



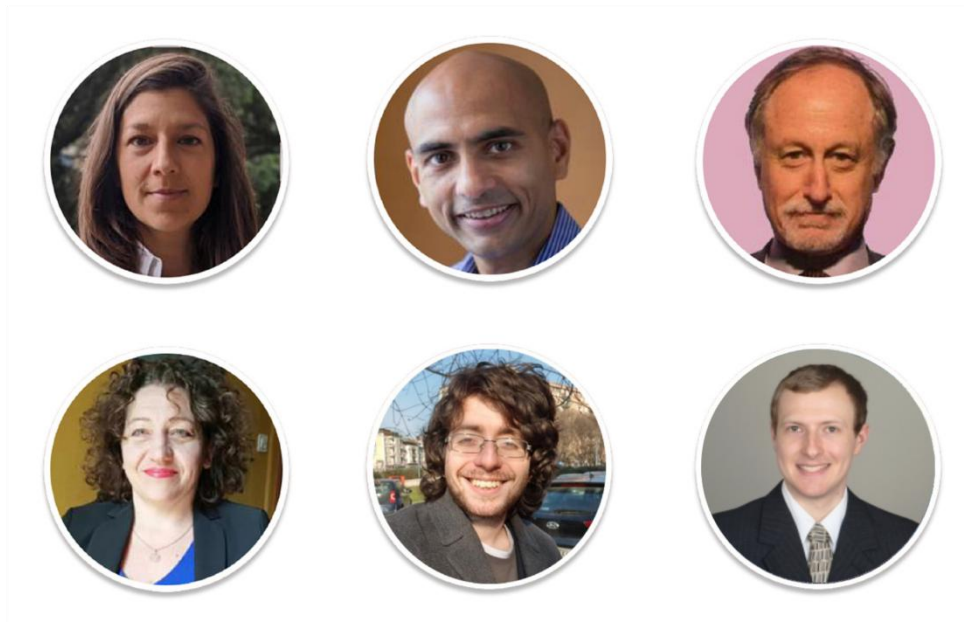
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Fair Observer^o
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

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

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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Is a New War on the Horizon for Ethiopia?

Martin Plaut
February 03, 2025

Tigray, Ethiopia's northern region, is recovering from its brutal 2020–2022 war. Serious tensions over the war's peace treaty, as well as economic troubles and political differences, have arisen between the ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Tigray Interim Regional Administration. Can the region recover without launching a civil war?

Tigray, Ethiopia's northern region, trembles on the brink of yet another conflict. It is just beginning to recover from the tragic war of 2020–2022, when it fought off the combined might of Ethiopian federal troops backed by Ethiopian ethnic militia, Eritrean forces and Somali soldiers. Tigrayans paid a heavy price, with some 600,000 dead. This time, however, the people face an even more bitter prospect: the possibility that internal strife could escalate to civil war.

Divisions within the Tigrayan ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), are now so deep, and the accusations being traded so vitriolic, there is a real possibility of their differences being settled on the battlefield. To many outsiders, this may come as a surprise. Tigrayans have managed to endure hardship and war for generations but have a reputation for using careful, lengthy debates to settle internal disputes.

Tigrayan fault lines

The rifts within Tigray can be traced back to how the 2022 war ended. Although the Tigrayan forces were not defeated, they only held on by their fingertips. They ran low on ammunition and were driven out of key strongholds. Eritrean troops captured areas of northern and western Tigray, while Ethiopian and Amhara forces — indigenous people of Ethiopia's central highlands — held parts of the south.

The peace treaty signed in Pretoria and Kenya reflected the reality on the ground. The Tigrayan team handed responsibility for the security of all Tigray over to the Ethiopian army, and required its troops to surrender their heavy weapons and disband. Politician Getachew Reda, the Tigrayan team leader, went on to head the Tigray Interim Regional Administration (TIRA). After such a bloody conflict, the peace agreement proved a bitter pill for Tigrayans to swallow. The agreement inevitably caused differences within the TPLF.

At the TPLF's core was the Marxist–Leninist League of Tigray. Though authorities said it was dissolved in 1991, few citizens believed it really was. The TPLF old-guard grew up with its principles of democratic centralism, which required all members to accept, without question, the decisions of the organization's ruling body. Under the strain of divisions over the peace treaty and the outcome of the war party, unity is severely strained and the rifts are now public.

Two factions have emerged. Debretsion Gebremichael, chairman of the TPLF, leads one side while Getachew and those involved in the TIRA lead the other. Author Gerrit Kurtz outlines the background to this clash in the publication *African Arguments*:

“Long-simmering tensions within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) broke out into the open in August 2024. The party leadership around President Debretsion Gebremichael now

stands apart from key TPLF officials in the Tigray Interim Regional Administration (TIRA) around its President Getachew Reda. Each side considers the other an illegal entity. The division has stirred up fears of renewed violence in northern Ethiopia. The split occurs in a context in which the economic and social situation in the northern highlands remains dire, the legacy of the devastating war four years ago that was only stopped by the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement signed in Pretoria, South Africa, in November 2022. ... At the same time, it is unclear how much support the TPLF still commands among the population at large in Tigray. Last year, the TIRA clamped down violently on an opposition rally in Mekelle. As a legacy of the war, many people are traumatised and focus on their own survival, especially the almost 900,000 internally displaced persons (out of a pre-war population of around six million). Tens of thousands of young people are leaving Tigray each year in search of better livelihoods, according to the TIRA. Others become criminals.”

