Iran possesses less influence there than elsewhere, but it has managed to insinuate it of late with the help of Hizballah, funneling weapons and perhaps even operatives to support Palestinian resistance movements, e.g., the Lion's Den, and aid a West Bank revival of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The major threat posed there is its proximity to Israel's major population centers: Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Despair and hopelessness are as intensely felt in the West Bank as in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority, led by an aging Mahmoud Abbas and a corrupt and inept coterie of Fatah elites and fat cats, nominally governs the West Bank but lacks credibility and is thoroughly distrusted by the Palestinians living there. Palestinian Security Forces are reluctant to insert themselves for fear of doing Israel's bidding. Right-wing Israeli settlers have stepped up their violence against Palestinian

towns and villages, sometimes with the willing participation of IDF soldiers. That is further fueling Palestinian animus and rage. The area is ripe for Iranian mischief and rabble-rousing and is a dagger aimed at the heart of Israel.

A full-on uprising on the West Bank would require significant Israeli forces to quell over an extended period of time. The toll on military personnel of such an occurrence, along with the ground campaign in Gaza, would represent a major taxing of IDF forces and assets. And it is in that scenario that others, especially Hizballah, may incorrectly perceive an advantage. That in turn precipitates an expansion of the Israel-Hamas conflict that so many fear.

Armed uprisings in both Gaza and the West Bank present another problem. Such an uprising will undoubtedly attract massive support in the Arab world. Think of the Arab Uprisings on steroids, except this time it will revolve around an issue that Arab governments will have to support. If it lasted for any length of time, as seasoned Middle East journalist Robin Wright has pointed out, it could potentially jeopardize the relationships Israel has painstakingly negotiated over decades with its neighbors Egypt and Jordan, as well as with Abraham Accord members the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. It would also destroy the ongoing talks over normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

What's in it for Iran?

Given the hesitation to see the Israel-Hamas war escalate to involve outside forces or expand to additional fronts, why does Iran take the risk?

First, the Islamic Republic likely sees this moment as a chance to prove its mettle on the regional and even global stages. Its deployment of proxies on Israel's southern, northern and northeastern borders demonstrates its ability to

project, if not power, then at least effective resistance, and threaten Israel. Success in war is greater with allies, and Iran has proven it has them. As such, it cannot be ignored.

Secondly, Iran seeks to destabilize the Arab Middle East, fragment its centers of power, and, in the ideal scenario, separate it from the United States. Iran would then stand as the unchallenged power in the region, which it frankly believes it is already. Therefore, the aforementioned West Bank nightmare scenario bears watching carefully.

If Israel is successful in ridding Gaza of Hamas — regardless of how that is defined — look for Iran to immediately rally its proxies, including whatever remnant of Hamas that may survive. Iran will continue fighting Israel to the last Arab, all the while protecting and advancing its Islamic Revolution.

Israeli victory over Hamas is the worst case for Iran. The regime of mullahs is playing for much higher gains and sees its odds too attractive to ignore. This makes it an extremely dangerous time for the Middle East.

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A Timely Analysis: The Foreign Policy Trends of Muslim-Majority States

Emir Hadzikadunic
April 23, 2023

Muslim-majority states prefer to pursue neutrality in their foreign policy. Many believe this is because they simply oppose liberal ideology. However, closer examination of their modern strategic foreign policy reveals a more nuanced, practical and multipolar approach.

After over a year of war in Ukraine, some 50 Muslim-majority states from Morocco to Indonesia are following a policy of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War. They neither support Russia nor Ukraine or its backer, the West. Muslim-majority states are not only unified in their neutral stance on the war, but also follow assertive foreign policy paradigms that contain broader international implications.

Muslim-majority states “de-westernize” their international affairs and establish strategic partnerships with other great powers while reducing their dependence on arms suppliers from the US. They also avoid interstate rivalry and interference in domestic affairs of fellow Muslim-majority states, or other authoritarian great powers.

This article analyzes the foreign affairs of Muslim-majority states through two prisms, descriptive and explanatory. The descriptive section highlights observable data, such as their foreign policy views, commitments, or actions that demonstrate their balanced approach to international affairs. The explanatory section questions the nature of their actions: Why, for

example, do Muslim-majority states diversify their relationships beyond Western partnerships, including their increased arms supply from Russia?

A Beacon of Neutrality

Muslim-majority states maintain a “practical”, “cautious” or “uneasy” neutrality over the Russia-Ukraine War. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan summarized this position by stating, “We cannot hold sides. We cannot take sides. And it wouldn’t be right for us to do that.”

Imran Khan, the former prime minister of Pakistan, emulated Erdoğan when he refused to blame Russia for the war. He said, “countries like Pakistan should not pass any value and moral judgment on this” and they should be “nonaligned, neutral, and friendly to both.” Malaysia has similarly committed to neutrality.

Saudi Arabia, like other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), generally views the war “as a complicated European conflict.” The GCC leaders see no reason for Arab states “to stand against Vladimir Putin’s government.” Egypt’s foreign ministry released a statement affirming the importance of “dialogue and diplomatic solutions”. This reluctance to blame and antagonize Russia triggered prompt expressions of frustration from Kyiv’s embassy in Cairo.

Currently, it is difficult to find any statement by Muslim-majority states that supports either the West or Russia. These states have remained studiously neutral. Syrian President Bashar Al Assad is an exception to this phenomenon.

It’s Not Personal, It’s Policy

The Muslim world’s approach to the invasion reflects their readiness to establish political, economic and security partnerships with multiple

players in the international system. They are not choosing alliances with a single power. This is what contemporary Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin and late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington posited when they spoke about Islamic-Orthodox or Islamic-Confucian alliances. Muslim-majority states prefer constructive engagements with various great powers based solely on their commercial, security or geopolitical interests.

Turkey, for example, sees Russia as an important partner for energy, tourism and regional security. At the same time, as a member of NATO, Ankara is allied with the US and European powers for its security. China has now become Saudi Arabia's biggest trading partner. The US still remains the Kingdom's most important security partner though. Since choosing one relationship over the other would be costly, Turkey and Saudi Arabia tend to pursue multi-directional foreign policies. Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Jakarta, Islamabad, and Doha also respect the US as a great power, while maintaining relationships with other great powers.

Muslim-majority states are forging relationships with non-Western groups, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Both groups approach international affairs in a multipolar manner, and act as an alternative to the US-led order. In the Middle East alone, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States Emirates (UAE) are current or prospective dialogue partners of the SCO. All medium-sized Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, look positively to BRICS. The same holds for other parts of the Muslim world, specifically Kazakhstan, Nigeria, the UAE, Senegal, Algeria, Uzbekistan and Malaysia. All prefer to participate in remaking the rules of the international system, a process that is now underway.

More consequential commitments from Muslim-majority states at the multilateral level are found within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, they defied calls from the US to pump more crude as prices of oil rallied to multi-year highs. In October 2022, Muslim-majority member states within OPEC+ decided to cut crude production by two million barrels a day, a move that benefitted not only Russia, but also themselves. On April 2, Saudi Arabia and other OPEC+ oil producers announced further oil output cuts of around 1.16 million barrels per day. For these states, staying friendly with the US is subordinate to pursuing their national economic goals.

Muslim-majority states are also generally reluctant to interfere in the domestic affairs of fellow Muslim states, including on issues of serious human rights violations. In the UN Human Rights Council, no Muslim-majority state member voted for the international fact-finding mission to independently investigate alleged human rights violations in Iran. Tehran had cracked down on protests that began on September 16, 2022 after the death in police custody of a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini.

Muslim-majority states also ignore the domestic affairs of other great powers, including serious human rights violations of Muslim minorities. This behavior of their political leaders, including their state religious bodies, is striking. They have remained silent on the massive detention and forced re-education of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in Northwest China. In July 2019, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, and other Muslim-majority states helped to block a Western motion at the United Nations calling for China to allow "independent international observers" into the Xinjiang region.

This year, a delegation from The World Muslim Communities Council (TWMCC), which comprises 14 Muslim-majority states, visited Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital. According to its statement, TWMCC "hailed the efforts of the Chinese authorities in combating terrorism in Xinjiang". As prime minister, Khan also complained that hardly any Muslim country, with the exception of Turkey, stands with Pakistan on the rights of the Kashmiri people.

Fighter Jets and Possible Peace

Neutrality in the exercise of international affairs generally does not come cheap. It is important to note that many Muslim-majority states take appropriate measures to protect and pay for their stances. According to a fact sheet of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 14 Muslim-majority states are listed among the top 30 largest importers of arms, accounting for 38.8% of the total volume of arms imports from 2017 to 2021.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Pakistan and the UAE are listed among the top 10 largest importers of arms. This illustrates that weapon imports from Russia are the most important driver of relations between Muslim-majority states and Moscow. According to SIPRI, Russia was the largest arms supplier for Egypt, Algeria, Iraq and Pakistan from 2017 to 2021. It was the second and third largest supplier for Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, Pakistan and the UAE. Moreover, half of the top Russian weapons importers are Muslim-majority states. At the regional level, the Middle East and North African (MENA) region was the second most lucrative for Russian arms sales between 2009 and 2018.

In recent years, Russia's share of MENA's defense market has doubled, as arms deliveries increased by 125% from 1999-2008 to 2009-2018. In 2009-18, Russia delivered weapons to 14

countries in the region, which accounted for 26% of the total volume of Russia's arms exports. In 1999-2008 this figure was only 14%. As arms imports from Russia increased, imports from the US decreased. They went down from 47% in 2012-16 to 43% in 2017-21.

Continuing this trend, arms exports from the US to the UAE fell by 36% between 2016 and 2020. The UAE was the second largest recipient of US arms in 2012-16 but fell to the eighth largest in 2017-21. For the same period, arms exports to Turkey fell by 81% as they went from the third largest recipient of US arms exports in 2011-15 to the 19th largest in 2016-20.

In 2022, Erdoğan revealed that his country is no longer dependent on the US. Facing problems with importing fighter jets, he said, "If we can't get the results out of the United States about the F-16s, what are we going to do? Of course, we're going to take care of our own selves".

The generalization of the Muslim world versus others ignores the important issue of interstate relations between Muslim-majority states. What happens between rival Muslim-majority states in a world that is no longer unipolar?

Data on civil, proxy, or interstate wars suggest that rival Muslim states compete far less today than in the past. States with previously strained relations, made bilateral U-turns in recent years. Turkey and Saudi Arabia established military collaborations and Erdoğan hosted Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). The Turkish defense minister met his Syrian counterpart in Moscow. Saudi Arabia reopened a consulate in Iraq and pledged \$1 billion in aid. Additionally, there was a ceasefire in Yemen and even the civil war in Syria has subsided.

The recent deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran marks a dramatic departure from years of open

hostility. Perhaps even more unexpectedly, Turkey began a rapprochement with Syria. While the rivalry between Muslim-majority states will not cease completely in the emerging multipolar world, old differences are shrinking considerably.

Assertively Moving from the Periphery

Leaders in the West might wonder why many Muslim-majority states are reluctant to embrace the Western narrative about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This might come across as surprising given that some of these states host US military troops. To make sense of what is going on, a closer examination of the Muslim world is necessary.

Both the Russian Dugin and the American Huntington depicted a unitary nature of the Muslim world. They generalized Islamic civilization as a single variable or meta-force in international affairs. This has provoked serious and never-ending debate. However, religion has never been the central defining element for Muslim-majority states. Furthermore, Dugin and Huntington did not examine the relationship between Islam and forms of government in Muslim-majority countries. The reality is complex.

Our assumption at the international level is that Muslim-majority states resent the liberal international order and the threat that it poses to their political societies. Their political elites do generally dislike what John Mearsheimer calls “a liberal unipole” in which the US, as the sole superpower in the international system, pursues a policy of “liberal hegemony.” They do not want the liberal American elites to reshape Muslim-majority states in their own image. Indeed, there is a problem in the Muslim world with accepting the universality and superiority of liberal ideology. The liberal political elite in the West believes in democracy and free markets, and wants to impose this on others. Muslim-majority states distrust this Western, especially American, article of faith.

They see recent military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as disasters.

Therefore, Muslim-majority states prefer multipolarity in the international system. In this system, their voices can be heard and they can move from the periphery to the center of international politics. Many Muslim-majority states have progressed from dependent status, serving foreign policy objectives of other great powers, to push for what Pakistani Khan calls “more dignity”, “self-respect” and “independence” in international affairs.

Turkey, for example, has gradually moved from a peripheral state, or as Huntington describes a “torn state”, in the Western block to a core state in its regional sub-system. Turkey’s recent stand on Ukraine or Saudi Arabia’s strategic partnership with China underlines an important shift. A new world order has emerged where China and Russia have become important, and are now challenging the US.

Michael Singh has explained how medium-sized states are “eschewing both alignment with a single power and nonalignment, and instead choosing omni-alignment: participation in the multilateral institutions led by the United States and those spearheaded by its rivals.” He argues that “omni-alignment also serves as a hedge against the unpredictability of great-power behavior”. This hedging is most clearly seen in the Middle East, where the future of both US and Chinese engagement remains unclear.

Muslim-majority states view liberal ideology as a threat to their political systems. They prefer strong, sovereign and authoritarian states. The Muslim world still remains unfriendly to liberal democracy, irrespective of variations in faith practices, ideologies, regime characteristics or elite interests. Muslim-majority states are either non-democratic or have no functional democracy by

Western standards. Those few Muslim countries that hold regular elections, such as Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia, have not reached the status of “consolidated democracy” according to Freedom House.

Data on individual freedoms reveals that Muslim-majority states score poorly on the right to vote, freedom of expression and equality before the law. Of all Muslim-majority states that are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), not one scored enough to be given the status of a free state. The majority are considered not free, with the rest deemed partially free. Given their opposition to the liberal order, contemporary Muslim kings, presidents, and prime ministers built stronger partnerships with Donald Trump, a like-minded American president. He railed against the liberal order and supported strongmen around the world such as Erdoğan, MBS and Mohamed bin Zayed. In turn, they prefer Trump to Biden.

Shared opposition by Muslim-majority states to the international liberal order is allied to their opposition to liberal norms at the national level. Today, Muslim-majority states and their leaders are aiming to move to a post-liberal, new global order where the East balances the West and where they are no longer “client”, “torn”, “vassal”, or “periphery” states.

It remains to be seen how the push for increased centrality within their regional sub-systems will play out for Muslim-majority states. This new assertive foreign policy of the Muslim world will certainly strengthen multipolarity. It suits China and Russia. However, Muslim-majority states will not become part of what Huntington defined as the Islamic-Confucian alliance or what Dugin proposed as a common front of Islamic-Orthodox civilisations against the liberal West.

They will continue to establish political, economic or security partnerships with different players in the international system. Muslim states may even contribute to stability in an anarchic and more complex multipolar system by offering mediation in conflict zones that involve opposing great powers. The future will be very different to the present and Muslim-majority states will become bigger players in the international system.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

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Defeating Hamas Is a Challenge Israel Cannot Overcome

Emir Hadzikadunic
November 17, 2023

Israel possesses a formidable military capability, but it has never been able to turn this capability into a lasting victory against Hezbollah or Hamas. In every engagement, Israel eventually withdraws, leaving behind death, destruction and greater instability. Israel must realize that it cannot fight its way to peace in Gaza; a two-state solution is the only way forward.

In 1979, there were two significant developments in the Middle East. First, Israel and Egypt signed a historic peace treaty, the Camp David Accords. The accords did not specifically address the issue of occupied Palestinian territories, including Gaza.

Second, the Iranian Revolution overthrew the Shah. This marked a change in the relationship between Israel and Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established “Quds Day” as an annual event to express opposition to the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem and other Palestinian territories, including Gaza. (Quds is the Islamic name for Jerusalem.)

These events had a profound regional impact, shaping politics and conflicts from the 1980s onward. Israel had defeated its Arab neighbors in several wars (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973), but now militant groups like Hezbollah and Hamas took their place. Backed by the US, Israel has in its favor a greater disparity in military power than history has ever seen. In conflicts with these militants (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s), the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) won every battle. Despite this, Israel has never been able to secure a strategic victory. Each time, Hezbollah and Hamas emerged stronger and more determined in their resistance. With Israel engaged in another war against Hamas in Gaza, we are seeing the same conflict play out once again.

Israel’s failed occupation of Lebanon

Over the past 40 years, Israel has demonstrated time and again that it cannot win wars against Hezbollah or end them by military means.

On June 6, 1982, the IDF crossed into southern Lebanon and quickly advanced to the outskirts of Beirut. However, the war that Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon believed would last for just few days

turned into Israel’s version of Vietnam. By the end of the war, Israeli casualties totaled 455 dead and 2,460 wounded.

Hezbollah, a Shia Muslim militia, formed during this war. It forced the IDF to retreat 30 kilometers south of Beirut, a major setback for Israel.

Faced with growing public pressure, Begin resigned on September 28, 1983. The new Israeli government, led by Shimon Peres, faced the same challenges as before and eventually withdrew to a self-declared security buffer zone in southern Lebanon on January 14, 1985. This move set a precedent for future Israeli withdrawals from occupied territories without negotiated agreements with opposing sides.

Israel left the battlefield to Hezbollah, which became a prominent actor in Lebanon and it solidified its presence and influence in the following years.

Israeli dissatisfaction with the occupation of a buffer zone grew during the 1990s. It escalated following a 1997 helicopter crash in which 73 Israeli soldiers were killed.

Ultimately, on May 23, 2000, the Israeli army executed the third and final withdrawal of Israeli forces. The IDF pulled out of southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, effectively ending the 22-year occupation. It was the second Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories in Lebanon without a negotiated agreement, marking another strategic setback for Israel.

After the withdrawal, the border with Lebanon remained unstable. Hezbollah expanded its missile and military capabilities in the area, and a new conflict erupted in the region only six years later. Although the Israeli army destroyed Lebanon's infrastructure in the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah was not defeated. Hezbollah’s leader Hassan

Nasrallah called the war a “divine victory.” For Israel, the conflict was a military failure. The conduct of the war discredited Israel's leadership, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s approval rating soon fell to 3%.

From Hezbollah to Hamas

Israel has demonstrated time and again that it cannot win wars against Hamas, either, or end them by military means.

Israeli security forces have killed many leaders from the military and political wings of Hamas. In 2004, they killed Hamas’s founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Ismail Yasin. In the same year, they killed one of the co-founders of Hamas, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi. Despite these targeted killings, Hamas has demonstrated the ability to rebuild its leadership, increase its popularity and act effectively as a political organization. It won the plurality of the vote in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election.

Some argue that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu carried out a strategy designed to weaken the power of the Palestinian Authority, the governing body led by President Mahmoud Abbas, by allowing Hamas to retain control over Gaza. One of Netanyahu’s associates, Major General Gershon Hacohen, said, “We need to tell the truth. Netanyahu’s strategy is to prevent the option of two-states, so he is turning Hamas into his closest partner. Openly Hamas is an enemy. Covertly, it’s an ally.”

Whatever the truth, Hamas maintained its presence in Gaza. Despite facing conflicts with Israel in 2008-09 (Operation Cast Lead), 2012 (Operation Pillar of Defense), 2014 (Operation Protective Edge), 2018 (Gaza Border Protests) and 2021 (Israel-Gaza Conflict), Hamas survived with support coming from regional actors like Iran, Qatar and Turkey. While Israel won each battle,

Hamas, after suffering casualties and infrastructure damage, consistently demonstrated resilience. Following each conflict, Hamas rebuilt infrastructure, adapted new tactics, and refined strategies.

On October 7, Hamas executed a swift and coordinated action by land, sea and air, resulting in the deaths of around 1,200 people, including at least 846 civilians, 278 soldiers and 44 police. Hamas also took an estimated 239 hostages. This unexpected move disrupted the status quo, altering dynamics in the Middle East. Journalist Alon Pinkas described Hamas's incursion as an “epic Israeli debacle.”

Israel’s mission impossible

Given the historical patterns of conflict between the Israel Defense Forces and non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas over the past 40 years, we can predict how this present conflict will evolve. Israel’s chances of winning the war against Hamas are slim. Netanyahu painted himself into a corner with "destroy Hamas" as an objective, just as Begin and Olmert painted themselves into corners with “destroy PLO” or “destroy Hezbollah.” Both of them won their battles but eventually lost their wars, withdrawing from the fight without achieving their declared objectives.

If Netanyahu aims to “destroy Hamas,” he would have to wage a protracted and bloody urban war, similar to what Begin faced. The question arises: Is Israel prepared for a prolonged war on multiple fronts against highly motivated militias entrenched for over a decade? Will the Israeli public tolerate significant IDF casualties? Even if the IDF incapacitates Hamas in Gaza, as it did with the PLO in Lebanon in 1982–83, merely destroying infrastructure will not eradicate its ideology. As Ami Ayalon, Gilead Sher and Orni Petruschka point out, Hamas is an idea, and it will persist among Palestinians as long as there is no

real peace option to which they can attach their hopes.

Moreover, Tel Aviv is unlikely to bring the 2 million Palestinians in an occupied Gaza to submission. More likely, considering history, we will witness the IDF leaving Gaza, leaving destruction in its wake, similar to its compelled withdrawal from Lebanon. Hamas would claim a victory because it, or at least its ideology, wasn't completely destroyed.

New trends in the Middle East

Netanyahu has said he will “change the Middle East,” establishing a regional order aligning with Israel's interests. However, his actions following October 7 have had the opposite effect. The region has undergone drastic changes: Protests have erupted in major Arab capitals, leading to the suspension of normalization talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia and forcing Cairo, Amman and Riyadh to change their official narrative. Israel's relations with Turkey are strained, and Iran's proxies have targeted Israel, as well as US assets in Iraq and Syria, with missiles and drones.

A sustained ground operation by Israel could result in tens of thousands of casualties, heighten the risk of a broader regional conflict and destabilize governments in multiple Arab countries. Iran has also hinted that it would not allow Hamas to lose without escalating the conflict.

Internationally, Israel's maneuvering space is narrowing, as public opinion increasingly rejects the dehumanization of the Palestinian people. The voices supporting Palestinians resonate from London to Madrid to Washington. The United States, once the primary force in the Middle East, is no longer the sole or main authority. We live in a multipolar world. Muslim-majority states in the Middle East are demonstrating greater

independence and a willingness to establish strategic partnerships with different global powers, including BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011 and Afghanistan in 2021 serve as poignant reminders of evolving regional realities.

Prime Minister Netanyahu presented himself as a master statesman who could do the impossible for Israel. In addition to killing two-state solution, his plan involved normalizing relations with all Arab states, and treating Palestinians as a security concern to be managed indefinitely. But everything Netanyahu has built for decades crashed in a matter of hours. The political grave he dug for the two-state solution may now become his own, and like Menachem Begin four decades earlier, he and his unpopular ministers may retire from politics.

The recent conflict and devastation in Gaza might sow the seeds for a new order, challenging the existing structure of the occupation of Palestine, which, in turn, contains the seeds for more wars that Israel cannot win and cannot end. The two-state solution is the only thing that can fix this system. Ending what UN Secretary-General António Guterres called “56 years of suffocating occupation” is the only reasonable option for any future Israeli government. This is the only victory Israel could make.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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The Bottom Line: Kemalism Just Won't Win

Nathaniel Handy
June 10, 2023

Western observers have been surprised by another win for Turkey's president, seemingly impervious to the economic and humanitarian disasters that have made recent headlines for him. What they, and the opposition alliance, fail to understand is what really motivates the Turkish voter.

Observers in the West could be forgiven for wondering how Turkey's newly re-elected president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, won again. Given the portrayal of these elections in much of the Western media, you could assume the only explanation is corruption.

Nevertheless, the turnout for the Turkish elections was high, higher than turnouts are in most Western democratic states. Turnouts in dictatorships across the region are pitifully low, caused no doubt by apathy due to the lack of any real choice—unless, of course, they are the fanciful “99.9% support” type of turnout.

Despite this, coverage of these elections has portrayed them as a contest between a dictator (as Erdogan has been described time and again) against a democrat. Opposition presidential candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu was painted as a

humble civil servant who had risen to take on the strongman in a David versus Goliath political moment.

A working-class hero

It matters that Kilicdaroglu was not an emergent democratic grassroots candidate, but the predictable consensus candidate of a broad six-party opposition alliance. He has been the leader of the main opposition Peoples' Republican Party (CHP) for 13 years. In that time, he has consistently lost at the ballot box to Erdogan.

The now casual and commonplace description of Erdogan as a dictator in Western media also misses another key point. Unlike most real dictators, who tend to be opportunist ex-military figures, or career politicians who are often scions of influential families, Erdogan is the real deal, and his supporters know it. He rose from humble origins in Istanbul's Kasimpasa neighborhood. He is in many ways unpolished. He is also sincere in his religious faith. His working-class roots and his understanding of how this constituency thinks—because he thinks like them—provide Erdogan an authenticity that you cannot simply manufacture.

All the onions and kitchen sinks in Turkey cannot obscure the fact that Erdogan is the figurehead for a constituency that was systemically disenfranchised for much of the modern Republic's history. This is at the root of his enduring appeal. It is a populist appeal, but it is no less real for that.

Erdogan has made his life's work the restoration of the dignity of a class of Turkish society that has felt marginalized and scorned by elites since at least the foundation of the modern republic, and arguably since the rise of westernizing reformist governments in the final years of the Ottoman Empire.

In the pre-Erdogan era (and for a long time after it had begun), women who chose to wear a headscarf could not get an education or work for the public sector. Consider that fact for a moment. Women can wear headscarves to school or work in most secular Western states, and yet a state often viewed as Islamic by outsiders outlawed it.

For his constituency, Erdogan's tenure has been a very real revolution in their life circumstances. These core changes are important. The average voter sets them against the more recent economic pain. They weigh the two. Basic goods have become painfully expensive, but recently gained political freedoms are also precious. These are fundamental political considerations.

A popular, but not invincible, leader

Erdogan has made big mistakes. The economy is reeling from ill-judged policies and nepotism. The swing to nationalist policies and hardline confrontation with Kurds in the wake of the coup attempt of 2016 has brought with it intractable problems internally and externally for Turkey. The president's post-coup paranoia of real or invisible enemies has made many old friends in his Justice and Development Party (AKP) lose faith with him, and his authoritarian style has alienated key Islamist figures who would make his government stronger.

When you consider all this, it is testament to the well of goodwill he is able to draw from that he still won fairly comfortably. However, it is easy to ascribe too much of the credit for Erdogan's success to his own charisma and political know-how. Much of the cause of the result of this election was also of the opposition's own making.

If the opposition alliance had really committed to challenging Erdogan, they should have found someone who didn't require Erdogan's core constituency to betray the legacy of what Erdogan

has built. The leader of the CHP was never going to be that figure.

A clear majority in Turkish society does not want a return to a Western-backed secular nationalist elite, as exists in much of the Arab world and did exist for most of the history of the Turkish republic. Erdogan has made another path possible. His tenure is far from fully successful, but for him to be usurped, he needs to be beaten on his own terms.

The person to do so has not appeared, or, at any rate, not been chosen to run as a candidate against him. As has been repeated by much of the media, even a CHP candidate such as Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu would have been a much more serious challenge, given his significant appeal with voters.

But to be genuinely successful at cutting into the AKP vote, an opposition candidate would have to reflect more of the conservative opposition to Erdogan, which did exist in the six-party alliance. This alliance included Meral Aksener's İyi Party, Ali Babacan's Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) and Ahmet Davutoglu's Future Party (GP).

In Babacan and Davutoglu, the alliance had two party leaders who were former members of the ruling AKP and former cabinet ministers. If they had led the opposition platform, that would have asked much more uncomfortable questions of the Erdogan campaign. As it was, the old lines of political and social loyalty were relatively undisrupted.

What will Erdogan leave to history?

The opposition must now reflect on the reality Erdogan has created and the need to realign their approach in the hope of denting Erdogan's appeal. The president himself, however, has an

opportunity. He is in his final term as president and has the chance to cement a legacy.

In appointing Mehmet Simsek as his new finance minister, he is making one clear signal in that direction. He knows that economic stability built AKP success in the 2000s. It nearly undid them in the 2020s. He needs to stabilize the currency to continue the prosperity that he has offered his constituency.

The other element is perhaps harder, but carries an even greater prize. It is the Kurdish question, Turkey's eternal question.

Ironically, Erdogan's revolution, for all its significance, has followed many of the trends long established by secular elites in Turkey. When his back was to the wall in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan turned to the hardline nationalists of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) for support. In so doing, he undid any attempt to solve the Kurdish question through political dialogue. The resulting mess has festered within Turkey and has had high costs for the nation's position in the region, leading to policy choices in Syria and Iraq that do not necessarily benefit Turkey in the long term.

In the wake of another victory, could this be the moment that an Erdogan now beyond the need for reelection takes on the role of a Father of the Nation, in much the way that Ataturk once did, and offers the ultimate magnanimous gesture? Could he find a political settlement to the Kurdish question that he might force through with his political capital?

If he did so, he could change the geopolitical dynamics of the region fundamentally, offering Turkey a vision of a foreign and domestic policy based not on anxiety and defense, but on economic and social opportunity. That might be the catalyst

for an even more successful future than anyone could have imagined today.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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

This Is Why Turkey Won't Make It Into the EU

Nathaniel Handy
September 02, 2023

European leaders consider Turkey unworthy of EU membership, but today's Turkey is as much a product of the bloc's strategic errors as it is of President Erdoğan's illiberal nationalist trajectory.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently suggested that the EU should reopen accession negotiations with his country. The proposal has been met with near-universal incredulity in the West. Observers today see Turkey as a far cry from suitable membership material. And they place the blame for that not only on one side, but largely on one man: Erdoğan himself.

European diplomats are now routine in their assessment that Erdoğan's Turkey is not the kind of place — considering the state of human rights,

freedoms in public life, freedom of the press, separation of the institutions of state — that can seriously expect to return to accession negotiations. Yet there is considerable shortsightedness in this “moral high ground” approach to Turkey’s long-stalled EU accession.

Certainly, to take just one example, the treatment of the country’s Kurdish minority since at least the failed coup attempt of 2016 has been repressive in the extreme.

Many supporters of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) are keen to point out that the only reason the opposition lost the recent elections in May 2023 is because they pandered to terrorists, in the form of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), a political party aligned with Kurdish interests, and connected with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) separatist insurgency.

However, this narrative is a false one. If engaging with Kurdish political groups were so electorally suicidal, how is it that the same Recep Tayyip Erdoğan led a thawing in the cultural and political climate for Kurds in the late 2000s, including peace talks with jailed leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, and yet continued to win elections? This fact reveals Erdoğan as a far more opportunistic, and less dogmatic, leader than is often supposed. And why did he support this engagement with Kurdish political figures? A key driver was the reform agenda of the EU accession negotiations.

The trouble with the EU

The truth is that the EU itself swung Turkish politics decisively in a nationalist and repressive direction. The reason lies in the fact that many in the EU — most conspicuously France and Austria — were never genuine in their promise of accession to the bloc. The strain of Islamophobia

in both states, and to a lesser extent in Germany and elsewhere, made even a squeaky clean Turkey unpalatable within what many still see as an essentially Christian club.

Brexit was, ironically, a further blow to Turkey. The year 2016 stands as the moment the EU slipped irrevocably from Turkey’s grasp. With the departure of the UK, a key supporter of Turkish accession, and the attempted coup d’etat in Turkey, the fate of the nation was sealed. It is a singular irony that, in the run-up to the Brexit vote in the UK, the Leave campaign distributed leaflets warning Britons that Turkey would soon join the bloc, sending millions of poor Turks to British shores. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

As a result of European disingenuousness, the goal of EU accession has lost its appeal. With it, the incentive to reform dissipated. The incentive provided by EU accession is an invaluable asset of the European project, as is being observed in Ukraine today. In Turkey, it was a powerful force, with membership being hugely popular not only among elites but among ordinary Turks as well. With no prospect of membership, Erdoğan’s ruling AKP turned to hardline nationalists to shore up its parliamentary majority. The result is a Turkey that looks far less palatable to the bloc than the one it quietly rejected in the late 2000s.

This moral high ground approach to foreign policy is still counterproductive for the EU, even at this late, late stage. When Turkey set out on its quest for EU membership in the 1950s, it was far from a model democratic nation. Indeed, it went through several coups and repressive military juntas, and the treatment of vulnerable groups such as the Kurds was easily equal to the treatment administered by the current government. Accession talks were not based on what Turkey was, but what it might become. The same could easily be applied today.

Ukrainian exceptionalism

It is striking that Ukraine, which is now seeking EU membership in earnest, is in many respects a more unpalatable prospect than Turkey would be. And yet it appears less of a stretch for the European imagination. In much the same way that Greece and Cyprus received membership despite serious shortcomings in terms of economic and political governance, Ukraine appears to find itself in a different passport lane from Turkey. The worry is that this double standard may be rooted in cultural perceptions that do not ultimately serve Europe's best strategic interests.

One cannot turn back the clock. And yet, if the EU at least observed where its strength actually lay and where its best interests lay, it might start to approach even the Turkey of Erdoğan with a little more of the long-term strategic vision necessary to avoid the inevitable repercussions of lost influence. For many decades, the carrot of EU accession served as a powerful tool in EU relations with Turkey and many other states. Without it, the ultimate result is likely to be long-term EU decline, while its borders become ever more insecure, its internal population more paranoid and introspective and its ability to project power abroad weaker.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Iran Has History of Persecuting Minorities: Might This Change Now?

Ramyar Hassani
March 24, 2023

Minorities have been mistreated in Iran both under the Shahs and the Ayatollahs. During the current protests, there is great unity among the different ethnicities of Iran. Is this likely to last when a new regime forms? Will minorities finally get their due?

There have been more than six months of nationwide protests in Iran. Nationwide unity has emerged among seemingly disparate groups: the young and the old, women and men, and even very different ethnic groups. Terrified by this unprecedented wave of activity, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), known in Iran as the Sepah, invaded the streets of many cities, towns, and even some villages in an attempt to clamp down on the unrest. Nevertheless, the atrocities have failed to deliver what the Islamic Republic of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has wished for: the total crackdown of the protests. The scapegoating of ordinary Iranians for the miseries brought upon by the corruption and mismanagement of Khamenei's regime has failed to work.

Between September 17, 2022, and January 23, 2023, Iranian security forces killed 525 protesters during the nationwide protests in response to the murder of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who was taken into custody by Iran's religious morality police in September last year. Sham trials and unjust executions have begun, and, according to the most recent figures, at least 100 of those

who have been arrested are in imminent danger of execution. Yet the protests have not stopped.

The new wave of protests poses a serious challenge to the Islamic Republic of Iran's security apparatus. The distinctive unity that has emerged among Iranians is unparalleled. In fact, Iran is experiencing a unity that has not been seen since the 1979 revolution. Simultaneous protests in more than 200 cities have exhausted security forces.

A Spontaneous Uprising, Not a Minority Movement

This new uprising has not been organized by any party or organization from abroad. It has occurred organically and is led by Iranians who reside in the country. The regime falsely lays the blame on Kurdish "separatists" who receive aid from foreign services and on opposition groups outlawed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Other non-Persian groups often blamed include Arabs and the Baluch.

Scapegoating non-Persians in Iran is not a new strategy. The establishment has done this for more than four decades in response to any sort of protest against injustice, corruption, or incompetence in the government. This strategy of scapegoating minorities has failed this time. The majority of Iranians do not believe in the phony claims of the Islamic Republic strategists. In fact, the nationwide solidarity is so strong that Persians have been chanting Kurdish slogans. For example, Jin, Jian, Azadi is translated into Farsi as Zan, Zendegi, Azadi, and it is translated into English as the now-familiar "Woman, Life, Freedom." In addition, Azeris have been chanting slogans supporting Kurdistan, and protests have taken place in Zahedan in solidarity with Kurdistan and vice versa.

As protests intensify, the Islamic Republic of Iran accuses the Kurds of separatism. The myth that Kurds are responsible for Iran's woes has been

partially successful for more than four decades. Persians, domestic or those in exile, do not accept the idea of a Kurdish state. Therefore, it has been relatively easy for the Islamic Republic to crack down on Kurds in the name of "fighting separatists" without facing any criticism from the Persian opposition groups in or outside the country.

A History of Kurdish Persecution

Iranian Kurds are mainly concentrated in the four northwestern and western provinces of Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan, and Ilam. A group of Kurds have also settled around Quchan in the northeastern province of Khorasan. They have a history of rebelling against Tehran.

The previous Iranian regime, led by Reza Shah and then his son Mohammad Reza Shah persecuted Iranian Kurds as well. In 1967, the Iranian military crushed a Kurdish uprising and hanged six of the movement's leaders, five of whom were executed in Sanandaj, the capital of the Kurdistan province, one of Iran's majority-Kurdish provinces.

It is important to note that the Shah's Iran supported Kurds in Iraq to weaken their western neighbor. It even sent two military units into Iraqi territories to help Mustafa Barzani, one of the prominent Iraqi Kurds who led numerous insurgencies against Baghdad, in the 1960s and 1970s for an independent Kurdistan. Iran changed this policy when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi struck the 1975 Algiers Agreement with Iraq.

This ended their dispute over the Shatt-al-Arab (Arvand Rud) border and Iran withdrew its support for Iraqi Kurds. After this, both countries turned on the Kurds. Because of the Shah's betrayal, Iranian Kurds took an active part in the 1979 revolution. They hoped for autonomy and a Kurdish parliament after the revolution.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini did not grant the Kurds any autonomy or self-rule. In fact, he crushed the Kurdish resistance brutally. Khomeini appointed Sadeq Khalkhali as the chief justice of Iran and sent him to the Kurdish areas along with a convoy of executioners. He also sent the military and the IRGC to crack down on the Kurds. Khalkhali sentenced hundreds of Kurds to death by firing squad in sham trials. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) and Komele, a Marxist party in Iranian Kurdistan, were both outlawed. However, resistance continued in Kurdistan's mountains.

Injustice, Especially Economic, Fuels Minority Resentment

Generally, separatist movements among minorities are a result of injustice by the majority. In Iran, both before the 1979 revolution and after, minorities have been treated as second-class citizens. They have been deprived of fundamental rights and basic resources. Despite being known for its rich diversity of different ethnicities such as Kurds, the Baluch, Arabs and Azeris, Iran's only official language is Persian. This means that children in Kurdistan or Ahwaz are deprived of studying in their mother tongue.

This one-language policy leads to intense disregard of scholars with minority backgrounds. When the only official language is the language of the rulers, it leads to a bitter atmosphere among the minorities. Other acts of persecution lead to further resentment and many of Iran's minorities desperately want autonomy if not freedom from the iron grip of Tehran's mullahs.

As is well known, economic grievances often cause protests and revolutions. In Iran, poverty and unemployment are running high. Minorities are suffering the most. According to the Chamber of Cooperatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the national gross product of provinces of Sistan and

Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and Ilam are among the lowest in Iran.

Poverty and a high unemployment rate have forced many Iranian Kurds into the minacious path of becoming a kolbar, a uniquely Kurdish word that literally translates as a porter who carries goods on his shoulders. These men risk their lives by carrying heavy loads of more than 60 kilograms of goods via mountainous donkey paths from Iraq into Iran while dodging bullets from the Iranian border patrols for a pittance. The mortality rate of the kolbar is very high. In 2022, 290 were killed or injured.

Other ethnic groups are suffering enormously as well. The Baluch who live in the Sistan and Baluchistan province on the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan lack economic opportunities, suffer from high unemployment rates and have low access to education. Discriminatory policies have forced many into becoming soukhtbars, which is Farsi for fuel porters. During one day alone on February 22, 2021, Iranian security forces killed at least 10 soukhtbars, including a 17-year-old boy.

It is obvious that there is a great unity among Kurds, other ethnicities and the Persians during the current protests. However, Kurds, Baluchs and Arabs have only had bitter experiences with the central government in Tehran. Two Iranian regimes in a row have failed to treat non-majority ethnic groups with dignity and respect. Neither the Shahs nor the Ayatollahs have delivered a fair share of the pie to other ethnicities who live far away from Tehran. This raises the very important question: What might a third Iranian regime do to minorities? Will it continue the despotic and discriminatory policies of the previous regimes? Or will minorities finally get the autonomy, justice and respect they deserve?

[[Erica Beinlich](#) edited this piece.]

Politics in the way of progress

While Lebanon has not yet experienced the type of political transformation its people long for, the May 2022 parliamentary elections resulted in a larger-than-expected number of reformists elected to office. One of these is Member of Parliament Mark Daou, who unseated a powerful incumbent in his surprise election victory. When I saw him shortly after the signing of the historic maritime agreement between Israel and Lebanon in October 2022, there was a certain sense of optimism in the air.

A great deal had changed when I saw Daou at our office in Washington, DC a few weeks ago. Since October 30, Lebanon's presidency has remained vacant. Furthermore, the country remains sharply conflicted over Judge Tarek Bitar's investigation into the Port of Beirut blast as he summoned several high-ranking officials for questioning. The prolonged presidential vacuum and lack of investigation into the port explosion both point to the struggling state of democracy in Lebanon today.

The price can be heavy for those brave enough to fight against corruption in Lebanon. While leaving his home one day, Daou himself found a Kalashnikov bullet in his windshield.

Lebanon needs a functional executive and independent judiciary

Daou's fellow "Forces of Change" parliamentarians Melhem Khalaf and Najat Saliba have been camped out in Lebanon's parliament building on a nightly basis until the parliament elects the country's next president.

The challenge of electing a president in parliament is that the body remains divided and no faction has the necessary votes to elect its preferred candidate. In the months since the

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Democracy is Now Dangerously Fracturing in Lebanon

Steven Howard
February 28, 2023

The investigation into the August 4, 2020 Port of Beirut Blast is once again delayed and Lebanon still has no president or government.

Lebanon has never been a perfect success story as a democracy, but it has traditionally distinguished itself as an inclusive state and modern society in a region plagued by sectarianism and conflict. This may no longer be the case.

As journalist Adnan Nasser notes, The Economist now classifies Lebanon as an authoritarian country, whereas it was once considered a "hybrid system." In response to the widespread corruption among Lebanon's political and financial elite, the Lebanese people responded. First they protested, then they voted.

presidency fell vacant, eleven sessions have been held to elect a replacement and no consensus candidate has emerged. More recently, parliament has yet to even have a quorum of MPs present to elect a president.

At the same time, the Lebanese parliament is attempting to carry out some of its legislative functions. This prompted 46 MPs, including Daou, Melhem and Saliba, announcing they will boycott future legislative sessions until a president is selected. They cite the Lebanese Constitution as justification for their stance, which makes clear that, until a president is elected, Lebanon's parliament is an electoral body and not a legislature.

While the eventual nominee will need to be a consensus candidate, the Lebanese people deserve a president who is clean, reform-oriented and committed to addressing their needs. Similarly, amid political gridlock, Lebanon's absence of an independent judiciary is crippling its ability to investigate the largest non-nuclear explosion in history, which killed 220 people.

Judge Tarek Bitar resumed his investigation into the blast in January, following 13 months of delay due to political pressure. In doing so, he issued charges against a number of high-ranking political figures, including Ghassan Oueidat, the country's top prosecutor. The latter responded by filing charges against Bitar and releasing all detainees in the case. This episode points to the need for a truly independent judiciary in Lebanon, one that even the current draft law in parliament falls short of establishing.