As Kurtz concluded in his October 2024 article, “the status quo is untenable.” This has proved accurate. Both Debretsion and Getachew’s factions have released statements attacking each other — unheard-of behavior in the ruling party. Both now attempt to win over public opinion in Tigray and the support of Tigray’s troops and officers. TIRA and the TPLF leadership have done this in Tigrinya.

Major divisions threaten rehabilitation

Here are some of the issues that divide the factions:

Debretsion’s faction tends to originate from northern Tigray and represents the party’s old-guard. Getachew is from the south and has more support in Tigray’s regional capital, Mekelle, as

well as from younger technocrats. Senior military officials have become embroiled in a lucrative gold trade sold via Eritrea and Sudan. This trade undermines unity and encourages corruption. Substantial quantities of aid from the United States and other donors were diverted and sold on the open market. As a result, the United States Agency for International Development and the World Food Programme paused their assistance for several months in 2023. The TPLF leadership believed Getachew is too close to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Debretsion is seen as having made his peace with neighboring Eritrea, a former enemy that still holds areas of Tigray. Senior members of the TPLF are determined to have federal authorities continue officially recognizing their party. This may seem like a technical issue, but it is considerably resonant. The party has valuable assets in Ethiopia’s capital, Addis Ababa, and beyond that could be forfeited.

These differences come as Tigrayans struggle to overcome the aftermath of the 2020–2022 war. Hundreds of thousands remain displaced from their homes and in serious hardship. As news organization Deutsche Welle reported from Tigray, “Tigray’s regional interim administration has announced plans to facilitate the return of displaced people. However, the plan is estimated to require \$2.1 billion and the political will to return the displaced people.” Any form of internal conflict, let alone a civil war, would put this rehabilitation at risk.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Born in South Africa, **Martin Plaut** is currently senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and holds the same post with King's College London. He studied

at the Universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Warwick before joining the Labour Party as secretary on Africa and the Middle East. In 1984 he joined the BBC, working primarily on Africa. He became Africa editor at World Service News, retiring in 2013. Plaut has advised the British and American governments, as well as the European Parliament. He has published widely on the Horn of Africa and southern Africa.

Embracing Stock Market Stoicism

Vitaliy Katsenelson
February 05, 2025

The last year brought me back to a core Stoic principle that I hold close to my heart: the dichotomy of control. We can control our choices and reactions, but many things are outside our control. We can apply this principle in investing.

Last year brought me back to a core Stoic principle that I hold close to my heart: the dichotomy of control. Here's the gist: Some things are within our power — our values, our character, our decisions — and some aren't — like your brother-in-law's random (and possibly dumb) comment, your spouse's mood or the fact that every traffic light turns red right as you pull up.

In investing, it's the same. We can control:

The quality of our research — being logical and thorough in our researchOur decisions and discipline — systematically following our researchOur reactions — how we react to the news and external environmental pressure (I will discuss this at the end of the letter)

The market can price our stocks however it pleases on a month-to-month — or even year-to-year — basis. That's the part we can't control. We have to remember that these market prices are merely opinions, not final verdicts. The Stoics teach us to focus our energy on what we can influence (our process) and accept what we can't (the market's whims).

This probably sounds straightforward, but there's a twist that makes it harder for you, the client, to see how this all plays out in real time. You can easily check the portfolio's value — my decisions, not so much. In theory, I could make subpar investments and hide behind fancy Stoic talk.

That's exactly the why of these very detailed letters: to show you our thinking, walk you through our individual decisions. I write, you read — that's our agreement. You're the judge of whether my process makes sense. But I can't do that part for you.

2024

Our final returns in 2024 ranged from “okay” to “mediocre,” depending on the vintage of the portfolio. This isn't the most exciting news to share, but it's a perfect example of how Stoicism applies. Early in the year, we were beating the market — despite the market's gains being driven mostly by a few large-cap tech names. Then, in late June, it was as if someone flipped a switch. Even though nothing in our holdings had fundamentally changed, the stocks in our portfolio

started giving back earlier gains month after month while the market surged ahead.

A couple of our companies hit temporary snags, which shaved a point or two off our returns, but others had some good news. In the big picture, it was just the market's focus shifting. My IQ didn't drop in the second half of the year (at least, I hope not!). The short-term sentiment did.

This is what Stoicism looks like in practice. We stay grounded in the things we can do — solid research, thoughtful decisions, transparent communication — and accept that we don't control how the market prices those decisions in the short run. When I say “accept,” I don't mean “ignore;” I mean we don't get caught up in the daily drama of stock prices. We keep refining our process, making the best decisions we can and communicating openly to you.

I've been doing this for more than a quarter century, and I'm certain this won't be the last time the market teaches us to embrace Stoicism and reminds us what we can and cannot control.

What can you expect going forward?

As a firm, we're obsessed with the Japanese principle of kaizen — constant, slow improvement. Our operations folks are fanatical about improving internal processes and our service to you.

I love investing. I'm obsessed with getting better at it. There are many reasons for that: It's one of my core identities. I want to feel good about myself, and helping you achieve your goals while moderating the volatility of your blood pressure gives me great satisfaction. I have skin in the game — Investment Management Associates, Inc. manages the bulk of my, my family's and our employees' liquid net worth.

Thus, kaizen are we.

Our decision-making and investment process have improved over time. We've made several important improvements — we've enhanced our focus on quality, with our latest emphasis on the management quality of the companies we research. This is our analyst Max's obsession. I'm obsessed with it, too, but next to Max's fixation on it, mine is just a “hobby.”

We've expanded the ponds where we fish for stocks. As I wrote in my late-December letter, while the US pond has lots of great fish, they've become insanely expensive and thus offer low future returns. Though we still own plenty of American fish, we've expanded to foreign ponds where we can find wonderful fish at a fraction of the cost. This international fishing actually hurt our returns in 2024, as the market remained obsessed with “made in the USA” fish.

We're in an environment where market participants only care about quality and growth and are indifferent to the price paid. Valuations won't matter until they do, and then years of gains vanish in days or weeks.

We'll discuss the market next, but let me conclude this section with one more thought: I smile when Apple says, “This is our best iPhone yet.” You'd expect a company to keep making a better product if they want people to keep buying their stuff. You can't see this in our numbers for 2024, but I think we're making a better product.

Clients asked, what can you expect going forward?

When buying new stocks, we target 15–20% annualized returns based on middle-of-the-road scenarios, not optimistic ones. We'll have upside surprises to conservative fundamental estimates — like McKesson's performance exceeding expectations. But we'll also have disappointments. We maintain models for every company, updating them when we learn new information to stay

grounded in fundamentals: revenues, margins, cash flows and earnings.

Based on these models, we project fair value four to five years out to calculate expected annual rate of return (including dividends) for each stock we own. Currently, our top 20 holdings show about a 16% expected annual rate of return, with our top ten stocks, which have higher weight, around an 18% annual rate of return.

Remember, these are our best estimates, not guarantees. Fundamentally, our portfolio did absolutely fine in 2024, as earnings growth outpaced our returns.

The market

It seems like there are several tiers in the US market. There are ten wonderful, awesome, unbelievable, incredible (I am running out of adjectives) US tech companies, which represent about 40% of the value of the S&P 500, and then there are 490 shmucks and everything else.

A lot of these shmucks are not cheap, but most of the returns in 2024 came from the ten stocks with great adjectives. I wrote about them here and here, so I won't waste your time reviewing.

Let me just touch on one of those infinite-adjective companies — Apple — which will also shed light on its brethren. Apple is very close to me, literally — I typed this on a MacBook Air.

Since the launch of iPhone and iPad, Apple has always seemed one product away from creating another iPhone-like success. But other than services, the company hasn't released a major successful product category since AirPods and the Apple Watch, almost a decade ago. The Apple Car is a no-go.

Then there's Vision Pro. As much as I admired the commercials for it and the early reviews — and I buy almost everything Apple makes — my Vision Pro went back to the store after two weeks of giant headaches. Aside from the confusing interface, it literally gave me migraines. So far, it's been a major market disappointment, too (though there's a lot of great technology for Apple to use in future products).

Apple is late to the AI party. Its AI integration in the iPhone is a joke. Siri's IQ has remained at a well-trained cat level for years, while its competitors are approaching human intelligence. (I use the ChatGPT app instead of Siri.) Apple will solve a lot of these problems. It has cash to buy its way out of many of them. It has a strong ecosystem and loyal customers (though this loyalty isn't infinite).

Maybe the market sees Apple as an AI play, but AI is becoming crowded with companies that didn't even exist a decade ago. And for Apple, AI mostly means that people will keep upgrading their iPhones — which they're doing anyway.

Apple's revenues haven't increased in three years, nor have its earnings, which have steadily hung around \$6 per share. This is why I'm writing — nothing in January 2024, or since, indicated Apple's valuation should go up.

If I told you in early 2024 that you could buy Apple stock at 30 times earnings, a reasonable person would have said, "no, thank you." That's what Warren Buffett did: He sold a good chunk of Berkshire Hathaway's Apple holdings. But if you had followed this reasoning, you would have missed out on a 33% return. Today, you can buy this wonderful Apple stock for "only" 40 times earnings.

If over the next ten years Apple's earnings double (a big if), and it trades at 20 times earnings

in 2035 (a generous assumption), current investors will make no money if they own Apple stock today. This describes 2024 and the bulk of the market.

Let me highlight one of the “shmucks” as an example of the rest of the market.

Walmart — another wonderful “made in America” company. Its revenues basically grow with GDP, maybe slightly faster at times. It has already conquered the US retail market. It has already failed and succeeded in international markets — that might have been a story of optimism three decades ago. Its international growth story was spotty. But that chapter is behind the company. It is now at 2–3% real earnings growth plus inflation.

Its earnings were around \$1.60–1.90 for a few years. In 2024, you could have owned this American icon for “only” \$52. You would have paid 27 times earnings in the best case or 32 times in the worst. Walmart is a retailer fighting with Amazon for consumers’ wallets that have been shrunk by higher interest rates and inflation.