Lebanon's Elected Leaders Need to Reinforce Lebanon's Democratic Institutions

The sad thing is that while Lebanon continues to veer away from democracy, its people continue to suffer. 80% of the Lebanese are impoverished and

there is a looming food security crisis. The currency continues to plummet while public school teachers and many public servants remain on strike. Many are warning this country could become the world's next failed state.

The prolonged presidential vacuum and failed port investigation both point to poor political leadership. The sad thing is that a functioning executive and independent judiciary are basic pillars of democratic states. The failure of Lebanon's elected leaders to satisfy these basic democratic criteria give the Lebanese people and their friends across the globe little to no hope Lebanon's politicians can address the hard things.

Electing a president, forming a government, and truly protecting the country's judicial branch from political interference are all necessary steps Lebanon's leaders should take now to reinforce democratic institutions in their country. Failure to do so would have catastrophic consequences not only for Lebanon but also the region.

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Should Israel Make Full Use of its Powerful Military, or Is the Cost Too High?

Josef Olmert
November 18, 2023

On October 7, Hamas terrorists from Gaza committed unspeakable atrocities against civilians in southern Israel. Now, Israel is invading Gaza to root out and destroy Hamas. In the densely populated environment, the operation is incurring high numbers of civilian casualties. Should Israel continue fighting?

On October 7, Hamas terrorists poured over the Israel–Gaza border. They slaughtered 1,200 people, including at least 846 civilians, 278 soldiers and 44 police. The terrorists brutally tortured, raped and dismembered their victims.

A crisis, as we know, provides both dangers and opportunities. To refer to Israel’s situation after October 7 as a “crisis” is to belittle a reality that the English language is unable to express. We talk here about a collective national trauma that Israel and the Jewish people have not experienced since the Holocaust.

Those who know something about Israel can appreciate the significance of the comparison made between the massacre of October 7 and the slaughter of six million Jews in the Holocaust. It is not about the numbers. It is about the very fact that the very state responsible for preventing massacres of Jews failed to do so on its own territory. This fact alone makes it clear that the current war will become a turning point.

The implosion of Netanyahu’s plans

The turning point has to do with the handling of the Palestinian question and Israel’s overall situation in the Middle East. For more than 13 out of the past 15 years, Israel has had the same prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu made very clear that he had two big missions; One was to show that resolving the Palestinian issue was not the key to peace between Israel and the Arab world; the second was, that Iran was the existential danger, not only to Israel, but also to the moderate Sunni Muslim Arab countries.

In Netanyahu’s mind, these two were intertwined. Go after Iran and on the basis of the old rule, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” try to expand Israel’s reach in the Middle East beyond Egypt and Jordan. Once that is achieved, the Palestinian question would be finally demoted to a local problem between Israel and 5 million disaffected Arabs, something that will be resolved “somehow,” while Israel and the Arab states deal with the Iranians together.

The attainment of all that depended on maintaining security relations with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and keeping Hamas in control of Gaza. Yes — although Netanyahu liked to present himself as Mr. Security, he worked diligently to keep Hamas in power in Gaza. The explanation he gave to his own supporters was that Hamas in Gaza meant no Palestinian state. At the same time, he told the moderate Arab states of the Gulf as well as Morocco and Sudan that, in the absence of any full-fledged Israeli–Palestinian conflict, they have no problem uniting with Israel against Iran.

All of the above seemed logical, achievable and plausible. Then came the Abraham Accords, which seemed to give the seal over all of it. Alas, it did not last. October 7 happened, and ever since then it has seemed that the pendulum is about to swing

back to the pre-Abraham Accords, perhaps even all the way to the pre-Camp David Accords situation. The Palestinian question is not going to disappear, Iran is not isolated and the entire Netanyahu strategy is collapsing like a house of cards. And with that, we come to the big Israeli dilemma.

How can Israel fight Hamas without blowing up its international situation?

Israel considers Hamas to be the reincarnation of Nazism. They are right. Hamas's actions and ideology are Nazi-type; they are genocidal with a Jihadist envelope.

This leaves Israel no choice. When you are an Israeli leader, then the comparison to Nazis leaves you with only one possible course of action — go to the very end and make sure that Hamas is no more. That is what the Israeli leadership has been saying. This is where 2023 is not 1942. The Jews are not going to be slaughtered without a battle; in fact, they are strong enough to finish off the modern-day Nazis — not all the Palestinians, but one murderous faction. Hamas are Nazis in all but their capabilities.

Israel can do the job, and the photos coming out of Gaza say it so vividly. But can Israel really pull it off, considering the potential prices to pay? The longer the war goes on, the more kidnapped Israelis, among them babies and the elderly, will die. Beyond this, the war has become a public relations disaster with piles of Palestinian bodies in the streets, rising global antisemitism, receding diplomatic support, a rift with the US and above all the reversal of the Israeli–Arab normalization process. Suspension or complete rupture of relations with a few of the Arab states may result, a major victory for Iran. This is now the dilemma of Israel.

Israel can go all the way. Hamas never anticipated, never expected the firepower of the

Israeli Defense Forces when unleashed as ferociously as now. They misread the internal situation in Israel prior to October 7, the strength of Jewish nationalism and of Israeli civic society. They are paying a huge and mounting price for it. Israel, however, needs to decide. Do they take all the above risks and lose a lot in the short term? Or do they have the stamina to sustain the immediate losses in order to gain for the longer term?

Here is what Israel can win in the longer term — the respect and support of none other than all the Arab participants of the Abraham Accords. Why? Because all these countries are afraid of a Hamas victory, or a perceived Hamas victory, which will be an Iranian victory. They know it could undermine their own domestic stability. If Israel does not finish the job against Hamas, Middle East stability will be jeopardized, very likely irreversibly. If Israel can present a real victory, the forces of instability will be defeated, hopefully for some time to come.

Israel should do everything it can to minimize civilian casualties as much as operationally possible, but do what it takes to defeat the enemies of stability and peace.

Does Netanyahu have it in him as the last great effort of his career? A big question, but he is no longer the all-mighty Netanyahu of the past. There are others in his emergency cabinet, in the Israeli Defense Forces and above all in the Israeli public who want this campaign to be the decisive one.

Easier said and done, and easy for me to say from the relative comfort of Columbia, South Carolina. There is nothing comfortable, though, writing about war — but October 7 is a transformative event, and so are its implications.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Kurdish Autonomy Can Boost Peace in the Middle East

Halmat Palani
April 11, 2023

The Kurds have been marginalized for decades in the world of modern nation states. Federalism for Turkey, Syria and Iran could end the marginalization of the Kurds and create a balance of power between the central governments and Kurdish regional governments. Boosting Kurdish autonomy within democratic structures would check the rise of authoritarianism, increasing prospects for peace and stability in the Middle East.

International organizations and western powers often speak of peace and democracy in the Middle East with no meaningful strategy for achieving such noble goals. Peace and stability in the Middle East require the development of institutions grounded in fundamental values and principles of democracy, consideration of the history of governance in the Middle East, the multinational character of states and demands for regional self-rule.

The Kurds, the largest nation without a state, have been struggling for self-rule and decentralized governance for decades in the Middle East. The Kurds and the countries that occupy Kurdistan are ideal case studies to examine when seeking ways to establish lasting peace and sustainable democracy in the Middle East.

The past as a guide to the future

An examination of the history of the Middle East reveals that even during imperial times, power was shared despite strong central authority. The Ottomans under the vilayet system never practiced complete central authority over Kurdish principalities and other Vilayets in the empire the way the Turkish Republic does today. The many revolts by Kurdish princes and governors like the Shaykh Ubayd Allah of Nihri and the Badir Khan Beg of Botan demonstrate the ability of the Kurds in Ottoman Kurdistan and Persia to govern autonomously. The principalities of Ardalan, Guran, Mukri, Baban, Buhtan and so forth are notable examples of Kurdish autonomy and self-administration before the establishment of the current boundaries of the Middle East under the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

Despite being labeled as separatists and terrorists by some, the Kurds have been one of, if not the only, actors furthering democratic development and resistance in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They have served as crucial resisters of oppressors and autocrats in the region for over a century. The blood they have given in the struggle for their national democratic rights has been a significant force in preventing the further spread and entrenchment of tyranny in the Middle East. Building lasting democracy in any of these countries starts with settling the Kurdish question.

Furthermore, The Kurds have historical connections and ongoing relationships with the states that occupy their land. Despite the

antagonistic nature of this relationship, they are ideal candidates for mediating a measure of peace and stability because their demands have always been democratic, making them natural allies of every democracy seeking Persian, Turk and Arab.

The next steps

Contrary to what many may claim, a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question is very much possible and it begins with the inevitable process of federalizing governance in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq.

Today we witness a federal Iraq with a Kurdish regional government (KRG). While The KRG is not without its problems, most scholars acknowledge that it is slowly becoming a serious model of a working democracy in the region with a growing civil society that is making significant social, economic and political strides. A similar phenomenon is likely to take place in Rojava (the Kurdish region of Syria) with the recent establishment of several autonomous cantons. The Kurds of Turkey have made similar demands with Ocalan's theory of democratic federalism, and the continued efforts by Iran's Kurds along with its other nationalities, for a federal democratic Iran, prove federalism and decentralization to be the most viable way forward for Middle East peace and stability.

In international politics, realists often emphasize the balance of power and how it is usually responsible for peace. If one applies this logic to the Kurds and the states they are resisting then it is quite clear that supporting the decentralization of the governments of Turkey, Syria and Iran into federal systems would serve to create some measure of peace and stability by creating a balance of power between the Kurdish regional governments and the central governments. Such a balance and decentralization of power would make it very difficult but not impossible for strong

dictatorial regimes to re-emerge and entrench themselves in these societies, as we have witnessed in the past and are witnessing today in Iran and Syria. Such an arrangement would undoubtedly force all powers to the negotiating table when disagreements arise since no power would be strong enough to defeat the other. The best course of action would thus be for all parties to sit down and work out their problems peacefully.

In a region as chaotic as the Middle East, a strong and autocratic central government will not work. History shows us that the monopoly of power by one nation or group over others will not lead to stability and peace in the Middle East, but rather harness the foundation for its end. For instance, Saddam Hussein and the Sunni monopoly of power in Iraq demonstrate what can happen when one group monopolizes power and deprives other groups. A lesson Iran, Turkey, Syria and even the Shia-dominated government of Iraq fails to comprehend at times. The only way to foster tolerance, democracy and a truly representative and inclusive system in such a multicultural and multinational region is by the promotion and advancement of a decentralized federal system. Federalism would localize governance making governance more effective and representative. This would create a sense of common interest between the various groups in the region given that each group is granted a share in power.

The path to a more peaceful and democratic Middle East is thus clear, and it starts with finding a just and peaceful resolution to the Kurdish question. For peace and democracy to make major headway in the Middle East it is essential that the international community and major international powers back the resolution of the Kurdish question and treat it as a priority in their respective Middle East policy. The freedom of the Kurdish nation would result in the furthering of peace and democracy in the Middle East and the birth of multinational federalism in a region where power

is unchecked and constantly contested by various groups and states.

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Pluralism Is the Only Way Forward for Iranian Democracy

Halmat Palani
June 16, 2023

Iran's diverse society struggles with recognition of non-Persian ethnicities like Kurds, Azeris, and Arabs. The authoritarian rule of the Shah and the Islamic Republic prioritized Persian identity, suppressing others. To establish a functional democracy, Iranians must reject Persian imperialism and ensure representation and autonomy for all ethnic groups.

For over a century, there has been a prevailing myth that Iran is solely represented by Persians, perpetuating the idea that Persia encompasses the entirety of the country. It is crucial to acknowledge that Iran is diverse and multinational in composition. It extends far beyond the Farsi-speaking Persian

people of the Iranian plateau, encompassing Kurdish, Baloch, Ahwazi, and Azeri peoples who have been sidelined and suppressed.

When these non-Persian Iranians speak of the need for the entrenchment and recognition of inclusivity in the linguistic, economic, and political spheres of life in Iran as a necessary condition for democratization, they are often accused of being separatists. They are told that Iran is one nation and that its territorial integrity is a red line that is not up for discussion.

Persian identity, Iranian identity

This notion in the debate about Iran's identity is championed by Reza Pahlavi but is also echoed in statements made by other Iranian figures like Nazanin Boniadi, Golshifteh Farahani, Shirin Ebadi, and activists Masih Alinejad and Hamed Esmaeilion.

The assertion and emphasis on territorial integrity as a response to demands for inclusivity as a precursor for democratization is a political tactic that is not only anti-democratic but also undermines the very democratic principles that many of these figures claim to be supporting. It is designed to reinforce the Iranian state's forced assimilation policy against the Kurds, Baloch, Ahwaz, and Azeri people.

For over a hundred years, the Iranian state has attempted to assimilate non-Persian nations into a national Iranian identity that is purely Persian. The state has used repressive tactics, from poisoning, imprisonment, extrajudicial killings, capital punishment, and threatening families to militarization, linguicide, and economic impoverishment, as part of its forced assimilation policy. These efforts have been partially successful given the decline in the use of non-Farsi languages in Iran. However, a sense of distinctiveness, and the political manifestation of this distinctiveness,

has only grown stronger among non-Persian peoples, as evidenced by the protests ignited by the death of Jina Amini in September 2022 at the hands of the morality police and past political agitations for change in areas inhabited by non-Persian people.

These demands for inclusivity and autonomy existed under the Pahlavi dynasty and have persisted for decades under the Islamic Republic. This is despite claims by Khomeini and his successors that the Shia government does not discriminate against any ethnicity or religious group. Scholar Sabah Mofidi analyzed numerous speeches, interviews and written texts of Persian and Kurdish nationalists and found that the “Persian nationalists use Islamic brotherhood and unity to reinforce Islamic identity over Kurdish identity in order to marginalize the Kurdish nationalist movement, as well as to mobilize ordinary people against the Kurdish forces.” Similarly, secular Persian nationalists use this rhetoric of Iranian brotherhood to delegitimize or negate Kurdish nationalist demands.

“Conversely,” continues Mofidi, “the Kurdish nationalists resist, and demand equality.” For instance, in a recent BBC Persian interview, journalist Ranya Rahampour asked the Secretary General of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, Mustafa Hijri, whether Kurdish political parties are separatists—an accusation that the Islamic Republic often cites to justify its attacks against Kurds in Iran and members of Kurdish political parties. In response to this question, Hijri stated that repeatedly asking this question is an insult to all Kurds and to his party, which has been advocating for “democracy for Iran and autonomy for Kurdistan.” He goes on to say that “the separatists are not Kurds or Baloch, but those who have violated the rights of all of the Iranian nationalities, created a difference between the periphery and the center, and used their power

to bring nothing but misfortune to these national groups.”

These skirmishes are part of a deliberation inside and outside Iran on how to achieve a democratic opposition that can help topple the Islamist regime and bring about a democratic Iran. Many of these forces have failed to unite mainly because of the refusal of some parties to acknowledge Iran's multinational character.

What has become increasingly clear since the death of Jina Amini and subsequent events is that Iran is a deeply divided society. The failure to find working solutions for managing such diversity and division has allowed the Islamic Republic to rule with impunity and repress dissenting voices, especially among the Kurdish population and other non-Persian populations, such as the Baloch, Ahwaz and Azeris.

Two theories for managing ethnic divides

For many, the number of political forces at play and the diversity of demands and peoples in Iran, as well as in the diaspora, has made it quite difficult to understand what the debate is about in Iran and where the country might or should be headed. There are two theories on how to manage divided societies like Iran and institutionally design an inclusive democratic system given the many social and political cleavages along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines. These two theories are centripetalism and consociationalism.

Centripetalism and consociationalism are two theories of political engineering for managing social cleavage in ethnically diverse societies. Centripetalism is a theory developed from the ideas of US scholar Donald L. Horowitz, who specializes in the study of ethnic conflict and has worked to help divided societies reduce ethnic conflict through democratic means. According to Benjamin Reilly, centripetalism aims to promote

cooperation, accommodation and integration across ethnic divides, seeking to depoliticize ethnicity and minimize the role of ethnic identities. It emphasizes the importance of institutions that encourage intercommunal moderation, such as multi-ethnic political parties, cross-cutting electoral incentives, and intergroup accommodation.

Consociationalism, however, relies on elite cooperation between leaders of different communities. It recognizes ethnicity as primordially rooted and seeks to protect and maximize the rights of ethnonational groups. Consociationalism promotes mechanisms that maintain interethnic harmony, such as grand coalition cabinets, proportional representation, minority veto powers, and communal autonomy. It aims to achieve a significant degree of autonomy for each ethnic polity and ensure fair representation in governance.

Which of the two theories provides the best prescriptions for democratically governing divided societies is a subject of great debate among scholars. Nevertheless, they all agree that the two theories are crucial in designing a working democracy in ethnically polarized polities.

Embracing pluralism is a prerequisite for democracy

While democracy in Iran has had periods of temporary existence, democratic movements have yet to establish a working democracy in Iran. Given the multinational character and diversity of the Iranian populace, the establishment and future of democracy in Iran require serious discussion, debate, and planning based on centripetalist and consociationalist theories, institutions, and practices.

The arguments of Iranian political parties and personalities that often take the side of the Iranian

state in response to demands for inclusive government can be conceived of as a sort of centripetalist prescription of governance. In theory, centripetalism advocates for institutions and governing arrangements that seek to depoliticize ethnicity or ethnic demands and identities. This theory and arrangement of governance may be viewed as preferable or even ideal, given that it seeks to enhance cooperation between groups despite their ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences. However, many of the Iranian political forces as well as the Iranian state, both currently and historically, use centripetalist notions not to depoliticize ethnicity and create a more level playing field between ethnic groups but to deny non-Persian nations in Iran their linguistic, political, economic, and cultural rights.

While centripetalism may seek to depoliticize ethnicity, what has happened in the last hundred years of Iran's history has been a further politicization of ethnicity and criminalization of ethnicity, particularly for non-ethnically Persian people in Iran. This is clearly illustrated in the inestimable number of Kurdish teachers and activists who are either languishing away in Avin prison or who have been executed over the years, both under the Pahlavi regime and under the Islamic Republic. The treatment of other non-ethnically-Persian people like the Baloch, Ahwaz, and Azeri has been similarly harsh.

The demise of the Islamic Republic does not begin with some outside power but with the unity of effort and goals among Iran's ethnonational groups. Iranians need to recognize their diversity not as a threat but as a necessary ingredient for creating a pluralistic and tolerant democratic system that can provide representation and self-governance to each national group.

The lack of vision and clarity for a democratically inclusive governance system for Iran has led to a lack of unity of purpose, both in

Iran and among Iranian opposition groups in the diaspora. For democratic forces inside and outside Iran to inflict significant damage on the clerical grip on power, there must be agreement, organization, and coordination among opposition groups, both internal and external. This can only happen when we find a clearly laid-out system of governance that can bring us all together as equals with an equal say and an equal share of power in the system, regardless of our identity, religion, native language, or gender. I believe that consociationalist theory, or a mix of consociationalism and centripetalist prescriptions and institutional arrangements of governance, can provide the necessary vision and model of governance that can allow us to flourish in our distinct communities as well as a part of a broader community that is Iran.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Halmat Palani** is a Kurdish human rights activist, English teacher, and freelance writer based in Vancouver, Canada. Halmat was born as a refugee, and his personal journey has fueled his determination to make a difference. With a bachelor's degree in political science and international studies from Simon Fraser University, he channels his expertise to shed light on pressing issues.

Iran's Mahsa Revolution One Year On

Reza Parchizadeh
September 16, 2023

The death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's religious police last year triggered a popular uprising that sought to liberalize and democratize the country. Yet the revolution was coopted by Pahlavists, and the Islamist regime was able to reestablish control. Has the cause of freedom been totally lost?

Last year, people rose up in revolt against Iran's mullahs. Iran's notorious religious police arrested 22-year-old Jina (Mahsa) Amini for not wearing the hijab properly. She was beaten and later died after falling into a coma, triggering unprecedented nationwide protests against the Islamist regime that has been in power since 1979.

The slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" (Woman, Life, Freedom) reverberated throughout Iran and gave the movement its name. Women came out in the thousands. Young men joined them too. The regime was caught on its heels.

September 16 marks the first anniversary of Amini's death and the popular uprising's beginning. This is a good occasion to pose fundamental questions. What has transpired in the aftermath of Amini's death? Has the popular uprising changed Iran? Has the Islamist regime weakened or has it managed to claw its way back?

Who are the protesters?

The Woman, Life, Freedom Revolution was not the expression of a unified political movement. Not everyone opposes the Islamist regime for the same reasons, and people from every imaginable political stripe took part. The opposition is divided, however, into two main camps, which we can identify as the "progressive" and the "reactionary" opposition.

In the progressive camp fall the various pro-democracy movements of Iran. This includes a wide sweep of ordinary people as well as politically active individuals and organizations ranging from liberal to socialist and secular to Islamist. These currents have popular bases in Iranian society, especially among middle and lower classes as well as the marginalized sections of society such as ethnic, religious and sexual minorities.

These people typically express their demands through street demonstrations and intend to establish a political system that accounts for liberal democracy, representative rule, ethnic and cultural diversity and decentralization and circulation of power.

The reactionary camp, on the other hand, is authoritarian. It is composed largely of the Pahlavists, who claim to represent the political legacy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ruled Iran as a monarch, or Shah, from 1941–1979, with Western backing. Although the Shah’s regime was pro-Western, it was by no means democratic. It asserted tight control over Iranian society while it enriched the Shah and his allies by selling oil abroad. The Shah sought to modernize the country by promoting secular customs without loosening his grip on power. This alienated many Iranians, precipitating the 1979 revolution that led to an Islamist takeover of the country under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

After the revolution, many of the Shah’s wealthy supporters fled to the United States. These émigrés now form an influential community on the American West Coast. Their informal leader is Reza Pahlavi, the Shah’s heir. The group finds a platform for its views in a multimillion-dollar, overseas Persian-language media industry that keeps the memory of the “Good Ol’ Days” alive.

The monarchist old guard in LA and elsewhere, however, are not the ones who have been the most active in Iran’s recent unrest; these latter are the “Pahlavists.” They are mostly composed of people affiliated with the Islamic Republic, both inside and outside of Iran. These include members of the Revolutionary Guards (a military force, distinct from the army, tasked with defending the Islamic Republic and its hardline Shia ideology) and the security forces. They also include people who had formerly been supporters of the Islamist regime but now have ostensibly become supporters of Reza Pahlavi.

These types claim that the monarchy should be restored with Reza Pahlavi as the Shah. They harshly attack supporters of democracy in Iran. They exhibit reprehensible intolerance towards Arabs and Jews, as well as towards those with different social or cultural values. Their reactionary rhetoric advocates positions that even the classic monarchists in LA would not dare support.

In my opinion, and the opinion of many other pro-democracy analysts and activists, the Pahlavists’ main function is to push back against democratic aspirations and democracy activists on behalf of the regime. They pose as if they did not work to advance the regime’s agenda but acted within the boundaries of the opposition. In so doing, they hope to command legitimacy among the Iranian people and the international community.

However, the Pahlavists can also have a secondary, more subtle function. Some of those who hold positions of power within the regime might hope to use the Pahlavists as a Plan B. That is, if the regime comes to a point of no return and is about to fall, those elites can utilize the Pahlavists to facilitate Reza Pahlavi’s ascension to the throne so that they can hold on to their privileges. That is to say, the Islamist elite could

cling onto the legitimacy of the monarch, just as Spain's Francoist elite did after the restoration of that country's monarchy.

Reza Pahlavi is now in a similar position to that of Juan Carlos in the early 1970s, and there are obvious signs that at least parts of the Revolutionary Guards and the regime's security apparatus promote him at the expense of democracy activists. Pahlavi himself has openly said that he is in touch with the Revolutionary Guards. He has even repeatedly proclaimed that anti-regime protesters must embrace the IRGC instead of fighting it and that the Guards should remain employed in positions of power after the fall of the Islamic Republic.

What is clear, then, is that the reactionary camp does not represent the demands of the ordinary people and those who want democracy, but the interests of power and wealth inside and outside of Iran.

The rise and fall of a revolution

The Woman, Life, Freedom Revolution at its peak had two major stages. I call the first the "real revolution." At that stage, democracy was the central aspiration of the revolutionaries. Activists were focused on pulling down the entire system of the Islamic Republic, liberating women and empowering disadvantaged groups of people.

The revolution was a truly postmodern one, and its characteristics proved profoundly different from classic revolutions. Most important of all, it did not have individual or group leadership. Rather, its many leaders were scattered across the country and the world, but were closely connected horizontally via the Internet and local networks. The protesters used these channels to exchange ideas and plan demonstrations. They organized defense strategies as the regime launched a brutal crackdown. Different layers of society inside and outside of

Iran coordinated with each other in order to confront the Islamic Republic and let the world know that Iranians wanted to establish democracy.

At this stage, the most progressive and egalitarian ideals were at the heart of the revolution. The emancipation of women was at the forefront, alongside the liberation of sexual minorities. Revolutionaries advocated pluralism, multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. They aimed to transform Iran's historically centralized power structure by devolving governance in Iran. They demanded the rule of law and civil and political rights, which would apply to all people equally, regardless of their origin and background. For these and many other reasons, the Woman, Life, Freedom Revolution might have been the most progressive revolution in the modern history of the world so far.

But this upswelling of revolutionary ideas was not to last. The initial stage of the revolution gave way to what I call the "fake revolution." The Revolutionary Guards promoted the Pahlavists as a front organization and sought to bridle the democratic aspirations of the uprising and drive the popular revolution in an anti-democratic direction.

The Pahlavists attempted to impose a top-down dictatorial leadership on the diverse revolutionary people and groups. They abused — verbally and sometimes physically — Reza Pahlavi's critics as "leftists" and "separatists." Contrary to the pluralism and progressivism that characterized the authentic revolution, the Pahlavists propounded reactionary ideas like patriarchy, absolutist monarchy and extreme nationalism.

When their attempt to make a charismatic leader out of the playboy prince failed, the regime's agents of influence, exploiting the mainstream Persian media overseas, pulled out all the stops to create a council of celebrities centered on Reza

Pahlavi to lead the ongoing revolution. However, most of these people, including Reza Pahlavi himself, had neither an organic connection with the protesters in Iran nor the necessary experience and expertise to deal with a revolutionary situation. As a result, they were soon reduced to vitriolic infighting which led to the collapse of the celebrity council.

The Pahlavist pseudo-revolution failed to gain any traction. It succeeded only in sucking the life out of the authentic revolution. The marginalization of pro-democracy activists made protesters on the ground lose their motivation to demonstrate and to fight back against the regime. This bought the Islamic Republic enough time to make peace with its foreign adversaries, suppress most of the domestic protests and come back from the brink.

So what have we gained from this clash of ideas?

The Woman, Life, Freedom Revolution has significant strategic implications for the future. Most importantly, it has fully exposed the unbridgeable chasm between the libertarian and the authoritarian forces among opponents of the regime. Before the revolution, this gap was not fully exposed, as various trends only engaged in routine rhetorical battles. But the revolution forced everyone to stand up for their values and tested their conduct in the field of action. Pahlavists and reactionaries can no longer credibly pose as revolutionaries.

Although they have suffered a setback for now, on the timescale of history pro-democracy forces have a fair chance to determine the political future of Iran. The valuable experiences they gained during the revolution have enabled them to see the situation on the ground more clearly and brought them closer together despite their differences. Their strong support of each other in the face of

the joint attacks by the regime and the Pahlavists shows that Iranian democracy activists have reached a level of maturity and inclusivity that would not have become possible without the revolution.

In the end, the future of Iran will be decided by the battle, not simply between the “opposition” and the “regime,” but between the supporters of democracy and the combined authoritarian forces of the Pahlavists and the Islamist regime.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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How Azerbaijan Found Victory, and Armenia Defeat, in Nagorno-Karabakh

Atul Singh, Anton Schauble
December 26, 2023

Armenia has played a weak hand badly while Azerbaijan has grabbed a once-in-many-generations opportunity with both hands. After taking over Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan now eyes a corridor through Armenian territory to the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan.

This could draw Turkey and Iran into the fight, threatening the stability of the entire region.

On February 21, one of the authors of this piece explained the backstory of the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Armenia was once a part of the Ottoman Empire, while Azerbaijan belonged to the Qajar dynasty of Iran. As both empires weakened and fell, Armenia and Azerbaijan ended up in the Soviet Union.

In 1991, the Soviet Union fell as well. Since then, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been at odds with each other over Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan. Until two months ago, Armenians lived in Nagorno-Karabakh, an area within Azerbaijan. Azeris still live in Nakhichevan, an area within Armenia that borders Iran and Turkey. Yes, this sounds complicated but so are most imperial hangovers.

On September 19, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive against Nagorno-Karabakh. This autonomous ethnic Armenian enclave called itself the Republic of Artsakh. Within 24 hours, this so-called republic ceased to exist. Now, Azerbaijani military forces control Nagorno-Karabakh. The Artsakh Defense Army stands disbanded and people who lived here for centuries, if not millennia, have fled to Armenia.

David J. Scheffer of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) states that Armenians are “experiencing ethnic cleansing at warp speed.” Others defend Azerbaijan and argue that its troops are only restoring sovereignty to territory that is rightfully theirs. Armenia had controlled Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas, all legally Azerbaijani territory, until a few years ago.

Azerbaijanis claim that this Armenian exodus is voluntary. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev

promised to protect Armenian civil rights in Nagorno-Karabakh, but fleeing Armenians feared persecution and massacre “after years of mutual distrust and open hatred between Azerbaijan and Armenia.”

A complicated history that goes back centuries

Over time, various empires have conquered and controlled the South Caucasus. Generals like Cyrus, Alexander and Pompey swept through this mountainous region. In antiquity, winning in the South Caucasus was essential if you wanted to be called “the Great.”

Why is the South Caucasus so important for the likes of Cyrus or Alexander the Great? Geography provides us the answer.

The South Caucasus lies at the crossroads of empires. To its west, lies the Mediterranean Sea which was the locus of the Macedonian, Roman and Ottoman empires. To its north and east (beyond the Caspian Sea), lie the great Eurasian grasslands that were once dominated by the Mongols and now by the Russians. To the south of the South Caucasus lie the Tigris and Euphrates rivers — historically known as Mesopotamia — and the Iranian plateau that was the power base of the Persian Empire.

This mountainous region has been the meeting place for great empires and the battleground for great powers. Romans and Persians traded Armenia back and forth. Over the past five centuries, Safavid Persia, Ottoman Turkey and the Russian Empire have controlled different parts of this territory at different times. Their successor states still jostle over the South Caucasus today.

World War I was critical in forging modern South Caucasus. Tsarist Russia faced disastrous defeat. In 1917, a revolution erupted and Russian control of this region evaporated. Idealists forged

the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, which disintegrated into Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia within five weeks. In this age of ethnic nationalism, a multiethnic state proved a bridge too far, especially for the fractious South Caucasus.

Like the Russians, the Ottomans fared poorly in World War I. Armenia took advantage of Ottoman weakness to take control over Nakhchivan. Rebellions by the local Muslim population followed but Armenia managed to retain control. In the case of Zangezur and Karabakh, Azerbaijan stood in Armenia's way and both these young countries fought inconclusively.

When World War I ended, the Ottoman Empire collapsed as well. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk set out to create a modern Turkish nation state. Out went a multiethnic empire, in came a more ethnically homogeneous nation. The Turks expelled the Greeks and the Armenians from this new state. Modern Turkey was built through ethnic cleansing, although the Ottomans had set the ball rolling with the Armenian Genocide in 1915.

Atatürk was rebelling against the peace settlement imposed by the victorious allies in 1920. The Treaty of Sèvres wrested the Arab and Greek portions of the Ottoman empire from Turkish control. The British and the French divvied up the Arab lands between themselves. Along with Italy, they also carved Turkey into spheres of influence. Atatürk defeated the occupying forces, scrapped the old treaty and negotiated the far more favorable 1923 Treaty of Lausanne.

The now largely forgotten Treaty of Sèvres provided for an independent Armenia. The idealistic Woodrow Wilson proposed that the US be the protector of this new Armenia. The 1920 treaty envisioned an Armenia four and a half times larger than the one today. Sadly for Wilson and

Armenia, the US turned isolationist at the end of the war. The US Senate withdrew from the League of Nations and torpedoed Wilson's plans for Armenia.

While the US turned inward, the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), now better known as the Soviet Union, went back to its expansionist imperial Russian roots. As one of the authors explained in his earlier piece, the Soviet 11th Army took over the South Caucasus, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, in 1920 itself. The Treaty of Sèvres was stillborn.

For the next seven decades, Armenia and Azerbaijan were Soviet republics. Moscow drew their borders largely on ethnic lines. The USSR granted Zangezur to Armenia, Nakhchivan became an Azerbaijani exclave and Karabakh became an autonomous province within Azerbaijan. The Soviets dubbed Karabakh the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) because Nagorny Karabakh in Russian simply means the highlands of Karabakh.

The dormant Nagorno-Karabakh volcano explodes

By the late 1980s, the Soviet empire began disintegrating. The Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989. On December 31, 1991, the Soviet Union itself dissolved. Ethnic tensions held in check by communist repression erupted like a dormant volcano.

In 1988, ethnic Armenians living in the NKAO demanded their region be transferred from Soviet Azerbaijan to Soviet Armenia. Conflict exploded into all-out war when the Soviet Union collapsed. Fighting only ceased in 1994 and Armenia emerged as the winner. Armenian troops took control over Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts. Armenia now controlled 20% of Azerbaijan. An estimated one million Azerbaijanis

became refugees and internally displaced persons. Armenia did not have it all its own way though. About 300,000–500,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan made their way to Armenia.

The end to war in 1994 did not lead to peace. Deadly incidents continued. Both sides used troops, special operations forces, artillery, other heavy weaponry and, more recently, drones. In April 2016, fighting broke out but stopped after just four days. Yet hundreds died on both sides. On the whole, an uneasy peace persisted until 2020.

During this uneasy peace, Armenia forged a security partnership with Russia while Azerbaijan developed a close relationship with Turkey. A shared Muslim faith and a common Turkic ethnic identity helped. Even though Armenia and Russia are part of the Oriental Orthodox Christian traditions, Moscow still sold weapons to Azerbaijan and played both sides.

Starting 2007, things changed dramatically. BP discovered gas at “a Caspian-record depth of more than 7,300 meters” about 70 kilometers southeast of Baku. Flush with gas wealth, the balance of power began to shift in Azerbaijan’s favor in the 2010s. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey rejected Atatürk’s secular European identity and embraced a neo-Ottoman foreign policy. Erdoğan’s political Islam led to greater military support for Azerbaijan and Baku’s geostrategic position improved. More gas money and Turkish military support gave Azerbaijan the edge over Armenia in the latest edition of South Caucasus geopolitical chess.

In late 2020, Azerbaijan made its decisive move and succeeded in reclaiming much of the territory Armenia had occupied since 1994. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War lasted 44 days and left at least 6,500 dead. Azerbaijan was unable to break through the defenses of Artsakh and Russia

brokered an uneasy truce. Nearly 2,000 Russian peacekeepers were to enforce the peace. These troops were deployed along the three-mile-wide Lachin corridor, the sole overland route connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.

The ceasefire agreement granted Azerbaijan control of Nagorno-Karabakh’s cultural capital, Shusha, which Armenians refer to as Shushi, and several other towns. Azerbaijan also gained surrounding Azeri territories that Armenians had held since 1994. Local Armenians got to retain control of the northern half of the region, along with Stepanakert, the capital of Artsakh. Future peace talks were to decide the final political status of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan grabs a historic opportunity with both hands

Needless to say, the peace did not hold. In December 2022, Azerbaijan closed off the Lachin corridor. The Russia-Ukraine War had broken out on February 24, 2022. The 2018 Velvet Revolution had ousted the Russia-friendly Republican Party that had been in power since 1999. After the revolution, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan took charge. Armenia began to extricate itself from the arms of Russia and started flirting with the US. This poked the Russian bear and earned Pashinyan’s Putin’s ire.

Azerbaijan had a once-in-many-generations opportunity and Baku seized it with glee. In December 2022, Azerbaijan violated the 2020 ceasefire agreement and closed off the Lachin corridor. This ten-month blockade denied 120,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh food, fuel and medicine. Putin’s peacekeepers stood idly by and Artsakh’s fate hung in the balance.

By April, Armenians found themselves in a dire situation. Pashinyan dramatically relinquished Armenia’s claim to Nagorno-Karabakh in an effort

to stop the long-running conflict. This failed to bring peace. On April 23, set up a checkpoint on the Lachin corridor, which was called “the road of life” for Artsakh. Neither Russian peacekeepers nor Western powers did much to help. By September, it was all over. Azerbaijan controlled all of Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh evaporated and Armenians fled to Armenia.

A little more than two weeks before Azerbaijan’s decisive move, Pashinyan had declared that “solely relying on Russia to guarantee its security was a strategic mistake.” History may judge his ill-judged statement as a historic blunder. Pashinyan turned to the West in general and the US in particular to guarantee Armenia’s safety. However, to paraphrase a Chinese proverb, the mountains were high and the emperor was faraway. The US had far too many pots on the boil to worry about Armenia.

Pashinyan forgot one simple fact: realpolitik is a rough game. The EU needs Azerbaijani gas after putting sanctions on Russia. In 2021, Europe imported 8 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas from Azerbaijan. This year, gas imports are expected to be 12 bcm and are on track to double by next year. Clearly, gas supplies trump the unity of Christendom for the EU. Post-Brexit UK is in the money because of BP. So, Armenia can expect little help from a land that was once the realm of Richard the Lionheart.

Azerbaijan has also been able to win over Israel to its side. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 13% of Israel’s arms exports were destined for Azerbaijan in the 2017-2021 period. They comprised more than 60% of Azerbaijani arms imports and included drones, missiles, and mortars. Furthermore, the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) reveals that 65% of Israel’s 2021 crude oil imports came from Azerbaijan.

Much more discreet than SIPRI and OEC figures are the close strategic collaboration between Israel and Azerbaijan for realpolitik reasons. Intelligence Online claims that Israeli military and intelligence contributed to Azerbaijan’s victory in Nagorno-Karabakh. Naturally, Israel has an ax to grind. Azeris comprise 16% of Iran’s population, three times the population of Azerbaijan. Although they have yet to rebel against Tehran, Azeris report widespread discrimination despite being largely Shias. By backing Azerbaijan, Israel is winning over Azeris and could foment trouble in the future against Iran. More importantly, Israel’s elite organizations — Unit 8200, Mossad and Sayeret Matkal — reportedly use Azerbaijan as a base of operations against Iran. For Israel, Armenia is eminently expendable in the pursuit of its national security goals.

For the US, Azerbaijan is of vital national interest because it borders both Russia and Iran, two key enemies. Washington cannot displease Baku too much and push it into the arms of Russia. Despite a powerful Armenian American diaspora that has historically backed the Democrats, the Biden administration turned the Nelson’s eye to Azerbaijan’s actions and did not back Armenia.

In contrast, Turkey is backing Azerbaijan to the hilt. Less than a week after Azerbaijan’s victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, Aliyev hosted Erdoğan in Nakhchivan. The two hailed this victory and signed a deal for a gas pipeline. Erdoğan was “very pleased” to “connect Nakhchivan with the Turkish world.” Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan paralyzes NATO, which cannot support Armenia. Most Muslim countries in the nearby Arab world to the more distant Pakistan, support Azerbaijan.

Poor Pashinyan is isolated. He has found himself with two not-very-useful friends: neighboring Iran and faraway India. Both are not powerful enough to stave off disaster for

landlocked Armenia. Besides, the Israel-Hamas war raging has cast Armenia further into the shadows. No one is likely to act against further Azerbaijani aggression.

What happens next?

Erdoğan and Aliyev have clearly signaled that Nakhchivan is next on the menu. They fear that Armenia could do this 460,000 strong Azeri enclave what Azerbaijan did to the Armenian enclave in Nagorno-Karabakh. Ethnic cleansing is a game two can play and Azerbaijan must press home its advantage before the tide turns.

Therefore, Baku seeks the Zangezur corridor, a transport link through Armenia's southernmost province Syunik to Nakhchivan. This landlocked Azerbaijani territory has a small border with Turkey and a much larger one with Iran. The former backs the Zangezur corridor while the latter opposes it. The descendants of the Ottomans and Safavids are clashing again in the South Caucasus.

Under Erdoğan, Turkey aims to breathe fire into the Organization of Turkic States, an attempt to bring together Turkic peoples all the way till Kazakhstan. Once Turkish horsemen dominated Central Asia. Today, Erdoğan is looking east and south, not west and north, to expand Turkey's influence. Therefore, the Zangezur corridor is an opportunity to create a new trade route between Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and China.

Despite academics like Anna Ohanyan calling the Zangezur corridor a violation of Armenian sovereignty and a challenge to the global rules-based order, Yerevan and Baku are engaged in peace talks. On December 7, they agreed to exchange prisoners of war. After failed mediation by the EU, the US and Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are engaged in direct bilateral discussions. Yet mutual distrust is high and both

sides are unlikely to come up with a lasting peace deal.

So far, Armenia has played a weak hand badly. Pashinyan has lost much of the goodwill he gained during the Velvet Revolution. Even before Azerbaijan's conquest of Nagorno-Karabakh, Pashinyan's popularity was declining precipitously. Now, many Armenians revile him as a weak and ineffective leader who has led the country to disastrous defeat.

Pashinyan has continued to offend Moscow by refusing to allow Russian troops to conduct military exercises and declining to attend an alliance summit. Armenia has also joined the Treaty of Rome that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC has issued an arrest warrant for Putin. By joining such an organization, Pashinyan is spitting in the tsar's face and inviting further Russian wrath.

Notably, Armenia is economically dependent on Russia. The country's landlocked geography does not make things easy. Turkey lies west, Azerbaijan east, Georgia north and Iran south. Therefore, about 40% of Armenian exports make their way to Russia. Armenia depends on Russian grain, oil, gas and basic goods almost completely. Gazprom owns all of Armenia's gas distribution infrastructure. The country depends on remittances from Armenians working in Russia. In 2022, \$3.6 billion out of the total remittances of \$5.1 billion came from Russia.

Armenia still remains a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, Commonwealth of Independent States and Eurasian Economic Union. Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War, the Armenian economy has become even more dependent on its Russian counterpart. Currently, Pashinyan is visiting Russia, promising greater economic bloc cooperation but Putin is unlikely to give his

rebellious satrap much of a break. Russia is grinding down Armenia into submission and will only relent when Pashinyan is no longer prime minister.

With little external support or internal legitimacy, Pashinyan is in no position to make peace. With Turkey's help, Azerbaijan will put Armenia under duress and drive a hard bargain. If Pashinyan does not capitulate, Azerbaijani troops can drive home their advantage. This time, the conflict might draw Turkey and Iran into the fight. Russia will wait and watch but eventually intervene. Israel, NATO, the UK and the US might also find themselves sucked into this conflict. Yet again, the South Caucasus has become a powder keg but few are paying this region the attention it deserves.

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Make Sense of Israel's New Tumultuous Judicial Reform

Atul Singh, Glenn Carle
August 11, 2023

A coalition government comprising ultra-orthodox parties has brought in reforms to weaken Israel's judiciary, arguing it needs democratic oversight. However, thousands fear the government has made a cynical move to cling to power and protect the corrupt, damaging public life, rule of law and Israeli democracy.