Again, a great company, but severely overvalued. Probably a decade of no or little return ahead of it, or even worse, if you ask me.

That is what I would have told you in January 2024, and I would have been wrong! Today, you can pick up Walmart shares for LVMH-like prices of \$90 at “only” 45 times earnings.

If you’d listened to my sound but wrong advice in 2024, you would have left 73% on the table. This market is filled with schmucky stocks like this. It’s a good thing we don’t own the market.

A brief (and smelly) case study

You want to hear how “not rational” the market is? We’re all adults here, so I try hard not to use childish vocabulary, but this market stretches my ability.

One of the best-performing investments in 2024 — of course, we didn’t own it — was a digital cryptocurrency called Fartcoin. If you wanted to buy its full (airy) supply, it would only cost you a billion dollars. Yes, the value of Fartcoin is a billion American-with-a-capital-B dollars. A gift!

Its utility is unknown (it has no earnings or use) other than being a vehicle for great fools selling to even greater fools, with everyone supposedly becoming rich in the process. (This is not how wealth creation works.)

I didn’t subject you to hearing about this juvenile nonsense for nothing, because Fartcoin’s slogan perfectly describes today’s market: “Hot air goes up.”

Physics was not something I excelled at, but I know this much: At some point, the holders of this magic coin (and the rest of the airy market) will discover that hot air doesn’t stay hot forever. When its temperature drops (even just relative to its recent high), it goes down — and then goes down fast.

Here’s the irony: If my money manager had bought Apple, Walmart or especially Fartcoin, I would have questioned his investment process, because the risk reward of these decisions made no sense. But this is what worked in 2024.

Our message for 2025 and beyond

Our message to you is as follows. If 2025 is going to be like 2024, I’ll just send you this piece in January 2026. In the meantime, we are going to continue to buy high-quality companies, run by awesome (shareholder-friendly) management, and

we are going to buy them at a significant margin of safety. This strategy should work; we just don't know when the air cools.

The market may be reaching crazy valuations and doing crazy things (that is what markets often do). We are playing a very different game — the only game we know how to play. Our goal is to grow and preserve your wealth.

One thing we can control is how we react to the market. So, we're going to keep our heads down and keep doing what didn't work in 2024 — until it does work. Yes, that may mean sticking to unpopular decisions, especially when things like "Fartcoin" are suddenly worth a billion dollars and already-overvalued stocks have surged another 70%. It might not look brilliant at the moment, but it's the only rational path.

Remember: Rational investing doesn't always pay every single year. That's both the feature and the bug of the stock market. For those currently enjoying big gains, I'd point you to Mark Twain's advice: "Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect."

Not too long ago, when the market was tanking, our portfolios were headed in the opposite direction: up. I told you back then to bottle that "I'm a genius" feeling, because eventually I'd look less than smart again. Well, that time has arrived. Let's uncork that bottle and remind ourselves that just because it isn't working now doesn't mean it won't work later. In the long run, hot air or cold air, none of those things matter. All that matters is intrinsic value — what companies are truly worth. That is what we focus on and will continue to focus on.

The question of AI

A few clients asked if we're concerned about AI.

As one long-term client, who has become a close friend, proudly (and appropriately) described me to his acquaintance: "My money manager is a paranoid Russian Jew." Paranoid I am, but also excited. We've already integrated AI into our investment process. Artificial Intelligence is a terrific tool that allows us to dig deeper and wider, but it is not a replacement for human intelligence.

AI is definitely going to change the world. We're learning as much as we can about it and assessing its likely impact on our portfolio, both good and bad.

A few months ago, my daughter Hannah, a freshman at the University of Denver, participated in a mock version of an AI science fair. Her freshman class was divided into a hundred groups of four, and they had to create a product using the latest sensor technology and AI. The top 15 groups presented their products at the science fair, and then six finalists presented their ideas. Hannah's team was in the top six — but that is not why I am writing this.

I was blown away by what AI and sensors will be able to do. To make sure that I'm not caught flat-footed by AI, I'm going to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas — that's not exactly my favorite place in the US, but I am really excited about what I'll learn.

[The Intellectual Investor produced this piece.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Vitaliy Katsenelson is a Russian-born American investor and author based in Denver, Colorado. He earned both his undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Colorado at Denver, became a CFA charterholder

in 2000 and taught investing at his alma mater. Vitaliy discovered his passion for writing in 2004, contributing to major financial publications and authoring three books, including *Soul in the Game*. He is the CEO of Investment Management Associates, Inc., where he invests his own funds alongside clients. Outside of work, Vitaliy explores Stoic philosophy and cherishes time with his wife, Rachel, and their three children.

Two East African Films Premiere at Sundance. Here's Why That's Important.

Mehret Ayalew Mandefro
February 06, 2025

At Sundance, two East African documentaries premiered in the World Cinema Documentary competition for the first time. *How to Build a Library (Kenya)* and *Khartoum (Sudan)* challenge clichés by telling African stories through local perspectives. Their success marks a shift toward African filmmakers shaping their own narratives on the global stage.

African filmmakers made history at this month's Sundance Film Festival (January 23 to February 2). For the first time, two documentaries about East Africa made by East African filmmakers premiered at its prestigious World Cinema Documentary competition. This watershed moment isn't just about artistic recognition — it represents a crucial shift in who gets to shape Africa's narrative on the global stage.

The selected films, *How to Build a Library* from Kenya and *Khartoum* from Sudan, emerge from a region historically starved of filmmaking infrastructure. While West Africa benefited from French colonial investment in cinema and access to financing schemes, East Africa's former colonial powers, Britain and Germany, left no such legacy. After independence, pressing development needs further sidelined investment in the arts.

Changing the narrative about Africa

As an Emmy-nominated producer who writes and gives TED talks about the impact of the creative industries on Africa's economic future, I know that too often, the stories that circulate about places like Kenya and Sudan depict them in a biased light.

As the report "Africa in the Media" from the University of Southern California's Annenberg school shows, television viewers are more than twice as likely to see negative depictions of Africa than positive ones and seven times more likely to see references to Europe on TV than any mention of Africa. Similarly, a recent report by the narrative change advocacy organization Africa No Filter demonstrated that skewed reporting on the continent increases African countries' perceived risk by investors, leading to higher borrowing costs that deprive Africa of \$4.2 billion annually in foreign direct investment.

This is even as the International Monetary Fund projects that, by 2050, more than 25% of the world's population will be African, and by the end of the century, 40% will be. Anyone not thinking about Africa as part of the future will be left behind.

Clichéd stories about Africa hurt us all by impoverishing our collective imagination and obscuring the many opportunities inherent in Africa becoming the largest source of global

workforce growth. But when African filmmakers tell their own stories, the perspective shifts. Audiences gain access to visions of Africa that are rooted in solutions instead of just the problems.

When a film like *How to Build a Library* circulates widely, it begins to repair the harm done by hackneyed portrayals of Africa like overreporting on election violence and instead highlights local solutions that are in full bloom.

The film follows two Kenyan women, Shiro and Wachuku, as they rebuild McMillan Memorial library, a colonial library that was not designed with Kenyans in mind. Shiro and Wachuku have to navigate local politics as they work to raise millions of dollars to rebuild the library which is owned by the government but has been left neglected and in disrepair. Unexpected obstacles, including skeptical librarian staff who view the women as outsiders, test their resolve and threaten to dash their dreams — though their cheery disposition and charisma on camera make it difficult to believe there is anything these women can't do.

The wife-and-husband filmmaking team of Maia Lekow and Christopher King captures the highs and lows of the journey, weaving archival materials of Kenya's colonial past (stored in the library's archives) with present-day portraits that reveal there is still a great deal of work remaining.

In a particularly poignant moment, the official charged with approving the extended lease that would allow Shiro and Wachuku to begin construction finds an old photo of his deceased mother in the archives of the library. Suddenly, it becomes clear that restoring the library is as personal as it is public, and that honoring the stories that may be lost to history — if not for intrepid individuals like Shiro and Wachuka — is an urgent task.

Similarly, Khartoum goes beyond the headlines about Sudan's civil war. It reveals the resilience of ordinary citizens fleeing the conflict, who find creative ways to respond amid what the UN calls the world's worst displacement crisis. Forced to leave Sudan after the war broke out, five citizens of Khartoum reenact their stories of survival and freedom. Among them are a civil servant, a tea lady, a resistance committee volunteer, and two young bottle collectors. Through their personal narratives, they reflect on their journey from dreams to revolution to civil war and, ultimately, to exile.

Told through green-screen, animated dreamscapes and an ethereal musical score, this inventive documentary takes audiences on an emotional journey. It weaves together vivid sequences that capture what it felt like to live in Khartoum before the conflict — and what it feels like to live in exile now.

The Sudanese filmmakers Anas Saeed, Rawia Alhag, Ibrahim Snoopy and Timeea Ahmed, along with British director Phil Cox, create a space for their subjects to process traumatic memories with extraordinary love and care.

The film's storytelling stands in stark contrast to news reports on Sudan. Its tone, depth and humanity highlight cinema's power to transform consciousness. This is as far from "trauma porn" as a film can get.

Instead, it is cathartic. It takes audiences on a journey that delicately weaves together memory, story, and love. It visualizes the human bonds that remain intact, even in the face of tragic violence. Ultimately, it serves as a reminder that to remember may be the most human act of all.

African filmmakers achieve independence

The selection of these films at Sundance is particularly striking, given the neo-colonial dynamics that often constrain African filmmaking. Most productions on the continent still rely heavily on European co-production funding. This funding often comes with strings attached, subtly reshaping stories to fit Western expectations of victims in need of saving.

This form of cultural gatekeeping can reinforce stereotypes rather than challenge them. A recent report on inclusive production by the European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs Association highlights the changes needed to address these asymmetries. Key recommendations include acknowledging the creative team's connection to or distance from the community being portrayed and ensuring that creative control remains with the original producers, even when financing comes from external sources.

Both of these films succeed in meeting those standards. Their narrative positioning and foundation are tied to local support, particularly from the Nairobi-based Docubox East African Film Fund. Docubox, a nonprofit whose funders include the Ford Foundation and the Global Community and Engagement Resilience Fund, focuses on stories that reflect a diversity of social, cultural, and political realities while also creating a thriving community for independent African filmmakers. The organization's "no strings attached" funding allows filmmakers to tell stories that escape the usual tropes other financing schemes may favor.