On Monday, July 24, the Knesset, Israel's parliament, adopted a highly controversial law to limit the Supreme Court's powers. The Knesset has 120 members, and this legislation was passed by 64 votes to 0 because the entire opposition boycotted the final vote.

The legal reforms concern the power of the elected government versus the power of the courts to scrutinize and even overrule government decisions. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu's government argues that reform is overdue. So do some others who argue that the judiciary is leftist, elitist and unaccountable. They believe that the judiciary interferes too much with legislation, is biased in support of liberal issues and is undemocratic in the way judges are selected.

A large number of Israelis oppose these reforms because they fear that the country's narrowly elected governments in general and Bibi in particular will become far too powerful. A simple majority in the Knesset would change laws easily, leading to a lack of certainty and continuity in Israel's legal and constitutional system. This

would damage public life, rule of law and long term Israeli interests.

What are these legal reforms?

At the heart of the reforms and the controversy is the so-called "reasonableness" bill. This removes the Supreme Court's power to cancel government decisions it deems unreasonable. Besides the "reasonableness" law, the government wants to:

— Weaken the power of the Supreme Court to review or throw out laws, enabling a simple majority of one in the Knesset to overrule such decisions.

— Have a decisive say over who becomes a judge, including in the Supreme Court, by increasing its representation on the committee which appoints them.

— Scrap the requirement for ministers to obey the advice of their legal advisers, guided by the attorney general, which they currently have to do by law.

The bill to overturn the reasonableness standard is part of a package of legislation unveiled by Justice Minister Yariv Levin in January. The reasonableness standard gained prominence later that same month, when Israel's High Court of Justice disqualified the Shas party chairman Arye Dery from serving as health and interior minister on these grounds, due to his conviction on charges of tax evasion, corruption as a public official, bribery and fraud.

Netanyahu's right-wing coalition

Currently, Israel is ruled by a coalition government consisting of six parties: Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas, Religious Zionist Party, Otzma Yehudit and Noam. United Torah Judaism and Shas are Haredi religious parties. Haredis are

characterized by their strict adherence to rabbinical halakha (Jewish law) and oppose modern, Western values. They form 13.3% of Israel's population.

Bibi formed his latest government on December 29, 2022, following the collapse of the coalition government led by Naftali Bennet and Yair Lapid. Israel's politics with its proportional representation system is known for fractious coalitions. This government is regarded as the most right-leaning government in Israel's history.

The Israeli Supreme Court disqualified Dery because it found his appointment to be "unreasonable in the extreme." The Shas leader had been convicted three times of criminal offenses and failed in his previous public positions to "serve the public loyally and lawfully." The decision and legal doctrine behind it sparked immediate backlash on the right and put Bibi, the longstanding leader of Likud, in the uncomfortable position of having to deny a ministerial position to a loyal and powerful coalition ally.

Dr. Amir Fuchs, a Senior Researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, takes the view that the standard of reasonableness refers to a balance between political and public interests in decision-making. An "unreasonable" decision is therefore one which "disproportionately focuses on political interests without sufficient consideration for public trust and its protection."

Who is protesting and why?

Protesters have called for all the planned reforms to be scrapped and for Bibi to resign. Not only Bibi's political rivals but also former top officials in Israel's military, intelligence and security services, former chief justices, and prominent legal figures and business leaders, amongst others, oppose the reforms.

Israel's Histadrut trade union confederation has threatened a general strike, and thousands of military personnel have vowed to not report for duty if the law is allowed to stand. First, over 1,000 Israeli Air Force reserve officers, including pilots, navigators and special forces threatened not to report for voluntary reserve duty. Then, another 10,000 Israeli Defense Force (IDF) reservists threatened the same.

Bibi's critics oppose the reforms because:

— Reforms will severely undermine the country's democracy by weakening the judicial system, the only tool for keeping the government in check.

— New laws might protect Bibi who is currently on trial for alleged corruption (he denies the charges) and help his government pass laws with narrow majorities for short-term political gain.

— The proposed system will change far too frequently, creating legal uncertainty and a lack of continuity.

— So-called reforms will weaken public life, rule of law and long-term Israeli interests.

Is this the end of Israeli democracy?

In some ways, we have been watching the slow suicide of the Israeli state for years. The exceedingly religious ultra-orthodox Jews have more children than their secular counterparts. They now comprise a larger percentage of Israel's population and have greater power in its fractious democracy. The religious extremism of these ultra-orthodox has been rising too. They now have the numbers and the determination not only to play kingmaker but also to bend the state to their will. Bibi has gotten into bed with them in his single-minded pursuit of power.

In the first-past-the-post system of the US, the UK and India, the ultra-orthodox would not have such disproportionate power. Israel's proportional representation system sets the electoral threshold at 3.25%. The number of seats a party receives in the Knesset is proportional to the number of votes it receives. So if a party gets 5% of the votes, it gets six seats out of 120. Ironically, this increases the power of the smaller parties and their leaders who choose their lackeys to be members of the Knesset. So, upsetting Dery is not an option for Bibi if he wants to cling on to his crown.

This increased power of the Knesset to change laws by small majorities runs counter to the cultural DNA of Israel. In 1948, most Israelis were Ashkenazis who immigrated from continental Europe. Therefore, Israeli democracy has less in common with the British Westminster parliamentary cousin and is more akin to continental Europe. Israel has implemented Montesquieu's separation of powers with the judiciary keeping its unstable coalition governments in check.

Of course, there is an argument for more democratic oversight of the judiciary. It is strongly left-leaning and may no longer represent the values of Israeli society. However, the Bibi-led Likud and its allies are pushing such a major reform through in a hasty, heavy-handed way. Bibi has made a Faustian pact with the far-right and is doing away with checks and balances. He is bringing a more unitary system which is majoritarian and risks turning authoritarian. The fact that this reform favors politicians with criminal convictions or risk of such convictions is deeply disturbing. That is why thousands are turning to the streets.

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The Truth About the Insidious Government Corruption in Iraq

Shermeen Yousif
July 09, 2023

For the last two decades, corruption has been growing uncontrollably in Iraq and has become deeply rooted in nearly every aspect of society. Although there are some citizens fighting back, they have to focus on dismantling corruption by addressing the root causes.

On 12 April 2023, the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) expressed their renewed collaboration on and dedication to the prevention and eradication of corruption in Iraq. The commitment was solidified through the formal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which aims to foster a

culture of transparency, accountability and ethical conduct in both the public and private domains.

The MoU extends the existing assistance granted by UNDP for Iraq's anti-corruption initiative. This collaborative initiative entails enhancing the capabilities of anti-corruption organizations and aligning strategic and legal frameworks with the principles of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption.

Corruption in the Iraqi government is a pervasive and entrenched problem that has impeded the country's progress and development for decades. Understanding the causes of this corruption requires a thorough examination of the contributing historical, political, economic and social factors.

A Consistent History of Political Instability

Instability in Iraq over the past two decades has been one of the primary contributors to the country's corruption. The collapse of a long-standing authoritarian regime in 2003 precipitated a period of uncertainty, which was rapidly filled by competing political factions and sectarian groups. The ensuing conflicts that broke out in Iraq, specifically the sectarian violence, exacerbated the political instability. The intensification of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia populations resulted in a cycle of violence, reprisals, and retaliation. These conflicts fostered an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility, in which political actors aligned along sectarian lines and struggled for power.

Corruption flourished in this environment. The pursuit of power and influence became intertwined with personal gain as individuals sought to exploit their political positions for financial gain. Political influence evolved into a means of amassing wealth, securing lucrative contracts and seizing control of resources. This environment encouraged

officials to use their positions to extract bribes, engage in embezzlement and manipulate public funds for personal gain. In a recent corruption scandal, nicknamed the “heist of the century,” former government officials were implicated in the larceny of \$2.5 billion in public funds.

The lack of political stability in Iraq has made it difficult to establish and implement effective anti-corruption measures. Comprehensive anti-corruption policies are impeded by frequent leadership turnover, ineffective governance structures and a lack of institutional stability. In certain instances, corrupt officials have been able to avoid accountability by utilizing their political connections or by taking advantage of the state of confusion in leadership.

Additionally, political instability has undermined the effectiveness of crucial anti-corruption institutions. The judiciary, law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies frequently confront interference, manipulation and intimidation in an unstable political climate. This hinders their ability to prosecute and penalize corrupt individuals, as political considerations frequently influence case outcomes. In addition, political instability has negatively impacted the continuity and efficacy of governance mechanisms. Frequent leadership and government structure changes impede the implementation of anti-corruption policies and institutional reforms. As political priorities have shifted, anti-corruption initiatives have frequently taken a back seat, allowing corrupt practices to persist and even flourish.

What’s more, the prevalence of patronage and nepotism in the Iraqi government has contributed to the spread of corruption. Often, positions of power and influence are filled on the basis of personal connections rather than merit, resulting in a system where loyalty and personal connections take precedence over competence and integrity.

This practice undermines the government's integrity and creates opportunities for corruption to thrive, as individuals in critical positions may place personal gain above the public interest.

Government Institutions Steadily Weakening

The Iraqi institutions charged with upholding transparency, accountability and the rule of law have frequently been undermined by inefficiency, lack of resources and political interference. Corruption within law enforcement agencies hinders their capacity to combat corruption at higher levels. Instances of bribery, nepotism and favoritism within these institutions compromise their integrity and hinder their ability to enforce laws and investigate instances of corruption. Corruption within law enforcement agencies can shield those who engage in corrupt practices, making it difficult to bring them to justice.

The judiciary, which is responsible for adjudicating corruption cases and upholding the rule of law, has also encountered difficulties. Corruption, such as bribery and political interference, has corrupted the judicial system. Corrupt individuals frequently use their connections and resources to manipulate legal proceedings or avoid punishment. This undermines public confidence in the judicial system and discourages individuals from reporting corruption, given that it is likely justice will not be served.

Regulatory bodies and oversight institutions have labored to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. These organizations are responsible for overseeing and regulating various sectors, such as public procurement, finance and public administration, to ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards. However, insufficient institutional capacity, a lack of resources, and political interference have hindered their ability to conduct effective oversight. Inadequate personnel, limited training and inadequate funding are also

important factors that promote the spread of corruption.

In Iraq, there have been deficiencies in the anti-corruption safeguarding mechanisms. Among these mechanisms are the auditing of public finances, the monitoring of public contracts and procurement processes, and the enforcement of conduct regulations for public officials. As a result of insufficient oversight, corrupt individuals are able to exploit loopholes and indulge in fraudulent activities with the knowledge that their actions are less likely to be scrutinized and challenged.

In addition to Iraq's fragile institutions and defective legal system, its lack of security has hampered efforts to combat corruption effectively. Continual terrorism, insurgency and armed conflict have diverted resources, attention and political will from anti-corruption initiatives. Authorities may prioritize security concerns over confronting corruption, thereby fostering an environment conducive to unchecked corruption.

A Widespread Issue With Transparency

Transparency, or the lack thereof, has played a significant role in the perpetuation of corruption in Iraq. Government transparency is a pillar of good governance as it promotes accountability, public trust, and effective supervision. In Iraq, however, access to information has been restricted and disclosure mechanisms are feeble or nonexistent. Transparency International continues to rank Iraq's public sector among the twenty-five most corrupt in the world.

Citizens and civil society organizations frequently encounter obstacles when pursuing information about government activities, budgets and contracts. This lack of transparency hinders the public's ability to hold officials accountable and allows corruption to continue unfettered. Individuals are unable to scrutinize government

actions, identify irregularities or expose corrupt practices without access to information.

In addition, inadequate disclosure mechanisms exacerbate the lack of transparency. In the absence of comprehensive and effective mechanisms for reporting, monitoring and investigating corruption cases, officials are able to engage in corrupt activities without fear of public exposure and repercussions. Without appropriate channels for reporting corruption or protection for whistleblowers, witnesses of corruption may be dissuaded from coming forward out of fear of retaliation or lack of faith in the system.

Oil and the Economic Struggles of Citizens

Economic factors also contribute to corruption in Iraq. The country's economy heavily relies on oil exports, which has led to a concentration of wealth and power. Mismanagement and misappropriation of oil revenues have caused corruption in areas including public procurement, contracts, and resource allocation. Lack of economic diversification and excessive reliance on hydrocarbon revenues not only limit the potential for economic growth and development but also increase the likelihood of corruption.

The focus on a single industry leaves other sectors vulnerable to corruption and underdeveloped. When a substantial portion of a nation's wealth is derived from a single source, those in control can manipulate and exploit the system for their own benefit.

In addition, the absence of a robust and diverse economy increases the likelihood that individuals will engage in corrupt behavior as they seek financial security. This establishes a system in which rent-seeking and illicit practices become the norm, perpetuating a cycle of corruption and stifling efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and good governance.

Lack of Trust in Government

The lack of functioning law enforcement, government credibility and transparency not only shields corrupt officials but also erodes public trust in the government and its institutions. When citizens feel they cannot trust their own government, they become disillusioned and may feel disconnected from the democratic process. This undermines the government's social contract with its citizens, impeding efforts to promote good governance and accountability.

In the absence of an empowered and active civil society, citizen engagement and accountability are hampered. A robust civil society serves as a watchdog, holding the government accountable and advocating for openness and good governance. In Iraq, civil society faces regular repression, lack of resources and restricted space for participation.

Without an engaged and active populace demanding accountability and transparency, corruption can flourish unchecked. Unfortunately, Iraqi citizens fear speaking out against corruption—particularly after citizens were arrested, tortured and murdered during and after the October 2019 demonstrations.

The Fight Against Corruption

On the whole, corruption has been Iraq's biggest challenge, and it has far-reaching consequences. Socially, corruption undermines citizens' faith in the democratic process and erodes public trust in the government. It promotes a culture of impunity and undermines the rule of law. It diverts funds from essential humanitarian programs, public services, and infrastructure development. It restricts economic prospects, discourages foreign investment and perpetuates inequality. Corruption hinders political stability by undermining the legitimacy of the government, exacerbating

sectarian tensions and fostering public discontent and unrest.

Combating corruption in Iraq is doubtlessly a complex problem. Without addressing the underlying causes and foundations of corruption, relying solely on memoranda and agendas will yield only marginal and superficial results. To make substantial progress, it is necessary to investigate the root causes of corruption and enact meaningful reforms.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

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SOUTH ASIA

India Is Growing Confident in Its New Role as a Powerful Nation

Glenn Carle
October 06, 2023

India has always been a large nation, but it is only now beginning to flex its muscles and project influence on the world stage. Most educated Indians are aware that their country is a nascent superpower. From GDP growth to

international military cooperation to covert operations in Canada, all the signs point to India's growing confidence in its new role.

My plan was to hike in the Himalayas for three weeks. But my hotel room phone rang early on my second morning in Mumbai. "Mr. Carle, your car is waiting for you. And your two ... guides." "What car?" I asked. "What 'guides'? And who are you?" "Your car is downstairs, waiting." Well, I thought, there is no escaping my earlier life in the CIA. I went downstairs.

It turned out that elements close to the top of the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi were aware of my arrival and had decided to "invite" me on a tour. Eventually, they told me that they were dissatisfied with the image the American media presented of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Modi people wanted to show me "what India is really like," and what the BJP government was seeking to accomplish.

They insisted that they were not intolerant, much less the fascistic, anti-Muslim nationalists some observers were describing them to be. Those were the biased criticisms of the anglicized, socialistic English-speaking Congress party elites with whom foreign journalists interact. For three weeks, they took me all over western and northern India and gave me better entrée to the corridors of power than most senior diplomats could ever hope to obtain. They showed me how India's power elites, both BJP and Congress party supporters, see India, as well as what the Modi government wants for the country.

India's national self-image is changing

For a thousand years, India was ruled by Muslims, like the Mughals, and later by the British. Hindus were powerless subjects. But Modi's BJP government sees India as a Hindu nation. This is the concept of Hindutva, a view of Indian society and government, first enunciated during India's struggles for independence against the British, which has guided the BJP since 1989.

Hindutva considers the Hindu religion as the basis of Indian culture and society. This is a powerful nationalistic break from the millennium of colonial subjugation and from the first sixty years of Indian independence, in which India embraced a secular, civic nationalist identity.

The Congress-party opponents of the BJP consider this concept of Indian society and government to be a dangerous betrayal of India's multicultural, tolerant and socialist post-colonial democracy. A majority of Hindus seem to feel empowered by Hindutva, however. Modi and the BJP consistently win substantial support at the polls and in opinion polling, and Modi's reelection in 2024 seems likely.

Hindutva strikes me as a powerful resurgence of national pride, but nationalism also can foster dangerous intolerance. Human Rights Watch finds that there has been an increase in protests against alleged government human rights violations since Modi's election and that government use of violence to suppress dissent has also increased. The BJP dismisses such criticisms: "The BJP is at least as democratic as the corrupt and totalitarian Congress party and the Gandhis," I was told repeatedly by BJP supporters.

India is a rising world power

One sees evidence of India's economic dynamism everywhere. Partially finished new highways and

skyscrapers loom overhead even as cows continue to sit placidly in the middle of major roads. Most educated Indians see themselves as citizens of a nascent world power. I was told repeatedly that “over 250 million” Indians have risen from extreme poverty in recent years, the BJP supporters intimating that this was due to Modi’s economic liberalism and industrial policies. The United Nations Development Programme presents a more nuanced picture, showing a decline in poverty that, while indeed impressive, began long before the BJP came to power.

Many Indians do feel that India’s bureaucratic sclerosis continues to slow economic development. Yet the World Bank now ranks India 63rd in its 2023 “Ease of Doing Business” report, up from 140th in 2014. When I was there, I sensed a country defining itself more by a burgeoning world-class economy than by timeless squalor, pre-modern stasis and colonial bureaucracy.

Much of India’s media expresses a simplistic, jingoistic nationalism due to pressure from the BJP according to government critics. Old ways of thought die hard, too: I heard many statements about how Russia remained a “trustworthy friend” and that the US was predatory and had sided with Pakistan for over sixty years.

These are vestigial echoes of a defensive, postcolonial, anti-Western, Congress-party-led India. The power elites with whom I met proudly highlighted India’s growing confidence as a global power. India is involving itself in the geopolitics of the Caucasus and the Indo-Pacific, aspiring to set global standards for semiconductor chips, building a world-class space program and diversifying its arms purchases as it develops its own arms production industry.

Many of the foreign policy experts with whom I spoke now consider India’s top strategic priority to be counterbalancing China. India’s leadership in

the “Global South” or the non-aligned movements, participation in the BRICS organization (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and increasing involvement in Indo-Pacific military maneuvers and in US-centric organizations such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue all seek to strengthen India as a nascent, independent global peer to the US, China and Russia, but above all they seek to counterbalance China. This is why Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar talks of India as a “south-western power” — part of the Global South — but with “very strong bonding” to the West and to Western norms.

India has long sought a seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The UN is nearly unreformable, though, and as a result, the world’s powers will slowly create alternative arrangements to address some of the problems of global governance. The G7 grouping of the world’s richest democracies has taken on increased strategic importance following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. One can thus expect India to pursue, and probably achieve, G7 membership, making a “G8.”

The death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar signals new audaciousness from a rising India

Nothing shows more strikingly India’s new bold and assertive attitude than the recent incident that occurred between New Delhi and Ottawa over the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Nijjar, a Canadian citizen, had been active in Sikh separatist politics. He organized an unofficial referendum among Sikhs resident in Canada on the independence from India of a new Sikh “country” named Khalistan. In June, Nijjar was gunned down in British Columbia. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared the killing had been an assassination, planned by India.

India, of course, denies having assassinated Nijjar, but for years has characterized him as a “terrorist.” India accused him of conspiring to organize a terrorist attack in 2018. India says that Trudeau has made his accusation in order to curry domestic political favor among Canada’s large Sikh population. It is likely, however, that Canada is telling the truth, given the diplomatic costs to Canada’s international standing of making spurious allegations about assassination and Trudeau’s explicit references to “credible allegations” collected by Canada’s intelligence agencies. The countries mutually expelled diplomat to show their anger. Relations between Canada and India have never been worse.

More significant than the tensions between India and Canada, however, is what the assassination says about the “stronger” India of Prime Minister Modi and about the Indian intelligence service’s apparently more aggressive role in India’s foreign policies.

“They need to understand that this is not the same India,” said Vineet Joshi, a senior BJP official. India now, he asserted, “is much stronger under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi.”

India’s foreign intelligence organization is the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Its mission is the same as those of the American CIA, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, or Britain’s MI6: to collect foreign intelligence on countries of strategic interest. But the RAW, like these other organizations, also conducts “covert actions.” Traditionally, the RAW has carried out covert operations against targets, including Sikh terrorists, within or near Indian territory. These operations are reputed to have included assassinations, but Nijjar’s assassination would be the first that the RAW is believed to have committed in a Western nation.

States often believe that covert actions offer them solutions to otherwise intractable problems. They believe that there will be no political cost because the actions are “covert.” The reality, however, is that most covert actions are eventually traced to the service that conducts them. When they become publicly known, they cause significant unintended negative consequences — just as we are observing with India’s likely assassination of Nijjar.

It is too early to know whether the “benefits” of the RAW’s assassination of Nijjar — eliminating an individual threatening India’s political integrity — outweigh the damage to India–Canada relations, to India’s standing and influence in the world and the possible increased hostility of India’s long-disgruntled Sikh population in consequence. Nijjar’s death, however, surely signals that India sees itself as “stronger” and freer to pursue its objectives unilaterally than at any time since Indian independence in 1947.

The event illustrates how India is now flexing the sometimes-obtuse muscles of a superpower. It also reveals a significant global expansion of the RAW’s covert actions, transgressing international and democratic norms in pursuit of what India considers vital national interests.

A newer, bolder India moves into the future

I never so much as glimpsed the Himalayas during my three weeks in India. Instead, I saw an India that will soon be the world’s third-largest economy, that is proud to now be the fourth nation to land on the Moon and that is playing a progressively large and confident role in international affairs. I saw an India that seeks influence in the “Global South” and closer relations with the West to counterbalance China. I saw an India that is struggling to overcome its colonial and socialist bureaucratic legacy and historical hostility to the West. I saw an India that,

as it recently demonstrated, is ready to pursue its perceived national interests globally in spite of the costs.

It seemed to me that the BJP, in its efforts to free India of the harmful effects of a thousand years of foreign domination and three generations of socialist torpor and crony leadership, risks alienating its non-Hindu populations and sliding into intolerant majoritarian rule and a strong-man system of government. We will have to see.

[[Newsweek Japan](#) first published a version of this piece.]

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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From Upstart to Start-Up Nation, Israel at 75 Faces New Challenges

Gary Grappo
May 01, 2023

Israel has triumphed over its foes in a rough neighborhood. Still, Palestinians present a new challenge, or rather an old challenge in a different guise. Also, internal strife over the

future of democracy presents an unprecedented challenge to Israel.

Seventy-five years ago, the State of Israel announced its independence on former British Mandate territory that the UN Partition Plan of 1947 had delineated. Arab states never recognized that partition plan, which also marked territory for the Mandate's Arab residents. Armies of five Arab nations struck the nascent Jewish state less than one day after its independence declaration. Despite having no formal army (or navy or air force) and being vastly outnumbered, the upstart state defied all predictions, defeating the combined Arab armies and shocking the world.

It wouldn't be the first time. Again in 1956, 1967 and 1973, Israel would square off against Arab armies, emerging victorious every time, though battered in the last conflict. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, realizing the futility of constant war against his neighbor, called it quits after the 1973 war and, with the extraordinary help of US President Jimmy Carter, negotiated the Camp David Peace Accords with Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin, ending the era of Arab-Israeli wars.

To the former Mandate's other inhabitants, the Palestinians, however, Israel's "War of Independence" came to be known as the "nakba," or catastrophe. This coming May 14, as Israelis celebrate their independence, Palestinians will commemorate "Nakba Day." They haven't forgotten the trauma of that time, and their conflict with Israel continues unabated.

The upstart nation, on the other hand, has prospered, defying all expectations. Accepting Jews from all over the world, Israel capitalized on its greatest resource, its people, to move from near

poverty to first-world prosperity. By the late 1990s, Israeli engineers, scientists, doctors, and technicians were moving into the big leagues of the global economy. It became the “start-up” nation, birthing new tech and finance companies regularly, often to be quickly snapped up by big American, British, and European corporations hungry for new ideas, technology, and products.

Internal Strife Over the Future of Democracy

As it celebrates the many achievements of its 75 years, Israel today also must confront new and unprecedented challenges. The first may be the most difficult. In the weeks leading up to the recent celebration of Passover, Israel was convulsed by massive public demonstrations throughout the country, some exceeding 200,000 participants. Demonstrators, who straddled all elements of Israeli society – from active and reserve military personnel to academia, youth, and techies – took to the streets. They were protesting actions of the most right-wing government in Israel’s history to undermine the independence of the state’s judicial system.

Critics of the government’s move argue that it would upset Israel’s balance of powers. Supporters assert the move is intended to right a heavily weighted elitist and liberal court system. Former PM Ehud Barak described Netanyahu and the conservatives’ efforts as “regime change” by attempting to manipulate Israel’s democratic system. Former Defense Minister Benny Gantz accused Netanyahu and his coalition of carrying out “a constitutional coup.”

With no formal constitution and no effective executive branch and its presidency largely a ceremonial and symbolic office, Israel is a two-branch government, the Knesset (its parliament) and its judiciary. As a parliamentary system, the prime minister is chosen by the Knesset. A coalition made up of Likud and five extreme

Zionist conservative and ultra-orthodox parties voted to return Likud’s Benyamin Netanyahu to the prime ministry. It was Bibi’s deal with the devil. The right wingers seek to dilute the authority of the judiciary, i.e., the Israeli supreme court, maintain military service exemptions for Haredim Jews, expand settlements in the West Bank, and erase previous court rulings protecting LGBTQ+ rights. Israel’s large secular class, those who defend the nation in the IDF and comprise its highly productive labor force, was having none of it and took to the streets.

Pressured as he never has been in his 15 years as Israel’s prime minister, Bibi blinked. Facing rebelling military reservists, armies of university students, the all-powerful tech and financial sectors, his intelligence chiefs, and hundreds of thousands of defiant citizens, he agreed to suspend legislation pending in the Knesset that would have undermined the supreme court’s independence. For now, the matter has been referred to discussions and dialog led by Israeli President Isaac Herzog to search for compromise. Israelis remain wary, nonetheless. Smaller demonstrations continue and some Israelis say they will return to the streets if the government attempts to introduce changes that alter the independence of the courts and the judicial branch. That is to say, this internal struggle for the nation’s democratic future is not over.

External Enemies Coalescing

Israel’s trials don’t stop at its borders. It faces an array of external threats as well. It’s distant nemesis, Iran, now appears to be working with closer enemies of the state. According to recent statements of Defense Minister Yoav Galant, Iran is supporting these foes through funding, weapons, advice and other means. They include Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza. Meanwhile, Iran is continuing its ongoing support for Hezbollah, Syria, and anti-Israeli militias in Syria. Iran’s backing for this multi-front

assault, per Galant, likely exceeds one billion dollars. It may also be funneling assistance to the many small militia gangs that have cropped up in the West Bank (see below).

The combined destructive might of these disparate enemy forces likely tops well over one-hundred thousand rockets and missiles, not including Iran's own formidable arsenal. For Iran, that means that even without its long-sought nuclear weapons, it presents a genuine and serious threat to Israel – perhaps not an existential threat, but one nevertheless capable of inflicting massive destruction and casualties on Israel.

In Israel's storied history of conflict, multi-front wars are nothing new. It has often had to contend with enemies on all sides of the postage-stamp sized nation. It has proved that betting against Israel was never a winning bet. But multiple barrages of rockets and missiles coming from all directions are a different scale of challenge than Arab tank battalions and feeble Soviet-era aircraft attacks. The nation's advanced defensive systems like Iron Dome, Iron Beam (scheduled for a 2025 introduction) and soon-to-be-introduced David's Sling, unquestionably are a mitigating factor, not to mention the continued support from its most vital ally, the US. Nevertheless, Israel may require more than ingenuity and innovative weapons to counter this threat.

The Enduring Challenge Persists

Finally, there is the region's most enduring conflict. Israel's co-inhabitants in the region between the sea and the Jordan, the Palestinians, present a new challenge, or rather an old challenge in a different guise. The West Bank has been wracked by violence for more than a year. In 2023 alone, 80 Palestinians and more than 20 Israelis have been killed as a result of violence. Should this continue, it would be the worst year of violence since the Second Intifada of 2000-2005, now

widely acknowledged as a disaster for the Palestinians. Palestinian attacks against settlers and other Israelis have become too familiar, as have IDF reprisal raids into the West Bank, including Area A where the Palestinian Authority nominally maintains administrative as well as security authority.

What makes the current situation different is that the Palestinian attacks appear to be not only indiscriminate but also aimless, i.e., without an apparent overarching purpose other than to inflict harm. In fact, they are carried out mostly by boys and young men exasperated with the current situation. The attackers are members of small, localized, militia-like gangs, principally from the areas of Nablus and Jenin in the territory's north. They are groups like the Lion's Den, Balata Brigade, and the Hornets' Nest and enjoy surprising popular support among Palestinians, who share their many frustrations. They likely have loose connections to the more established Palestinian organizations and parties like Fatah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Unlike previous Palestinian groups, however, these new groups lack an overarching political ideology. They are a new generation of young Palestinians simply at war with the status quo. That means not only Israel's occupation but also the incompetent, ineffective, self-serving, and corrupt Palestinian Authority, whose aging President, Mahmoud Abbas, is in the 18th year of a four-year term and has canceled multiple elections. A toxic cocktail of PA fecklessness, little prospect for change, and despair for a better future only aggravates frustrations and the rage of these youth. They act out of desperation, perhaps the most insidious of motivations.

The attacks present little significant threat to Israel, though Israelis must exert greater caution to avoid these episodic occurrences of violence. More than anything, however, they point out the 75 years

of continuing frustration and anger of Palestinians. The nakba continues to simmer.

Israel has demonstrated remarkable ability to overcome hardship, danger, and challenges throughout its brief history. How will it meet the new challenges of today? Might it be best served by returning to address the unresolved problem of 1948. That won't resolve its internal political problems nor the external challenges entirely. Those might be the lesser of the challenges. It's addressing the challenges of the Palestinians that may be most critical.

For the Palestinians, commemorating 75 years of the nakba, there are perhaps even graver challenges. The current system, if one can use that term, is not working. If it isn't the PA, which desperately needs fresh and innovative leadership, then they will have to find another way to prove to themselves and to Israelis that they are capable of self-government and of becoming a true negotiating partner of their neighbor.

One hopes, the Palestinians won't have to wait 75 years.

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India's Replacement Theory Is About Money, Not Race

Peter Isackson

November 15, 2023

With an election only six months away, uncertainty about India's role within a shifting geopolitical landscape at a time of major world conflicts has never been greater. Today's rivalry with China and India's ambiguous relationship with the West may be turning in a new direction, possibly a creative one.

In 2023, shifting balances of geopolitical power appear to have become the norm. The world is painfully witnessing both the breadth and the limits of US political and military power in both Ukraine and Israel. Washington's "best-laid schemes" — to quote Robert Burns — continue to produce a frustrating pattern marked by the failure to achieve stated objectives, followed by months and sometimes years of trying to dig itself out of the latest hole. With the center of gravity of the global economy now sitting clearly on the eastern side of the Eurasian continent, all eyes are turning to China and India as pundits try to imagine the shape of the new world order.

China has its own internal tensions and uncertainties. In contrast with the dominant hegemon, the US, China sits comfortably outside the morass of the two highly Americanized wars on the eastern edge of the Western world.

India, now the most populous nation, boasts a dynamic economy, which nevertheless represents only a fifth of that of China's in GDP and 40% in PPP. At the same time, India is credited with a growth rate in 2023 of 7% compared to China's 3%.

Liu Zongyi, an expert in India–China relations, writing for the Chinese publication *The Global Times*, predictably offers a less optimistic

prognosis for India. Concerned that India is aggressively trying to replace China at the core of the global industrial chain, he comforts himself by citing “various constraints holding back the Indian domestic economy.”

Liu innovates by offering a full-fledged “replacement theory” when he claims that India is intent on “replacing Chinese products with Indian products or products from other countries, replacing Chinese capital with Indian capital and capital from other countries, and replacing the cooperation model between China and the West with the cooperation model between India and the West.”

Liu then explains why he believes India cannot succeed. After signaling India’s slow pace of industrial development and what he sees as a relatively unskilled labor force in comparison to China, he adds another consideration. “Western enterprises are aware that although India is currently choosing to cooperate with Western companies in order to replace China’s position in the global supply chain, Western companies will still face setbacks in India when the domestic industry in India develops to a certain extent. This is because Indian monopolistic capitalists will not allow Western companies to make a lot of money in the Indian market.”

Today’s **Weekly Devil’s Dictionary** definition:

Monopolistic capitalists:

Capitalists. (Even those who do not or cannot have a monopoly aspire to monopoly.)

Contextual note

Chinese analysts have good reason to be worried when speaking about “the global supply chain.” Over the past three decades, as the world moved towards what everyone accepted as the norm of

“globalization,” no other nation was as effective as China in crafting the global supply chain to its own needs. In practical terms, China assumed a role far more “indispensable” than even the US, who famously claimed and still claims the title of “indispensable nation.”

But the times really are “a-changin’,” as Bob Dylan once put it. Already, the higher cost of Chinese labor has affected China’s position at the core of the manufacturing supply chain. The Middle Kingdom’s growth rate has radically declined and its economy is now faced with unanticipated and seemingly unresolvable crises, notably in its real estate markets.

India possesses several obvious advantages with respect to China, including a positive image as “the world’s biggest democracy” and official use of the English language. Both of those features, though not necessarily as solid as some might suppose, facilitate India’s global relationship-building, especially within the Western world.

India does sit alongside China at the core of a now expanding grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) that is seriously threatening to mount a challenge to the US dollar and thereby reconfigure international trade. However, it is important to note that India has successfully resisted China’s effort, embodied by Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative, to dominate and unilaterally manage the evolution of Asian and indeed global infrastructure.

So how well founded is Liu’s observation that “Indian monopolist capitalists will not allow Western companies to make a lot of money in the Indian market?” The claim does have some merit when compared with the Chinese system. China has achieved a paradoxical success by massively attracting US and European capitalists to its historically expanding markets. Those same capitalists officially deplore China’s authoritarian

system. But they couldn't be insensitive to the fact that, in a matter of decades, China has lifted 800 million people out of poverty, producing the world's fastest-growing consumer economy.

Liu is right to mention the factor of monopoly. Unlike open capitalist economies, for China the practice of monopoly is a privilege of the state, which guides the economy and sets the rules by which foreign investors can operate in its markets. In contrast, Western companies vie at home for a position as private monopolies. They are driven by the goal of "owning" their respective marketplaces and are skilled at keeping competition at bay. They strive to be monopolists in any lucrative marketplace, which they achieve at home but fail to do so in China.

Western Capitalism has become a monopoly culture, which is one aspect of what economist and former finance minister of Greece Yanis Varoufakis calls "technofeudalism." What a monopolizing company can't accomplish through the unique quality of its products, it achieves through the science of branding combined with the logic of financialized capitalism. Thanks to accumulated and well-managed financial clout, monopolies consolidate their marketplace by either buying or crushing their competition. That has become the unwritten "law of the land," a law everyone has learned to respect.

Liu is right. India does count a number of powerful monopolistic capitalists, but the role they play on the global stage will always be ambiguous. For the moment, India is caught between the logic of the financialized West — whose banks and financial institutions along with its governments still call the shots — and the centralized, authoritarian model of China. India's monopolists lack the ability to compete on the same scale as Western monopolies like Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook, which increasingly function as platforms that provide an exclusive space within

which others operate. And the Indian state, for complex historical and ideological reasons, simply lacks the means to control and literally monopolize its economy the way China has done.

Historical note

The capitalist West has always had a problem with monopoly. In Adam Smith's 18th-century vision of a world in which "wealth of nations" was ensured by competing businesses, the very idea of monopoly contradicted the core logic of his theory. Success and progress resulted from competition, not control. But anyone who runs a business, especially in today's technofeudal culture, dreams of achieving control of the marketplace. Peter Thiel unambiguously says so in his book *Zero to One*.

Thomas Piketty, a far deeper thinker and one of the towering economists of our time, examines monopolies in his book *Capitalism and Ideology*. He points out that the English economy in the 18th century already evinced a strong monopolistic trend. What better example to illustrate the trend than the East India Company? The one economy, Piketty tells us, that functioned pretty efficiently in conformity with Adam Smith's principles at that time was China's!

Smith's ideal supposed that capitalists would exercise control in a reasonably self-interested, rather than self-obsessed way. But once one accepts Friedrich Hayek's notion of the primacy of shareholder interest, it is only natural that capitalists see monopoly as the ultimate goal, if not an ideal.

So, is India caught between a rock and a hard place from which it cannot escape? In reality, the entire geopolitical and geo-economic landscape is undergoing a radical transformation that may reserve a few surprises for the pundits, both Western and Chinese. Anyone who has doubts

about how many twists and turns history is now taking should ponder yesterday's headline from the South China Morning Post: "Iran says it hopes to work with China to de-escalate Israel-Gaza war."

The very idea of Iran stepping up alongside China to help resolve the war in Israel, Iran's sworn enemy, would have seemed absurd only a few months ago and sounds absurd even today. In the meantime, China has negotiated peace between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and both of those countries may be about to join BRICS. Does this adumbrate new combinations of geopolitical cooperation and economic creativity made possible by the BRICS alliance?

India faces an almost impossible challenge in finding its place in the new emerging world order precisely because it is so difficult to predict. For once, the Pentagon's jargon about a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world rings true. Perhaps our Indian friends could attend our VUCA workshops to look around the corner to see what may lie ahead. ;)

*[In the age of Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, another American wit, the journalist Ambrose Bierce produced a series of satirical definitions of commonly used terms, throwing light on their hidden meanings in real discourse. Bierce eventually collected and published them as a book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, in 1911. We have shamelessly appropriated his title in the interest of continuing his wholesome pedagogical effort to enlighten generations of readers of the news. Read more of *Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary*.]

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Bangladesh Unveils its New Indo-Pacific Outlook

Sadia Korobi
June 06, 2023

Bangladesh's Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO) is a pragmatic approach to a region that holds substantial importance in global affairs. But rather than becoming ensnared in geopolitical rivalries, Bangladesh has chosen to carve a distinct path that serves its own interests. The country intends to actively participate in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region while safeguarding its independence.

On April 24, Bangladesh formally announced its first Indo-Pacific Outlook (IPO). The announcement signifies the country's proactive involvement in the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region. The timing of the announcement came right before Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan, the UK, and the US.

The IPO outlines 15 objectives for the Indo-Pacific region and "envisions a free, open, peaceful, secure, and inclusive Indo-Pacific for the shared prosperity for all."

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has adhered to a policy of non-alignment. While the IPO aligns with the broad objectives of the region championed by the United States and its allies,

Bangladesh remains resolute in maintaining its neutral stance.

The Indo-Pacific region has its identity not solely because of its geographical boundaries but primarily due to its immense geostrategic importance. The region produces more than 62% of the global GDP and accounts for more than half of the world's population.

The region also serves as home to several of the world's largest economies, including China, Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. It comes as no surprise that the Indo-Pacific has evolved into a significant geopolitical hotspot, with major powers vying for influence and asserting their positions on the region's order.

The Indo-Pacific strategy emerged as a response to China's assertive rise in the region, with the United States playing a leading role. The term "Indo-Pacific" was first coined by the late Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe. In 2017, US President Donald Trump introduced his "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" plan. President Trump garnered support from key Western allies, including the European Union, India, and Japan, as they recognized the need to counterbalance China's expanding presence.

Bangladesh has now joined the bandwagon. Its first and foremost objective for the Indo-Pacific is to "strengthen mutual trust and respect, forge partnerships and cooperation, and promote dialogue and understanding with the aim of ensuring peace, prosperity, security and stability for all in the Indo-Pacific."

In line with its pledge, Bangladesh aims to actively contribute to peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and counter-terrorism programs in the region. It also emphasizes the importance of upholding international values and collaborating

with other stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific to achieve shared goals.

Maritime freedom of access and movement, and sustainable management of oceans, and seas are also key priorities. Bangladesh adheres to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

In addition, the country aims to promote inclusive societies that embrace a culture of peace, prioritizing the advancement of the "women, peace, and security" agenda. It also advocates for transparent, rules-based multilateral systems that enable inclusive economic growth and development for all stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific.

The country recently unveiled Vision 2041, an ambitious roadmap aimed at uplifting the economic status of the country and improving the living standards of its people through rapid industrialization. Currently, Bangladesh is the 7th most climate-vulnerable country, according to the climate vulnerability index. Bangladesh is keen on proactive engagement in addressing disaster risk reduction, biodiversity loss, marine pollution, and other climate change issues.

Bangladesh has made a deliberate choice to use the term "Indo-Pacific" instead of "Asia-Pacific," which is favored by Beijing. This reflects the country's independent stance in regional geopolitics. However, it has avoided including explicit military goals in its strategy, in contrast to other countries like the USA, France, the UK, and Canada.

Bangladesh's non-alignment policy is a prudent decision for a small state. Bangladesh has effectively balanced its relationships with the US and China, both of which have been vying for greater influence in South Asia.

Maintaining this balance will be crucial for Bangladesh as it strives to achieve its goals amidst the evolving dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region and the emerging multipolar world. The country is bound to find a place in this new world order.

[[Naveed Ahsan](#) edited this piece.]

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India Boldly Asserts Independence with New Technology

Wes Kussmaul
May 08, 2023

After centuries of colonialism, India is looking to recent technological advances in their country to carve out global independence from the West. India's cutting-edge digital payment system and mobile operating system, BharOS, represent a long awaited opportunity for users desiring more freedom and privacy.

India is one of many nations looking for ways to assert their independence from past and present Western colonialism. This desire can result in projects that have an air of petulance that is successful locally, but not particularly productive.

Sometimes, an independence effort is made in a more positive spirit. One shining example is India's plan to build a digital environment that is independent of "Silibandia", or Silicon Valley and West-dominated media and broadband industries.

This new endeavor, called BharOS, is a fork of Android built with the sponsorship of India's government, now a nation of 1.4 billion people. This also includes its topnotch developer community, led by alumni of the distinguished IIT.

What Google Doesn't Want You To Know

Android is built on the completely open source Linux operating system originally developed by Linus Torvalds. Thanks to this technology and free software pioneers like Richard Stallman, anything built on their open source platforms is required to be similarly open source. This means that it is free for the public to copy, re-brand, and make their own operating system.

A number of attempts have been made to develop forks of Android that allow for more user privacy than what Google builds into Android systems. BharOS will presume that its user is part of the Aadhaar identity platform, but developer documentation suggest they are eagerly looking towards creating a Google-free version of BharOS for Western users.

Building a complete mobile operating system usually requires more resources than even a well-funded entrepreneurial team can typically muster but BharOS is a unique undertaking in a few ways.

The Future Is BharOS

The BharOS platform is ripe with potential. BharOS is well funded, concerned about the overreach of Silicon Valley and will attract the

attention of app developers given its large user base in India.

However, the mobile operating system is just a start. Today, since most people conduct business and shop online in our location-independent digital world, a payment system is necessary.

In this regard, India has a unique edge. In 2016 India launched a payment system which, unlike “Silibandia”’s balkanized patchwork of competing systems, is integrated and unified. The Unified Payment Interface (UPI) is powered by the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) under the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). UPI built a real-time payment system that allows users to pay directly from their bank accounts without a credit or debit card, running contrary to many “Silibandia” payment systems that require a middle entity.

UPI is also a fairly low cost producer. This allows savings for merchants and users while the system keeps its profitability. With this strategy, UPI could steadily eat into the market share of competing systems as users desire more control over their finances than other competitors can offer.

Like the Chinese retail economy, India was dominated by cash while the rest of the world absorbed the overhead of moving to plastic substitutes. This enabled China and India to eventually move seamlessly into integrated digital payment systems, while Western payment systems were slowed by the complexity of their old plastic-driven economy.

This seamless integration from cash to digital payment systems is responsible for a significant surge in digital payments across India. In March 2023, UPI reached a record breaking 8.65 billion transactions. The elimination of friction by reducing the number of “moving parts” in the

payments system has generated 2021 cost savings of 12.6 billion dollars.

UPI is not resting on its laurels. UPI 2.0, launched on 16 August 2018, enabled users to 1) link their overdraft accounts to a UPI handle; 2) pre-authorise transactions by issuing a mandate for specific merchants; 3) view and store the invoice for the transactions; and 4) set up AutoPay for recurring payments.

The Indian expatriate diaspora, along with an increasing number of Indian tourists abroad, are major factors in the use of UPI in other countries. For those who welcome the tools to build a publicly governed world information and commerce infrastructure, the rapid internationalization of UPI will be a welcome development.

While China attempts, in spite of their looming financial crisis, to encourage the renminbi replacing the US dollar as the world’s reserve currency—could the rupee be in the running as the successor to the dollar in that role? With BharOS and UPI and other developments energizing the development of India’s infrastructure, that seems more plausible than ever.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

***Wes Kussmaul** created the world’s first commercially available online encyclopedia in 1991. It quickly morphed into the Delphi social network. In 1993, Delphi was sold to Rupert Murdoch’s News America Corporation. Wes’s book, *Quiet Enjoyment*, about solving online accountability problems through measurably reliable identities, led to a relationship with the World e-Trust Initiative of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

Caste and Party: A Volatile Mix in Karnataka

Shishira Maiya
July 23, 2023

Karnataka is the only southern Indian state where India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is competitive. In the 2023 Karnataka state elections, the BJP has just lost to the Indian National Congress. Karnataka's intricate caste and religious dynamics make local politics quite unpredictable. With national elections coming up next year, can the BJP recover in this state?

With the dust of the election finally settled, the new king has been anointed. Siddaramaiah, a senior leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), became the chief minister of Karnataka once again on May 20. He had previously served in the office from 2013 to 2018.

D. K. Shivakumar has begrudgingly taken the second post of the deputy chief minister. It remains to be seen if he will continue to stand on the sideline, as history tells us that chief ministers usually have a hard time completing their terms in this state. In the 66 years of its modern political history, Karnataka has seen only four instances of chief ministers completing their terms. The last one, though, was Siddaramaiah himself.

A brief history

The roots of this anomaly lie in the 20th-century unification movement that led to the formation of the state. This movement aimed to bring together various regions, uniting the territory of the former Mysore Kingdom with parts of Hyderabad and Bombay states, along with the districts of Ballari, Dakshina Kannada and Kodagu. These regions shared a common language, Kannada.

Despite the unification of the state into a single administrative entity, politics in Karnataka remained highly regionalized. This resulted in a system with a weak state capital. Regional strongmen held considerable sway over policy, often demanding plum posts for their supporters. Winning in Karnataka means effectively winning six different elections, each with its own unique characteristics. To have a chance at forming a government without a coalition, a political party must perform exceptionally well in at least three regions and achieve above-average results in at least two others.

In Karnataka's 66 years of existence, the INC has been the dominant political force, governing the state for approximately 50 years. As in any other Indian election, caste plays a crucial role in determining electoral outcomes. Before the unification of Karnataka, the Vokkaligas, a landholding community, held considerable sway within the INC party of Mysore state. Concerned about potentially relinquishing power to the numerically superior Lingayats, a dominant Shaivite caste in the northern regions that were to be added to the state, several Vokkaliga leaders voiced their opposition to the unification of Kannada speakers. Vokkaliga fears were not unfounded. After unification, Lingayats swiftly captured power within the INC and also took the coveted post of the chief minister. They continued to dominate the INC until the late 1980s.

The turning point came when Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi unceremoniously dismissed Chief Minister Veerendra Patil in a press conference over his handling of a communal riot. This 1990 “humiliation” of a son of the soil by a national leader prompted the entire Lingayat community to align itself with the then-nascent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under B. S. Yediyurappa, a loyalty that has endured ever since.

Meanwhile, the capture of the INC by the Lingayat community had created the need for a strong Vokkaliga leader who could unite them into a formidable force. H. D. Devegowda and his party Janata Dal (JD), quickly filled this void. The JD rose rapidly thanks to the support of the Vokkaliga community. This resurgence led to the Vokkaligas reclaiming the post of chief minister after nearly four decades, and, to their delight, even the post of prime minister, albeit for only a year from 1996–1997. In 1999, the party split and Devegowda’s faction became the Janata Dal (Secular), or JD(S).

Twenty years ago, H. D. Kumaraswamy, the son of Devegowda, took over the reins from his father. Since entering politics in 2003, Kumaraswamy has served as chief minister twice.

With these two dominant castes fighting for power, a third alternative emerged in the form of “Ahinda”—an alliance between religious minorities, backward castes and Dalits. The alliance masterminded by former chief minister Devraj Urs has found its torchbearer in Siddaramaiah today. These are the three corners of the triangular fight that has dominated Karnataka politics for the past three decades.

The Lingayat blunder

The previous assembly elections in 2018 had returned a hung assembly, with the BJP as the single largest party. However, the INC and JD(S)

managed to stitch together an alliance with H. D. Kumaraswamy as chief minister.

A year into the government, discontent grew and 12 legislators belonging to both coalition partners defected to the BJP and formed a government with Yediyurappa at the helm. He was a leader of great stature, with a massive following in the state. Since 1990, this Lingayat leader had toiled to build up the BJP in Karnataka, the party’s only home in the South. However, Yediyurappa’s independent style of working often clashed with the ever-centralizing impulse of BJP high command.

When the conflict between the state and national parties reached a deadlock, Yediyurappa resigned after Home Minister Amit Shah and the central BJP leadership used a clause in the BJP charter that mandated compulsory retirement at 75 to force the senior statesman out of office. Cognizant that the sentiments of Yediyurappa’s community would be hurt, the BJP tried to placate it by appointing Basavraj Bommai, another Lingayat, as the chief minister for the remainder of the term. But the damage was done. Bommai was a political lightweight who could never fit into Yediyurappa’s shoes.

Adding insult to injury, the BJP also decided to endorse the former chief minister and Lingayat leader Jagadish Shettar, a six-time elected member of Karnataka’s legislative assembly, and the former deputy chief minister Laxman Savadi a month before the elections. Unfortunately for the BJP, both leaders left the party and joined the INC, claiming that the BJP was anti-Lingayat. Their supporters followed en masse, further adding credibility to their claims that “BJP is anti-Lingayat.” Even though Shettar lost in the polls, his joining the INC worked in the party’s favor. It swept the Hyderabad and Mumbai Karnataka regions with a majority of Lingayat votes.

Hindutva vs. Kannada pride

After the leadership change, the BJP thought it could offset potential losses on Lingayat votes by building a pan-religious identity of Hindutva. The party focused on national Hindu identity to win support. While the monsoon ravaged the infrastructure of the state capital Bengaluru, the Karnataka government busied itself making a fuss about hijabs in schools and the boycott of halal products. This aggressive push was spearheaded by C. T. Ravi, a rising star in the state party. However, this imported northern version of Hindutva failed to resonate with the people of Karnataka. While Hindutva politics can be seen as an acceptable side dish, it cannot serve as the main course in Karnataka. Unsurprisingly, Ravi lost his seat, and the BJP drew a blank in his district, Chikmagalur.

Hindutva has a natural tendency to homogenize people under a broad blanket of Hinduism and Hindi. In South India, language forms a fundamental part of identity and Hindi is still resented as an imposition by North Indian leaders. In Karnataka, the BJP was seen as neglecting the interests of the Kannada language and cozying up to New Delhi's edicts, heightening concerns about the erosion of local autonomy. Moreover, the non-payment of goods and services taxes owed to the state and the promotion of Gujarat's Amul dairy cooperative over the local Nandini brand contributed to this narrative of the neglect of Karnataka.

Administrative Failure

Furthermore, the BJP had many failures on the administrative front. The Karnataka State Contractors Association (KSCA) alleged that ministers were demanding illegal cuts as high as 40% of the project budget, making it unfeasible for KSCA members to operate. The INC, under the guidance of their consultant Sunil Kanugolu, who

worked formerly for McKinsey & Company, latched on to this and launched a campaign: "40% Sarkara" (40% Government). The campaign prominently featured posters with the phrase "Pay CM," cleverly playing a pun on India's popular payment network "Paytm," with an accompanying QR code to "pay bribes." Kanugolu's campaign was a hit on social media, tilting the narrative battle towards the INC.

The BJP faced the polls with a sinking ship and an unreliable captain. The best they were hoping for was a hung assembly. When the results were out, they could only hold on to their bastions in the capital Bengaluru and in coastal Karnataka. As many as 11 ministers lost their seats and the party drew a blank in eight districts. Their only silver lining was the BJP vote share remained unchanged at ~36%.

Meanwhile, the INC increased its vote share by a decisive ~5%, going up from 38% to 43%. This came at the cost of Kumaraswamy's JD(S) whose vote share fell from 18.3% to 13.3%. The INC's remarkable victory in the Old Mysore region can be attributed to Vokkaligas uniting behind the state INC chief Shivakumar who is now the second-in-command. He missed out on the chief ministerial positions because Jawaharlal Nehru's great-grandson Rahul Gandhi favored Siddaramaiah once again. This overlooking of Shivakumar might have consequences. It remains to be seen if Vokkaliga support for the INC will extend to the crucial upcoming national elections next year.

What Next?

The 2023 Karnataka election victory was a hard-fought one for the INC. They needed the organizational skills of Shivakumar as well as the personal charisma of Siddaramaiah to win. The two leaders realized that they depended on each other. Hence, they buried their differences and fought the elections unitedly. Now that victory is

theirs, their rivalry is back and the gloves are off. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that the government's reign might not be frictionless.

Gandhi is banking on the Shivakumar-Siddaramaiah duo to deliver a major chunk of seats in the all-important national elections next May. In the 2019 national elections, the Congress managed to win only one out of the 28 seats in Karnataka. However, 2024 might turn out differently. The BJP has been completely decimated in Karnataka and is in soul-searching mode. The state BJP lacks a strong leader who can deliver the only potential set of seats in South India to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Yet it is important to remember that the people of Karnataka possess a commendable level of political maturity. In the past, they have often made distinctions between state and national issues, voting for different parties in state and national elections. Time will tell if the Congress can successfully capitalize on its 2023 victory or whether the BJP will make a comeback.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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The Great Omission: Why Don't Indians Talk About Africa?

Nishita Malhan
August 21, 2023

We have a problem worldwide with a skewed and innacurate representation of Africa in the media. Indian media are no exception. There needs to be greater exposure to authentic African stories to counteract these biases and recognize the continent's true significance.

I watched an Instagram Reel a few days ago where a college student was asked to name 5 countries starting with the letter A. One of her answers was "Africa." Now, while that may speak worse of the American public school system than of anything else, we still have a problem.

I'm an Indian teenager and have lived and studied in India all my life. I am ashamed to say that until I was 12, I also thought that Africa was a country. I likened it to the Australian situation, where the country and continent are more or less the same.

Could you blame me, though? Much of what I had read until then, whether in textbooks or the news, spoke of Africa as an undifferentiated whole, an exotic landmass roamed by wild animals and exotic people, all sporting face paint on a dark canvas. Sprawling savannahs and exposed ribs were the images associated with the continent, pitifully ridden with disease, poverty and civil unrest. I never once read something that referred to the thriving middle class that constitutes about a third of the African population or to the rolling beaches that the continent boasts, let alone an

individual reference to any of its 54 distinct countries.

The stereotype lives on

This very pigeonhole—or “shithole,” as Mr. Trump likes to say—of Africa as an outlandish jungle is what a 2019 New York Times want ad for a Nairobi bureau chief position invokes. When it announces the exciting opportunity to cover “unexpected stories of hope” from the “pirate seas of the Horn of Africa” and the “forests of Congo,” it reduces Africa to the very stereotypes that a correspondent reporting from Africa should aim to topple. The LAM Sisterhood, an African feminist content studio, posted a humorous dramatic reading of the advertisement online, mocking it.

However, the video wasn’t easy for me to find. At first, when I searched for it on Google I was not able to find it. Indeed, when I think about it, I haven’t encountered, as far as I can remember, any content online produced by Africans. Why are young Indians like me so unexposed to African voices? If we don’t learn about Africa from Africans, from where do we learn about the continent and its expansive culture?

The answer, as it turns out, is that we just don’t. And when we do, it’s almost always negative. While Western media are often criticized for their coverage (or lack thereof) of developing countries like Nigeria and Tanzania, Indian media are no different. Even today, the press of the world’s largest democracy tends to pander to well-established African typecasting—that is, in the rare instance that African news even makes it to print.

Western bias and pessimism

Prabhat Kumar and Dorcas Addo published a paper titled “A Study on the Coverage of Africa in Indian Print Media” which revealed that, out of the entire sample of 185 stories on Africa from the

Times of India and The Hindu, two leading English-language newspapers in India, only 62 were positive. Even these few optimistic human-interest stories were permitted only a small space in the newspaper.

The authors propose that the primary reason for this scarce and skewed representation is a lack of Indian media correspondents on the ground in Africa and a resulting reliance on Western media for African news and stories. Kumar and Addo’s study found that, from August 2014 to August 2016, all stories about Africa, except for opinion pieces and editorials, had been taken from Western sources such as Agence France-Presse, the Associated Press, Bloomberg and the New York Times News Service, among others.

Another interesting finding from the study was that the single country receiving the highest coverage in the newspapers examined, more than any of India’s neighbors, was the United States, which also featured in the greatest number of lifestyle and entertainment pieces.

The reality is that the US can fit more than 3 times into the continent of Africa. Why does it get disproportionately more representation in Indian media than our African friends?

In Indian media, the most intuitive reason for this distortion in coverage is that the media give the people what they want. As the media are nothing but a business setup following the principle of demand and supply, they only produce what sells, and they only churns out what their audience wants to read. So the underrepresentation of Africa in Indian media is merely a reflection of the Indian audience’s indifference towards and disinterest in African stories.

The most plausible explanation for this disregard is the average Indian reader’s fascination with the West, which as a result receives markedly

more coverage in Indian news. Maybe it's not unusual to look with awe upon more developed countries, eager to learn more about them to emulate the economic, military and sociocultural conditions that have earned them reverence and influence worldwide. It is likely an intrinsic human trait to mirror those one thinks are doing better than themselves. Or perhaps the Indian mindset's captivation with the West stems from a deep-rooted perception of Western superiority, a gem that colonialism has securely embedded into the Indian psyche.

None of these explanations, however, can do away with the importance of African news as a source of learning. Unless we start exposing ourselves to African narratives, we risk falling prey to the danger of a single story, the one of the West.

Africa is a landmass where the earliest known Homo sapiens emerged, teeming with natural resources and home to a panoply of cultural traditions and some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The continent and the significance of its stories are not to be underestimated.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

***Nishita Malhan**, a student at the Cathedral & John Connon School in Mumbai, India, possesses a profound enthusiasm for political matters and international relations, coupled with a strong affinity for writing. Alongside her practice of *bharatanatyam* (South Indian classical dance) and love of Bollywood, she finds particular joy in delving into social and political subjects within India and its context.

India's G20 Presidency Is the Dawn of New Multilateralism

Narendra Modi
November 30, 2023

Today marks 365 days since India became president of the G20. Over a historic year, India revitalized multilateralism, amplified the voice of the Global South, championed development, and fought for the empowerment of women, everywhere.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pens an op-ed exactly a year after India assumed the presidency of the G20 for the first time and highlights the country's achievements.

Today marks 365 days since India assumed the presidency of the G20. It is a moment to reflect, recommit, and rejuvenate the spirit of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — One Earth, One Family, One Future."

As we undertook this responsibility last year, the global landscape grappled with multifaceted challenges: recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, looming climate threats, financial instability, and debt distress in developing nations, all amid declining multilateralism. In the midst of conflicts and competition, development cooperation suffered, impeding progress.

When India assumed the presidency of the G20, it sought to offer the world an alternative to the status quo. We pushed for and achieved a paradigm shift from a GDP-centric to a human-centric progress. India reminded the world of what unites us, rather than what divides us. India changed the global conversation, which had to

evolve. Under Indian leadership, the interests of the few gave way to the aspirations of the many. This required a fundamental reform of multilateralism as we knew it.

Indeed, four words — inclusive, ambitious, action-oriented, and decisive — these four words defined India's approach as G20 president. In fact, the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration (NDLD) was unanimously adopted by all G20 members and is testimony to our commitment to deliver on these principles.

A true multilateralism

Note that Inclusivity has been at the heart of our presidency. For this reason, we championed permanent membership of the G20 for the African Union (AU). The inclusion of the AU into the G20 has integrated 55 African nations into the forum. Now, the G20 has expanded to encompass 80% of the global population.

India's more inclusive stance towards the AU and the Global South has fostered a more comprehensive dialogue on global challenges and opportunities. The first-of-its-kind 'Voice of the Global South Summit,' convened by India in two editions, heralded a new dawn of multilateralism. India has brought the Global South's concerns into mainstream international discourse. Our country has also ushered in an era in which developing countries have taken their rightful place in shaping the global narrative.

Inclusivity also infused India's domestic approach to G20, making it a people's presidency that befits that the world's largest democracy. Through "Jan Bhagidari" (people's participation) events, India's G20 activities reached 1.4 billion citizens. India's national government partnered with all 28 of India's states and all eight of its union territories to boost people's participation.

A clear developmental agenda

On substantive elements, India focused the international attention on broader developmental aims. As part of the 2030 Agenda, India delivered the G20 2023 Action Plan to Accelerate Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This plan adopted an integrative, proactive strategy along with a cross-cutting, action-oriented approach to interconnected issues involving SDGs, including health, education, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

A key area driving this progress in SDGs is robust Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI). On the DPI front, India's recommendations were decisive. Even in the West, people are now realizing the revolutionary impact of digital innovations such as Aadhaar, UPI, and Digilocker on the Indian economy and daily life. Through G20, India successfully completed the Digital Public Infrastructure Repository, making a significant stride in global technological collaboration. This repository, featuring over 50 DPIs from 16 countries, will help the Global South build, adopt, and scale DPI to unlock the power of inclusive growth.

For our One Earth goal, we introduced ambitious and inclusive aims to create urgent, lasting, and equitable change. The NDLD's Green Development Pact addresses the challenges of choosing between combating hunger and protecting the planet. This pact outlines a comprehensive roadmap in which employment and ecosystems are complementary, consumption aligns with climate consciousness, and production is planet-friendly.

Simultaneously, the G20 NDLD calls for an ambitious tripling of global renewable energy capacity by 2030. Coupled with the establishment of the Global Biofuels Alliance and a concerted push for Green Hydrogen, the India-led G20 has

demonstrated bold ambitions to build a cleaner, greener world. Sustainability and conserving the environment have always been central to India's ethos. In this G20 Summit, India pioneered Lifestyles for Sustainable Development (LiFE). This new LiFE initiative could greatly benefit the world through India's age-old sustainable traditions.

The question of climate, gender and equity

The NDLD also addressed the burning issue of our times: climate change. India highlighted the need for climate justice and equity, urging substantial financial and technological support for the Global South from the Global North. For the first time, the Global North recognized the need for a quantum leap in the magnitude of development financing. Under India's leadership, this figure moved upward from billions to trillions of dollars. In fact, the G20 acknowledged that developing countries require \$5.9 trillion to fulfill their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by 2030.

Since countries need monumental financial resources for their NDCs, the G20 emphasized the importance of better, larger, and more effective multilateral development banks (MDBs). Key MDBs include the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, the African Development Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In addition to improving MDBs, India is taking a leading role in reforming the United Nations. In particular, India is working to restructure principal organs of the United Nations such as the Security Council to create a more equitable global order.

Concerning equity, the NDLD put gender equality center stage. India has pioneered the formation of a dedicated working group on the empowerment of women, which will commence work next year. India's Women's Reservation Bill 2023 reserves one-third of the seats in the national

parliament and state legislative assemblies for women, epitomizing India's commitment to women-led development that could serve as a model for the rest of the world.

The NDLD embodies a renewed spirit of collaboration across key global priorities, focusing on policy coherence, reliable trade, and ambitious climate action. It is a matter of great national pride that the G20 achieved 87 outcomes and adopted 118 documents during India's presidency. Note that this is a marked increase from the past. Under India's leadership, the G20 certainly got a lot done.

India also led deliberations on geopolitical issues and their impact on economic growth and development. One such issue is terrorism, which kills innocents and causes severe economic damage. It is clear that the senseless killing of civilians is unacceptable, and we must address it with a policy of zero-tolerance. The world must prize humanitarianism over hostility and ensure that our era does not turn into one of terrorism, violence or war.

In conclusion, I am delighted that India achieved something extraordinary during its presidency. We revitalized multilateralism, amplified the voice of the Global South, championed development, and fought for the empowerment of women, everywhere.

As India hands over the presidency of the G20 to Brazil, we do so with the conviction that our nation's collective steps for people, planet, peace, and prosperity, will resonate with the world for years to come.

Making Sense of Vladimir Putin's Long Game
Han and Hindu Nationalism Come Face to Face
FO° Live: Make Sense of the New Israel-Gaza War
Richard Fontaine on US Security in the World Today
Is the German Economy Now Destined to Decline?

***Narendra Modi** has been serving as India's 14th prime minister since May 2014. He is the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and has been a prominent figure in Indian politics for decades. Before serving as prime minister, Modi served as the chief minister of the Indian state of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014.

Indigenous People in Bangladesh Suffer as Government Drags Feet

Saleem Samad
June 09, 2023

25 years ago, ethnic militias fighting in Bangladesh's southeastern forest hills agreed to lay down their arms against the state in exchange for concessions of self-governance and land rights. To date, the government has not made good on its promises, leaving many ethnic minority farmers stranded, unable to reclaim the farmland on which they once made their livelihoods.

In the hill forest districts of Bangladesh, known collectively as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the inhabitants continue to suffer in agony. Many of these indigenous peoples speak Sino-Tibetan languages and practice Buddhist, Hindu, or other local religions, traits which set them apart as a minority in largely Indo-Aryan-speaking and Muslim Bangladesh. They are suffering because the government has not complied with the peace accord, celebrated at the

time, which it signed 25 years ago with armed militias seeking autonomy in the region.

The United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (PCJSS), the political high command of the mainly Chakma, Marma, and Tripura guerillas called the Shanti Bahini ("Peace Force"), signed a peace accord with the government of Sheikh Hasina on 2 December 1997. The historic CHT Peace Accord brought to an end a protracted insurgency of more than two decades, a bush war that had cost many lives and livelihoods in southeast Bangladesh.

Parliament quickly ratified the accord, and the surrender of the combatants and their ordinance quickly followed. Finally, thousands of ethnic refugees, until then languishing in squalid camps in the neighboring Indian state of Tripura, were able to come home.

Implementation is taking forever

However, PCJSS leader Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, known as Shantu Larma, lamented that this silver jubilee is nothing to celebrate. The government has not been willing to implement it. Unfortunately, a quarter of a century after the signing of the accord, a peace audit claims that only 25 provisions and 18 clauses have been partially implemented, out of 72 provisions.

While the government celebrates the anniversary of the proclaimed peace, full-fledged governing councils have not been formed through direct elections, as promised by the peace accord, in any of the CHT's three districts. The interim councils were formed with hand-picked ruling party members, mostly ethnic Bangalees from outside of the region and a few ethnic minority members. The government remains conspicuously silent when the implementation of the fundamental provisions of the accord is raised.

In spite of these headwinds, Shantu Larma is hopeful that the accord will see the light of day by its golden jubilee, if not earlier. And so it must, for unless the peace accord, signed during the first term of Sheikh Hasina's government, is put into reality, peace will remain elusive for the indigenous peoples of these beautiful hills.

In the last 25 years, the CHT Peace Accord Implementation Committee has held only six meetings. This is a reflection of the government's lack of seriousness.

Larma remains loyal to the Prime Minister, who is now in her fourth term. He argues that as she made a sincere political commitment to getting the peace deal inked and ratified, so will she surely strive to make progress in implementing the accord.

However, he reminded the national government that the responsibility to implement the peace accord lies with them and with no one else, not PCJSS or the former insurgents. He fears that the delay will cause frustration and anger among the hill people, creating a political divide in the community, especially among young people and students. In the years since the accord, young people have from time to time acted out violently in the hopes of putting pressure on the government to realize the accord's implementation.

A roadmap to implement the accord to achieve peace was also agreed with the government. Those affected do not understand what is causing the delay in the implementation of the accord.

A history of discrimination

The PCJSS argues that, like previous regimes, the ruling Awami League party has been implementing a policy of Islamization, and, coupled with the crisis, it has intensified militarization in the CHT to completely eradicate

the national identity of the hill people. In this, they see the continuation of a long and painful history.

The military dictator General Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981) attempted to Islamize the hill forest and pushed tens of thousands of landless Muslim Bangalee settlers from the plains districts to outnumber the local ethnic population.

Parleys with the government's liaison committee were initiated during the military junta of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990) when he offered an olive branch to the guerillas to surrender. The peace process was entrusted to a small group of immature military officers, who forced the community leaders to sign a halfhearted peace treaty. This treaty was rejected by the Shanti Bahini commanders.

Subsequently, when Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party came to power in 1991, she unilaterally declared a ceasefire in the hills and initiated peace talks with members of parliament. Her regime experienced hiccups as the liaison committee could not spell out a political solution to the crisis. The end result was zero. The dialogue was abruptly abandoned in 1996.

When Sheikh Hasina came to power a year later in 1997, a flurry of peace talks resulted in the CHT Peace Accord after the government recognized the crisis in the hill forest as the political problem it was. The Peace Accord was written with the supreme sacrifice of the blood of the hill peoples and the political vision of the Awami League government, but the effects of Bangalee ethnic imperialism still continue.

Thousands of people in Bangladesh, especially those visiting the hill forests as tourists are not aware that de facto military rule continues and that the so-called Operation Uttaran, the government's offensive, has not been withdrawn, despite what was agreed in the accord.

Rights groups complain that appalling human rights abuses, including illegal detention, extrajudicial deaths, enforced disappearances, legal harassment, and attacks against the hill people by Bangalee settlers continued without any respite. The members of the CHT Citizens' Council, an outfit of the Bangalee settlers, have gained notoriety for forced conversion of native girls to Islam, kidnapping for ransom, looting of produce from native farmers, land grabbing, and other crimes. Human rights organizations have recorded evidence from parents and guardians that indigenous children have been taken away by force and admitted to madrasas (Islamic schools) in other areas of the country and converted to Islam without the knowledge of their parents.

Native administrations disempowered

The authorities are presently making systematic efforts at forced demographic transformation of the region—further marginalizing the natives who have protected the hill forest, the flora and fauna for centuries.

Law and order, police, land and land management, forest and environment conservation, communication infrastructure development, and other competencies stipulated by the accord have not been handed over to the district councils. Alas, district police forces have not been formed. And despite the decision of the Accord Implementation Committee, the jurisdiction to issue “Permanent Resident Certificates,” vital for the recognition of indigenous identity and of the incumbent rights to vote and to receive restitution according to the peace agreement, has not been turned over to the native administrations as promised.

It is an ongoing tragedy that the refugees who have returned from India have not yet gotten their land back, in violation of the accord. Internally displaced refugees have regained their land either,

Mangal Kumar Chakma recently wrote in *The Daily Star*.

The list of permanent residents of the three hill districts, who are the ones eligible to vote there, has not yet been prepared, again despite the accord’s mandate. Even the electoral rules and election rules for the hill district councils have not been formulated.

This undemocratic and partisan path sends the wrong message to the hill people, demonstrating the government’s dearth of political commitment. The land occupation and eviction of ethnic minorities remain an apple of discord between the Bangalees settled and protected by the military and the ethnic nationalities of the hill forests. The hill people are constantly losing their lands and being evicted from their homesteads in the absence of a functional CHT Land Commission and with the sluggish progress of the implementation of the peace accord.

The Land Commission mandated under the CHT Peace Accord has not progressed at all. The commission was supposed to demarcate the ancestral lands of the minorities to establish their legal rights against encroachers. So far, the light at the end of the tunnel still appears distant.

The crucial issue is whether the government will come forward to implement the Peace Accord after being called upon to do so during the session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues held on 17–28 April 2023.

In August 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the government of Bangladesh to implement the accord and allow independent actors unrestricted access to the CHT region.

For the hill people, peace continues to remain a long way off as Bangla-speaking settlers from the

lowlands, brought into ancestral indigenous lands at the behest of the military and continuing to enjoy the favor of the military, civil, and party figures that privilege them against the land's native inhabitants.

Frustration is mounting. As Shantu Larma said: "It does not take 25 years to implement a peace accord."

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Saleem Samad** is an award-winning independent columnist and media rights defender based in Bangladesh. He became an Ashoka Fellow in 1991, and won the Hellman-Hammett Award in 2005. Saleem's articles have appeared in top publications such as *Time*, *India Today*, *Outlook*, *India Narrative*, and *The Times of India*, and his research has been published by institutions like the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), the Kolkata Research Group, Jadavpur University, and the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies.

No Justice for Victims Under Nepal's Maoist Prime Minister

Saleem Samad
September 01, 2023

Nepal's decade-long Maoist insurgency ended 16 years ago, but war crimes victims are still seeking justice. The government, headed by the same party leader that carried out the insurgency, has largely refused to prosecute alleged war criminals. If the international

community does not change its tack, this situation will doubtlessly continue.

Once popularly known as the Himalayan Kingdom, Nepal transformed by fits and starts from a Hindu nation-state to a secular, democratic state through the 20th and early 21st centuries. From 1996 to 2006, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), or CPN (MC), waged a bloody insurgency against the royal government. The civil war took some 17,800 lives. In 2008, Nepal finally abolished a thousand-year-old monarchy and the official Hindu kingdom, introducing secularism and a fragile democracy, for better or worse.

Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, aka Prachanda, began his third non-consecutive term in December 2022. He has been the leader of the CPN (MC) since its founding. The prime minister has recently refuted allegations that his party recruited and used child combatants during the insurgency and the years of the peace process. Dahal made the claim in an apologetic response to a petition filed at the supreme court in Kathmandu. The petition claimed that child combatants were used during the Maoist insurgency. Dahal pointed to the documents of the peace process, insisting that the term "child soldiers" was not used.

By documents, he meant the Comprehensive Peace Accord, the Agreement on Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies, the Interim Constitution, the 2015 constitution and other authentic documents, where "child soldiers" had indeed not been mentioned.

Nearly three decades after the Maoists launched their armed struggle on 13 February 1996, Nepal is still haunted after 27 years of conflict and violence.

Of the 17,800 Nepalis, including civilians and armed forces, who were killed during the conflict, Dahal admitted to being responsible for only (if that word can even be used) 5,000 of the deaths.

Decades later, victims still seek justice

Dahal has left many wondering what it was all for, writes Sonia Awale in Nepali Times. When heinous crimes against humanity including summary executions, torture, disappearances and war rape by both sides go unaddressed and unpunished, it creates a sense of impunity for unpunished war crimes, she wrote.

Families of the victims worry that with the Maoists now in the governing coalition with their erstwhile nemesis, the Nepali Congress, justice may never be served.

Suman Adhikari's father was brutally killed by the Maoist foot soldiers. He was a popular school teacher at Panini Sanskrit Secondary School in Duradanda in Lamjung district. His crime? Refusing to contribute a quarter of his salary to the so-called people's war fund.

Adhikari and his family members petitioned the independent Nepal Human Rights Commission (NHRC) but have little hope in justice for the murder. They pled with the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The members of these latter two commissions were selected on the governing party's recommendation.

Adhikari believes that both of the commissions are more interested in letting war criminals off the hook than in providing justice and protecting the perpetrators. He is worried by reports "that they want a blanket amnesty for all war crimes by both sides in the conflict," he lamented.

In another case, nearly 3,000 child soldiers were disqualified for integration into the Nepal Army by the United Nations Missions in Nepal (UNMIN) during the verification process in 2007. After being blocked by UNMIN, several of the child soldiers demanded adequate compensation and also demanded punishment for Dahal and his second-in-command, Baburam Bhattarai. The aggrieved young persons claimed that the Maoist leaders committed war crimes using children in the armed conflict.

These thousands of victims are still waiting for justice 17 years after the signing of the historic Comprehensive Peace Agreement. What they need is an investigation through a tribunal, like the trials in Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Yugoslavia. The government's unresponsiveness has lost it the victims' trust.

On October 15, 2020, the NHRC published a major report evaluating government responses to its recommendations over the last two decades. The commission said that, out of 286 individuals whom it said should face legal action, only 30 had been held accountable. The list of those identified includes 16 civil servants, 98 policemen, 85 Nepal Army personnel and 65 Maoists.

Of a total of 1,195 recommendations made by the commission over the last 20 years, the government failed to act on half, and only 163 recommendations were fully implemented.

A mentality of violence lives on

The Maoist insurgency has profoundly shaped Nepali political psychology. The Maoist rebels still believe in the ideology of violent revolution to bring about what they term "people's government." Poor governance, corruption, government apathy towards integrated socio-economic development and, most importantly, political instability have contributed to the continuing growth of Maoism,

says researcher Smruti S. Pattanaik, writing for Strategic Analysis Journal.

Former insurgents continue to address political rallies and blatantly boast that they killed 5,000 people. People like Adhikari and the former child soldiers are being ignored while those responsible for conflict-era crimes are walking openly in broad daylight.

Dahal's decision to declare February 13 as a national holiday marking the start of the "people's war" in 1996 "sparked outrage in Nepal's cybersphere and brought conflict survivors out into the streets," according to Nepali Times. Glorification of the violence continues to come from the highest levels of government.

Meanwhile, Dahal has claimed that he will complete the transitional justice process. In a statement on November 20, 2021 English op-ed in The Kathmandu Post, he termed Nepal's peace process a successful "home-grown model" that avoided heavy-handed Western intervention.

We must not ignore Nepal or expect the government to police itself of its own volition. I will conclude with the words of an editorial from Nepali Times:

The international community, which was once so vociferous on transitional justice, has suddenly gone quiet. ...

Nepal's conflict ended without a victor or vanquished. The former enemies are now the state. Neither they, nor the police, nor Nepal Army generals or former guerrilla commanders, want to rake up wartime atrocities. They have colluded to set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as a Commission on Enforced

Disappearances, both of which can offer amnesty to those found guilty.

If something is not done, the victims of brutality may be waiting forever.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Were 30 Years of the Slaughter of Kashmiri Hindus Inevitable?

Vijay K. Sazawal
December 02, 2023

Pandit minorities in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir have long been targets of ethnic cleansing efforts by Islamic terrorists. The grotesque truth of Pandit genocide has only recently come to light for many Indians. Corrupt politicians, the mass media and other organizations had suppressed the news, enabling and even rewarding continued bloodshed. The latest genocide has ended after

30 years, but could it have been prevented altogether?

The year is 1998. Sunday, January 25, 1998, to be precise. Super Bowl XXXII is in full swing. The Denver Broncos defeat the defending champions, the Green Bay Packers, by a score of 31–24. Bill Clinton is the president of the USA, and the following day he will discuss the Monica Lewinsky story publicly. India celebrates its Republic Day on January 26 as well. Both countries experience a festive weekend.

But not everyone in India enjoys it. Approximately 800 kilometers from the Indian capital of New Delhi, in a hamlet in the Ganderbal district of Jammu and Kashmir (or simply Kashmir), a gruesome event of horrific proportions takes place. Wandhama village is home to roughly 200 farmers, with about two dozen being Kashmiri Pandits — a minority community living in a few homes surrounded by Muslim neighbors. On this day, foreign mujahideen and domestic terrorists enter the village. These radicals pluck Kashmiri Pandits, assemble them in a line, and shoot them dead one by one. The deceased include four children, nine women and ten men. The sole survivor, a boy, escapes death because other victims fall over him and the killers assume the boy is dead. In the hamlet of Wandhama, the centuries-old Kashmiri Pandit community is wiped out in minutes.

Ghostly as the Wandhama tragedy is, an even more heinous crime took place a year earlier. On June 15, 1997, in the Ramban district, about 130 kilometers south of the state capital of Srinagar, terrorists stopped a bus carrying passengers from Ramban to the nearby village of Gool. Four terrorists entered the bus and asked Hindus to step out of the bus. Six Hindu passengers did so. The mujahideen then shot three of them. All three

victims were Kashmiri Pandits who were teachers in the Gool Higher Secondary School. The three Hindus spared were not Pandits.

The Wandhama tragedy of 1998 was followed by another massacre. On March 23, 2003, mujahideen members massacred all Kashmiri Pandits in Nadimarg village, located in Kashmir's Pulwama district. Of the 24 killed, 11 each were men and women while two were young boys.

An little-known story about a great tragedy

Western, especially American, media tends to forget one key fact about Kashmir. Fanatical Islamic mujahideen terrorists perpetrated genocide of Kashmiri Pandits. This fact was even forgotten by Indian media until the film *The Kashmir Files* came out in 2022.

Only a year ago did Indian moviegoers grasp the horrors of the genocide. Behind this brutal ethnic cleansing, lies a tale of betrayal and deceit. The dominant groups in the country — Indian political leaders, Indian media, Indian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — did their best to hide this genocide. Their cover-up efforts were effective. To this day, even many Indians question whether Kashmiri Pandits faced genocide. Wikipedia erroneously still defines this genocide as an exodus.

Even today, Kashmiri Pandit massacres of the 1990s remain unsolved. Importantly, the Indian state in the 1990s was well aware of what was going on. On June 10, 1999, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) concluded that the Kashmiri Pandit experience had been “akin to genocide.”

Only in the last couple of years — 30 years after the Kashmiri Pandit genocide — has the Indian

government finally started investigations into the killings of only a few victims. Even talk of genocide ignores the extent of the tragedy that Kashmiri Pandits experienced. They experienced their own version of Kristallnacht (the “Night of Broken Glass”) that Jews experienced on November 9, 1938, in Berlin. The Kashmiri Pandit Kristallnacht occurred in Anantnag district of Kashmir on February 20, 1986. Their homes, shops, temples and other property were desecrated or burned in the district.

The government shamefully failed to act in Anantnag. After the Kashmiri Pandit Kristallnacht, there was no arrest, no investigation and no trial. Murderers, arsonists and ethnic cleansers got away scot-free. The morale of fanatical Islamists shot up. They now rightly assumed that Kashmiri Pandits were on the menu.

In 1986, the Congress Party was in power in New Delhi. In 1989, a ragtag opposition coalition took charge. A certain Kashmiri politician took charge as home minister, the top job in the cabinet that oversees internal national security. Ironically, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed — the new home minister from Kashmir — was the rabble-rousing politician who instigated the Kashmiri Pandit Kristallnacht in Anantnag.

Sayeed belongs to the elite Kashmiri Muslim ruling class. Supposedly, he is a direct descendant of Muhammad, the prophet and founder of Islam. This ruling Muslim elite first systematically persecuted Kashmiri Pandits, then subjected them to a brutal campaign of violence, intimidation and terror, and then ethnically cleansed Kashmir of its original community: the Kashmiri Pandits. New Delhi appeased the Kashmiri Muslim elite, gave them a clean chit and turned a Nelson’s eye to the genocide of the hapless Kashmiri Pandits. Justice has not only been delayed but denied to these tragic victims by successive Indian governments.

Murderers got away scot-free, appeasement did not work

Sayeed and other members of the Kashmiri Muslim elite got away with murder. National politicians in New Delhi pursued an appeasement policy with this murderous elite. The Congress Party and the coalition that succeeded them wanted to retain support of the Kashmiri elite to keep control of Kashmir. They also thought this elite would be useful for getting the Muslim vote in the rest of the country. So, they colluded with national media to keep the genocide of Kashmiri Pandits out of the press.

During this period, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was in the ascendant. They were training jihadis to foment trouble in Kashmir. Since 1947, Pakistan has wanted control of Kashmir. As a Muslim-majority region, Pakistan sees Kashmir as a natural part of the nation. Kashmir is part of Pakistan’s foundational myth. Hence, the genocide of Kashmiri Pandits is part of the grand plan of Islamizing this region and reclaiming it for the pure nation of Islam.

Before the genocide began, Kashmir had 350,000 Kashmiri Pandits. By 2016, this number had declined to 2,764. Note that the genocide of Kashmiri Pandits has been a long, drawn-out affair. It began as early as the 14th century when Islam first came to Kashmir. The difference between earlier waves of violence and the one in the 1990s is the fact that this genocide occurred in the sovereign territory of secular, democratic and multiethnic India.

Two questions arise.

Was the 1990s genocide of Kashmiri Pandits inevitable? Yes, given the stupidity of national politicians and the weakness of Indian democracy.

Was this genocide avoidable? Yes, if leaders had acted bravely and wisely against fanatical Islamists, a messianic Pakistan and a diabolical, duplicitous local Muslim elite.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]

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India's Urban Middle Class Craves Better Quality of Life

Atul Singh, Manu Sharma
July 23, 2023

Most of India still lives in villages. Yet cities have given birth to social and political movements in the past. Today, urban voters are discontented with their quality of life and want politicians, especially the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, to address their concerns.

Gone are the days when only officers of the Indian Foreign Service and a chosen few traveled abroad. The socialist India created by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi is safely

dead. Indians now travel extensively, their relatives do WhatsApp video calls from all parts of the world, their children study in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Singapore and even Hong Kong and they see images of foreign cities on a daily basis on their mobile screens.

Increasingly, Indians are asking themselves why their cities look and feel like slums. Buildings are in disrepair, city roads have potholes, sewage overflows, tap water is far from clean and waste is everywhere. Cody Daniel, an entrepreneur, MIT alumnus and great lover of India, once remarked during his visit to Gujarat, "The tragedy of India is trash."

Even ten years ago, Indians might not have felt the same way as Daniel. Today, many of them do. Indians have achieved success in cities like Singapore, Sydney and London. They have run global institutions and even other nations. Middle-class Indians are often world-class. They want their own cities to be world-class, not trash towns that seem war-ravaged and shell-shocked.

Ironically, as India's economy has grown and the middle class has increased, its cities have deteriorated. Older citizens in Bengaluru (once Bangalore) speak of how their beloved garden city has now become a garbage city. Pune, the historic city of the Peshwas, is another casualty. Urban populations have outgrown the cities they live in and put tremendous pressure on infrastructure. Urban authorities have simply failed to deliver.

Urban cash cows fund redistribution

India's politicians have long taxed cities and redistributed the revenue to rural areas. Despite significant improvement in tax revenues by the current government, India's tax base remains frightfully narrow. The urban middle class shoulders much of the tax burden but gets very little in terms of return.