Supporting independent African filmmakers leads to transformative results, with an impact that extends beyond cinema. When African storytellers control their own narratives, they help repair the psychological damage caused by decades of reductive storytelling. Their films act as a form of cultural medicine, addressing what Nigerian writer

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously called "the danger of a single story."

Of course, two films alone cannot fix the widespread inequities in representation. But their success at Sundance signals something profound—the emergence of a more equitable global storytelling ecosystem. This shift is largely driven by local arts organizations that have been quietly doing the work for years.

It suggests that African perspectives no longer need to be filtered through a Western lens to reach international audiences. In a world where perceptions shape reality, these films offer a vision of Africa authored by Africans themselves. They serve as a reminder that the power to tell one's own story is not a luxury — it is a necessity for building a more just global future.



Mehret Mandefro is an Emmy-nominated producer, writer, and Executive Producer of Truth Aid Media, a Paul and Daisy Soros fellow and OpEd Project Public

Voices Fellow. She is a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Science and works at the intersection of art, science, and social entrepreneurship.

Balkan Tinderbox: How Russia's Moves Could Reignite Bosnia

Harun Karčić
February 07, 2025

Russia is trying to stop the Balkan nations from joining the Euro-Atlantic community. This is

causing instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the Republika Srpska region. The push for independence in Republika Srpska threatens the country's stability. The international community must stay alert and act to prevent more unrest.

Russia illegally and deliberately interfered in the recent Moldovan presidential elections. It may even be laying the groundwork for a false flag operation in Moldova's Transnistria region, providing a pretext for invading the nation. Russia is evidently willing to destabilize its neighbors in order to expand its sphere of influence.

Moscow could easily adapt this broader strategy to the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains one of the most politically volatile states in the region. It has a legacy of ethno-political divisions. The Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the Bosnian War in 1995 is fragile.

A potential flashpoint lies in Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, where secessionist ambitions are a persistent undercurrent in political discourse. A well-executed false flag operation by Russia could serve as a pretext to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina and pave the way for Republika Srpska to declare independence, transforming it into a satellite akin to Abkhazia or South Ossetia in Georgia.

Russia's strategic interests in the Balkans revolve around undermining Euro-Atlantic integration, in addition to maintaining influence in a region historically linked to Slavic and Orthodox cultures. Bosnia and Herzegovina's aspirations for NATO and EU membership are particularly problematic for Moscow, which views such moves

as an encroachment on its sphere of influence — it is already furious at the extent of NATO expansion in the Balkans today, which has left only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo outside the alliance.

Republika Srpska is a highly autonomous political entity comprising 49% of the country and covering its eastern and northern borders. Under the de facto 16-year leadership of Milorad Dodik, it has frequently flirted with the idea of secession, capitalizing on the entity's significant autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina to resist centralization efforts and align closely with Belgrade's and Moscow's interests.

Furthermore, Dodik's criminal links and business ties with Serbia's strongman Aleksandar Vučić and fellow pro-Russian aligned Serb politicians and underground networks in Montenegro and Kosovo are well known and well documented. Dodik himself takes pride in having met Russian President Vladimir Putin more than a dozen times and has continuously defied the authority of Christian Schmidt, the appointed High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, who is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Dayton Agreement.

Deception in the Balkans

A highly concerning potential scenario is emerging. Russia could carry out a false flag operation, creating the illusion of a crisis that necessitates Republika Srpska's unilateral declaration of independence, all while providing Russia with plausible deniability.

The target for such a false flag operation could be a symbolically significant site or community within Republika Srpska. This could include ethnically mixed areas and towns like Brčko, where ethnic Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks coexist, or it could take the form of an attack (framed as

terrorism) on critical infrastructure sites such as bridges, transportation hubs or government. Moreover, targeting critical economic infrastructure, such as energy pipelines or trade routes and blaming Bosniak Muslim or Croat elements could portray the Republika Srpska as an economically besieged entity. Russia could then step in with economic aid and recognition, mirroring its actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Radical nationalist groups or extremist organizations with ties to Belgrade or other external forces could target emotionally sensitive locations such as Srebrenica, site of the 1995 genocide perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs against Bosniak Muslims, with a false-flag operation.

These groups could carry out an attack on Muslim returnees in that town or launch an arsonist attack against a local mosque, which would be enough to provoke Bosniak Muslims to launch reciprocal attacks against Serbs in Muslim-majority areas. That would spark tit-for-tat violence which would quickly spiral out of control in a country where almost every household has an assault rifle buried in its backyard.

Another possible false flag operation would involve covert Russian operatives or local proxies staging an attack and attributing it to Bosniak Muslim extremists. This narrative could exploit existing Islamophobic hatred among Bosnian Serbs towards Bosniak Muslims, portraying the Serb entity as under siege and its independence as a necessary step to protect its people.

Russia's extensive disinformation apparatus would likely amplify this false narrative. Pro-Russian media outlets active in the Balkans — such as RT and Sputnik — as well as social media bots and influencers would disseminate fabricated evidence of Bosniak aggression or Western complicity. Concurrently, Russian officials could

use diplomatic channels to cast doubt on the credibility of Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions and NATO's intentions.