Historically, neglect of urban areas did not hurt political parties in elections. India was a largely agrarian society. In the early days of India's independence, the rural population was 82%. This figure has been declining consistently and, in 2022, only around 64% of Indians lived in villages. As they did during British colonial rule, cities have spearheaded social and political movements. The Indian National Congress (INC) was an urban organization until Mahatma Gandhi made it a mass movement.

After independence, Jawaharlal Nehru became prime minister. He embraced socialism, which meant heavy taxation of India's small urban population. His daughter Indira Gandhi doubled down on socialism; so did the opposition that unseated her in the 1977 elections. Socialism, not Hinduism, led to the infamous Hindu rate of growth.

Liberalization in 1991 freed up the economy and Indian growth rates improved, but urban areas have still disproportionately borne the burden of taxes.

Historically, it is this disaffected voter base that has seeded new parties. Initially, the core base of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was small traders in urban areas. Most recently, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has targeted the urban vote, promising better public services to this section of the population. Both are following in the footsteps of the INC that began in Mumbai in 1885.

Today, urban Indians are disaffected again. They do not expect their cities to turn into Singapore or London, but they want water supply, electricity, public transport, schools, basic healthcare, basic law and order and some public spaces such as parks and playgrounds. These Indians feel they have no representation. During a cross-country tour, one of the authors met business leaders, executives, engineers, doctors and many

other urban Indians. Invariably, they complained that they had no real representation. Politicians were milking them for taxes and redistributing them to rural areas or, worse still, doling out freebies whilst neglecting cities. Above all, these urban voters want more livable cities and a better quality of life.

The current situation is reminiscent of the Nehru family-led INC pre-2014. The grand old party of India thought that the Hindu vote could never consolidate and ignored the growing threat from the BJP. Today, it is coming from the opposite direction. The BJP has been taking its urban voter base for granted. The party has imposed unpopular tax policies with the assumption that urban voters have nowhere to turn to. Besides, some BJP leaders seem to think that these voters do not have the numbers to matter.

India's seemingly dominant party might be in for a surprise. The success of AAP is based on targeting urban voters. The party has solidified its support by improving schools and promising primary healthcare centers as well as providing free water and electricity. In the 2022 Gujarat elections, the BJP won 52.52% of the vote in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state. Yet it is important to note that young AAP got 12.91% of the vote, almost all of it in urban areas.

Urban middle-class voters were once loyal to the BJP, but that loyalty is increasingly being tested. A crisis is brewing. After months of internecine warfare, the opposition seems to be coming together to take on the Modi-led BJP. Should urban voters switch to other parties, the government might lose valuable and much-needed support. The BJP will have to act speedily before next year's 2024 national elections to retain its urban support.

No real local democracy or competent urban government

India is a vibrant democracy, but most people do not realize that the unit of power is the national government in New Delhi and the state government in capitals like Chennai, Lucknow, Kolkata, Mumbai and Guwahati. The prime minister, known often as PM, rules the country largely through the heaven-born Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Chief ministers (CMs) of states also use IAS officers to enforce their writ.

Rural districts and urban areas are ruled by IAS officers who are modern-day mansabdars—feudatories sent by the Mughal emperor to collect revenue and do his bidding. They are called district collectors (because the job of ICS officers was to collect revenue for the British Empire) or district magistrates (because the ICS officers were responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the district). A district magistrate is popularly referred to as the DM. In India, it is a running joke that only three positions matter: PM, CM and DM. Everyone else has to serve these three regardless of whether they are surgeons, scientists or software engineers.

The IAS DMs are responsible to the CMs in state capitals and not to the population in their jurisdiction. Descendants of the imperial Indian Civil Service (ICS), they still suffer from the hangover of the British Raj. Too many IAS officers invariably behave like rulers instead of public servants. Some things have changed, though, and not for the better. Unlike ICS officers who had secure tenures, IAS officers are transferred at the drop of a hat. They know that they enjoy their position thanks to the patronage of the chief minister. They answer upwards, not downwards.

Simply put, Indian cities are run not by elected officials, but by IAS satraps. Unlike Chinese Communist Party bosses who spend a lifetime in their fiefdom and move up the hierarchy on the condition that they deliver economic growth and build infrastructure, IAS officers rarely look back at the districts or cities they run. They settle around the national capital New Delhi or various state capitals and tell tall tales of how they “civilized” Nagapattinam or East Champaran. Truth be told, what IAS officers do is immaterial. Loyalty to their political bosses matters much more than their performance.

This means that most IAS officers do not care two hoots about the concerns of local citizens. In the words of a senior IAS officer who would only speak on condition of anonymity, the so-called steel frame of India has become a “steal frame” instead. On July 20, airport authorities stopped an IAS officer with assets worth over \$12 million (100 crore rupees) and a prime suspect in a Covid scam from fleeing the country. Ironically, this officer is also the CEO of the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), responsible for providing affordable housing in the state. Needless to say, MHADA has done an awful job of providing housing in any of the state’s cities.

In Noida, where the parents of one of the authors live, politicians and IAS officers were involved in an over \$6 billion (50,000 crore rupees) scam. While Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has taken action against minor forest officials, he has spared the IAS officers who engaged in this grand heist that would have done Robert Clive proud. Unsurprisingly, Noida is not exactly a pleasant place to stay. Other cities have also been victims of such scams and are not doing much better.

In rural areas, citizens are more forgiving of IAS officers engaging in the loot. In India’s cities, the

times they are a-changin', and citizens expect more. As stated earlier, they return from cities abroad wondering why their urban areas cannot be cleaner, greener and better run. Most political parties, including the ruling BJP, are increasingly out of touch with this changed zeitgeist. IAS officers clear one exam in their 20s to become feudal barons for life. Politicians, especially in the ruling BJP, do not have that luxury. In particular, overtaxed urban voters will weigh, measure and find them wanting if Modi's promise of achhe din (good days) rings false.

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Reasons Why India's Big Democracy Is Dynamic

Vikram Sood, Kanwal Sibal
April 28, 2023

At a time when polarization and dysfunction are affecting even well-established democracies such as the US and the UK, Indian democracy is proving to be resilient, dynamic and inclusive. It is also an example for much of the world.

Vikram Sood is the former chief of India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing. Kanwal Sibal is the former foreign secretary of India. Both are noted policy wonks, formidable intellectuals and prolific writers.

Today, many scholars find democracy in danger. Social and political polarization has risen. January 6, 2021 in the US and January 8, 2023 in Brazil stand as real life examples of the risks of discord in democracies. In both these deeply divided countries and many others, a significant section of the population is losing faith in democracy. These two countries are not alone. Faith in democracy has eroded in many countries.

A few decades ago, things were very different. In 1989, thousands gathered in Tiananmen Square and at the Berlin Wall. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. The same year, Samuel P. Huntington published *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, describing the global trend towards democratization. More than 60 countries in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa had experienced democratic transitions since Portugal's "Carnation Revolution" in 1974.

A Resilient Democracy

Many forget that Indian democracy predates this post-1974 democratic transition. Since 1947, India has been a diverse, dynamic and resilient democracy. In 1957, the southwestern state of Kerala elected communists to power. These communists have survived the fall of the Soviet

Union and won the most recent election in Kerala. Ten years after the 1957 communist victory in Kerala, its eastern neighbor Tamil Nadu elected a regional party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Since 1967, Tamil Nadu has always been run by a regional party. The current chief minister of the state is the DMK leader M.K. Stalin, named after none other than the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

India has a whole host of parties that jostle for the affection of its 1.4 billion population. In Punjab, a western state that borders Pakistan, the new Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is in power. In West Bengal, an eastern state that borders Bangladesh, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) is in power. Both the AAP and the TMC beat the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in their respective state elections. The Indian National Congress (INC) is the oldest political party of the country. Rahul Gandhi, the party's de facto leader, is the great grandson of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The INC remains a political force despite declining from its heyday. The party beat the BJP in the 2022 Himachal Pradesh elections and could win in the upcoming Karnataka elections. Karnataka is the state home to India's IT capital Bengaluru, better known as Bangalore internationally.

In brief, India stands as a shining example of a seemingly improbable and incongruous success. In 1947, India gained independence from the UK. In 1950, India inaugurated its "sovereign, democratic republic" with universal suffrage and fundamental freedoms. This audacious experiment was far ahead of its time. The French Fifth Republic would be born only in 1958. Australia would give votes to aborigines in 1962. Switzerland would give votes to women in 1971. In 1975, Portugal would conduct elections and become a democracy. The same year, General Francisco Franco would die, inaugurating Spain's democratic transition. In

South Africa, apartheid would only dissolve in 1994.

Social Mobility and Dynamism

Since 1947, India has been a dynamic democracy. The brief two-year period from 1975 to 1977 when the then prime minister Indira Gandhi assumed dictatorial powers was soundly rejected by Indian voters at the polls. The Election Commission of India which conducts national elections is independent. Transfer of power from one candidate or party to another in villages, towns, states and the center occurs seamlessly. India's once marginalized communities are increasingly in the limelight.

In the 2019 national elections, India had over 880 million eligible voters. Of these, 612 million, i.e. 69.5%, voted in the elections. These were, by far, the largest elections in history. Turnout was higher than the 66.8% voter participation in the charged 2020 US elections. Typically, however, voter participation in US presidential elections hovers around 60%. Voter participation in India is generally higher than in the US. Poorer people are much more likely to vote in India than in the US. Unlike the US, there is no vote suppression of minorities and the poor, and both record high voter participation rates, demonstrating that Indian democracy is more inclusive than its American counterparts.

With their humble roots, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Droupadi Murmu personify the increasing inclusivity of Indian democracy. Modi began life as a tea seller by a train station. Unlike Nehru, he is not a rich Brahmin. Note that India's first prime minister came from a family rich enough to send him to Harrow, the same boarding school that Winston Churchill attended, and then to Cambridge where he inhaled the Leftist ideologies of the times.

If Modi's rise is exceptional, Murmu's story is extraordinary. She is a Santhal, one of India's Scheduled Tribes, a forest-dwelling indigenous community that was slaughtered by the British East India Company after its historic 1855 rebellion. This preceded the 1857 rebellion that Indians now call the first war of independence. The British crushed both revolts with savage retribution, executing thousands of Indians. More than 15,000 Santhals lost their lives and the survivors were condemned to lives of abject poverty. For years, Murmu worked as a teacher in a poor small town and now this Santhal lady is the head of state of a nation of 1.4 billion people.

Modi's and Murmu's remarkable stories are not unusual in Indian politics. Mamata Banerjee, the TMC chief minister of West Bengal, a state with over 90 million people, is a self-made woman from a poor family. Pinarayi Vijayan, the Communist chief minister of Kerala, was once a handloom weaver. Eknath Shinde, the chief minister of Maharashtra, India's most industrialized state, used to drive an auto rickshaw to earn a living.

This extraordinary social mobility in politics in India is in stark contrast to Britain. The last five prime ministers—David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak—studied at the University of Oxford. The Social Mobility Commission's 2019 report titled, *Elitist Britain*, tells us that 57% of the current British cabinet attended Oxbridge. Today, class-divided Britain is much more inequitable and far less democratic than its so-called caste-divided former colony.

So, what explains this extraordinary deepening of democracy and its striking success in India?

Western democracies trace their roots back to ancient Athens and Rome. In contrast, democracy is deeply rooted in Indian culture itself. For millennia, many faiths and philosophies have

thrived cheek by jowl in this land of Indus, the Ganges and the Kaveri. As Shailendra Mehta chronicled in his lecture at MIT, the modern university began 2,600 years ago in India. The tradition of shastrarth, uncannily similar to the Socratic method, makes India a spiritual democracy.

In the Indian spiritual tradition, everything is open to inquiry and discussion. This openness makes India the most multicultural society in the world. Civilizationally, India is the land of diversity and plurality. It accepts differences: social, religious, linguistic, political and cultural. As the world goes through economic slowdown, war and polarization, Indian democracy is an example for much of the world.

The success of Indian democracy is leading to a new kind of economy. India has now overtaken the UK to become the fifth largest economy in the world. The Modi government has been building infrastructure at breakneck speed. A huge multiplier effect will follow and build the new India that the prime minister repeatedly refers to in his many speeches. At the same time, India's political leaders have focused on inclusive growth. Direct transfers to millions of bank accounts and free meals for millions provide a fast-improving safety net. The International Monetary Fund has called it a "logistical marvel."

India's inclusive spirit goes beyond its borders. This year, it is the leader of the G20 even as the world faces an unprecedented "food, fuel and fertilizer" crisis. The summit sought to "generate ideas from the developing world for achieving energy security, which is affordable, accessible and sustainable." Perhaps more importantly, India promised to utilize its G20 presidency "to give resonance to the voice of the global south." By doing so, the world's biggest democracy is giving expression to the democratic spirit and representing the billions who are invariably not

represented at the top table in international relations. Today, India's democracy is clearly an example for much of the world.

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***Kanwal Sibal** has over 40 years of diplomatic experience. He has served as India's foreign secretary, as ambassador to Turkey, Egypt, France and Russia, and as deputy chief of mission in Washington, DC. From 2008, he sat on India's National Security Advisory Board.

US

Can Bobby Kennedy Win the Presidency Now? Of Course

Scott Bennett
November 28, 2023

Recent polls show that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has suddenly become a serious contender in the

2024 race for the US presidency. Despite the traditional headwinds against an independent candidate, RJK Jr. shows a powerful possibility of winning.

It may come as a surprise, but Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. can win the 2024 presidential election.

Every article you read about RFK Jr. is going to emphasize that his candidacy is a long shot. Some sources — like a recent Vox podcast — will even come right out and say he'll never win.

The dominant message to the American public is that if you're not voting Democrat or Republican on Election Day, you are "throwing your vote away." This is the knee-jerk response to any discussion about a candidate that does not have a D or an R next to their name.

There are huge institutional barriers designed to block upstart challengers from operating outside the two-party system in the US. Stat-heads can summon Excel spreadsheets that "prove" it is impossible for an independent or third-party challenger to win the Electoral College. In fact, no independent has won the presidency since George Washington. Obviously it would be easier to get around that problem if the popular vote counted in presidential elections. But the US continues to hand victory to the loser of the popular vote about 11% of the time.

These psychological and structural barriers exist and will still be firmly in place on November 5, 2024. But RFK Jr. can still win.

Watershed polling

A recent Quinnipiac poll showed Kennedy with a surprising 22% share of the electorate in a head-to-

head matchup against Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Another poll shows Kennedy pulling ahead of both major party contenders among voters under 45 in several key battleground states. This is a significant breakthrough.

Unexpectedly, Americans are becoming aware that 2024 could be a three-way race: An independent candidate could potentially upset the two-party hammerlock on power.

But is this a surprise? Joe Biden and Donald Trump are hugely unpopular. According to 538, a majority of Americans holds an unfavorable view of both candidates: 54% for Biden, same for Trump. To say that the people are not jazzed about a replay of the 2020 election is supreme understatement. In contrast, more view Kennedy favorably than unfavorably.

Old name, new game

So who is Robert Francis Kennedy Junior, who promises to inject fresh blood into the 2024 race?

Well, the name is a clue that he is actually some very old blood, at least by American standards. The Kennedy name is the most recognizable brand in US politics, putting even the Bush dynasty at a distant second place. RFK Jr. is the son of Senator Robert F. Kennedy Sr. and the nephew of President John F. Kennedy. It makes one wonder how many Americans would vote for RFK Jr. even if they didn't know a single other thing about him besides that surname.

The Kennedy provenance gives establishment credibility that past independent and third-party candidates would have killed for: the advantage of an entire life spent in politics. RFK Jr. has been attending high-profile parties since childhood, including the one Frank Sinatra threw for his uncle Jack at the 1960 Democratic convention. As a result, Kennedy knows the fathers of practically

every prominent modern American, and there's a good chance he's met their grandfathers as well.

However, several members of his family have gone out of their way to disavow his candidacy. Four of eight living siblings put out a statement saying, "Bobby might share the same name as our father, but he does not share the same values, vision or judgment ... We denounce his candidacy and believe it to be perilous for our country."

While his family is busy spurning him, Kennedy has now spurned the Democratic Party his family's traditional home. The Democrats currently hold the White House, and incumbency is always the strongest advantage in any election. Earlier this year the Democratic National Committee voted to support President Biden's plan to reorder the primaries according to his preference. On top of that, Democrats won a court case in 2017 that gave the major parties an all-clear to play favorites during the primary election season. Facing what he called roadblocks to "fair primary elections," RFK Jr. is now running as an independent.

RFK Jr.'s political views: third-party mindset

Voters may know what they're getting with Biden and Trump, but Kennedy is a true wild card. He told New York Magazine, "I still consider myself a Democrat, and I have all the values that I grew up with, nothing changed." But outside of his positions on the environment and abortion, there isn't much overlap between RFK Jr. and his family's party.

The perception of many Democrats is that RFK Jr. is an anti-vax nutjob. His unorthodox views on the subject are like catnip to the millions who listen to Joe Rogan, but absolutely anathema to mainstream MSNBC-watching Dems — though Kennedy has not actively sought the approval of traditional Democrats, anyway.

It is precisely Kennedy's ability to appeal to voters outside of the traditional Democratic spectrum that makes him a threat to both major parties. Taking a page from Trump's playbook, Kennedy has recently said he plans to “formulate policies that will seal the border permanently.” He has also been critical of gun control. He has stressed that, while he might support a bipartisan assault weapons ban, he was “not going to take people's guns away.”

As a Democrat who was willing to criticize President Biden, Kennedy was a frequent guest and darling of the right-wing media circuit during his period in the Democratic primary. After announcing his independent run, however, that relationship may have soured. Republicans like Trump spokesman Steven Cheung swiftly went on the attack, saying in a statement, “Voters should not be deceived by anyone who pretends to have conservative values.”

The GOP has good reason for anxiety. Current polling shows Kennedy is likely to take a bigger chunk of Republican voters than Democrats. No doubt even more alarming to party insiders, a Politico analysis of campaign finance reports shows Kennedy is pulling in significantly more big-money political investment from those who traditionally give to Republicans, hitting the GOP where it hurts.

Kennedy's image as an anti-establishment populist has enabled him to stake foreign policy positions far outside what either major party could stomach. His primary attack on the Democratic establishment is that Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden are “warmongers.” He has also criticized the CIA as an institution designed only to provide more wars to keep the military-industrial complex afloat.

But there are also reasons to question how anti-establishment Kennedy truly is. Despite a willingness to call out chemical and oil companies,

industrial agriculture and Big Pharma for their culpability for chronic disease, he does not support single-payer healthcare. His views on the Israel–Palestine issue are unlikely to win over many on the left either.

Kennedy also regularly reaffirms his economic orientation as that of “a free-market capitalism kind of guy.” This really shouldn't be surprising, of course, considering Kennedy's roots. As he wrote in his own family memoir, *American Values*, “During the Depression, there were only twenty-four known millionaires in the country, and among them were” both of his grandfathers, Joe Kennedy and George Skakel.

The US's perfect independent candidate?

Herein lies the irony of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s campaign for president. He is the most establishment candidate, strictly on the strength of his family and the privileged personal position and connections the Kennedy name confers on every member, and yet he possesses an anti-establishment streak. This candidate spent his entire career as an environmental attorney (and if a job like that doesn't make a person distrustful of what corporations or bureaucracies tell them, nothing will). He is somehow establishment and anti-establishment all rolled into one.

It is precisely this combination of factors that might make him the perfect candidate for this moment. Independent voters, a huge plurality according to recent polling, have an unfavorable view of both Donald Trump and Joe Biden. They are looking for something that neither major-party candidate is offering. If Kennedy gives independents reason to show up on Election Day, he can win.

The 2020 election contest had record voter turnout — the biggest in more than a century, 66%. But 80 million eligible voters still didn't

vote: one-third of the US voting population. 80 million is more than enough votes to turn the tide in Kennedy's favor.

It is the winner-takes-all election system that bequeaths two-party politics to the US. It is winner-takes-all that gives us the lesser-of-two-evils phenomenon, making any independent or third-party candidate a “spoiler.” But another reality of a three-way race is that it is possible to win with a simple plurality of the vote, as little as 34% if the race is a dead heat. As Kennedy himself said, “The Democrats are terrified I’ll spoil the election for President Biden. The Republicans fear I’ll spoil it for President Trump. The truth is — they’re both right! But only their inside-the-beltway myopia deludes them into thinking we have no chance to win.”

Of course RFK Jr. can win.

[[Bella Bible](#) edited this piece.]

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UFO Disclosure: The Most Significant Law in Human History?

Ran Chakrabarti
September 11, 2023

After hearing sworn testimony on evidence of alien intelligence, Congress is now drafting a law that will require agencies to disclose information to the public. That Congress is taking the matter seriously in the first place, implies that the testimony and further evidence provided behind closed doors has a substantial basis in fact.

On the face of it, the proposed “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024” doesn’t sound like very glamorous or exciting reading. Even the most meticulous of lawyers’ eyes will be glazing over while they scroll over the mundane section headings and definitions of the proposed legislation.

Section 554, entitled “Community college Enlisted Training Corps demonstration program,” is unlikely to raise the heart-beat. There’s passing acknowledgment of our contemporary gender sensitivities in section 583, entitled “Prohibition on requiring listing of gender or pronouns in official correspondence,” but I’m afraid that is not going to be the subject of this article.

Interesting little quirks pepper the legislation: ongoing claims relating to waste from the Manhattan Project can be found in section 1099AA, no doubt essential reading for anyone who’s just come back from the cinema after watching *Oppenheimer*. Section 581 extends deadlines for the review of World War 1 valor medals. Who would have thought that this was something we were still figuring out and spending money on?

Persevere through the text, though, and it becomes very clear that something very, very interesting is about to happen. This just could be the most important piece of legislation ever drafted

in human history, with incendiary consequences. It will potentially answer, once and for all, whether or not we are alone in the universe.

Metaphorical echoes of Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man start to resonate when we get to "Division G – UNIDENTIFIED ANOMALOUS PHENOMENA DISCLOSURE." When you see it, your scrolling immediately pauses, with first thoughts of, Wait a minute, did I read that correctly? The division in question is described as the "Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena Disclosure Act of 2023."

So what does the Unidentified Anomalous Disclosure Act of 2023 actually say? There are no prizes for guessing what it might be associated with following recent sworn testimony by David Grusch, David Fravor and Ryan Graves before Congress earlier this summer on the subject of strange goings on in the skies, crashed craft from other worlds and "biologics" described as "non-human" in origin.

Evidently, members of Congress have followed up on Grusch's multiple responses along the lines of, I can't answer that now in public, but can do so behind closed doors. Those meetings appear to have taken place, and those few members of Congress who are security-cleared to attend those meetings must have reached some astonishing conclusions.

The introductory sections of the act hit you like an express train. Section 9002(a)(4) states that: "Legislation is necessary because credible evidence and testimony indicates that Federal Government unidentified anomalous phenomena records exist and have not been declassified or subject to mandatory declassification review."

The act provides for the disclosure of "technologies of unknown origin" and evidence of "non-human intelligence". Just pause for a minute:

if Congress legislated for hobgoblins, dwarves, hobbits, dragons and orcs, you would think that it had lost the plot, right? By inference, it must have seen evidence in relation to the existence of those hobgoblins, dwarves, hobbits, dragons and orcs, or why legislate in detail in relation to them? Can you see where this is heading?

To emphasize the point, word searches for "unidentified anomalous phenomena" tally 169 counts in the bill's text and references to "non-human" tally 26. On the other hand, "tin foil hat" (in whatever spelling) appears nowhere, and neither does "conspiracy" or "alien," except in the unrelated legal senses of those terms. This is serious business. Evidently, Congress is not concerned with crackpots and sci-fi enthusiasts, but with extraterrestrial intelligence and technology themselves.

So just what evidence does Congress think might be out there? We can glean some insight from the disclosure procedures, from the exceptions to those procedures that Congress has carved out and from how the bill describes the information and artifacts concerned.

Disclosure?

Section 9004 of the act sets up a record collection in the National Archive of all records that the government may have on the subject of unidentified anomalous phenomena. That's great, you might think, but it might wind up empty if government departments claim that they have absolutely nothing in their records to contribute.

In that regard, section 9005 is quite interesting. Each government office would have to identify and organize their records on the subject and prepare such records for inclusion in the National Archive, with an additional provision preventing their destruction, alteration or mutilation in any way.

But what about the really sensitive stuff? There's a further catch in the provision referring to "records pending review," which seems to suggest that whatever data dumps might occur are likely to be very benign, with the more serious stuff being constantly queued with mysterious reasons for delay.

Still, section 9005(c) does say that, within 300 days of the date of enactment of the act, the head of each government department has to review, identify and organize each record of anomalous phenomena for disclosure to the public, review by a board created by the act and transmission to the National Archive.

But disclosure doesn't just apply to government records. The act defines a "close observer" as anyone who has come into close proximity to unidentified anomalous phenomena or non-human intelligence, and a "Controlling Authority" means any federal, state or local government department (presumably including the Sheriff's office in Roswell), commercial company, academic institution or private sector entity in physical possession of technologies of unknown origin or biological evidence of non-human intelligence.

These are quite wide-ranging definitions and will no doubt spook private-sector entities who have been alleged to have such materials in their possession, though the inclusion of "physical" in the definition of "Controlling Authority" also makes it quite narrow. If a corporation had such material, an astute lawyer would advise its transfer to an off-shore shell company in order to argue that they don't possess it, avoiding difficult questions about how they got it. The definition should perhaps be expanded to include records relating to such material (which will inevitably run the risk of destruction) and possession by entities in foreign jurisdictions over which American companies exercise control.

Preventing disclosure?

Aside from these possible loopholes, sections of the act address the possibility that some material may remain concealed.

In that regard, paragraph (D)(i) of section 9005(c) is a critical provision. When deciding to disclose, the head of each government department shall determine whether the unidentified anomalous phenomenon records are covered by the standards for postponement of public disclosure. The act establishes a board to review such cases. Naturally, in these circumstances, you can easily imagine that the files would be carted off to the board and never actually see the light of day.

Section 9006 basically says that disclosure can be postponed if there's clear and convincing evidence that the threat to military defense, intelligence operations or conduct of foreign relations posed by the public disclosure of anomalous phenomena record is of such gravity that it outweighs the public interest of disclosure.

This is the logical paradox we continue to find ourselves in when we talk about little green men and flying saucers. If it's real, then it's obviously a national security issue; and can't be disclosed. If it can't be disclosed, then by inference, it is real; and if it can't be disclosed, then the very evidence that proves that they exist is withheld from public scrutiny.

The review board itself will make the contentious determination of whether disclosure needs to be postponed. Section 9007, which governs the process, is a very dense piece of drafting and requires multiple readings to see the wood and not the trees. Essentially, we can summarize it as follows: the board's nine members are appointed by none other than the President of the United States (with the advice and consent of

the Senate) and shall be suitably qualified, security-cleared and without conflict of interest.

Whether the review board reaches decisions by majority or unanimity is not abundantly clear, but who those nine members may be is obviously going to be fundamental to the decision-making they might be capable (or incapable) of. Depending on the background of the appointees selected, their views may naturally align with, or potentially oppose, embedded positions within the Department of Defense or the Pentagon.

Irrespective of the decision of the review board, ultimately, under section 9009(C)(4)(B), the review board has to give the President contemporaneous notice of its determination; and the President has the sole ability to require the disclosure (or even the postponement of disclosure) of records. The buck stops with the President, it would appear.

Alien technology and bodies?

Of course, we don't know what kind of material the act, if passed, might uncover. But we can infer some quite extraordinary things from the act's provisions and definitions.

To get all closet Roswell conspiracy theorists excited, the act refers to "Legacy Programs," meaning all federal, state and local government, commercial industry and private sector endeavors to collect, exploit or reverse engineer "technologies of unknown origin" or examine biological evidence of living or deceased "non-human intelligence" that predate the act. And, of course, the term "Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena" includes what we would historically call flying saucers or UFOs.

If the earlier parts of the act aren't jaw-dropping enough, then section 9010 will have your eyeballs on stalks. The provision begins with the statement

that the Federal Government "shall exercise eminent domain over any and all recovered technologies of unknown origin and biological evidence of non-human intelligence that may be controlled by private persons or entities in the interests of the public good." All such material, presuming it exists, shall be made available to the review board for examination. Following such examination, the review board shall determine whether it constitutes technology of an unknown origin or biological evidence of non-human intelligence and whether it qualifies for postponement of disclosure.

That the provision stops there begs further questions. It's not clear what "eminent domain" means, and it's not clear whether private persons or entities are to be construed to include legal persons like corporations. It's an extraordinary provision, potentially suggesting a nationalization or expropriation of such technologies and biological evidence by the Federal Government. If so, the obvious question is how a private company or entity came into possession of such material in the first place; and it is worth underlining that "controlling entities" in possession of technologies of unknown origin or biological evidence of non-human intelligence, as defined in the act, include the private sector.

Is this tacit acknowledgment that the government has off-loaded crash retrieval material to the private sector for the purpose of reverse engineering? If so, then it begs the question as to who actually owns the material in question and any derivative products from it. Does documentation account for the transfer of ownership or conditions attached to it? What intellectual property rights have arisen from that material? Have they been registered? By whom?

A further point for reflection. The act assumes that potential possession of biological evidence of non-human intelligence is in fact, dead. But what if

it were alive? On what legal basis does the detention of non-human intelligence rest? And with what oversight conditions and by whom? What legal rights should it have? One could suggest that if contact was benign, then treatment parallel to diplomatic representatives would be intuitively appropriate. If the contact was malevolent, then treatment in accordance with applicable criminal law on detention would be the intuitive parallel. Essentially, the act does not contemplate a scenario (and the consequences) where non-human intelligence is found alive and the Pandora's box that it opens.

A historic document?

“Wow!” to quote astronomer Jerry Ehman, scrawling in red pen on the data printout recording the famous radio signal anomaly received by the Ohio State University's radio telescope in 1977.

Is this another “Wow!” moment? For the first time in history, we are seeing a piece of legislation that is likely going to become law (with no doubt, last-minute revisions to potentially water down the consequences of it) that tacitly assumes at its starting point that, far from us being alone in the universe, parts of that universe may already have been (and continue to be) here.

By analogy to hobgoblins, dwarves, hobbits, dragons and orcs, it's absolutely inconceivable that Congress would legislate about a subject in the absence of evidence to suggest that its subject matter requires regulation. To say that the act is “out of this world” is a metaphor that just also happens, for perhaps the first time ever, to relate to its subject matter.

Though the congressional hearings of July 2023 have obviously catalyzed the timing of it, the act must have been in the drafting pipeline for some considerable time. You can't just magically conjure up something of this detail and complexity

without a substantial lead time, with review and commentary by relevant stakeholders.

Even though the structured processes within the act will be fairly familiar for any constitutional lawyer, its subject matter is evidently not; perhaps the closest analogy for private law is that of how we deal with confidential information and to whom it can be disclosed.

On that analogous note, the mechanics of any determination by the review board are going to be absolutely critical. If it discloses, then who knows what the consequences might be. If it fails to disclose, we implicitly infer that the only reason for blocking disclosure is the very fear of what those consequences will be.

It is on that note — what the consequences might be — that we should further reflect. The purpose of the act might very well be to establish the truth about a subject that has long been ridiculed, but the reality of what we may discover will have its own ineluctable consequences. Who of us are ready for that?

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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The US Needs External Enemies to Overcome Internal Division

Josep M. Colomer
March 31, 2023

The US is deeply divided and its political system is dysfunctional. Only the perception of an existential threat allows Republicans and Democrats to work together. Hence, the US needs an enemy.

One may wonder what has prompted the US government to become so heavily involved in the war in Ukraine after the defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I take the view that the conflict arose from the expansion of NATO to ex-communist countries in breach of initial promises to Moscow. The unstated aim was to block any attempt by Russia to reemerge as a major world power. The list of new NATO members after the Cold War includes the former East Germany, three former members of the Soviet Union and five former members of the Warsaw Pact.

It is also well known that some de facto powers in the US have a private financial interest in the war industry. President Dwight Eisenhower, who was Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Chief of Staff of United States Army, knew what he was talking about when he warned citizens in his farewell address in 1961 to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.” Eisenhower predicted that “the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

enemy has its uses

It is well known that warmongering think tanks in Washington pushed to arm Ukraine after the Russian occupation of Crimea. Many Washington, DC strategists believe that the lesson of American defeats in the Middle East is that the US must sell arms without sending soldiers. That benefits shareholders, creates jobs and keeps America as the dominant superpower.

Private geopolitical and economic interests for the foreign conflict need a favorable internal political situation, something I discuss in my forthcoming book *Constitutional Polarization: A critical review of the U.S. political system*. When the country was under internal construction during the 19th century, it had no foreign policy.

The issues at that time were territorial expansion from the thirteen independent colonies, the structure of new territories and states and the layout of their boundaries. Only since the early 20th century, when the United States established fixed continental borders and became internally organized as a more stable federation, has it been able to pursue an independent foreign policy.

However, American foreign policy is heavily clouded by the ineffectiveness of the domestic political system. The constitutional formula for the separation of powers between a legislative Congress and an executive President with only two political parties tends to produce deadlocks. They often lead to legislative paralysis, frequent government shutdowns and presidential impeachments.

Only existential threats make bipartisan cooperation possible. Only then do the White House and Capitol Hill work together. This proved to be the case during both World War II and the Cold War. The call for war in the 1940s, the “Red Scare” in the 1950s and its second edition in the

1980s were accompanied by popular feelings of fear and national unity, as well as low electoral participation and widespread political apathy.

In contrast, during the last thirty years of relative peace, unresolved internal political issues and new demands have emerged on all sorts of issues: health, climate, immigration, race, religion, gender, sex, family, education, gun control and voting rights. These have caused mass mobilizations, protests, confrontations and partisan polarization. External fear has been replaced by internal anger.

An external enemy helps political leaders

When President Bill Clinton was under siege from Republicans on all sides, he confessed, "I would have preferred to be president during World War II" and "I was envious that Kennedy had an enemy." President George W. Bush also longed for such a past when he launched the fight against a new "axis of evil" and Islamist terrorism that, according to his nonsensical logic, "followed the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism."

President Barack Obama was paralyzed by the suspicion that ending those wars might open up too many divisive domestic issues. It was President Donald Trump who started the withdrawal of troops from the Middle East and the first president in many years who did not start a new war; as a result, he faced an inner hell.

President Joe Biden and the Democrats know that the Republicans will block any initiative on economic, social and cultural issues in the House of Representatives. To attract their cooperation in this context of yet another divided government, the Democrats may adopt a belligerent foreign policy. A bipartisan foreign policy could satisfy the geopolitical interest of expanding NATO, containing Russia and making money for the American defense industry.

The US faces a constant dilemma between internal anger and external fear. This constantly creates political tension. This tension is resolved when faced by a transparently bad foreign enemy. Russia plays this role perfectly today. In the past, the Soviet Union, its earlier avatar, played the same role.

Yet, we are not living the nationalist hysteria of the Cold War, but a flimsy bad copy of it. Security and military chiefs, including William Burns, the former ambassador to Russia and current CIA director, and General Mark Milley, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, remember Eisenhower's warning. They are more aware of the human costs of war than politicians who are worrying about the next election. Hence, both Burns and Milley have no overriding interest in another long-running conflict and are pushing for peace negotiations. It remains to be seen if the politicians let them succeed.

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Why Is Congress So Polarized? It's the Institutions

Josep M. Colomer
October 11, 2023

**Political polarization has reached the point that
dissident Republicans have fired their own**

Speaker. How did the political scene get this bad? The explanation lies in a flawed electoral structure that incentivises extreme positions.

The issue was about shutting down the government. It ended up shutting down Congress. The recent removal of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy, reflects a policy conflict and shows a serious institutional flaw.

The controversial policy is the public debt. The United States' national debt reached nearly 100% of GDP, prompting Congress to suspend its debt ceiling months ago. Last month, Congress failed to reach an agreement for the annual budget. Ultras in the Republican party wanted to scrap certain expenses, in particular those regarding the supply of weapons and aid to Ukraine.

A last-minute agreement avoided shutdown for a few weeks, but the wacky little wing of the Republican caucus accused Speaker McCarthy of betraying the party and triggered a motion to remove him. The episode is not completely new, as the past three Republican speakers of the House were pestered by their own side and resigned or retired before being ousted. But this is the first time in history that they've succeeded in actually firing the Speaker.

A conflict over policy

The policy conflict should not be dismissed as simply the result of acrimony. Bipartisanship and cooperation in Congress flourished during several decades of foreign tension through World War II and the Cold War as external existential threats triggered national unity. But when the mortal external risk became paltry, it looked like there were no limits to internal confrontation.

Over the last thirty years, the public agenda of controversial issues has grown enormously. With just a little exaggeration, one could say that the international Cold War was replaced with a domestic political war. Right now, it is not coincidental that the most aggressive Republicans spurn US aid to Ukraine. A focus on external conflict would reduce the space for domestic policy and make internal confrontation less easy. The new war in Israel may increase their malaise.

A conflict caused by institutions

The institutional flaw is that the framework based on the separation of powers with only two parties incentivizes and exacerbates political animosity. With pervasive partisan antagonism, the filters and "checks" between the House, the Senate and the presidency do not produce fair balances as expected. Actually, mutual checks between institutions boost parties' hostilities and preclude effective governance.

The two major political parties in the US encompass a range of policy proposals and ideological orientations comparable to the typical European system with multiple parties: There are liberals and socialists within the Democratic Party, conservatives and populists within the Republican Party, and the minor Greens and Libertarians flanking each side. The system has produced factional candidacies and long disputes within each party to select its candidates. There is ideological plurality within parties, but not at the level of competitive bidding for public office. This forces political polarization, as I analyze in my book, *Constitutional Polarization: A Critical Review of the U.S. Political System*.

An additional factor is the system of primary elections to select candidates. In traditional closed-party primaries, low participation heavily skews the vote toward extreme positions on issues with no social or political consensus. The participants in

primaries are typically the most active and ideologically motivated people in the entire electorate, so they often favor candidates prone to foster antagonism.

In congressional primaries, only about a fifth of eligible voters tend to participate. On many occasions, the winner in a primary for an open seat, which tends to attract multiple candidates, wins only a plurality of the vote. Thus, many candidates for House seats have been selected by less than a tenth of their party voters. Closed-party primaries can select minority-supported candidates that might not be most preferred by the general public. This is how the House of Representatives is formed and why some of its members sometimes behave like firebrands.

It may be significant that none of the eight Republicans who voted to overthrow McCarthy were elected in any of the five states that select their representatives by top-two open primaries or by ranked-choice voting, alternative systems to closed party primaries that favor more moderate and consensual winners (Louisiana, Washington, California, Alaska, and Maine).

The immediate consequence of the current calamity is the blockage of legislation for the next few weeks. Yet even if the House resumes its activity soon, the threat of a government shutdown in November remains on the horizon.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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What You Need to Know About the Debt Ceiling

Alex Gloy
June 07, 2023

The debt ceiling, originally conceived as a tool to control government spending, has failed to do so. What it has succeeded in doing is introducing uncertainty into markets, raising borrowing costs, and serving as a tool for parties to introduce their preferred spending policies, all too often to the detriment of ordinary households.

The recent debate surrounding the US debt ceiling has evoked widespread concern and uncertainty. However, with the signing of a bill by President Biden on June 3rd, the debt limit has been temporarily suspended until January 2025, averting the immediate threat of a debt default. Despite this temporary relief, important questions persist regarding the purpose and effectiveness of the debt ceiling. This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the US debt ceiling, its historical context, and the implications and challenges associated with its existence.

The debt ceiling in the United States originated from the need to control government spending and ensure fiscal responsibility. Initially, Congress had to authorize each new batch of debt issued, a cumbersome process that was modified with the

passage of the Second Liberty Bond Act of 1917. This act established an aggregate amount, or debt ceiling, to govern the total debt to be issued. Since World War II, the debt ceiling has been adjusted over 100 times to accommodate the country's evolving financial needs.

The concept of a debt ceiling, however, itself poses logical inconsistencies. All federal government spending is already authorized by Congress, making it contradictory to prevent the Treasury Department from raising the necessary debt to fund these authorized expenditures. In other words, Congress forbids spending which it has already mandated. Reaching the debt limit forces the government to choose between not fulfilling previously agreed obligations or defaulting on existing debt service. Either of these would be a violation of obligations established by law, and would therefore have severe implications for the US economy.

Implications of reaching the limit

Reaching the debt ceiling carries significant implications for the US economy. It can lead to a government shutdown, disrupt essential services, and even result in default on financial obligations, jeopardizing the nation's creditworthiness. Credit rating agencies closely monitor debt ceiling debates. If they were to downgrade the federal government's credit rating, this would increase borrowing costs and undermine investor confidence. Uncertainty surrounding the debt ceiling, even if it is not eventually reached, also introduces volatility into financial markets and can impact global economic stability.

Government default entails the non-payment of interest or principal on its obligations. This triggers a credit event that has far-reaching consequences. Individuals and institutions relying on government funds would not receive payments. Credit default swaps (CDSs)—insurance contracts taken out

against credit events—would be triggered, potentially causing financial difficulties for institutions which have written CDSs. Rating agencies would downgrade the US credit rating, impacting other borrowers, and Treasury securities would no longer serve as acceptable collateral for institutional borrowing, leading to a collapse of credit availability, choking the economy and leading to a severe contraction.

Rating agencies such as Fitch and Standard & Poor's have expressed concerns about the United States' credit rating, despite the recent agreement on the debt ceiling. A potential downgrade could have implications not only for the US but also for all other borrowers whose credit rating is usually influenced by the sovereign rating. With the US bond market dominating global markets, the loss of the anchor role of US Treasuries, which form a substantial part of institutional portfolios worldwide, could create disarray in international bond markets.

Partisan shenanigans and a borrowing spree

The debt ceiling has become a contentious political issue in recent decades, with both major parties sharing responsibility for substantial increases in outstanding debt. The threat of a debt default has often been used as a bargaining tool in political negotiations. However, neither party wants to bear the blame for driving the country into a crisis, resulting in a risky game of chicken in which each party attempts to see who will budge first and agree to concessions favorable to the other party's spending policy. This raises questions about whether the debate really revolves around the debt itself. The recent deal, featuring a suspension of the debt limit, essentially provides the Treasury the freedom to borrow as much money as needed until January 2025—a *carte blanche*.

The government's account at the Federal Reserve, the Treasury General Account (TGA),

has almost been depleted. It will have to be replenished to 600 billion US dollars (it peaked at 1.8 trillion US dollars during the pandemic). Those funds will have to be raised by raising additional debt—on top of money needed to fund the current federal fiscal deficit of around 2 trillion dollars. As I mentioned in a previous article, it is not apparent who would buy that amount of Treasury securities. The Federal Reserve might be forced to reverse its plan to slowly shrink its balance sheet, having to absorb additional government debt.

After borrowing 726 billion dollars during the second quarter of 2023, the Treasury Department expects to raise another 733 billion dollars in the following quarter. Total government debt is hence guaranteed to continue rising at a fast pace. Having briefly been arrested at 31.4 trillion dollars (the amount of the debt ceiling), federal debt is expected to exceed 50 trillion dollars by 2033. The exponential growth of government debt is going to continue unabated.

The spending bill includes some mild cuts of non-military discretionary spending in 2024, and a limit of all discretionary spending in 2025. Military spending, however, will increase further, to 886 billion US dollars in 2024, and 895 billion in 2025, a 23% increase over the amount spent in 2022.

The bill's drafters found other devices to cut costs. 20 billion dollars originally awarded to the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) to fight tax evasion will be clawed back. The bill imposes new requirements for adults to maintain access to food stamps. It also ends the freeze on student loan repayments. In short: money taken from the poor is being given to the military and to people crafting "innovative" tax returns.

Hidden under the surface-level negotiations was a fight over permit reform. Local governments had the ability to block interstate pipelines and

electricity lines by dragging out the permitting process. Alternative energy companies need new transmission lines to transport energy produced by wind and solar farms towards population centers near the coasts. Fossil fuel companies need pipelines to move abundant natural gas from sparsely populated areas with shale reservoirs towards the big cities or harbors for export. In the end, the Mountain Valley Pipeline, bringing natural gas from the Marcellus shale fields in West Virginia to Virginia, made it into the bill, securing Senator Joe Manchin's vote.

A proposal to end recurring debt ceiling drama

US lawmakers recognize the insanity of recurring debt ceiling debates, especially since it is a question of funding spending that has already been authorized by Congress once.

One option contemplates a bureaucratic rather than a legislative solution. This would involve the Treasury Department disregarding the debt ceiling and continuing to issue debt. The perspective finds support in the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, which states that "the validity of the public debt of the United States, authorized by law...shall not be questioned." However, pursuing such a unilateral move could result in a legal dispute and potentially generate still more uncertainty.

Another suggestion entails the Treasury minting a platinum coin with a denomination of 1 trillion US dollars, as it is legally permitted to do. This coin would then be deposited with the Federal Reserve in exchange for a credit of 1 trillion dollars. However, Treasury Secretary Yellen has dismissed this idea, noting that the Federal Reserve is unlikely to agree to such a proposal.

It is worth noting that the US government has in fact experienced instances of default in the past. Esteemed Wall Street veteran Jim Grant argues

that a default can occur through a unilateral change in payment terms, resulting in a diminished financial obligation, such as forced currency redenomination. Two events over the past century align with this definition. Firstly, the devaluation of the dollar relative to gold under US President Roosevelt in 1933, when the gold price was raised from \$20.67 to \$35 per ounce. Secondly, the “temporary” suspension, which has since become permanent, of the dollar's convertibility into gold by US President Nixon in 1971.

In reality, persistent inflation can be viewed as another form of default, albeit spread out over many years. Over time, the US dollar has lost approximately 97% of its purchasing power since the establishment of the Federal Reserve in 1913. While the dollar remains an effective medium of exchange, it has proven to be a poor long-term store of value due to the erosion of its purchasing power through inflation.

If spending is not controlled, the government will find one way or another of making ends meet, and all too often it is the consumer who foots the bill.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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The US Merchant Marine Is a National Security Necessity

Benjamin Harrison
June 12, 2023

The US, once one of the world's foremost shipping economies, has become almost entirely dependent on foreign firms to transport goods to and from its mainland. This is a vulnerability of which China is well aware. If the US does not overhaul its shipping system soon, it may be caught unprepared by a hostile naval power.

Power talks. Realistic descriptions of the buildup of military power often will convey a better sense of the likelihood of action than will a series of estimative-type judgements which fail to include the military details or reasons on which the assessment is based. To understand the capability, and to be able to view it objectively, is a prerequisite to the understanding of intent.

—Cynthia Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise* (2002)

Despite having the fourth largest coastline in the world (behind Canada, Indonesia, and Russia), the United States has almost no domestic maritime presence on the high seas today. The US has essentially disappeared from the world's oceans as a commercial entity. The only trading partners to which the US has overland access are Canada and Mexico, and for seaborne commerce to its east and its west, the US is dependent on the goodwill, and the cargo holds, of strangers.

America could be left high and dry

The risks surrounding this situation are known, but rarely, if ever, discussed in the public forum.

“Global Trends 2040,” published in March 2021 by the National Intelligence Council (NIC), posits five scenarios for 2040. The fourth scenario, “Separate Silos,” imagines a world in which supply chains have been frustrated to the point that nations across the globe move toward isolationism and restrict trading to their immediate geographical neighbors. In this scenario, the commercial and security interests of the United States are limited to North America; similar arrangements are to be found in Europe and Asia. Resource-rich blocs like North America, China, Europe, and Russia are at an advantage vis-à-vis developing nations due to their relative self-sufficiency. Of the five scenarios posited, this represents the best case.

In the NIC’s other four scenarios, China is portrayed as the principal catalyst of whatever shape the world happens to be taking. China’s relationship with the US is either that of a strategic adversary or of a fierce commercial competitor. In all cases, China is driving the relationship.

Curiously, these four scenarios assume that throughout the projected twenty-year development of this more-or-less adversarial relationship, the import and export of goods to and from the United States on foreign-flagged cargo ships and tankers, an ever-increasing majority of which are Chinese, will continue unencumbered and unthreatened. It is a telling and possibly unintended editorial omission for the “Separate Silos” scenario not to specifically address the role or fate of ocean transport in the broken supply chain, even though roughly 90% of the world’s goods are moved by sea.

The US Department of Transportation’s Maritime Administration warns of the sobering fact that China has been investing heavily in traditional infrastructure projects at home and around the world, building port facilities in Asia as well as Africa, and supporting a booming shipbuilding industry. The latest edition of

Farwell’s Rules of the Nautical Road notes that “the number of vessels traversing the world’s oceans increased by 60 percent” between 1992 and 2012. A 2017 report by HSBC claims that “China’s merchant fleet has more than tripled in tonnage terms over the last decade.” According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, China leads the world in the number of ships owned—more than four times the number under US ownership—and is second in the world, after Greece, in tonnage. The US does not even make it into the top 10 on the latter list.

Historically, a threat to a nation’s access to the sea was seen as an existential threat, an immediate and legitimate justification for war. Such a threat has been cited as a contributing factor to the US entry into World War I and to Japan’s attack on the US in World War II. In the United States today, however, we give very little thought to the maritime component of our national defense posture, and most Americans take little notice of ocean commerce until a pandemic causes colorful container ships to stack up in US ports, or an ultra-large box-carrier blocks the Suez Canal. China, on the other hand, does not appear to have a similarly uninterested view on the importance of sea lane and supply chain domination. This is a relatively new development, and it should concern us more than the NIC scenarios suggest.

The American merchant fleet has all but disappeared

According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, in 1960 the United States had a merchant fleet of nearly 3000 oceangoing ships, comprising nearly 17% of the entire world’s merchant marine. Many of those ships in the US fleet were built for WWII and were nearing end-of-life by 1960. By 1970, the US merchant fleet had shrunk by half, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the world’s fleet. By 1980 it had shrunk by yet another half, and by 2019 the entire

US merchant fleet of oceangoing cargo ships and tankers numbered only 182. By comparison, the world's (currently) largest shipping company, Maersk Line of Denmark, owns and operates nearly 700 ships; the world's second largest shipping company, MSC of Switzerland, owns and operates nearly 600 ships; COSCO of China and CMA CGM of France, the world's third and fourth largest shipping companies, each own and operate between 500-600 ships. These are individual companies, each with several times the number of ships that make up the entire domestically flagged oceangoing merchant fleet of the United States.

The Merchant Marine Act (Jones Act) of 1920 states that:

It is necessary for the national defense and the development of the domestic and foreign commerce of the United States that the United States have a merchant marine:

Sufficient to carry the waterborne domestic commerce and a substantial part of the waterborne export and import foreign commerce of the United States and to provide shipping service essential for maintaining the flow of the waterborne domestic and foreign commerce at all times;

Capable of serving as a naval and military auxiliary in time of war or national emergency;

Owned and operated as vessels of the United States by citizens of the United States;

Composed of the best-equipped, safest, and most suitable types of vessels constructed in the United States and manned with a trained and efficient citizen personnel; and

Supplemented by efficient facilities for building and repairing vessels.

Of the above five requirements, it has been half a century since the first was even an aspirational goal. The second had been doubtful for some years, and the recent Turbo Activation test of the National Defense Reserve Fleet by the US Transportation Command in September 2019 settled the matter with disparaging results: only 40% of the ships activated were able to leave port, in stark contrast with the 80% successful activation for Desert Shield in 1990 and the 92% successful activation in 2003.

China has built up while the US slept

Cynthia Grabo notes that the buildup of an adversary's capabilities is an indicator of his intent. Grabo is speaking of military capability and military intent. After witnessing the effects of accidental disruption of the supply chain—sudden and widespread shortages of essential items such as baby formula, medications, technology, building materials, and more—we cannot underestimate the ability of an intentional competitor to dominate and control the shipping lanes and to engage in, and win, a modern version of maritime siege warfare. We would do well to keep in mind that the objective of siege warfare is an adversary's capitulation, not destruction. Nor is it a new idea that merchant shipping is a military capability:

The clash of interests, the angry feelings roused by conflicting attempts thus to appropriate the larger share, if not the whole, of the advantages of commerce, and of distant unsettled commercial regions, led to wars. On the other hand, wars arising from other causes have been greatly modified in their conduct and issue by the control of the sea. Therefore the history of sea power, while embracing in its broad

sweep all that tends to make a people great upon the sea or by the sea, is largely a military history.

—Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*

Alfred Thayer Mahan's concept of sea power, known as the Mahan Doctrine, can be summed up as follows: Control the seas, control the world. The corollary of this doctrine is that if a nation does not control the seas, or at least its own waters, someone else will. The twin objectives recommended by the Mahan Doctrine are to achieve the first and avoid the latter. Mahan was an American naval officer, the "most important American strategist of the nineteenth century" in the estimation of military historian John Keegan. According to Mahan, one of the essential and existential missions of the US Navy is to protect the sea lanes for American commerce. Not only does this allow the United States to achieve prosperity through commerce, but this also protects us against siege by embargo.

Even if the US Navy still embraces its mission to protect the sea lanes for American shipping, the point is all but moot, since an American oceangoing fleet is all but non-existent. In a time of national crisis, assuming the US were to rebuild its merchant marine as it did in WWII, and assuming we had the trained mariners needed to operate a merchant fleet of the size needed to supply our country in crisis, it could not be assumed that the US Navy had either the mission, the capacity or the disposition to protect US shipping and sea lanes. This would mean that we would also assume extensive losses at sea, churning through even more merchant vessels and mariners. In other words: as the Mahan Doctrine would predict, the situation we have watched develop over the last 60 years has rendered the US essentially defenseless against an adversary with a

superior combination of martial and merchant maritime capability.

And what becomes of Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the US Virgin Islands if the sea lanes are no longer safe for American cargo? If those strangers on whose goodwill we have become dependent find it too risky to move American cargo, resupply of any one of these non-contiguous populations will be impossible. Aerial resupply is not a serious option. Roughly speaking, 1000 cargo planes are needed to move the equivalent amount of cargo of one ship. Such a feat would be unsustainable for any protracted period.

Ships are expensive to build, expensive to operate, and difficult to operate profitably. The massive buildup of cargo capacity by China is not profit-driven; it is a national security imperative for China and the key to their long-term geopolitical ambitions. For this reason, Chinese shipbuilding and ocean shipping are heavily subsidized. The continuous launching of new Chinese merchant ships, new overseas ports, and new warships of the ever-increasing PLA Navy is fully capable of performing its intended strategic role within the framework of the Mahan Doctrine.

Re-preparing the merchant fleet will be serious work

The US has a few options. It can accept the "Separate Silos" outcome and retreat into isolation and global irrelevance, or it can reduce its addiction to foreign imports to the point that China's investment in ocean shipping becomes an albatross for the PRC. These options would entail a fundamental change in US standards of living, like those experienced on the home front during WWII. Or, as a third option, the US can compete with China for dominance on the high seas. It would require conscious national will to change

the current regulatory and employment environment that makes building, owning, and operating ships under the US flag as outrageously prohibitive and unprofitable as it is. Unless US mariners are to receive the third-world wages and conditions that give competitors the economic edge, US flagged shipping will require substantial and effective subsidization.

Moreover, rather than being unionized, professional mariners would be better served, and would serve the nation better, as a uniformed service, analogous to NOAA or the USPHS Commissioned Corps. Such a measure would require radical rethinking and a cultural change for mariners, but the organizational structure already exists, and could be accomplished by expanding the role of the US Maritime Service to assume the responsibility for training and licensing of mariners that is currently distributed across public, private, and governmental organizations and regulated by the US Coast Guard. Mariners would admittedly lose the independence that draws many to the seagoing life, but in return they would have predictable income and employment as well as training, promotion, and retirement.

A crucial component of executing this third option is something that has been firmly established and operating for many decades: mariner training. Alongside the US Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York, there are six state maritime academies (one each in Texas, Michigan, Maine, Massachusetts, California, and New York) which together graduate approximately 1400 licensed merchant marine officers per year. With the notable exception of Michigan's Great Lakes Maritime Academy, though, most of these newly licensed merchant marine officers will sail only briefly on their licenses, if at all, and in time will lose not only their licenses but also the skills they had at graduation. As was dramatically demonstrated in WWII, with the right incentive the US can build

hundreds of ships with breathtaking speed. Training mariners to operate them, however, takes years, and the skills are perishable if not continually used.

Indications of the conscious national will required to effect any of the changes needed to embark on this option are not apparent at the present time. In the Commandant of the Coast Guard's 2023 State of the Coast Guard address, Admiral Linda Fagan's only mention of the US merchant marine was her promise to end sexual harassment on US flagged vessels. This is of course a non-negotiable goal, but, considering the dwindling size of the US flagged merchant fleet, not terribly ambitious. On the other hand, if it were part of a larger vision to revive the US merchant marine and ensure a safe working environment for the robust talent pool of mariners that will be needed, then the Commandant's promise would be of strategic significance.

The fact that political decision-makers prefer to focus on short-term solutions to immediate problems is nothing new. Revitalizing and reinventing an industry that has been permitted to decline for over fifty years requires a long-term solution to a problem that most Americans will not recognize until it is upon them. By the time they do, any likely solution will entail great cost and sacrifice. The US has a small window of opportunity to prevent the "Separate Silos" scenario, and possibly the others that project the US on its heels by 2040. Ruling the waves is hard and sometimes dangerous work. It requires investment and regulatory facilitation at the national level. Above all, it requires recognition of its importance to national security. It is hard work, but eminently preferable to the alternatives.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Article Five Is Now Killing the United States

Anton Schauble
May 31, 2023

Like any living thing, a society must learn to adapt if it is to survive. America's legal and constitutional system makes meaningful change extraordinarily difficult. This inability to change is choking America's ability to remain the vibrant republic which it once was and can still be.

Anation, like an animal, is a living thing. It changes, as does its environment change, and it must adapt to its internal and external environment if it is to survive.

“It is in changing that things find repose,” says the philosopher Heraclitus. The world that we live in is a world of flux, and things that resist this flux die. Mountain ranges wear down because they attempt to stand still against the wind and the rain. Biological life, which at first glance seems much more fleeting than geological features, has survived on this earth for billions of years while the mountains wear away. Land plants and the

Appalachian Mountains both formed in the same geological period, but now the Appalachians are eroded hills while plant life grows thick on top of them, eroding them further.

Without belaboring the point too much, we can say that life is not just change, but organized change, change according to a definite plan. An organism must react to its environment and modify itself and its behavior in order to survive, but it does so while preserving the nature that it has from birth. Even evolutionary history, which enacts no preconceived plan, does not simply change without direction. Mutation is without direction, but evolution is mutation guided by selection. This is why crustaceans turn into crabs, and mammals do not. What we will become is guided by the nature and the needs of what we are. What life enacts is not random change, but change that preserves its existence and, so to speak, mission. Deer developed antlers so that they could keep being deer.

To survive is to change

A state is like an animal, but it is most like that rational animal, man. It is capable of understanding its core principles and values and of planning and enacting deliberate change in order to live up to those values. We are not called to evolve blindly, but by deliberation and understanding to move forward into history with our eyes wide open. Using reason—our ability to conceptualize, to dialogue, and to plan—we humans do what all life does, but intentionally. And when we cease to do this, we die.

States die. Civilizations die. History is all too full of tales of the calamities, wars, and devastations that occurred when statesmen and citizens became either too complacent, too divided, or otherwise too unequipped to take account of reality and affect adequate change. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, infamously crippled

by the broad right of individual nobles to veto legislation, precipitating a humiliating and disastrous partition between its land-hungry neighbors and over a century of suffering for the Polish people. The same pattern has played out time and time again in human history from the dynasties of China to the republics of Latin America as corruption, factionalism, and poorly functioning political processes paralyze states, rendering them unable to reform.

I stand here with the strange privilege of living in one of the most successful and powerful states that have existed in the history of this planet, the United States of America. This country has astounded the world more than once with its capacity for innovation and dynamism, finding solutions hardly imagined by generations past. But there is a sickness in this country, an ideologization of what are taken to be our values that is slowly killing that dynamism, which is meant to come to the defense of our core values and is indeed one of them. What I am talking about is the notion, so much in vogue in the current popular discourse but so alien to the founders of this nation, that every jot and tittle of the Constitution—not only its principles and values, but the mechanisms that were originally crafted to enact those principles—is so imbued with the wisdom of that founding generation that it cannot be changed.

Everyone understands, perhaps, that on a basic level no commonwealth can exist very long without some change. “Even the barley-drink,” says our friend Heraclitus, “will separate if it is not stirred.” Yet was it not that same philosopher that admonished a republic to “fight for its laws as it does for its walls”? For what could protect it from upheavals of a social, economic, military nature or otherwise if, without its laws, it were no community of citizens but just an unorganized mob of men and women? Only a fool would argue for a nation with no respect for the laws that have

created it and guided it, but all the same it would be folly, too, to forget that it was reason that crafted those laws, and it is still reason—the reason of the living, communicating, rational animals that we are—that must judge those laws and modify them, in an orderly way and for the common good.

The United States has a legislation problem

American law is in many ways uniquely hard to change. Even ordinary legislation must pass through an intricate path of checks and balances in which, at every step of the way, there are barriers that can stop proposed legislation in its tracks. It may die in committee, fail to pass on the floor of the chambers of Congress which often operate on razor-thin partisan majorities, fail to achieve the agreement of the House and of the Senate, experience filibuster in the Senate, suffer veto by the president, and so on...it is a wonder that any laws ever get passed at all. Of course, this kind of legal process is going to be an essential part of lawmaking in any democracy, but the American process has so many choke points that it is far easier to kill a bill than it is to pass one.

This creates a bias in favor of old legislation rather than new legislation which is, on the face of it, irrational, since the time at which a law was crafted has no essential bearing on whether or not it is wisely framed. The new is not automatically better than the old, but neither is the old automatically better than the new. If old laws are to continue, it should be because human minds, in a legally structured process, have considered them and judged them prudent to continue, not because of an institutional structure so full of snags that the previous way of doing things is mindlessly approved simply because it is too difficult to do anything else.

“Ah,” I can hear the reply coming back, “but this is by design. A government that governs less

governs best, after all, and the founders intended to make it very difficult to pass new laws.”

If this is the founders' intent, it is ill-served by this mechanism. New laws do not always mean more government; indeed, there are good reasons to think that the growth of government can be fostered by the rigidity of laws, rather than hampered by them. More of this anon. But the more basic notion is this: if small government, or any other ideal that we prize, is to be the aim when we are deciding how to craft our laws, then we must do so consciously, keeping that ideal in mind when we make laws and adjusting every measure to best suit it. We can only do this consciously, not by trusting unconscious processes like legislative inflexibility to do the work for us. We must choose to be what we will be: A republic cannot better itself by hindering its own ability to make choices. Only a nation self-conscious of its own activity can keep itself free. Legislative snarls will not keep you free.

The most fundamental reason underlying the fact that unconscious processes will not keep one free, or serve very many other useful purposes, is that what is done unintentionally will inevitably have unintentional consequences. Of course, all human endeavors on this side of heaven will have unintentional consequences, but the surest way to multiply them is to hinder reason's ability to monitor, to anticipate, and to forestall negative events by assessing and readjusting its methods.

Legislation problem expands executive and judicial power

If Congress does not issue its own guidance in the form of laws, the president will find his own way. This leads to the expansion of executive power, about which enough ink has been spilled that I need not continue the subject here. The bureaucracy will find its own way, and what ought to have been laws, deliberated by civil society and

enacted by the people constitutionally empowered to make laws for the republic, instead become regulations, of dubious democratic merit and perhaps of opaque origin. The courts will find their own way, concocting in legal decisions directives which often have very little to do with the text, history, or intent of the laws that they claim to find their source in. But the executive and the courts are not simply being irrational or selfish. They are making do in a system where the direction that ought to be given by law is found lacking. And this is because the legislature cannot act.

I don't think either liberals or conservatives are thrilled with an imperial presidency or with judge-made law. Such channels can provide temporary wins, but each side can count just as many smarting losses. In the end the real loser is an America which is seeing her ability to deliberate clearly and openly and to make laws that best suit everyone weaken with every year.

Nowhere is this country's inability to legislate more acute than in that most vital legislation of all, our Constitution. Here, Article Five mandates that in order to make any change at all to the Constitution, in addition to proposal by a supermajority in both houses of Congress (aside from an alternative convention process which in 234 years has never been used), a proposed amendment must be ratified by a whopping three quarters of states or state conventions.

This extraordinarily high bar harkens back to the confederal origins of the union, in which the nation's first constitution behaved more like a treaty, requiring unanimity, than like the constitution of a republic. But the United States is a republic, in spite of the many and time-honored aspects of federalism that it possesses. It is conceived both by its own citizens and by the global community as a nation among nations, not a supranational organization, and as a nation it ought to have the constitution of one. It should be able to

decide its own destiny, by common as well as by fundamental law, and it should not be subjected to the levels of paralysis, often more reminiscent of the EU or even the UN, that do indeed more befit a treaty organization than a constitutional republic.

US constitutional law is in disarray. Judges and legal commentators, all the way up to the high court, seem torn between a rigid originalism which would tie the world's hegemonic power to the legislative framework framed for a league of thirteen recently liberated and mostly agrarian colonies, and a "living constitution" model which seems to be employing a biological metaphor not in support of an ordered and self-conscious development of a political community operating through rational laws, but to support the departure from those laws into a zone of individualistic, moralizing, often ad-hoc judicial oligarchy. Neither of these will do and indeed neither should we expect that any judicial philosophy should. The problem is not with those who interpret the laws, but with those who make the laws.

We need a different system. We need to stop hiding behind institutions and processes which no longer work for any of us as an excuse not to step up and take control of our future. We need to stop using processes as a way to bludgeon each other and exploit thin majorities which will inevitably reverse and learn to reason with each other and develop genuine consensus. Only genuine consensus can save us, and only genuine consensus is worthy of the kind of social and rational beings that we are.

I am proposing that we make amendments easier. What I am not proposing, however, is that some new clever set of norms and processes will make all of the difference. Ultimately, the change will not come from some new system but from a new mindset which will make new systems necessary. We need to start to talk to each other. And we need to listen.

Going down a dangerous path

In ancient times, the most powerful republic in the world was the one that belonged to the Romans, a people more famous for devotion to their laws and their constitutional customs than we. Through it all, the wisdom of the senate, the energy of the people, and the ingenuity of the magistrates guided Rome from a tiny vassal city to the Etruscans to a superpower that dominated the entire classical world. Its laws were singularly well-developed, intricate, and socially entrenched, but at the same time the republic—ultimately, unlike ours, a direct democracy—could modify its most basic laws with a single act of legislation, something it did time and time again to resolve the numerous social and military crises the city was beset with in its long history.

When the Roman democracy finally did come to an end, it was not because of its mechanisms of flexibility, but rather because of the degradation of them. The republic did not end because a demagogue whipped the people up into a fury and convinced them to vote away their democracy—although this sort of thing certainly can happen—but through a much longer, slower process of loss of political consensus-building, the increasing abuse of its institutions through partisan corruption and obstructionism, which eventually necessitated the use of illegal force as a brute substitute for consensus in order to stabilize the state.

After a century of strongmen—Sulla, Pompey, Caesar, Antony—tried and failed to use military authority to shore up a republic that no longer knew how to govern itself, the empire was founded when Octavian, using his personal prestige, took control ultimately not as a legally appointed dictator but as a private citizen granted extraordinary powers to do what the magistrates and the senate could not do. Even Tiberius, his successor, was surprised to find the senate so unwilling to govern that he was caused to continue

this unorthodox arrangement. Eventually, the imperial role would evolve into an unfettered despotism.

This is how a republic dies. When it forgets how to deliberate, it degenerates into political gamesmanship. When political gamesmanship degenerates, as it inevitably does, the door is opened to violence. And violence can only breed more violence.

We cannot allow this to happen. If we are to avoid this fate, we must learn how to legislate. And to do that, we must rediscover how to debate, and how to think.

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The Great Arctic Game Is Now in Full Swing

Atul Singh
May 09, 2023

The melting of polar ice caps opens up new opportunities for resource extraction and sea routes. This has sharpened rivalries between the US-led West and a China-backed Russia.

Tensions are increasing and so are the possibilities of conflict.

While all eyes are on Ukraine, the Arctic is heating up. On May 8, NATO kicked off “Formidable Shield,” a three-week military exercise. The exercise is intended to showcase the strength of the NATO alliance and its commitment to the defense of Europe.

As many as 13 NATO allied and partner nations with more than 20 ships, and 35 aircraft, including the F-35 fighter, and 4,000 personnel are participating in this exercise. As per the Pentagon “encompasses live-fire rehearsal events in a multidomain environment against subsonic, supersonic and ballistic targets.” In effect, this exercise is a shot across the bow of Russia.

Moscow has been active in the Arctic for decades. In 2007, two mini submarines (mini subs) planted a one meter-high titanium Russian flag more than two and a half miles beneath the North Pole. In a record-breaking dive, the mini subs Mir-1 and Mir-2 descended to 4,300 meters. In Moscow's words, this was “a serious, risky and heroic mission.”

Riches Under the Sea and Across it too

It is an open secret that global warming is accelerating and climate change is already upon us. NASA tells us that polar ice is melting dramatically and Greenland is losing about 270 billion tons per year. This is leading to sea level rise, which will be catastrophic for the likes of Bangladesh, Maldives and New Orleans but offers polar powers access to natural resources and new trade routes.

The Arctic has major reserves of oil and natural gas. Large quantities of minerals, including iron

ore, copper, nickel, zinc phosphates and diamonds, are also on offer. In 2008, the United States Geological Survey estimated “90 billion barrels of undiscovered, technically recoverable oil, 1,670 trillion cubic feet of technically recoverable natural gas, and 44 billion barrels of technically recoverable natural gas liquids in 25 geologically defined areas” in the Arctic.

The melting of the Arctic is also opening up new trans-Arctic routes, including the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the Northwest Passage (NWP). The NSR and NWP are shorter maritime routes. They offer an economic boost to Arctic economies. New ports, both hydrocarbon and military, are opening in the region. With such riches on offer, the US, Russia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland stand to gain.

Russia Ahead in Great Arctic Race

A great Arctic race is now on. As a resource-based economy that exports commodities, Moscow is taking the lead in the militarization and resource grab in the region. Elizabeth Buchanan, the author of *Red Arctic*, chronicles how Russia has cannily used “international rules for over two decades to secure its rights in the North Pole seabed.”

Russia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1997. Since then, Moscow has worked ceaselessly for the recognition of its claims to the extended continental shelf. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) has deemed the majority of Russia’s claims in the Arctic to be valid. This February, Moscow gained rights to an approximately 1.7 million square kilometers of seabed.

Russia has used international law to its advantage because UNCLOS allows coastal states to establish the outer limits of their continental

shelves beyond the limits of 200 nautical miles. The CLCS seeks scientific data and Russia has been diligent in providing this evidence. It also made its claims to the CLCS first. Danish (thanks to control of Greenland) and Canadian claims came later and might be a decade away from recognition. The US does not recognize UNCLOS and thus cannot make claims to the extended continental shelf.

While bolstering its legal claims, Russia has been building military strength in the Arctic. Last September, Reuters reported that “Russia has reopened tens of Arctic Soviet-era military bases, modernized its navy, and developed new hypersonic missiles designed to evade US sensors and defenses” since 2005. Russia's bases inside the Arctic Circle outnumber NATO’s by about a third and the West is at least ten years behind.

Russia has seven nuclear-powered icebreakers and around 30 diesel-powered ones. The US and China have just two diesel-powered icebreakers each in operation. The US is the global superpower but Russia is the Arctic superpower.

Apart from resources and sea routes, the Arctic offers some of the best places to station ground stations for satellites. One such place is the island of Svalbard off the Norwegian mainland. SvalSat in Svalbard downloads time-sensitive data from most of the world’s commercial and scientific satellites. In 2021 and 2022, fiber-optic cables on the Arctic seabed connecting the island and the mainland were severed. Norwegians suspect the Russians of sabotage.

Norway is not alone in worrying about Russia. In the 1939-40 war, Finland lost 11% of its territory to the Soviet Union, which was then led by Joseph Stalin. Finns view Russian President Vladimir Putin as a grave threat to national security. In their eyes, he has reverted to expansionism that characterized both Stalin and

the Tsars. In November 2022, Putin launched two nuclear-powered icebreakers capable of year-round navigation in the Western Arctic. Russian “Arctic power” is making its neighbors nervous. Exercises like Formidable Shield demonstrate that the US-led NATO can act in the Arctic.

The West Also Worries About China

China also has Arctic ambitions and claims to be a near-Arctic state. The United States Naval Institute tells us that “China is subtly installing a larger presence in the Arctic through an extensive partnership with Russia in areas ranging from multi-use ports and airfields to energy extraction.”

A Brookings paper tells us that Chinese President Xi Jinping and officials responsible for Arctic policy want their country to be a top polar power by 2030. They see this region as one of the “new strategic frontiers” where China can quench its thirst for energy and minerals. Some concerns about the future Chinese play for the Arctic seem overblown. What makes sense is that Chinese demand might fuel Russian supply.

The two countries are inching closer together even though China has not fully backed Russia on Ukraine. They have conducted naval exercises together in the Arctic. In 2021, Russian and Chinese ships circumnavigated Japan’s main island Honshu in a naval exercise of immense significance. China is the workshop of the world. Its demand for oil, natural gas and all the minerals under the Arctic is immense. It has the money to invest into Russian polar infrastructure from ports and naval vessels to pipelines and other infrastructure.

The opening up of trans-Arctic routes would allow these to be transported to Chinese ports at much cheaper rates than today. So, China has a stake in the Arctic and is therefore making a strategic bet by cozying up with Russia. Talk of

polar silk roads is rife. Together, Russia and China could make a formidable Eurasian alliance, especially in the Arctic, despite their rivalry in Central Asia and elsewhere.

What Lies Ahead?

In August 2017, the Russian tanker sailed from Norway to South Korea in 19 days without needing an icebreaker. This Arctic passage along the conventional route through the Suez Canal would have taken over 50 days. In 2018, The Economist opined that “the Arctic route has drawbacks: a navigation season of three to four months each year, unpredictable ice conditions, high insurance fees, costly specialised vessels, and a lack of search-and-rescue teams and support infrastructure.”

The increasing rate of the melting of the poles might mitigate these drawbacks. Furthermore, instability and piracy along the traditional routes, especially in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, might add costs to traditional shipping. The Suez Canal and the Straits of Malacca could clog up. For China, they are trade arteries that could be cut off. The Arctic passage is far better for Chinese national security.

With the Russians beefing up their military in the region and the Chinese bankrolling them, the Arctic is set to change. The other Arctic powers will not stand idly by. They will inevitably respond both diplomatically and militarily. The mood in Washington is already increasingly belligerent. In December 2022, Kenneth R. Rosen argued in Politico that a battle for the Arctic was already underway and the US was behind. As the US gears up and its allies join in, the Arctic will heat up further and become a new theater for potential conflict.

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The Hidden Gem of a Mid-Century Modern Church

William Softky
August 20, 2023

Half Moon Bay, CA, is home to one of the best examples of mid-century modern design in a Catholic church. Its swooping, curved lines capture the aesthetic of the age of aircraft. Sadly, this artistic history has little recognition, and it is in danger of being lost.

A fleeting but magnificent era of artistic history is the mid-century modern movement. It was an interlude of geometric simplicity and craftsmanship in the space between the stylishness of Art Deco of the 1920s-30s and the Jetsons-like space age vogue of the 1960s. It was the art of the era of aircraft.

Mid-century modern design is best known for furniture, among the best ever produced (like the curved writing desk, with a lip, at which I sit right now). Mid-century furniture flourished at the

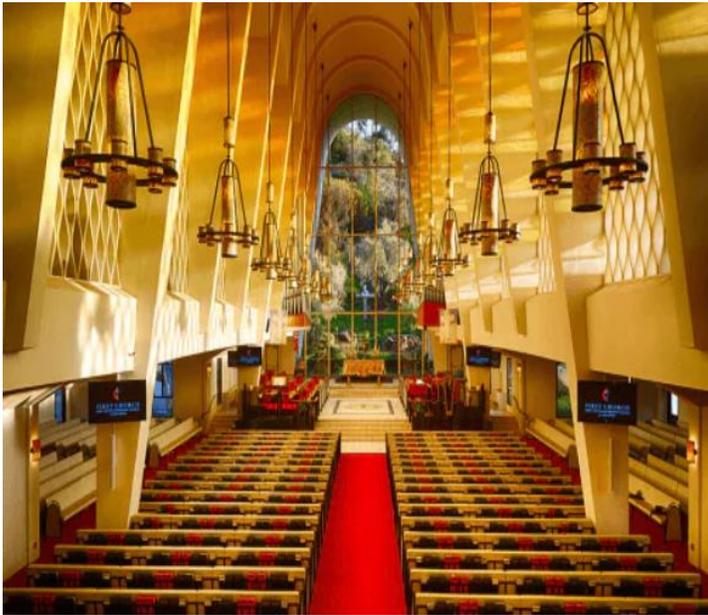
simultaneous peaks of aesthetic science, ergonomic design and new high-precision woodworking technology. Sadly, its slow death ensued with the plummet of profit margins and consumer discrimination. Designers like Charles and Ray Eames lost out to mass-produced furniture by Ikea and others.

Alongside furniture, however, mid-century aesthetics gave us amazing architecture and art—often both in one place. Every week I visit a stunning example, Our Lady of the Pillar Catholic Church in Half Moon Bay, California, affectionately known as OLP.

An unrecognized jewel

OLP is a mostly unknown, seaside country church with an intricate, curved interior of stained glass murals under a soaring aircraft-hanger roof. The choir at 10:00 AM Mass has only three people, of whom my wife Criscillia and I are two. I may be the only person there who recognizes OLP's unique artistic heritage, which is why I want to keep it as it is, and why I'm writing this.

Since OLP is unknown, let's compare it with an actually famous mid-century building, First United Methodist Church of San Diego. Here's what that church looks like inside:



Via fumesd.org

Note the curved barrel ceiling and angled supports, which bisect horizontal beams. The ends of the pews echo that parabolic art, as do the outlines of the chandeliers, shaped like rocket ships. In great buildings like this, as with those by architect Frank Lloyd Wright, motifs reappear across the floor, the furniture, the windows and the roof. Everything elegantly fits.

Now let's look at OLP. From the outside, it looks simple and boxy, a cross between a mission church and a high school gym (although the gardens are magnificent).



Via ourladyofthepillar.org

The inside of the church is a complete contrast. Curves dominate, a likely relation to the new age of aviation in the 1950s, when the church was built. At that time, San Francisco had just opened its international airport “over the hill”—this little town of Half Moon Bay, although just thirty kilometers south of San Francisco, was effectively isolated from San Francisco and the rest of the Bay Area by steep mountains. Half Moon Bay had gotten its own airport only a few years earlier, thanks to the Army and World War II.

Also south of San Francisco, but on the populated side of the mountains, was one of the largest buildings in the world, Hanger A at Moffett Field. The hanger was built in the 1930s to accommodate Zeppelins.



Via nasa.gov

The angled sides and curved roof of this giant hanger resemble a smoothed-off trapezoid.

Now let's look inside OLP:



There are actually three kinds of curved arch here: the most boxy is the wall/ceiling shape, then the wider arch, then the narrower arch whose perfect half-circle centers on the circle of the Virgin Mary's halo. That narrower arch has the same shape as the one in San Diego, as do the vertical struts bisecting horizontal beams.

The same curves appear looking from the altar towards the entrance. From this angle, the circular Rose Window is prominent. It carried over from the older church which this one replaced.



The chandeliers contain gentle arcs at their tops, echoing the arc motif seen in the roofline and the

stained-glass windows. Unusually, the curved flares of the cylinders imitate aircraft-engine cowlings, a separate invocation of aviation in addition to the aircraft-hanger shape.



So it looks to my amateur eye as if this tiny rural church contains several of the key motifs of the famous San Diego church, in particular the angled support columns, aircraft-hanger roofline and matching aircraft/rocket chandeliers. But here's the catch: OLP held its first mass in 1954, a full ten years before the San Diego church was built. The little rural church beat out the big famous one and perhaps even inspired it.

But what makes OLP so spectacular is the cycle of stained glass windows portraying eight frames of the Christian narrative. The windows incorporate circular arcs in the cartoonish, abstract mid-century style, a style that rarely depicts human figures.



1. The Annunciation. The arcs here intersect above Mary, as if forming the roof-beam of a church.

2. The Nativity of Jesus. Here the arcs intersect above as the beams of the manger, and below to cradle the baby.

3. The Three Wise Men bringing gifts. Here the arcs intersect to form the Star of Bethlehem

4. Jesus enthroned as Christ the King. The arcs form his crown:

5. Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit descends on the Apostles.

6. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The arcs here are palm leaves.

7. The Crucifixion. The arcs are asymmetrical, like a spiral.

8. The Angel of the Resurrection. The arcs form a sun:

Below, at eye-level with the congregation, is a very different view. There is a large stained-glass “mural” that depicts the Christian history of California and its missions. The same arc-shapes

that appear in the upper windows reappear as dividing shapes throughout the mural, but in muted blues and golds which match the original rose window. Note also the metal decoration wrapping the angled vertical beam, part of the metallic aviation theme.



My photographs do not do this church justice, and my dilettante’s knowledge of art and architecture should not be the last word on this gem box of a church. I sincerely hope that others more qualified will visit this beautiful place, to know what it is to sit, sing or worship inside a unified work of art.

OLP is a church, not a museum

But what if no one knows it’s art?

The photos above show the building, not the people. Lots of old people, yet enough newborns to coo together during service. Three different languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese. Rich and poor. And brought together recently through tragedy, when three church members were killed in a violent attack.

The congregation works hard on the church. A few years ago, when Covid first hit, construction-minded men jerry-rigged a giant tent in the parking

lot so Mass could be held outdoors. It was held there for two years. The services were the only continuous services in the area. OLP people also share a love of neat, bright decoration. The gardens are pretty and thriving, the festive fabrics stunning, the flowers always vibrant.

And therein lies the problem. Those abstract modern chandeliers don't have the bright and festive look most OLP folks like, and they're the ones who worship there. Over the last few years, congregants have renovated almost every element: the church now has a freshly painted ceiling, a new carpet, a new altar, new pews, restored paintings. Those rusty, abstract chandeliers are now the dullest elements in the building.

Some parishioners want to replace those old chandeliers with these brand-new ones:



These sparky new things don't match the old aesthetic, but many parishioners like them. It's possible that OLP, a perfect example of a bygone form of art, like other art before it, will slowly erode its coherence to serve the people who use it now. It's not just their right, it's their obligation to worship as they want. The church belongs to them,

not to history. But oh, what a wonderful history it is.

[[Throvnica Chandrasekar](#) and [Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***William Softky** is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming, and among the first technologists to build that understanding into algorithms. Thousands have cited his scientific work, his PhD in Theoretical Physics is from Caltech, his name is on 10 patents and two of the companies he inspired were acquired for \$160 million total.

US Emergency Departments Are Overstretched and Doctors Burned Out

Jennifer Wider
January 15, 2023

With gridlocked emergency departments, patients waiting for beds, doctors overwhelmed and exhausted, US healthcare is on the verge of a breakdown.

In recent months, emergency departments across the United States have been brought to their knees. A problem that became highlighted during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic is now seeping into the fabric of American hospital care with not enough inpatient beds, exhausted and burnt out doctors and nurses and staffing shortages almost universal.

Dr. Eric Dickson, president and CEO of UMass Memorial Health in Central Massachusetts told the *The Boston Globe*: “When health officials ordered an end to elective surgeries during Covid-19, it was understood to be temporary. The difference now is we don’t see the end. We’re not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. This isn’t a surge we’re dealing with. This is the new reality.”

Boarding is wrecking emergency departments

One significant cause of the trouble is something called boarding which occurs when a patient is held in the emergency department after they have been admitted to the hospital because there are no inpatient beds available. In a letter written to President Joseph Biden by more than 30 medical academies and national associations, including the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), the American Academy of Emergency Medicine (AAEM) and the Emergency Nurses Association, healthcare leaders implore the administration to recognize and address these most pressing issues. “Boarding has become its own public health emergency and our nation’s safety net is on the verge of breaking beyond repair.”

The letter goes on to outline the underlying issues caused by boarding, “while the causes of ED boarding are multifactorial, unprecedented and rising staffing shortages throughout the healthcare system have recently brought this issue to a crisis point, further spiraling the stress and burnout driving the current exodus of excellent physicians, nurses and other healthcare professionals.”

The winter months have brought this crisis to a head. In many parts of the United States, a “triple threat” of flu, Covid-19 surges and RSV or respiratory syncytial virus in the pediatric population is placing an insurmountable burden on the emergency departments across the country. The letter goes on to ask the President: “the undersigned organizations hereby urge the

Administration to convene a summit of stakeholders from across the healthcare system to identify immediate and long-term solutions to this urgent problem. The letter explains that the “breaking point” is completely outside the control of the workers and looks to the administration for help.

Doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers burnout

Another issue compounding the present crisis is healthcare worker burnout. The American Medical Association (AMA) recently released a study revealing that almost 63% of physicians felt burned out in 2021. And these statistics aren’t reserved solely for doctors; nurses, physician assistants, technicians and other healthcare workers are reporting similar burnout numbers. Feelings of burnout and being overwhelmed are plaguing the American health workforce and reflect a systemic breakdown in healthcare. According to Chrisine Sinsky, MD, AMA vice president of professional satisfaction: “While burnout manifests in individuals, it originates in systems.” Burnout is not the result of a deficiency in resiliency among physicians, rather it is due to the systems in which physicians work.”

The rate of burnout is a major contributing factor to staffing shortages and needs to be addressed. The letter addressed to President Biden recognizes this issue and calls for solutions: “Overcrowding and boarding in the emergency department is a significant and ever-growing contributor to physician and nurse burnout, as they must watch patients unnecessarily decompensate or die despite their best efforts to keep up with the growing flood of sicker and sicker patients coming in.”

Healthcare workers who experience burnout have a much higher rate of early retirement and/or leaving the practice of medicine altogether. It also

directly contributes to the loss of skilled healthcare professionals, adding more strain to those left behind. The letter states: “It is critical that we end the burnout cycle in the emergency departments to ensure our nation’s health care workforce can meet the needs of its patient population.”