A perfect storm of manipulation

In the aftermath of a staged attack, Republika Srpska authorities would declare a state of emergency, mobilize its security forces, set up hard borders along the existing invisible entity-division line and declare independence. Russia, leveraging its position in the UN Security Council, could block any resolutions condemning the Republika Srpska while extending “humanitarian” support to the entity. Given Russia's heavy presence in neighboring Serbia — especially its so-called humanitarian center in Niš (seen by the US as a spy center) this would be relatively easy to carry out bearing in mind that Republika Srpska effectively shares a 302-kilometer-long border with Serbia.

For such a plan to succeed, several preconditions must align. First and foremost, weak state institutions and Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented governance structure, characterized by competing ethnic agendas and an under-resourced central government, provide fertile ground for manipulation.

Secondly, there is plenty of distrust among Bosnian Serbs towards the international community, particularly towards NATO, foreign embassies in Sarajevo and the Office of the High Representative. Russia could exploit this distrust to fuel grievances among Republika Srpska leaders, potentially destabilizing the region.

Thirdly, there must be local proxies — “little green men” like we saw in Crimea — and there are plenty. In the Republika Srpska there are already well-connected pro-Russian biker gangs, local chapters of the Night Wolves, criminal networks and paramilitary units often tied to veterans'

associations. These could serve as enforcers in the wake of a false flag operation.

Finally, there must be global distractions: a concurrent global crisis, such as heightened tensions in Ukraine or the Middle East, could divert Western attention and resources away from the Balkans.

All this is in place at the moment.

Who would respond?

The international response to a false flag operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be crucial in determining its success. However, the West faces several challenges.

At the very outset, the international community's focus is divided. With NATO and the EU preoccupied with Ukraine, anxiety over US President Donald Trump's new administration and Europe's own defense shortcomings, their ability to respond decisively to Balkan instability may be limited. For example, the international community failed to react and refuses to openly hold Belgrade accountable for the Banjska Monastery incident, a thwarted but very serious attempt by criminals affiliated with Belgrade to destabilize Kosovo, despite overwhelming evidence.

Furthermore, the international community promotes inconsistent policies. Western powers have often struggled to present a unified stance on Bosnia and Herzegovina, with some EU nations such as France and Germany prioritizing stability over justice and reform. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden's policy of "decoupling" Serbia from Russia, and thereby the Republika Srpska too, was a failure of epic proportions.

Serbia has not only played these actors but used the legitimacy it gained from the US and EU to tighten its repression against any forms of

opposition to the Vučić regime. All the while, it continues to receive EU investment and to maintain cordial relations with Moscow and Beijing.

Should the Republika Srpska declare independence, who would react? Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces cannot react without a unified decision of all three members of the tripartite presidency, and the Serb member of the presidency will never vote to send the country's forces against his or her own statelet. Given that Darko Čulum, former interior Minister of the Republika Srpska, runs the State Security Agency (SIPA), it is unlikely that he will send special forces to prevent the entity from declaring independence either.

From my observations as a journalist working in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past twenty years, all Republika Srpska politicians, regardless of their political party affiliations, pledge their allegiance first and foremost to the Republika Srpska and not to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many of them have even made public statements expressing their disrespect and even outright hatred for the country.

Defusing a Balkan powder keg

EUFOR, the European Union's peacekeeping mission, is unlikely to react effectively to a crisis. It has only around 600 soldiers, mostly reservists without heavy weaponry or military experience.

Similarly, NATO's headquarters in Sarajevo has a limited mandate, focusing on providing assistance and advice to the country's military reform process rather than taking direct action. In other words, NATO would have to deploy a rapid reaction force if it decided to act. A number of high-ranking NATO generals are certainly following events in Bosnia and Herzegovina closely. They would push for a quick response. But

would all 32 NATO members vote to send forces to keep the peace in a small slice of non-NATO territory?

For me, the answer is in the affirmative. This isn't because there is any love between NATO and non-member Bosnia and Herzegovina, but because the last thing NATO needs is another Abkhazia, this time nested between two NATO member states (Croatia and Montenegro).

Before things get out of control, it is imperative to prioritize certain measures. First and foremost, EUFOR's presence must be beefed up to a brigade level. A more visible EUFOR presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including joint military exercises, public military presence and counter-disinformation campaigns, could deter Russian adventurism.

Another avenue is bilateral military cooperation. For one thing, Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces have had decades-long military cooperation with the Maryland National Guard. The US can intensify this existing cooperation, which would send a very strong message to Moscow.

Moreover, the NATO headquarters in Sarajevo must increase its public visibility and take concrete steps to promote the political, economic and social merits of joining the alliance. Merely organizing closed-door roundtable discussions and meetings about the need to reform Bosnia and Herzegovina's military has proven futile. It needs to embed cyber security and disinformation advisors to work in key ministries and agencies and provide support.

Enhanced support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's central government, judiciary and security apparatus could mitigate vulnerabilities. These institutions must be reformed in order to prevent them from being hijacked or blocked by

Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat nationalists. Bosnia and Herzegovina risks a Lebanon-like scenario if left to the mercy of vetoes by ethnically driven agendas. A Russian-backed false flag operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a plausible scenario, and Republika Srpska's secession would not only destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina but also set a dangerous precedent for other frozen conflicts in Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina neighbors two NATO member states — Croatia and Montenegro — and any conflict in the country would have a spill-over effect that would drag the transatlantic alliance in. Ultimately, to prevent this outcome, the international community must remain vigilant, proactive and united in supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Only through robust preventive measures can the region avoid becoming the next theater of Russian geopolitical gamesmanship.