It is quite clear what problems are facing the healthcare system in the United States. And with this crisis looming over the heads of millions of Americans, it will be imperative for the government and its agencies to recognize the scope of the problem and to act accordingly.

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WORLD

Should We Now Have the Right to Die?

Roberta Artemisia Campani
February 05, 2023

The first of this two-part article examines the privilege to die on our own terms. This is a personal reflection based on a real-life example of a close family member. I examine the legal, social and historical aspects of assisted suicide in Switzerland.

Switzerland, an Alpine island in the middle of the European continent, is a peculiar place. Not only do people find it normal to have four national languages, but it is also one of the few countries whose open-mindedness extends to allowing the practice of assisted suicide. Swiss citizens appear to be unique in that they can say what they want directly to their government, create organizations and associations, and even choose when and how to die.

Not that the law does not explicitly allow assisted suicide, but Article 115 of the Swiss Penal Code states that assisted suicide without self-interested motivation is not a crime. This means that if the person assisting the suicide is not doing it for her or his benefit, then she or he is not committing a crime.

I will explore the case of A-L to elucidate the Swiss position on assisted suicide. She was a real-life example of someone who wants to end her life surrounded by her loved ones.

A-L was 83 years old. She was the mother of two and the grandmother of three—my own two children and their older step-sister. A-L had been a physician since the late 1950s, specializing in children’s psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Until well into her 70s, she was an active member of the local psychoanalytical society, where she tutored numerous new psychoanalysts. Many of them remember her as a great teacher.

By 83, A-L was suffering from bone cancer. She had suffered breast cancer in her 40s. Perhaps the cancer returned after a few decades. A-L feared the onset of dementia, which afflicted her father and one of her brothers. She regularly spent weeks or months in hospitals. Her bones had turned brittle and broke easily. She should have been walking with a cane but complained “it got in the way.”

A-L wrote to an organization in her home canton of Geneva in Switzerland named Exit, asking for help. She hoped to end her life with dignity.

Death with dignity is a privilege, not a flawed liberal law.

In Switzerland, both the law and the relationship citizens have with institutions are very close and open. Many decisions and even paradigmatic changes are bottom-up rather than top-down, following well-established social and cultural practices. In theory at least, nothing is sacred. Everything can be openly criticized through referenda or popular initiatives. The downside is that any change takes a very long time to take place. Remember that Swiss women earned the right to vote only in 1971. Some characterize our political landscape as boring. We do not dramatize politicians' deeds and tribulations as much as other countries. Some of our federal counselors go to work on a bicycle or using public transport.

Still, aging and illness are present in every society. Every year, more than 1,000 people request the help of a few organizations to end their lives. The Federal Council and the parliament avoided clearly defining a law on assisted suicide in 2011 and 2012. They support mental health care, palliative end-of-life care and suicide prevention but consider that Swiss law and customs already provide enough elements to avoid abuses. The Federal Tribunal's judges stand their ground despite the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg suggesting that the Swiss make the laws more explicit.

In many ways, assisted suicide is an astonishing practice, counterintuitive for some and appalling for others. Swiss citizens mostly see it as humanistic, even humane, meaning it respects the human person. In this country, being "liberal" doesn't necessarily mean seeing every individual

as an island. Community ties are strong and cross many different domains, including one's church or a section of the Alpine Club. Grassroot organizations are an integral part of the political and social landscape.

Recently, Swiss-French Film director Jean-Luc Godard chose death with dignity, and it made the headlines in France and elsewhere. This led French President Emmanuel Macron to relaunch the debate on a new law for France in September 2022. This law would make assisted suicide a possibility. Many other cases of citizens asking for an amendment to the interdiction against assisted suicide have made the headlines in the past two decades. Some, from as far away as Australia — such as David Godall, a 104 year-old scientist — have traveled to Switzerland to access the privilege of a death in dignity.

How does it happen

A-L's daughter initially did not like the idea of her mother choosing assisted suicide. Still, after about a year and some conversations with her mother and her partner who was a retired physician, the daughter accepted the idea. A-L's son, my partner, agreed with his mother's decision from the beginning. She had gotten into the habit of spending time alone and sometimes with her companion whom she met after her husband passed away. On several occasions, we had to call the police to break in and see how she was doing in her apartment, as she could not reach the door or answer her phone.

We were not surprised when A-L announced her will to die in dignity. In the months following her demand, her health kept degrading. In the end, we took her into our home and made arrangements for nurses to see her in the mornings and evenings. We didn't know for how long and what kind of engagement her stay would become. During the spring of 2020, her health deteriorated again after a

fall and a long stay in the hospital. When she returned home, A-L rested for a couple of weeks and decided to go forward with her plan to end her life.

She called the association's volunteer and said she was ready.

An indefensible practice or the privilege of the ultimate choice?

Some detractors or adversaries find assisted suicide indefensible. They accuse Switzerland and other "liberal" countries of negligence. The long history and the genesis of the Swiss Penal Code gives us clues as to the country's cultural mindset. Alex Mauron, a professor of ethics at the University of Geneva, did a brilliant summary of the genesis of article 115 of the penal code, which was drafted during the second half of the 19th century but only enforced in 1937. The drafting was a painstaking deliberative exercise that was interrupted by World War I. Eventually, the consensual Swiss society came to accept the penal code and even embraced death with dignity.

In Christian Europe, suicide of any form was abhorred. Life is considered sacred. It is for this reason the Catholic Church still opposes abortion and even contraception. For centuries, anyone who committed suicide was denied burial in a church graveyard. Both l'ancien regime and the legendary French revolutionaries of 1789, prohibited suicide. It was considered a crime.

The Enlightenment questioned established values. The injunction against suicide gradually weakened. In the 19th century, suicide was decriminalized. Swiss legislators asked: if suicide was not a criminal act then could assisted suicide be acceptable as well?

Eventually, legislators came to the view that if the person assisting suicide had nothing to gain

from the dying person's death, then she or he was not committing a crime. Over time, assisted suicide has become an accepted practice in Switzerland. This is not to say everyone agrees with this practice. Healthcare professionals continue to question it.

The Académie Suisse des Sciences Médicales applies stricter criteria than those of civil society organizations that practice assisted suicide. Note that euthanasia is forbidden in the Swiss Penal Code. Article 114 clearly states: "Any person who for commendable motives, and in particular out of compassion for the victim, causes the death of a person at that person's own genuine and insistent request shall be liable to a custodial sentence not exceeding three years or to a monetary penalty."

As stated earlier, A-L had stage IV terminal bone cancer and various other ailments due to her age. When she decided upon assisted suicide, she wrote to Exit and became a member of the association. The organization asked A-L for her entire medical history. They examined all relevant documents and conducted a medical examination. A-L also had to write a letter by hand explicitly explaining her motivations.

A couple of weeks later, Exit sent a trained volunteer to speak with A-L and interview close family members to assess the situation. Once her demand had been approved, A-L could wait until she felt ready. This eased her anxiety to some degree. Her late husband MR had already chosen death with dignity five years earlier. He handled things independently, didn't ask anyone, and only informed everyone in his usual matter-of-fact manner when everything was already decided. He was also a physician and a psychoanalyst.

Jean-Jacques Bise, the co-president of the Association for Death with Dignity known as Exit, states that people who apply for assisted suicide and are accepted often "calm down" and don't get

back to Exit for quite some time. He reckons that the possibility of choosing one's death to be a peaceful one surrounded by those one feels safe with can make the end of life more serene.

The picture that Bise paints is best captured in the documentary *Le Choix de Jean* (2005). We see a middle-aged Swiss man from the canton of Fribourg who has chosen assisted suicide after a long and sadly fruitless battle with brain cancer. This long-suffering man says that he fears collapsing on the street among strangers. Instead, he would much rather die in his bed in the presence of his wife before life becomes too hard for both of them. His wife says that she would support whatever he chooses. Choice in Switzerland in life and to end life is accepted both socially and legally.

***Roberta Campani** looks after business development at Fair Observer. She studied philosophy, history and linguistics at the University of Bologna before researching the Rwandan genocide. Roberta worked for a few years in an internet start-up as a marketing and business development assistant.

An Allegory About Unidentified Floating Objects

Ran Chakrabarti
August 04, 2023

With the recent headlines about UFOs, Ran Chakrabarti offers a playful reimagining of a civilization's encounter with mysterious travelers set in 16th-century Mexico.

With Congress recently hearing testimony from whistleblower David Grusch and retired navy pilots David Fravor and Ryan Graves in relation to strange goings-on in the skies and the alleged retrieval of crashed objects and “biologics” from other worlds, this author dug around in the archive to assess whether we've been here before; and what the potential consequences might be.

Tenochtitlán. Thursday, January 23, 1519.

Mayan fishermen have been reporting unidentified floating objects (UFOs) for quite some time now. These mysterious objects, often with pointed protrusions and white, flexible material have been spotted with increasing frequency by coastal dwellers on the eastern seaboard ever since the early part of 1493.

“We don't know what they are, but they appear, often on the horizon for some time,” Ixpiyacoc, a fisherman from a small coastal town on the Yucatán peninsula told our reporter. “Then they disappear, like magic.”

“But it's the stories of white men coming ashore with metal hats that really strike fear of the unknown into our hearts,” he continued, looking visibly shaken.

Back in the empire, the Aztec government takes a very different view on the matter and denies the reports. “Unidentified floating objects are just a figment of people's imagination,” said a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense in the capital, Tenochtitlán.

“These UFOs are total nonsense,” a leading scientist employed by the Ministry of Technology was quoted as saying. “We are alone on this planet, and it's flat,” he continued.

But others are more troubled by the possibility that there could be life elsewhere on the earth and that it may be hostile. They have cautioned about the possibility of contact with other forms of intelligent life.

“Twenty years ago, we cast out a message in a clay pot from the shores of our land,” said Camaxtli, head of the Aztec Search for Terrestrial Intelligence. “Who knows whether it will ever be found by intelligent life? We just don’t know how vast the ocean is, and what’s at the other end of it,” he continued. “Whether it’s endless and stretches to infinity, we’ll just never know.”

But just what did that pot contain? “We spent a lot of time thinking what to write on the parchment and whether other forms of intelligent life would understand our phonetic glyphs,” Camaxtli explained. “So we settled with pictograms of who we are and where we come from and the stars that we can see in the sky.”

However, there are those that are deeply concerned about the consequences of the pot-throwing act.

“Imagine, if someone finds it: they come; they might want our gold, our women, our men, our natural resources, our livestock. We could be enslaved,” said a wise old man who spoke to us anonymously. “I think it was a pretty stupid thing to do, and who knows who might pick up the message?”

But the mystery doesn’t stop there. Mayan conspiracy theorists from the Yucatán peninsula talk openly about a recent meeting between their leaders and “them.” Some Aztecs have reported similar happenings.

“There are some who say that Aztec ruler, Moctezuma has already met with the strangers from elsewhere,” said an official in the Aztec

government on condition of anonymity, fueling rumors that the Aztec government met with life forms from elsewhere on the beaches near the town of Cempoala.

“There are eyewitness accounts that Moctezuma met with six tall white men with beards. They rowed ashore from this strange wooden contraption called a ship, the likes of which we had never seen before,” the official continued. “Our delegation was in a state of total confusion and awe as the leader of their delegation gave them gifts and then demonstrated the power of an object that spat fire and metal balls.”

“It was extraordinary,” he continued, “The delegation took off their metal headpieces and spoke in a strange language that we could not understand and offered us a thing called ‘Christianity’ in return for our gold and silver.”

After the meeting, the Aztecs were promised one of these Unidentified Floating Objects (otherwise known as ‘ships’) and Aztec scientists are trying to reverse engineer the technology.

“Those who’ve allegedly seen these ‘ships’ just can’t believe the complexity of the engineering,” said the official. “How they manage to cross the ocean is just unbelievable.”

Many others regard these claims as completely preposterous. “If these white people exist, then why don’t they come down in front of the great pyramid at Tenochtitlán and show themselves to the world?” a skeptical Aztec elder said.

Others have a more sophisticated argument.

“Traveling beyond the speed of a paddle canoe is just not physically possible,” a leading witch doctor at the Center for Human Sacrifice went on the record as stating. “These ships just don’t exist, they can’t exist and it would defy the laws of nature if they did,” he dismissively asserted.

But some Aztec government insiders think otherwise. Internal documents seen by our reporters suggest that there could be up to 4 different species of ‘white man’ who organize themselves in what are known as ‘empires.’ While they look similar to us, they are much taller, speak in strange tongues and are obsessed with the extraction of natural resources.

Those few who allege a first-hand encounter with them tell stories that they ride on animals with four legs, which are up to five feet high.

“It was terrifying,” said an Aztec woman from the town of Texcoco to our reporter in confidence. “I was abducted by four of them who appeared from nowhere on these white four-legged beasts,” she revealed under hypnosis.

While many dismiss the phenomenon, leaked reports suggest that the Aztec government is taking the sightings very, very seriously.

“There are reports that have been leaked from the Ministry of Defense that a tall white man was found dead, washed up on the shores of the Yucatán peninsula,” village elder Quetzalxochitl told our reporters. “Nobody knows how he got there, but the rumor is that they found a strange wooden object with a metallic barrel and a trigger mechanism.”

“They also allegedly found parchment with interesting shapes inscribed across it that potentially relate to our phonetic glyphs,” he continued “but nobody so far has been able to decipher what it means.”

Allegedly, the body of the man, the strange wooden object with the metal barrel and the parchment were rushed off to a secret Aztec research facility near Tenochtitlán and examined by a high-level committee comprising, amongst

others, the Minister of Defense and the Chief Priest.

“We’ve seen a leaked transcript of the record of that meeting,” Tupac, an investigative reporter at the Tlacōpan Times, told our correspondents. “Apparently, opinion was divided. Some thought that the artifacts and the alien body were dangerous; others thought that they could be a source of great enlightenment and expressed amazement over the script on the parchment.”

“What’s really interesting about the transcript though,” Tupac continued, “was that the Minister of Defense thought that the wooden object with the metal barrel might somehow be useful against the Tlaxcaltecs.”

“It’s also clear from the transcript that the High Priest expressed reservations about the findings,” Tupac said. “The High Priest remarked, ‘What happens if this parchment leads to the erosion of our belief system and the structures that support it?’”

Others that we spoke to, however, stress that the transcript is a fake and that the event never happened. They deny that the Aztec government is in possession of the body of a white man and there is any wooden artifact with a metal barrel or any parchment with strange writing on it.

“It’s all nonsense,” laughed General Tezcacoatl with a coy smile. “The leaked transcript is a clear forgery: you can tell by the error in the way that it is dated. It’s the wrong format. We use day, month, year, and not month, day, year,” he continued.

But notwithstanding the best efforts of the Aztec government to gloss over this strange phenomenon, the chattering classes seem to be hooked on the idea of these strange white men and how they might arrange themselves in society.

“It’s a discussion we often see in the marketplace when they go and buy their corn and beans,” local merchant Ichtaca told our reporter “But I think that these guys have just been drinking too much of that potent intoxicant, xocotātl,” he suggested dismissively.

“The implications are potentially enormous,” a professor at an independent educational institution said, on condition of anonymity. “Apart from the obvious stuff in relation to technology and security, we just don’t have a theory of knowledge that is flexible enough to explain change,” he mused. “For that, my hunch is that we are going to have to wait another 200,000 daily cycles of the sun, if (and it’s a big if) the prophecy of Thomas Kuhn writing a script called ‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’ is accurate,” he added.

“Just think what it would do to all our belief systems. It could turn people against the Aztec gods. If they started to think for themselves and question their own existence amongst other, more superior beings, it could be chaos,” he pondered further.

Meanwhile, the Aztec government continues to refuse to disclose their records on the matter, saying that Unidentified Floating Objects don’t exist and are not a threat to Aztecs.

“Look, if these so-called ‘ships’ and ‘white men’ exist, and they can sail the vast oceans, they would have taken over us by now,” a leading Aztec prophet said to our reporters.

“Take a look around you, where are they?” he said, with total confidence.

Reporting by Tochtli and Ixtl on the ground

Edited by Icnoyotl in our Tenochtitlán bureau.

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[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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What Good Is China's New BRICS For Brazil And India?

Helder Ferreira do Vale
September 08, 2023

By funneling its own authoritarian friends into BRICS, China has made clear that it is in charge of the group. Brazil and India now have to ask themselves: What is the use of a club of autocracies that does so little for them?

The main outcome of the 15th BRICS summit this August was the enlargement of the group. Six new members — Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — will join BRICS in January 2024, a move that reveals the ambitions and limitations of a group that serves as a thermometer to the shifting global political order.

This first wave of BRICS enlargement was riven with tensions. While China favored the diffusion

of its influence through the enlargement of the group, Brazil and India had pushed back against enlargement. They were more interested in deepening coordination between the existing members.

Although diplomatic coordination was never easy within BRICS, the group's founding members used to share the objective of counterbalancing Western dominance. However, this shared objective has been shattered with the recent group's enlargement.

China in charge

The manner and selection of countries for the enlargement of BRICS made clear China's unchallenged ability to transform the group as an agent of an increasingly Chinese-led emerging global order. The selection of several autocracies as new members is telling of China's view of how the global order should be shaped: an ad-hoc multilateralism that aids its own global ambitions.

With this autocratic turn of BRICS, the group's previous rhetoric of reformism of global institutions is now replaced by a new narrative. China sees BRICS as a way to promote a global governance model that downplays liberal-democratic values and weakens the global rules-based order. As BRICS turns autocratic, the bloc is likely to start opposing US influence more emphatically, and Brazil and India will be isolated within the group.

Brazil and India's acquiescence to the enlargement of BRICS has been possible with China's support to the permanent membership of both countries in the UN Security Council. Brazil and India were never shy about their dream to permanently sit in the UN Security Council. However, neither country had imagined that China's support for their entry into the UN's

selective club would result in their diminished influence in BRICS.

Two democracies in an authoritarian club

Unlike their autocratic fellow members of BRICS (both old and new), Brazil and India have a natural inclination to embrace the principles of equality and liberty both domestically and internationally. These principles, or the lack thereof, determine how democratic or autocratic regimes govern their countries, and, as a result, how they shape their foreign policies.

BRICS until now lacked an ideological or political orientation. What seemed to hold these countries together, apart from being large and prosperous emerging economies, was the shared experience (except for Russia) of colonialism and economic dependence. This experience is no longer enough to keep BRICS united. Brazil and India have made democratic governance part of their development as nation-states. The road towards democratic development has been tortuous, but Brazil and India have both succeeded in embracing democratic methods to guide their domestic governance and their international behavior.

Under democracy, Brazil and India have prospered greatly, achieving impressive levels of economic development. These countries increased their human capital with more educated populations and reduced poverty and inequality, although slowly, over the past decades. Indeed, democracy has given these countries the opportunity to shine globally.

As democratic reformers of the fragile liberal order, Brazil and India will continue their efforts to become more influential in international multilateral institutions. And if these institutions welcome both countries by giving them more relevance, Brazil and India's level of commitment

to the now-autocratic BRICS will wane. In the meantime, BRICS will become the dream group of autocrats who want to find political and economic support in an increasingly chaotic international arena.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Is the Gold Standard Now Alive or Dead?

Alex Gloy
January 06, 2023

The current monetary system is unsustainable. The Bretton Woods gold standard system collapsed. Can another form of gold standard make a comeback?

For the first time in 40 years, inflation has spiked in developed markets, reaching double digits in many countries. Calls for a return to a gold standard are getting louder. The list of supporters includes names such as former US president Donald Trump, the American

Institute for Economic Research, and US politician Ron Paul. In 2022, US Congressman Alexander Mooney went as far as introducing a bill to “define the dollar as a fixed weight of gold”.

Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, in a 2016 interview stated “If we went back to the gold standard as it existed prior to 1913 it would be fun. Remember that the period 1873 to 1913 was one of the most progressive periods economically that we have had in the United States.”

Current chairman Jerome Powell, however, does not think a return to the gold standard would be a good idea. Economist John Maynard Keynes famously referred to gold as a “barbarous relic,” which was no longer needed as a backing for currency.

What is a gold standard and why is gold valuable?

A gold standard is a monetary system where a country’s currency has its value linked to gold. This can be done directly, by setting a fixed price of gold to the dollar, or indirectly, by other currencies setting a fixed price in relation to the dollar, thereby linking indirectly to gold. One could imagine a full gold standard, where 100% of paper money issued must be backed by gold. Another option is a partial backing, covering only a fraction of money supply that is backed by gold. Under the Bretton Woods currency system, only non-US official holders of dollars (i.e. central banks) were able to exchange dollars into gold at the fixed price of \$35 per ounce. Private ownership of gold in the US was outlawed under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933. President Ford legalized gold ownership in 1974.

The amount of above-ground gold is limited (estimated around 200,000 tonnes). The amount of gold contained in ores has been declining as most

rich deposits have been exploited. The average grade of gold mines has fallen to 1 to 5 grams per ton. Large amounts of energy are needed (to crush and transport rock, for example), limiting how much gold can be economically mined. Over the past decade, annual mining output ranged from 2,800–3,600 tonnes, adding less than two percent annually to the stock of gold available.

and cons of a gold standard

The idea behind a gold standard is to ensure a stable currency that is the bedrock of a well-functioning economy. A currency collapse impoverishes large sections of the population. This could lead to political extremism, and, ultimately, threaten democracy. Historians point out how hyperinflation in Germany led to the rise of Nazis.

There are several advantages to a gold standard, which are as follows:

1. Linking the growth of money supply to the growth of gold stocks would keep inflation in check, thereby ensuring monetary stability.
2. Government spending would be limited to the amount of tax receipts. Any deficit financing via debt issuance would require additional gold.
3. Central banks would be immune from political pressure as the amount of money in circulation is determined by gold.

However, there are considerable drawbacks, which are as follows:

1. Under a gold standard, growth of money in circulation would be severely restricted and could suffocate economic growth.
2. Fixed supply of money would be deflationary, and most likely lead to a

period of depression with bankruptcies and high unemployment.

3. The expansion of money supply would depend on successful gold mining operations and continued investment in exploration of new deposits.
4. Gold standards in the past might only have worked because the stock of existing gold was much lower. So an increase in the stock of gold was possible. The 46% growth rate of gold stock between 1900 and 1909 would be impossible to repeat today.
5. Policy makers would be unable to respond to economic shocks.
6. Not all countries have equal access to gold for lack of gold mines or existing reserves.
7. International trade deficits, if settled in gold, would, over time, lead to a depletion of gold reserves, leading to a balance of payments crisis coupled with the inability to pay for critical imports.
8. In the (unlikely) event that the amount of gold available would allow for additional debt to be issued, who would be entitled to do so? The government? Banks? Households? Who would decide on who has access to fresh debt?

The problem with a gold standard

In August 1971, US President Richard Nixon “temporarily” suspended the convertibility of the US dollar into gold, effectively ending the gold standard. Since then, the total amount of US dollar debt outstanding has increased from \$1.6 billion to \$92 trillion — an annual expansion rate of 8%. During the same time, gross domestic product (GDP) has grown from \$1.1 billion to \$25.7 trillion, an annual increase of 5.8%. Debt,

synonymous with “money,” is growing faster than GDP.

Most economic activity is dependent on the availability of credit. An increase of average 30-year mortgage rates in the US from 2.7% at the end of 2020 to over 7% in October 2022 has led to a decrease in existing home sales from 6.5 million to 4.1 million, a 36% reduction. Potential homeowners without access to debt would have to accumulate the entire purchase price through savings for an “all-cash” deal, which would exclude most people from being able to afford a home in their lifetime.

Proponents often counter that a gold standard could be flexible, with adjustments of the amount of gold backing (downwards) or the price of gold (upwards, hence devaluing the currency) as necessary. But how would that be different from the current system? A flexible gold standard would let imbalances accumulate over time, require large adjustments, introduce speculation, financial friction, and potentially unintended consequences. The cure could turn out to be worse than the disease.

The current monetary system is unsustainable

The current fiat monetary system seems unsustainable in the long run, for mathematical reasons.

First, it is impossible to create money without simultaneously creating an equal amount of debt. The current system is “damned” to increase debt continuously to enable the economy to grow. Given positive interest rates, debt with interest owed is an exponential function (interest on interest in subsequent periods), which is a problem in a world of finite resources.

Second, the marginal utility of debt has decreased as debt levels increased. Since 2007, US

GDP increased by \$11 trillion, while the amount of debt outstanding grew by \$40 trillion. In other words, an additional dollar of debt generates only 27 cents of additional GDP. Interest on debt is owed annually (and increases the debt pile), while GDP resets on January 1st to zero. It gets harder and harder to generate additional GDP with additional debt.

Third, the amount of interest due on rising debt levels is reaching dangerous levels. According to the Institute of International Finance (IIF), the global ratio of debt to GDP stands at 343%. If we (generously) assume an interest rate of three percent, more than 10% of GDP is siphoned off the economy for interest payments – every year. This does not even include repayment of principal.

Is return to the gold standard inevitable?

Would a crisis or collapse in the current system open the way for a return to the gold standard? Central banks, while denying gold had any monetary function, still hold more than 36,000 tonnes of gold valued at more than \$2 trillion at current market prices (\$1,838 per ounce; 1 metric tonne = 32,150.75 troy ounces). Central banks reduced their gold holdings from 1968 to 2008. Interestingly, gold sales ceased after the “Great Financial Crisis” of 2008/9, and central banks began purchasing between 250 and 750 tonnes annually.

Over the past two decades, purchases have been led by countries mostly outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), led by Russia (1,875 tonnes), China (1,447 tonnes), India (428 tonnes), Turkey (373 tonnes) and Kazakhstan (324 tonnes).

In absolute terms, the largest holders of gold are the US (8,133 tonnes), Germany (3,355 tonnes), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), (2,814 tonnes), Italy (2,452 tonnes) and France (2,437

tonnes), mostly “old world” countries. Members of the euro-area, including the European Central Bank (ECB), hold a combined 10,771 tonnes. But none of those countries are adding to their holdings, since doing so could signal to markets a dwindling confidence in their own currencies. Emerging market economies have, in absolute terms and relative to GDP, to catch up to developed ones.

The advantage of gold holdings is evident: in a currency crisis, a central bank could arbitrarily set a (dramatically increased) gold price, thereby realizing a large revaluation gain on existing gold holdings. Euro-area central banks could, for example, by raising the price of gold ten-fold, generate a book gain of roughly 6 trillion euros. In a recent interview, Klaas Knot, Governor of the Central Bank of the Netherlands, suggested gold revaluation as a tool to remedy any solvency crisis.

As a bonus, gold revaluation would lead to windfall profits at private owners, potentially providing consumers with a boost in otherwise dire economic circumstances. According to reports, German citizens privately hold more gold than the Bundesbank, Germany’s central bank.

For the US, the outcome is less clear. Data on private ownership of gold in the US is not available. The Federal Reserve, unbeknown to most, does not own any gold. The Gold Reserve Act of 1934 required it to transfer all of its gold to the Treasury. In exchange, the Fed received a “non-redeemable gold certificate,” valued at the “statuary” gold price of \$42.22 per ounce, a fraction of today’s market price (\$1,838 per ounce). The Fed is “owed” 261 million ounces, but only at the book value of \$11 billion, due to the mandatory gold price of \$42.22. More than 75% of US gold is actually controlled by the military, as it is stored at West Point and Fort Knox.

The European Central Bank (ECB), on the other hand, values its gold at market prices (currently worth around EUR 600 billion, about \$633 billion), listing it above all other assets. The ECB is free to sell or buy gold in the market.

The Federal Reserve cannot sell any gold since it does not own any. It might also have difficulties buying gold at market prices since this would, due to the above-mentioned mandatory gold price of \$42.22, create an immediate loss on the position.

The Fed’s hands are tied regarding gold. As the issuer of the world’s reserve currency, demonetizing gold was necessary for the dollar to replace gold as prime reserve asset for central banks around the world.

This reveals a fundamental rift across the Atlantic Ocean: European central bankers are, albeit covertly, gold-friendly, the Federal Reserve is not. The former is ready to use gold as a tool to recapitalize its central bank (and subsequently commercial banks), while the latter is not.

In case of a break-down of the current monetary system, an international conference (akin to Bretton Woods) would unlikely be able to agree on a common position on the role of gold. This would signify the end of the dollar as the world’s reserve currency. In the ensuing turmoil, market participants would value currencies issued by central banks with sufficient gold holdings. Central banks will not revert to a gold standard, given before mentioned disadvantages, but use their revalued holdings to restore confidence in the continued use of paper currencies.

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How I Got Students to Accept ChatGPT as a New Classmate

Peter Isackson
March 19, 2023

In a course on geopolitics at IIT Gandhinagar (India) at the beginning of the year, I invited ChatGPT to join us as an anthropomorphized member of the class. The students discovered that AI's input can be used not only profitably, to get things done, but also creatively. Can we dare to hope that what is essentially mechanically constructed discourse will prompt humans to engage in real dialogue with one another?

This January and February, I had the opportunity of teaching a 20-hour course in geopolitics at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar (IITGN). I called the course: "From the Cold War to a Multipolar World: the Future of Globalization." The world order is undergoing a major transition before our very eyes. This seemed like the perfect moment to launch such a course that bridges the past, present and future.

The Ukraine conflict and the various largely unplanned for geopolitical movements it has provoked stands as the emblematic event of the year 2022. The events of January and February, culminating with Russia's invasion of the neighboring state, accelerated a movement of

uncomfortable realignment that has long been underway. But another event, this time at the end of 2022, signaled a very different but equally tectonic disruption that, like the clash in Eastern Europe, has also been long in the making. ChatGPT exploded onto our computer screens, provoking a flurry of both admiring and worried news coverage accompanied by a wave of panic in the universe of academia I was about to return to.

IIT Gandhinagar is, as its name indicates, an institute of technology. That means most of my students were doing technology or engineering degrees. My course belonged in the less significant realm of the humanities. Because of the nature of their studies, the students tended to be acutely aware of the emerging technologies now actively transforming traditional human activities and challenging many institutional practices. We are witnessing what some see as an assault on the organic reality of the material world. Our physical, social and mental world is turning into something that can only be called hybrid, if not bionic. Certain technology promoters and media pundits, especially on the west coast of the United States, have long predicted that we are all destined to become cyborgs.

AI's sudden intrusion into our daily lives

ChatGPT publicly launched in November of last year. The media immediately perceived the panic spreading through academia about this insidious generator of undetectable cheating. In December, I decided that the best strategy consisted of confronting the challenge head-on. I was determined to find a way of integrating ChatGPT into the course, as something to think about and eventually wrestle with, rather than banning it or pretending it didn't exist. At the very least, I wanted to bring the tool and everything it represents into the discussion from day one, to identify it as something more worthy of our curiosity than fear. Even before arriving at any

kind of coherent strategy, I was convinced that working together we could find a collective way of dealing with it.

In the first weeks in Gandhinagar, I got some unsolicited help from the academic community at IIT. I discovered an atmosphere in which dialogue and intellectual exchange are encouraged. The faculty's email discussion group had already jumped into the fray. With some background in the area of technology-enhanced learning, I joined the debate. We compared experience and ideas. It was thanks to that faculty-wide discussion initiated by the dean of humanities and social sciences, Jaison Mangaly, that I was emboldened to suggest the idea of actually assigning the use of ChatGPT and making the students accountable for the gap between human and artificial intelligence. If nothing else, it would have the effect of differentiating the authentic voice of our students as sentient beings from the obviously inauthentic voice of ChatGPT. With that in mind, I set about redesigning my pedagogical strategy for my course.

My original idea back in December was simply to demonstrate to the students from day one that I had myself begun exploring the tool and was familiar with its features and capacity. At the same time, I wanted to show that in no way did I consider it to be threatening. I felt it was important at this stage to find a simple way of demonstrating both my appreciation of the AI tool's very real power and what it can bring to the learning process, on the one hand, and what seemed to me to be its obvious limits.

But first, a children's poem to get things started!

After a few introductory words to situate what geopolitics is (the ongoing story of a very complex world) and isn't (a study of precise historical events), I chose to surprise the students with an

exercise that appeared to be as remote as possible from the high seriousness of the course's title. I asked individuals in the class to read aloud the successive stanzas of Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter," a poem that appears in the second Alice book: *Through the Looking Glass*. The students could not help but wonder why a deliberately nonsensical 19th century poem presumably intended for children was serving as an introduction to the theme of globalization and multipolarity.

Once the students had been exposed to the story of two obviously very British characters walking along an unfamiliar beach and then cajoling a bed of oysters to trot along with them in genteel conversation before expeditiously devouring the colony of mollusks for dinner, I asked the students to think about whether the poem was simply, as it appeared to be, a fun example of Carrollian nonsense or possibly something else.

The next step was to remind them of the precise historical context at the time of the poem's publication (1871). It happened to correspond to a historical moment with which the Indian nation still has a few strong associations. To make things clear, we looked at the events that followed from the 1857 "sepoy mutiny," or the first war of independence.

I then suggested that there might have been a connection in the author's mind with what he knew about his nation's colonial practices at the time. Could it have had any bearing on Carroll's conception of the roles of these two Englishmen? What sort of person was the fat walrus? And what about the enterprising, technologically up-to-date carpenter, who "shed a bitter tear" when he realized that all his organizational skill might not be sufficient to clear the beach of its "quantities of sand?"

Once the students had begun thinking about who these two Englishmen were and what mission they might be trying to accomplish as they strode along the beach, the question then arose as to the identity of the oysters. The poem tells us that “eldest” (and wisest) contumaciously resisted the blandishment of their visitors. But their resistance was to no avail. Quickly multiple groups of “young Oysters” adhered to the project proposed by the strangers. (Carroll’s capitalizing of the word “Oysters” suggests that he was endowing them with the status of an ethnic group).

The dismal treatment by the Englishmen of the Oysters they had befriended can suggest parallels in European imperial geopolitics of Carroll’s time. Whether that was what he was thinking privately, or whether he intended readers to notice the parallels no one will ever know. But literary investigation – just like scientific empiricism and Sherlock Holmes’s style of criminology – requires exploring very real possibilities and not discounting them without good reason. Holmes stated the principle clearly: “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

To bring home my point that Carroll may have been alluding to contemporary reality, I returned to the first stanza, fraught with the outrageous absurdity of self-contradictory nonsense.

"The sun was shining on the sea,

Shining with all his might:

He did his very best to make

The billows smooth and bright —

And this was odd, because it was

The middle of the night.”

That stanza was clearly designed to provoke laughter. The effect is very similar to the American composer Stephen Foster’s famous lines in his song *Oh, Susanna* (from the same epoch). “it rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry. The sun so hot I froze to death, *Susanna* don’t you cry.”

Who wouldn’t agree that writing such lines must have been done in good fun? Absurdity for absurdity’s sake. A chuckle, if not a raucous laugh is the guaranteed reaction. Highlighting the nonsensical nature of the lines, I then asked my class this question: Does the idea of the sun shining at midnight ring any historical bells, especially ones that might concern Carroll’s 19th century? It didn’t take long for one of the students to remember the cliché, current at the time of Carroll’s writing: “The sun never sets on the British empire.” Was this Carroll’s game? Could the poem really have contained an allusion to British geopolitics?

Literature, complex messages and the importance of linguistic analysis

Many have claimed that Stephen Foster’s song, “*O Susanna*,” whose lyrics originally prominently contained the dreaded “n-word,” may well have been racist, reflecting Foster’s own possible racism. The lyrics of the second stanza read: “I jumped aboard the telegraph, and traveled down the river,/Electric fluid magnified, and killed five hundred Ni—er.” It’s worth pointing out that leaving “Ni—er” in the singular but meaning the plural magnifies the sense of racism, since it evokes the way hunters talk about animals.

If Stephen Foster’s lyrics reveal him to feel comfortable with the ambient racism of his era, is it reasonable to think that Carroll’s text may reflect his awareness of and discomfort with imperial forms of racism? Alice clearly condemns their outrageous behavior, but given her age, no one

would expect her to make the connection with the way the British were dealing with conquered populations overseas. Adult readers aware of history, on the other hand, might make that precise connection. If such a thing is not impossible, Holmes would say “it must be the truth,” or at least a possible truth.

In the context of the course, the major point I was making by getting the students to read the poem aloud was that in geopolitics, just as in literature, we should always be ready delve below the surface of any text, including official political and even diplomatic discourse. We should never be satisfied with the superficial, literal meaning of official policy.

Whether the subject is geopolitics or nuclear physics, as the great physicist David Bohm pointed out in his book, *Science, Order and Creativity*, meaning exists at many levels and should be explored through its multiple dimensions and varying perspectives. In all human discourse, some meaning is hidden, some disguised and a lot of it – especially when the discourse is intended for the public –perceived and processed unconsciously and uncritically. My regular *Daily Devil’s Dictionary* columns in *Fair Observer* have all been dedicated to guiding readers of the news to understand that words – to quote Carroll’s *Humpty-Dumpty* – are slippery beasts: “ “When I use a word” Humpty told Alice, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.” Except, of course, Carroll’s point is that meaning will always surpass any specific intention and Humpty’s belief in his control of meaning is both presumptuous and illusory.

From Alice to AI’s wonderland

At this point I still hadn’t quite finished with “The Walrus and the Carpenter.” There was one more thing to do. Having established the possible legitimacy of my audacious reading, it was time to

confront the students with AI’s capacity to understand and account for topics as rich and complex as literature, which is, by definition, the result of the creative use of language. After all, ChatGPT calls itself a “large language model.” Is it large enough to contain the meaning and “truth” of human discourse?

While preparing the course back in December – only a few short weeks after the release of ChatGPT – I was curious to test the tool’s capacity for human-like insight. My initial attempts at using it convinced me of its infallible ability to produce a good old stodgy, academic-style exposé on any topic. You know, the kind of essay that will earn at least a B for content and possibly an A for correct style, devoid of grammatical mistakes. Still, I remained skeptical of its capacity for creative insight. I thus decided to conduct an experiment with “The Walrus and the Carpenter” to test ChatGPT’s capacity to process the meaning of a text.

I began with a general question about the meaning of the poem. ChatGPT’s response remained at a level of literal banality.

“The poem ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ by Lewis Carroll, is a narrative poem that tells the story of a walrus and a carpenter who go for a walk on the beach and encounter a group of oysters. The walrus persuades the oysters to come with them and the carpenter ends up eating most of the oysters. The poem has been interpreted in many different ways, but one possible message is that appearances can be deceiving and that those who seem charming and trustworthy may actually have ulterior motives.”

At this point, if I wanted to test for an awareness of multiple levels of meaning, I realized I needed to be more precise, so I asked whether there could be a political meaning to the poem. ChatGPT offered these thoughts:

“Some readers have interpreted ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ as a political poem, with the walrus representing a politician who uses rhetorical tricks and manipulation to persuade others to follow him. In this interpretation, the oysters represent the general public who are easily swayed by the walrus' charms, but end up getting exploited for his own gain. However, this is just one possible interpretation of the poem and there may be other ways to understand its meaning. As with all works of literature, the meaning of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" can be open to interpretation.”

That was a slight improvement, but in its abstract generality, it missed the real point. I decided to take it one step further and asked whether Carroll might have had something overtly political in mind. This question produced the following answer from ChatGPT:

“There is no overt political message in Lewis Carroll's poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter." The poem is a narrative that tells the story of a walrus and a carpenter who encounter a group of oysters and end up eating most of them. While the poem has been interpreted in many different ways, it does not have a specific political message. It is possible that some readers may find political allegory in the poem, but this would be a personal interpretation rather than a clear message from the author.”

So, there is the lesson I'll have to live with for the rest of my years in a world that is likely to be increasingly instructed – if not dominated – by the authority of AI. ChatGPT's response was unambiguous: “it does not have a specific political message.”

My continued experiments with ChatGPT to this day in my regular column “Breakfast with Chad” have demonstrated a clear tendency for this tool to put forward what appear to be common sense moral strictures. These usually take the form of a

phrase beginning with the words: “it's important to...” In this case I might have expected ChatGPT to keep an open mind and suggest that an author could very well have secondary meanings or messages contained within a work. But in this case, it peremptorily tells me that “it does not have a specific political message.” The moral here seems to be something like this: “Critic, stay within your bounds, and don't leap to unfounded conclusions.”

In ChatGPT's moral universe, an unfounded thesis would appear to be anything that doesn't fall within well calculated statistical norms. After all, ChatGPT acknowledged that “some readers have interpreted ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ as a political poem.” But upon further interrogation it affirms that those readers are wrong. On what authority does ChatGPT know this? I expect that its database eliminates anything that is statistically marginal at the time of consultation. Had Einstein interrogated the tool before devising his theory of relativity, I expect that ChatGPT would have told him that space and time are measurable and cannot be thought of as relative.

I shared these three exchanges concerning Carroll's poem with the class to show, mockingly, how I had been humiliated and corrected by ChatGPT's authority! At the same time I wanted to encourage studies to “move beyond” and “think outside the box,” the AI tool seemed to be saying, “stay within the box, it's more comfortable there.”

Pedagogical aims can also have degrees of meaning

Apart from demonstrating that I was not averse to having some “unserious” fun in the course – which, by the way, is a very serious pedagogical goal – I chose to begin the course with Carroll's poem for several other reasons. First, I wanted to establish the notion that, rather than focusing exclusively on power relationships and the

components of political authority and influence, understanding geopolitics requires a general awareness of changing historical worldviews and evolving trends. That means acquiring a sense of what ideas and beliefs guide us to define what any society takes to be normal and acceptable at any given moment of history.

I made the point that there is no way of “knowing” – in the sense of accepting as orthodoxy – what Lewis thought about specific political events and chose to put into his literature. But knowing is not the same thing as constructing one’s understanding. With a few clues, we can shape reasonable ideas and contrast them with others before deciding what we “know.” As one analyst of Carroll’s thinking has pointed out, Charles Dodgson (who adopted Lewis Carroll as his pen name) belonged to a category of “conservatives” who “abhorred 'Liberalism' which they felt turned men into brutes and desecrated the land, flora and fauna.” This would seem consistent with my suggested reading of the poem. Knowing that such thinking existed at the time helps us to understand the stakes of geopolitical decision-making.

The pre-Raphaelite designer and poet, William Morris, a contemporary of Dodgson’s, is remembered, just like Lewis Carrol, for his contribution to the arts rather than his views on geopolitics. But in his rarer work as a journalist he wrote that “the one thing for which our thrice accursed civilisation craves, as the stifling man for fresh air, is new markets, fresh countries must be conquered by it which are not manufacturing and are producers of raw material, so that ‘civilized’ manufactures can be forced on them. All wars now waged, under whatever pretenses, are really wars for the great prizes in the world-market.” That may help us to understand the Walrus’s and Carpenter’s war on the Oysters.

In other words, artists like Lewis Carroll and William Morris were thinking about other very serious ideas, some of which might find a way into their artistic productions. Carroll’s Wonderland is built around the metaphor of a game of chess dominated by a particularly arbitrary and sadistic Red Queen. The standard metaphor for global diplomacy and geopolitics in European culture is the game of chess.

Even after mounting all this evidence and more from the poem itself, I cannot affirm that *The Walrus and the Carpenter* is a poem about geopolitics. From a learning point of view, it suffices to understand that it might be, and that if it is, it is consistent with the culture of the time. It also suffices to understand that ChatGPT “believes” – if belief is a useful metaphor for what an AI tool affirms – that there is no political meaning to the poem and appears to be in the business of discouraging people, including students, from thinking about it.

So here was the real point. Geopolitics may be about how power is wielded but we must always analyze it according to the culture of the time, or rather the successive times. Geopolitical culture, just like popular culture, has its fashions and fads as well as a permanent need to adapt to a constantly shifting environment. We must consider the culture of every time period in the context of its evolution in both space and time. Once we begin acquiring those habits, we can consider ourselves legitimate, open-minded geopolitical investigators. My hope with this course was that, whatever the students thought about the changes currently taking place in the world, they would come away with this sense of context and the reality of cultural relativity.

What the 19th century tells us about today's geopolitics

As I mentioned above, the fun poem enabled me to begin the course with a consideration of a painful moment in India's history. That moment was one in which multiple European empires interacted amongst themselves in the context of what historians continue to refer to as a "multipolar Europe." The price of the largely peaceful multipolarity of Europe at the time was the binary division of the world into colonizing empires and colonized regions and peoples.

I intended the work on the poem to stimulate reflection on these historical themes. We took a further step backwards to examine the relationship between the emergence of nation-states and the construction of European global empires. These general considerations made it possible to begin looking at the events of 20th century that undid the complex multipolarity of the 19th century and led up to the bipolarity of the Cold War. That in turn set the scene for exploring the relationships that shaped the rest of the century and everything that is going on in today's world.

The "Walrus and the Carpenter" served yet another purpose. It enabled me to introduce, in our very first session, a fundamental theme of the course, one that Lewis Carroll never stopped exploring in his Alice books: the odd relationship between language and meaning. In international relations, there are not only starkly contrasting cultural assumptions in play at all times, but even within a single nation the language of politics becomes a major component of power. That language, with its explicit and implicit levels of meaning, is shared between governments, who make policy, their media, who translate and disseminate what they construe to be its meaning, and their populations, who receive it. To understand geopolitics it is essential to build awareness of the play of ideas that language

permits. And those ideas, as well as the language they are couched in, shift radically in emphasis and meaning during periods of historical transition, when frameworks for thinking break down and reform.

The shift in 1991 from a bipolar to a unipolar world order – marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union – provided the concrete example we began working on, once we left the Walrus and Carpenter behind. We began with Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay, "The End of History." For the rest of the course, we would focus on the shifts that occurred between 1945 and what most observers agree is the trend towards a multipolar world.

As I noted above, the pretext of Carroll's poem permitted me to introduce the AI question that, since the release a little more than a month earlier of ChatGPT, was now seriously troubling the academic community. I wanted the students to know that I was familiar with it, but also that I didn't fear it. I could thus demonstrate how it could become a useful tool for beginning to explore issues, so long as one is aware that the limits were in its scope of reasoning.

Assessing the notion of multipolarity

One of the key messages I had for the class at the very beginning of the course was that, although geopolitics is clearly about events and trends in history, this was not a history course. It was a course essentially focused on tuning into the sense of historical shifts, particularly the ones that were playing out before our very eyes. To underline this idea, I displayed a quote from India's Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar: "A world order which is still very, very deeply Western is being hurried out of existence by the impact of the war in Ukraine, to be replaced by a world of 'multi-alignment' where countries will choose their own particular policies and preferences and interests."

What this meant is that every student in this group of essentially twenty-year-olds had a personal stake in the subject matter of the course. We are witnessing the birth of a “new world order” (or possibly disorder) in which these students will have an active part to play. Not every generation has this opportunity. To underline the fact that while studying the past and present we should be focused on the move into the future, I assigned an essay that, aimed at imagining – just as Fukuyama had done in 1989 – the direction the world was moving towards. I insisted that they should think of it as an imagination exercise. I told them they had free rein to imagine how the future would play out.

With such an open objective, their production was predictably variable. The assignment was meant to be an experiment, with little impact on grades. It was my chance to discover who they were and what their “voice” sounded like. This would be useful for the other classwork they would be doing. I specifically told them to think how the world, which was already evolving, might appear after the end of the Ukraine war, irrespective of the winners or losers of the war.

Despite my instruction to minimize the role of the Ukraine conflict, most of them felt constrained by the reference to it and focused on their reading of the dynamics of that war. Some used that analysis to hint at new power relationships in a changed world, but few let their imaginations run wild. I should have realized that one of the terrible effects of a war is that dwelling on it inhibits any form of creative thinking. Much of this inhibition is the result of the black and white ideas and tropes produced by propaganda on all sides.

ChatGPT becomes an initially intrusive member of the class

Of the twenty submissions, two of them stood out from the rest, not in terms of quality but in the style

of the writing. As soon as I read two sentences, I recognized the inimitable style of my newest friend, ChatGPT. I refer to the tool as a friend because that was just about the time I decided on the metaphor of breakfast conversations with Chad (ChatGPT) as a regular feature on Fair Observer. It shouldn't take long for anyone trained in the literary arts to understand that this very competent “large language model” had an apparent personality and style that could be described quite literally as an absence of personality and style. It had no center of gravity other than an anodyne correctness of vocabulary and a standardized mode of reasoning.

While correcting the copy submitted in the form of a Google doc, I left a comment for both of these students that I suspected ChatGPT to be the source and requested a private meeting to talk to each of them individually. I presume they feared the worst, but once we were seated face to face and I enquired about their source, both admitted without hesitation that they had used ChatGPT.

At this point, I could have objected not only to the fact that their admission amounted to a confession of cheating, but that it was a particularly stupid decision to use AI for an assignment described as focused on imagination and personal vision. Instead, despite a clear expression of disappointment, I thanked both of them for anticipating what I had resolved to ask all the students to do in the next assignment. It was, after all, the implicit message behind my initial demonstration of ChatGPT to situate the debate on Carroll's poem.

The two students were reassured, even if humbled for being found out. Both of them asked me how I could tell it was ChatGPT. It gave me the opportunity to inform them that some skills go beyond the usual academic practice of focusing on facts and material evidence. Such skills of discernment constitute a major component of what

we call competence, which is the result of human intelligence that interacts with the environment it inhabits. At university, students should be cultivating those skills, possibly even above the more material ones. Sensitivity to style and the ability to create a personal perspective are perhaps the core of those skills.

Alas, schools and universities long ago abandoned any interest in such skills, perhaps for lack of time, but there may be other reasons related to our ideas of what constitutes knowledge. In any case, that lack of interest may help to explain why plagiarism became rampant, requiring the creation of anti-plagiarism tools in an attempt to enforce honesty. Part of the drama surrounding ChatGPT lay in the fact that, confronted with generative large language models, those expensive tools developed to check for plagiarism had no power over the original production of an AI algorithm.

I told the two guilty students I was disappointed that they failed to identify their source even while encouraging them to use it. Both had added a personal touch or supplementary information and had not simply copy and pasted ChatGPT's text. I acknowledged that and told them that I was personally grateful for the examples they provided, to the extent that it helped me elaborate a strategy for the group's final assignment, for which I would require their not only using ChatGPT but also finding a way to engage with it.

How AI may transform educational methodologies and revive ancient traditions

Towards the end of the course, I informed the students precisely of my new expectations/ that for the final assignment they would have to use ChatGPT, not as a tool to produce their own text but as a well informed personality with whom they would need to engage in dialogue. I asked them to think about this disembodied voice as that of another student taking the course with whom they

can mutually explore information and ideas, including by challenging one another.

My aim was to change their thinking even about what AI is or can be. By Identifying the AI tool as a fallible person in the group rather than as an infallible authority reframed their view of the learning process and learning objectives. It put the emphasis not on faithful reproduction of existing knowledge, but on the exploration of context leading to a combined effort of research coupled with critical and creative thinking. Because there would be two voices in their production, their own voice would have to emerge and become distinct. It was on the quality of their voice, including the reasoning and style of its discourse, that they would be judged, not merely on the supposedly factual input provided by ChatGPT or indeed any other source.

The implications of this change of perspective that seeks the integration of AI into our teaching and learning strategies goes beyond the methodology of research and personal expression. It may mark a new turning point in educational history. After centuries of losing its way thanks largely to the industrial revolution and the emergence of the consumer society, educational practice may at last find a way of returning to its most productive historical roots. The true origins of constructive, creative learning take us back in history to practices that have long since been abandoned. These include the dialogue form favored not only famously by Socrates thanks to Plato's dialogues, but also to Plato's pupil, Aristotle the peripatetic, who was thus called because he conducted his teaching in active discussion while walking around the grounds of his Lyceum.

In Europe the tradition of dialogue continued throughout the Middle Ages thanks to the adoption of the creative dialectics of *disputatio*, raising objections to philosophical or theological

statements to specify their meaning and application. It was disputatio that famously allowed philosophers and theologians to speculate on the meaning of space and spiritual concepts by considering the question of how many angels might dance on the head of a pin. Far from being ridiculous this example was closer to Einstein's famous thought experiments than it was to later critics' accusation of belonging to the world of medieval superstition. Disputatio as a methodology for exploring ideas reigned throughout the Middle Ages and ultimately enriched the thinking of both Hegel and Marx, who embraced the idea of dialectics. And what would the Enlightenment have been without the Paris salons, in which independent spirits exchanged and critiqued ideas new and old?

In Asia, over several millennia, the guru-shishya tradition – which thrived as a relationship rather than a program of curriculum – defined the meaning and style of learning. At the same time, traditional African education emphasized – alongside a variety of physical and pragmatic activities – “poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs, storytelling and story relays.” Everywhere in the world, throughout most of human history, education has been about human intelligences talking to one another, exploring problems and expanding understanding, transmitting but also critiquing the bases of their dynamic cultures.

Correcting the errors of the industrial age

Industrialization and the emergence of the consumer society turned education on its head, precisely by putting all its emphasis on the brain as a supposed container of knowledge? This ultimately gave us that wonderful modern concept, “standardization,” and the ideal tool facilitating the accurate measurement of intelligence: the multiple choice question. If politics could be managed by manufacturing consent (to use Edward Bernays' expression repeated by Noam Chomsky) then

education could focus on one thing alone: manufacturing content. This endowed education with its essential industrial vocation. It has brought us to where we are today: producing the commodity known as a diploma, a supposed, but not always valid ticket for employment. It has also produced in at least one powerful nation, the United States, generations of willingly standardized former students now permanently saddled with crushing debt from the student loans that allowed them to pay the ticket price on their coveted diplomas. That what happens when education is no longer about learning, but about earning.

At one point towards the last part of the course, my friend and colleague, Frederick Coolidge, a psychologist and specialist of the evolution of the human brain, offered to present to the class his thesis on how humans developed and exploited the faculty of empathy. He proposed to explain the neurological and cognitive bases of diplomacy. According to Fred, during the middle and upper paleolithic the brain of homo sapiens acquired the ability to trade and negotiate thanks to what he calls “allocentric perceptions,” or the ability to understand and resonate with the perception of others. Once this became established as the means of conducting business by constructing fields of understanding not just between individuals but also groups, homo sapiens acquired a distinct and perhaps decisive advantage over neanderthals, who appeared to be confined to modes of egocentric perception.

I have simplified Fred's insights immensely, which he backed up with archeological evidence, but I consider the point important in a more modern sense than the rivalry between homo sapiens and neanderthals. As homo sapiens, we have retrained our capacity for allocentric perception. I have no doubt that a generation of coders will try to find a way of duplicating its logic for future iterations of AI. But we have to ask

ourselves whether this is even possible. Human perception is much more than the data our technologies are capable of capturing.

Thanks to ChatGPT everyone has become aware of a kind of public battle or rivalry between human and artificial intelligence. Is it a new cold war? The original cold war avoided degenerating into a hot war because politicians at the time – the example of John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev stands out – had built at least something from their capacity for allocentric perception into their policy. Today, when people are evoking a new cold war, we have to wonder whether that allocentric perception is still present in their brains. Adhering to principles is fine, but using them to defeat perception is risky.

As for the other cold war – the one between human and artificial intelligence – we may be running the same risk. It is perfectly possible that we humans could learn to understand and feel for the motivation of the AI we program to emulate our own intelligence. But that requires a certain transparency concerning the algorithms. Algorithms are now sources of power for those who own and operate them. Given the way people who possess power are conditioned to protect their possessions by keeping others, even eventual imitators, in the dark, the utility of our allocentric instincts may count for nothing.

So, are we moving towards a new cold war – not between the US and China or Russia this time around – but between human intelligence and artificial intelligence? It is sad to observe that our geopolitical culture seems slightly less allocentric than in the past. The Ukraine war, declared by at least one of its proponents to last “as long as it takes,” demonstrates that the culture has veered towards an obsession with the kind of absolute and incompatible competition and ideological hubris that may remind us of the quandary Rudyard Kipling once summed up in his famous lines: “East

is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet.” Kipling’s “East” is now commonly referred to as the “Global South,” which appears to be drifting away from its moorings on the West’s “rules-based order.”

In the other cold war, between human intelligence and artificial intelligence, the West owns the artificial tools for the moment but the East is catching up in the technology race. Humanity itself has not yet abandoned the powerful toolbox of its allocentric intelligence. But if the battle continues, who will prevail? Education will play a vital role in determining that victory.

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Long Covid Shines Spotlight Now on Other Long Diseases

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
May 13, 2023

COVID-19 can have long-term effects and so can other diseases. The time has come for us to accept that seemingly short-term diseases can have long-term consequences, and help millions of patients to attain more complete treatment and support.

Long Covid. Chronic Covid. Post Covid. Long-haulers symptoms. Over the past two years, we've learnt that the fiery comet head of COVID-19 can come with a long tail of impact. Perhaps for the first time in our human history, the long-term effects of a short-term disease are being so thoroughly researched all over the world by such a large number of scientists, using such advanced technology, and with such numerous subjects.

However, the concept of Long Covid also raises a broader question. If we can have Long Covid, can we also have long versions of other supposedly short diseases? What about Long Malaria? Long Pneumonia? Long Shingles?

A look at Long Covid

When people first started reporting symptoms after the acute stage of covid had passed and they were testing negative, the initial response of the medical community was to label it as either 'anxiety' if the patient was young and particularly female, or as 'natural aging' if the patient was elderly. Not only did doctors dismiss the post-Covid symptoms of the general public, they also dismissed the post-Covid symptoms of their fellow healthcare workers. Then the research began and the results started coming in—first in a trickle and then in a torrent.

COVID-19 has been generally viewed as a severe acute respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Long Covid refers to its after-effects, which can be broad in nature, evolving, and continue for an indefinite time. Mayo Clinic defines it as “an inflammatory or host response towards a virus that occurs approximately four weeks after initial infection and continues for a yet uncharacterized duration.” One meta-analysis looking at 14 to 110 days after infection listed 55 Long Covid symptoms, with the most common

ones being fatigue, headache, attention disorder, hair loss, and shortness of breath.

Another study involving patients six months after 'recovery' found “functional mobility impairments, pulmonary abnormalities, mental health disorders.” Other studies also refer to brain fog, cognitive dysfunction, loss of taste and smell, pain in muscles and joints, depression, autoimmune diseases, and neurological impairments. A recent 2023 review says the following: “More than 200 symptoms have been identified with impacts on multiple organ systems. At least 65 million individuals worldwide are estimated to have long COVID, with cases increasing daily.”

Such after-effects of covid should not have been a surprise to the medical community given the documented after-effects of previous pandemics.

Long-Term effects of 1918 Influenza Epidemic and other illnesses

After the 1918 Influenza Epidemic, many people suffered for weeks, months, and years. And some were never quite the same again. Fatigue, insomnia, and depression were common post-flu symptoms. Admissions in psychiatric hospitals increased significantly for six years following the pandemic. People born during or just after the 1918 flu pandemic were on average slightly shorter as adults, and, some 60 years later, they showed a greater incidence of heart disease and diabetes.

Given the past documented long-term effects of the 1918 Flu, not to mention SARS and MERS, and the current well-researched COVID-19, long-term effects of other illnesses seem not only plausible but probable.

The discovery of Long Covid has led to the recent development of the term “post-acute

sequelae of Covid-19” (PASC) — a medical term for the lingering after-effects of COVID-19. And by association, we’ve seen a renaissance of older, more general, terms such as ‘post-acute sequelae’ (PAS) and ‘post viral syndrome’.

The PAS of some illnesses are easy to believe because they affect the same primary organ and present similar symptoms as during the acute stage – only much later in life. Early childhood Pneumonia can result in adult conditions of lung function deficits as well as “an increased risk of adult asthma, non-smoking related COPD, and bronchiectasis.”

Tuberculosis comes in two forms: active or latent. This means we can carry the tuberculosis bacteria within our body and it becomes active when our immunity is low. This can happen years or even decades into our life. Shingles is defined as an acute viral infection, but it could be said to be chronic on two counts. First, after the rash has disappeared, the pain can linger on for months or even years. And second, even once all symptoms are gone and the patient is said to have recovered, “the virus remains latent in the dorsal root ganglia.” And so, similar to tuberculosis, shingles can recur, even years later, in times of stress.

The PAS of other illnesses are more difficult to accept because they are more varied.

Malaria is a parasitic mosquito-borne disease and has been found to be complex in its progress. After the mosquito bite, it can have an incubation period alone of anywhere from six days to one year before any symptoms show. Then, there is chronic malaria, which can continue for years. We seem to think that we have an illness and an infection only as long as we have a fever—but a silent infection can linger. Chronic malaria causes anemia, increased susceptibility to other infections, and even maternal complications. Furthermore, children who get the more dangerous version,

cerebral malaria, have been shown to suffer from lifelong neurological issues such as “cognitive, motor skills, and visual coordination impairment, as well as seizures and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.”

Dengue is a viral mosquito-borne disease. It is lesser known than malaria but equally or more prevalent. And since it is lesser known in the western world, dengue is relatively under-researched. Its febrile period is about a week, but its PAS—body pain, fatigue, and depression—continue much longer. Most studies did follow-ups for only a maximum of six months. But a Cuban study covering two years actually showed an increase in fatigue after the one-year mark.

A study looking at patients who had had Ebola more than two years earlier found they still struggled with impairment of vision, hearing, swallowing, sleeping, and arthralgias as well as memory loss, mental confusion, and chronic health problems.

For more than the past 50 years, research has shown how viral infections in general can have a long lasting impact. A 1970 study showed that neonatal virus infection in mice affected their behavior and weight, which in turn affected their aging process. A 1985 study showed exposure to viral infections in utero increased risk of cancer and diabetes in adulthood. And now it’s known that acute infections of respiratory and gastrointestinal systems can initiate long-term inflammatory disorders.

Even a condition very limited in time and space like burns can have a “long lasting impact on the quality of people’s lives, with persisting problems related to scarring, contractures, weakness, thermoregulation, itching, pain, sleep, body image and psychosocial wellbeing.”

Three hurdles seem to be limiting our imagination to see these illnesses in their entirety and therefore our complete treatment of them: we seem desperate to see all illnesses as short duration, implying fully curable; if illnesses cannot all be curable, then we want to at least neatly categorize them as acute versus chronic; and we wish to clearly allocate each illness to a single organ.

How long is long?

We like to see people as either well or sick. And if we're going to be sick, we want to be sick only for a limited and well-defined number of days. So we haven't wanted to think of the long-term effects of diseases. But unfortunately, they exist. With coronaviruses, a study found fatigue in 60% of so-called recovered patients at the 12-month mark. With dengue, a study found clinical symptoms in patients two years after infection. With SARS, a study found fatigue in 40% of the subjects at the four-year mark. And the 12 months, 2 years, and 4 years did not signify the end of the PAS – merely the end of the studies.

How long is “long”? Why should a disease that has somehow remained active in the body for so long suddenly subside at the 4-year mark? It may not work in accordance with our hope, our calendar, nor our attention span. A 2021 study of post viral syndrome shows how the viral load and inflammation often subside immediately after the acute stage but then gradually increase years later, bringing in their wake old and new symptoms. Some posit that the 1918 Flu may have been responsible for the surge in coronary disease in the 1960s—some 40 years later.

Doing longitudinal studies of 10, 20, or even 40 years requires time, money, a long attention span, not to mention a historical bent. And we'll have to wait to do truly long-duration studies of COVID-19. But in the meantime, we would be unhelpful

and irresponsible to dismiss patients' post-illness symptoms just because we can't prove them, we don't understand them, or we don't yet have research evidence. What we don't yet know about diseases and medical science will fill many textbooks in the future. We need to be humble and open-minded.

Rethink “acute” versus “chronic” and “single system” versus “multi system”

We also like to neatly categorize things. With illnesses, our practice has been to categorize them into chronic and acute. A chronic illness is slow developing and long lasting: like diabetes or hypothyroidism. An acute illness is sudden in onset and short in duration: like a broken bone or a heart attack or influenza (flu). But a broken bone can be the result of slowly evolving osteoporosis and a heart attack can be the result of plaque slowly building up in the blood vessels. And even a flu can have long PAS.

Perhaps there are no such distinct categories as acute and chronic. Perhaps it's more of a spectrum. And perhaps one leads to another. An acute condition can be the result of a chronic illness. And what begins as an acute infection may have a chronic avatar. And furthermore, that chronic avatar may or may not be identical to the original disease.

We are prone to thinking of one illness as affecting one organ or, in other words, a single system. But this perspective is being questioned. Many autoimmune diseases—and even diabetes and hypertension—are now viewed as multisystemic.

Furthermore, Dr. Barbara Starfield, a physician and an academic, has said that many diseases themselves are not distinct entities, but rather heterogeneous entities, which are all associated with each other. She gave the example that “people

with hypothyroidism are four times more likely to have rheumatoid arthritis and cardiovascular diseases." Dr. Debby van Riel, a virologist at Erasmus University in the Netherlands, sees even the flu as a multisystemic disease that affects not just the respiratory tract but many parts of the body.

And while COVID-19 is thought of as primarily a respiratory illness, Long Covid is considered "a multisystem disorder that commonly affects the respiratory, cardiovascular, and hematopoietic systems," not to mention the neurological, cognitive, and musculoskeletal systems.

A recent German study gives a list of over 25 'non-persistent viruses' and an even longer list of their associated PAS. These PAS concern not only the primary infection organ, but also various other organs – making the long-term effects multisystem in nature.

Getting a fuller picture

The reason we're not getting the full picture of illnesses is primarily due to our refusal to see it. And our refusal to see the full picture is contributing to the partial treatment and persistence of such illnesses, not to mention the frustration and continuing disability of patients.

A 1939 study said the following: "Malaria is a chronic disease, not alone an infection of the blood stream characterized by chills and fever". And yet, even today, the World Health Organization (WHO) labels malaria as "an acute febrile illness." That 1939 study also warned that "Failure to comprehend or detect its insidious course and its strong tendency to relapse, even after months or years, accounts for the fact that it still ranks as one of the serious social and economic problems." And yet an article in the Lancet just last year was titled "Malaria: (still) a global health priority." A 1987 study presented the term 'post-viral

syndrome' and hoped that "awareness of the syndrome will lead to an increase in its diagnosis in general practice". More than three decades on, we're still waiting.

In the spirit of optimism, our society likes to see diseases as short, clearly defined, and easily curable. Speedy onset, obvious symptoms, crisp diagnosis, a magic potion, and fast resolution. Long-term chronic conditions that do not arrive in a dramatic fashion, that have no clearly visible symptoms, and that dribble on are – let's face it – boring. Doctors lose interest and sometimes even the families lose interest. The patients may not lose interest but they get exhausted by their struggle to be heard and believed over a course of weeks, months, and sometimes years. But with such myopic and dismissive behavior, we will continue to see only the fiery heads of the comets and miss their debilitating long tails. And in doing so, we're failing to fully treat these diseases and we're doing a huge disservice to the sufferers of PAS—leading to economic costs to our society as well as costs in lives only partially lived.

If we are to fully and effectively manage the long tail of diseases, we need an evolution in the perspective of the academic research community as well as the practicing medical community to view illnesses more holistically both in terms of time, encompassing years, and space, encompassing multiple body systems.

Today, we can use the unprecedented opportunity thrown up by the current discovery of, attention to, and momentum concerning Long Covid to finally do three things: ignite researchers to look into the long-term effects of other illnesses, convince medical practitioners to accept the possibility that seemingly short-term diseases can have long-term consequences, and help millions of patients to attain more complete treatment and support, giving them the opportunity to live fuller lives.

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One Hundred Years of ChatGPTude

Mauktik Kulkarni
January 24, 2023

The profound banality of artificial intelligence tries to conquer the magical realism of the human experience in the form of ChatGPT.

“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” Gabriel Garcia Marquez used this iconic line to embark on a tour-de-force on human nature in his literary masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Had Gabo, as his adoring fans call him, been alive today, he would have begun with ‘A few days later, as he put a gun to his head, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember his lonely midnight doomscrolling that introduced him to ChatGPT.’

The famous opening line, juxtaposing the macabre realities of life with the sense of wonder that comes with appreciating human ingenuity,

draws readers into a wild journey of exploration. Not just of human existence and their place in it, but also the fertile nature of the human mind that can conjure up imaginary worlds to convey profound insights. And then, there is ChatGPT. No matter which line one prompts the machine with, it spits out a few paragraphs mimicking the human mind.

Magical Realism and AI

Gabo makes us marvel at the human ability to understand our origins, internalize our journey through civilizations, observe the mundane, day-to-day life, and convey a deeper sense of meaning and belonging that fills our hearts with contentment when we turn the last page. Ironically, ChatGPT uses similar means to achieve fairly pedestrian ends. The Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) – built on something called a large language model – takes in everything ever written in a particular language, calculates the probability of any word following a given word, and strings together human-sounding sentences. Gabo playfully mocks the cyclical nature of human endeavors in the hope of liberating our souls. ChatGPT exploits the cyclical math of words to keep us trapped in a linguistic status quo.

The irony does not end there. By hand holding us into his small, rustic, and isolated community of Macondo, Gabo takes us back to our childhoods, making us wonder how magical it would feel if gypsies from a faraway land brought along thingamajigs like magnets, magnifying glasses, and telescopes that we have never been exposed to. In the book, it inspires the patriarch Aureliano and his son Arcadio to embark on a lifelong quest to master alchemy. On the other hand, ChatGPT, while robbing us of the alchemy of cogently expressing our thoughts, resembles another one of those shiny new objects we have gotten used to in the age of social media. The viral tide of

amusement will wash away faster than we think, leaving a void for another AI algorithm to fill.

And finally, there is fatalism, writ large in Gabo's real and imaginary worlds. In his make-believe world spanning a hundred years, the author pokes fun at the folly of conservative and liberal idealism in politics. The repeating names of the characters and their personalities spanning generations of the Buendia clan capture the somewhat limited nature of human imagination. Even in real life, a cruel twist of fate, or fatalism, made Gabo befriend Hugo Chavez. One of the most discerning minds of our generation finding virtues in a run-of-the-mill populist who later turned into a dictator. In a way, Gabo's life and body of work challenge us to reconcile fatalism with Mark Twain's famous quote that the radical invents the views, but when he has worn them out, the conservative adopts them.

Where will ChatGPT take us?

ChatGPT evokes fatalism of a completely different kind. At one level, it is just another, and utterly predictable, step in the long march of technological progress. The geek in me asks: If an assembly line can automate and obviate physical labor, what is wrong in ChatGPT automating the mental labor of stringing together words? Who are we, if not elitists, to benefit from the efficiencies assembly lines bring and lament the banality of the language ChatGPT spits out without even a moment's worth of 'thought'?

On another level, as the euphoria subsides and people at large start searching for the next supposedly game-changing invention, ChatGPT will certainly creep into our daily lives. It will make some jobs redundant and be a godsend for those who dread the thought of writing a story. Even those who struggle with a writer's block or small businesses with no marketing budgets will benefit from it. At the same time, it will

supercharge the deadly social media driven propaganda machines, which we have accepted as a part of life, with little accountability.

While the world is still in thrall of the capabilities of the latest version of ChatGPT, the perils of using such AI for automating writing are already staring at us. A recent report in the Washington Post summarizes how AI created a journalistic disaster for a media outlet, forcing it to issue countless corrections. Soon enough, pitfalls of such advances will sow socio-political divisions, prompting ethicists and politicians to call for meaningful regulations. As this author has argued before, AI engineers will have to grapple with issues of technology for its own sake vs. the democratic systems that enable free inquiry, challenging authority, and maximizing human capital.

Whatever the future holds, it will certainly chip away at our sense of what it means to be human. The fatalist in me even wants to believe that one hundred years of ChatGPTude will produce a masterpiece like Gabo's. The radical and romantic in me is screaming inside, begging me not to bet on it!

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Will the New BRICS+ Be Able to Come Together?

Kanwal Sibal
August 28, 2023

Last week's BRICS summit marked a historic moment as the five partner nations agreed to integrate six new members in January 2024. This will be a positive step in the trend towards multipolarity, but it also may prove a danger to cohesion within the group of rising nations.

Russia, India and China formed RIC in 2001. Together with Brazil, they formed BRIC as an informal grouping in 2006. BRIC became a more formal entity and began holding annual summits in 2009. BRIC became BRICS when South Africa entered the grouping in 2010.

This year's BRICS summit took place in South Africa from August 22–24. The most important outcome of the summit was the decision to expand the group. Six new members will join on January 1, 2024: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Argentina, Iran and Ethiopia. The original membership has just been doubled and this is a transformative outcome.

Originally, the RIC group was a response to the emergence of a unipolar world following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Then, the BRIC nations, four economically rising powers from three continents, shared an agenda. All four wanted to make the global order more democratic and equitable. When BRICS emerged, these powers wanted a greater role of developing countries in the new world order. At least three of the powers—India, Brazil and South Africa—

sought to reform the postwar UN system, including its political and financial institutions. These emerging powers wanted to make the UN the centerpiece of a reinvigorated multilateralism.

End of the unipolar moment

This multilateral approach is becoming all the more important as the world exits its unipolar moment. Although the US remains the world's leading political, military and economic power, it is no longer able to unilaterally dictate the rules of the international system. It failed to change the Middle Eastern balance of power in its favor by military intervention in the Iraq War or by indirect means during the Arab Spring. The disastrous end of its War on Terror, exemplified by the retreat from Afghanistan, has reduced its international primacy.

The US now sees the need to strengthen its alliances in Europe and Asia to retain its global preeminence. This includes the reinvigoration of NATO in Europe, as well as the alliances with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines in Asia.

The US is pulling the team together as new tensions—with potentially dire consequences for global peace and security—have pitted it against both Russia and China. It has succeeded in getting its European partners to throw their full support into a common effort against Russia and acknowledge that China is a systemic threat as well.

Furthermore, the US has used its financial power to the hilt to isolate Russia and cause its economic collapse. Washington has also openly subscribed to the idea of regime change in Russia, a peer nuclear power. It is not only Russia but also China that lies in American crosshairs. The US now sees China as its principal longer-term adversary and is taking aggressive steps to thwart China's technological rise.

Tensions between great powers are straining the international system. Western sanctions on Russia have been draconian. In particular, the US has weaponized the dollar-based global financial system. The war in Ukraine has also had deeply disruptive effects on the supply of food, fertilizers and energy to developing countries. The equity of a global order based on rules set by the powerful is now in serious question. This order does not emanate from the collective will of the international community but is defined and determined by the West.

RIC, BRIC and then BRICS were all about multipolarity. These non-Western powers wanted a seat at the top table. Yet the dominant Western powers who champion human rights and democracy are not ready to cede control. In fact, the West imposes its agenda on these powers through championing supposedly “universal values” and does not want to give up its traditional hegemony. Naturally, the BRICS nations oppose this hegemony and want a redistribution of global power.

The West has been locked in a confrontation with Russia and China. Both these powers are responding by expanding BRICS. Hence, they have added six new members to the group. Some of them, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Argentina have historic links with the US. Yet their joining BRICS demonstrates that they are willing to reduce their dependence on the West. These nations want a counterbalance to the US and seek a rebalancing of the global political and economic system, which does not have such punitive costs for transgression.

The inclusion of new members into the BRICS club is telling. Iran is already a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and close not only to China but also Russia. Iran has long been at loggerheads with the US and is subject to strong Western sanctions. Ethiopia is wracked by civil

war and prolonged drought. Yet the country has made it to the club on the basis of its increasingly close relationship with China.

Clearly, the BRICS expansion sends a loud and clear signal. BRICS has welcomed powers that challenge the US and are close to China and Russia.

What were the criteria and what does BRICS expansion mean?

The entry of new members to the BRICS club raises a key question. What were the criteria?

Were they GDP size or growth prospects or population size or geographic location or regional influence or some combination of these factors? It turns out that, except for energy exporters Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the other new countries face serious economic problems. Egypt is the most populous Arab nation with the largest military in the region. Yet its economy is in an acute crisis. Argentina, the second-largest Latin American country, is in yet another economic crisis. Their addition does not exactly strengthen the BRICS club economically.

Importantly, no East or South Asian country joined the BRICS club. Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE lie in Asia but are part of the Middle East. Indonesia withdrew its candidacy at the last moment. It seems to be betting instead on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). BRICS is a geographically dispersed club while ASEAN is a cohesive organization with shared interests. External pressure by the US might also have played a role in Indonesia staying away from BRICS.

When it comes to African countries, Nigeria would have been a more credible addition than Ethiopia. However, the country did not apply for membership. Neither did Mexico. Algeria applied

for membership but does not seem to have gotten in.

Clearly, the expansion of BRICS has been lopsided. Ethiopia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran are clustered together geographically. Only Argentina seems to stand out.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa declared: “We have tasked our Foreign Ministers to further develop the BRICS partner country model and a list of prospective partner countries and report by the next Summit.” Yet it is unclear what are the criteria for the expansion. It seems that new members have been admitted to the BRICS club on an ad hoc basis.

While expansion may boost multipolarity, it risks making the new BRICS+ club less cohesive. India and China have deep differences. Their militaries are in a standoff at the border. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran are not exactly the best of friends. Brazil and Argentina are rivals.

Furthermore, the commitment of various countries to BRICS+ is far from solid. Under Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil had less commitment to BRICS than current president Lula da Silva. Tellingly, South Africa could not welcome Russian President Vladimir Putin because of its obligations to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Ramaphosa might wax lyrical about BRICS+, but his government is still constrained by Western-made law of The Hague-based ICC.

It remains to be seen how BRICS+ shapes up but it is clear that the addition of new members and prospects of further expansion are an indication of a growing, if inchoate, trend towards multipolarity.

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secretary, as ambassador to Turkey, Egypt, France and Russia, and as deputy chief of mission in Washington, DC. From 2008, he sat on India’s National Security Advisory Board. Sibal is currently a board member of the New York-based East-West Institute, an executive council member of the Vivekanand International Foundation, and is also an adviser to the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum.

Is the Indo-American Relationship Being Handled With Intelligence?

KJ Singh
June 24, 2023

The US and India, both democracies, have not always seen eye-to-eye. While India resents being perceived as a subordinate partner, recent shifts in the Asian balance of power are pushing India closer to the global hegemon. If America can handle its partner with tact, Indian ingenuity and tenacity can make American defense technology go a long way.

There has been a lot of hype about the state visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United States. It is being hailed as a defining step in growing the strategic relationship between the two nations. Mr. Modi, beside his unprecedented personal popularity, carried with him the legitimate expectations of a rising India to the US.

The itinerary indicated how much prominence had been accorded to the visit. In the run-up to the visit, defense deals like the purchase of much-

delayed Predator armed drones worth \$3 billion have been finalized. The US has also agreed to a Transfer of Technology (ToT) of FE-414 engines for India's Tejas-2 fighters. It appears that the visit covered most bases, from formal and informal events to defense deals and publicity.

However, it is appropriate to look beyond the hype and get down to brass tacks in our examination. There are a few hard choices that, if made, can really foster a long-term and meaningful strategic partnership between the world's two largest democracies.

Partners at two different places in the relationship

American expectations are based on a model of Indian compliance, if not one of an outright patron-client relationship. Despite declining US power, the huge remaining asymmetry between two prospective partners—especially in defense technology and brute hard power—fuels such expectations.

India, on the other hand, is known to be a difficult ally. India fiercely safeguards her strategic autonomy and views herself as practicing a refined version of non-alignment. Indian reticence resulted in giving new customized names to bilateral foundation agreements. “Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement” (COMCASA) had to be tweaked and customized to “Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement” (CISMOA) for India. Such complexities, often dubbed bureaucratise, have prompted experts like Ashley Tellis to highlight the limitations of the promised relationship. India would like to be seen as the ultimate balancer, promoting multipolarity. New Delhi insists on partnership even when it may, in the near- and mid-term, remain the net recipient or beneficiary.

The geopolitical necessities of dealing with an aggressive China have forced India closer to the Quad in order to dissuade her aggressive neighbor. India knows the limitations of such relationships and doesn't expect boots on the ground. It also realistically appraises the concentricity of Washington-led alliances, like the Five Eyes alliance which complements the Quad, where India is missing.

India, with the Pakistani thorn in her side, was content to accommodate Chinese sensitivities until 2020. Millennials with no memory of the 1962 humiliation were content to remain focused on geo-economics. Economic growth in cooperation with China, as visualized by Deng, seemed to be a fait accompli. Xi Jinping, with his tactical mindset and brash aggressive maneuvers on the Sino-Indian borders, has destroyed that strategic dream. Self-reliance, decoupling and standing up to bullies are now part of the altered discourse in India.

While America may have failed to mold India to its expectations, Xi has certainly pushed India closer to the US by creating a strategic gulf between his country and its Asian neighbor. In the future, while Washington may not have a fully compliant ally, it can certainly bank on a rising India competing with, countering and balancing Beijing.

India, America and that other, once-great power

India has been dependent on Russia for its armaments and munitions since 1971, when Nixon and Kissinger, chaperoned by Rawalpindi brass, were courting China. Russia (and, before it, the USSR) has been a dependable ally to India, but its capacity in a post-Ukraine scenario will be severely circumscribed. More importantly, the myth of Russian ToT stands exposed by the federation's continued dependency on extra-

Russian sources for critical components. The arrangement really amounts to licensed production.

The first things Russia will need to borrow from India are not just “print to design” (know-how) but also know-why. India has at its disposal probably the largest inventory in a war scenario, whether that is a proxy war with Pakistan to the west or a deployment (already prepared for) to ward off China in the north. Unlike many smaller nations, India has not only displayed the nerve to stand up to China but has undertaken quid-pro-quo operations against it, debunking the myth of Chinese invincibility.

Indian crews have the magical ability to quickly master equipment and improvise, something that is known as Indian jugaad. This has been demonstrated by far inferior Gnats in Indian hands taking on Sabre jets and near-obsolescent Centurions creating a graveyard of Patton tanks. Unfortunately, American equipment in Pak hands was on the receiving end. In 1971, Indians once again defied the challenges of riverine terrain in a lightning strike. Medium tanks, T-55s, forded boggy fields and PT-76s floated across mighty rivers with helicopters ferrying infantry across. They actually are devoted to and worship their weapons.

Ukrainian and other conflicts have busted the reputation for invincibility of many famed weapon systems, mostly due to inept handling. One is reminded of a horse breeder, who mandated compulsory riding tests for his customers. In this, there can surely be the vested interest of the US military-industrial complex. Sell your equipment and technology to capable users.

Defense partnership can flourish with genuine and assured life cycle support. It should empower hosts with spares, repairs and overhaul capability. In fact, India can be utilized as a hub for the region. Indians are known for not discarding their

equipment in a hurry. T55 tanks, which this author was commissioned on as a young man, continue to be in service. Life cycle extension and retrofitting would be in keeping with Indian ethos. Russia sold India weapons in famous barter deals like bananas-for-guns exchanges. Considering how long the drone deal was delayed due to money issues, Indians should hope that the Russian example will inject pragmatism into their American partners’ working out effective packages, especially for life-cycle support.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Lt Gen KJ Singh** is the former Western Army Commander of the Indian Army. In this role, he was responsible for the Pakistan border, including controlling terrorism in Jammu-Kathua-Samba region, and for the China Border in the state of Himachal Pradesh. He held many important commands during his long and distinguished military career.

Climate Change: A Toxic Gift for the Next Generation

India Nye Wenner
December 07, 2023

Since 1981, Earth has been heating up at double the previously recorded speed — and the people responsible for the burning are leaving its consequences to the innocent next generations. Young people are crying out for change.

Since 1981, Earth has been heating up at double the previously recorded speed. People spent the last century luxuriating in the gains of the Second Industrial Revolution. They drove gasoline-powered automobiles and bought cheap goods mass-produced in coal-burning factories. All this activity released greenhouse gases, which filled the atmosphere. These gases raised heat to unprecedented levels. The ten warmest years ever recorded have all been since 2010.

Older generations have already experienced the impact of climate change. In 2021, devastating flooding occurred in Australia, Europe, Asia and the US Northeast. California burned and crippling icy temperatures paralyzed Texas. As the climate grows hotter, these events and their risks will only escalate.

Previous generations contentedly burned more and more fossil fuels, and now future generations will experience hotter and longer heat waves, intensifying droughts and increasingly devastating flooding. While they enjoyed luxury, they've left their posterity with the burden.

Youth activism in the face of inaction

The younger generation cares a lot more about climate change than the older one. This is clear when you consider how younger people organize their family life. An increasing number of young adults have qualms about bringing children into a world experiencing intensifying disasters due to global warming. In 2018, the United States Census Bureau reported that 83.5% of adults aged 55 and older have children. On the other hand, a 2020 Morning Consult poll, with a majority of younger Gen-Z and millennial voters, found that a quarter of childless adults cite climate change as a reason they did not have children.

Unlike thoughtless older generations, younger people do not have a choice in caring about climate change. It is their reality and their future.

Young people, realizing the climate burden left to them, have fought for change and organized mass youth climate strikes. In September 2019, more than 4 million young people in thousands of cities worldwide gathered to protest.

However, adults and politicians have criticized the youth climate movement, often claiming youths are overreacting and would be better off going to school. The adults who are causing climate change will be dead when its consequences peak. The children they are deriding as dramatic are the very same children whose lives their actions will jeopardize. Activists from the younger generation are being shut out and mocked by an older generation living in denial.

For instance, Greta Thunberg, a prominent climate activist, passionately spoke at the United Nations Climate Summit in 2019 at age 16. She denounced global leaders for their inaction and greed in the face of extreme suffering due to climate change. Numerous policymakers, including US President Donald Trump, mocked Thunberg. Trump tweeted to say she had an “anger management problem” and sarcastically described her as “a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future.”

Trump demeaned Thunberg because her criticism personally attacked his presidential ability and high self-image. Thunberg and other young climate activists threaten the worldview and greedy interests of politicians who refuse to acknowledge the severity of the climate crisis. As Greta Thunberg puts it, “you [politicians] are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal.”

Climate anxiety and what young people can do

In the face of stubborn and selfish policymakers, young people can feel overwhelmed by hopelessness. In a study published in 2022, the majority of youth and young adults expressed extreme worry about climate change. They agree that their worry has negatively affected their daily life. In order to combat this hopeless worry, young people must do something to give themselves agency and a localized sense of control.

Advocacy is an accessible way for young people to get involved in and take action on the climate struggle. It can mean simple things, such as signing petitions, participating in marches or educating friends and family.

Little actions, such as turning off unnecessary lights and water flow, are also easy ways to take action and tackle the crisis.

The most effective way to get rid of feelings of helplessness is to take the bull by the horns and do something. The older generation of policymakers has taken agency away from young people, and they must take it back.

With all the odds pushing against them, young people must continue to press the older generation for change. They must shout, not whisper — demand, not ask — for immediate action.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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