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Islam, in the post-communist Balkans. He also writes about the role played by foreign powers including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. His scope has more recently expanded to include China and Russia as well. He also regularly reports on Muslim minorities in Europe and rising right-wing nationalism.

The Largest Festival in the World: Kumbh Mela 2025

Mudit Jain
February 11, 2025

The Kumbh Mela, the world’s largest religious gathering, takes place in India every 12 years, and the Maha Kumbh Mela occurs every 144 years. Rooted in Hindu mythology, the festival attracts millions of pilgrims, sadhus and spiritual seekers who gather at sacred river sites to find purification and liberation in the holy waters. The Indian government is investing heavily in infrastructure to support the massive 2025 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela.

People celebrate many carnivals worldwide. For example, there’s Mardi Gras in New Orleans and France, which takes place annually during Lent on Ash Wednesday, just before 40 days of fasting. Similarly, the Rio carnival in Brazil and various festivities in the Caribbean Islands occur right before the beginning of Lent. These carnivals embrace hedonism, leading to an explosion of dancing, eating and merrymaking.

However, the largest festival of them all is the Kumbh Mela in India, with the Maha Kumbh Mela being the grandest, celebrated once every 144 years. Unlike the carnivals of the Western world, the Kumbh Mela embodies asceticism drawing sadhus and sanyasis from the remote corners of the Himalayas and other holy cities. These spiritual seekers gather with pilgrims from across the globe to rejuvenate their spiritual energies.

The mythology of the Kumbh Mela originates from the Samudra Manthan, a cosmic battle that took place between the Gods and demons over a pot of nectar (amrit) which emerged during the churning of the oceans. The Gods wrested the pot of nectar from the demons and, in the ensuing battle, a few drops of amrit fell at four locations onto India: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik. These sites became sacred as a result.

Bathing in the holy river during the Kumbh Mela not only purifies one’s sins but also the soul, leading to moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth). Among these sites the Prayagraj Triveni Sangam is considered to be the most sacred, where the Yamuna and Ganga merge with the mystical Saraswati, forming a Triveni — a confluence of three rivers in Prayagraj.

Maha Kumbh Mela 2025

The 2025 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela, also referred to as a Maha Kumbh Mela, is celebrated following 12 successive Kumbh Melas. The previous Maha Kumbh Mela was celebrated in 1881, and the next will be in 2169. The 2025 Kumbh Mela will span 45 days from January 13 to February 26.

The normal Kumbh Mela rotates every 12 years across the four locations — Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik — based on astrological calculations of Jupiter (Guru), the Sun (Surya) and the Moon (Chandra). The 2025 Kumbh Mela aligns with the same planetary alignment present during the original Samudra Manthan, making it exceptionally significant.

The statistics of the current Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj are staggering. Over 400 million pilgrims and tourists from around the world will attend the festival over its 45-day duration. To put this into perspective, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar attracted 3.5 million people over 40 days, and the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics drew 11 million people over 18 days. The Kumbh Mela, in contrast, will host an audience equivalent to over 110 FIFA World Cups.

The Uttar Pradesh State government has allocated ₹12,000 crores (~\$1.4 billion) to enhance infrastructure for the Kumbh Mela. Experts estimate that the festival will generate around ₹2 lakh crores (~\$25 billion) in revenue. Authorities have constructed a temporary tent city spanning

4000 hectares (~9884 acres) along the banks of Ganga and Yamuna, featuring 150,000 tents, along with sanitation and transport facilities. Over 40,000 security personnel will oversee the event, and the bathing area includes 12 kilometers of temporary railings in the river for easy bathing. The site also offers 1800 hectares (~4448 acres) of parking space and 450 km of internal roads. Organizers have built 30 temporary pontoon bridges over the holy Ganga on both sides of the river to facilitate movement.

The akhadas

The Kumbh Mela's major attractions are the akhadas and dhams (temporary ashrams), where spiritual leaders and their followers live for the 45-day duration. The festival also revolves around the holy dip in the Triveni Sangam where the rivers Yamuna, Ganga and Saraswati converge. Several dhams, including the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and others, operate throughout India and provide free meals to pilgrims and the poor as a service. The Kumbh Mela hosts 14 akhadas, including 13 traditional ones and a newly established akhada in 2015 for transgender people. There are many famous akhadas, such as the Jina and Niranjana akhadas. Laurene Powell Jobs, the wife of Steve Jobs, even had a brief stay at Niranjana's akhada.

The most famous of these akhadas are the ones housing the naga sadhus who smear their bodies with ash and wear only a loincloth. Female naga sadhus, on the other hand, dress in saffron clothes. The aghoris, known for their reclusive and esoteric practices, emerge only on the special days of the religious baths (shani snans) from midnight to 7:00 AM in the freezing hours of the night, marching in a procession from camps to akhadas, chanting hymns full of religious fervor. These aghoris wear necklaces made of skulls and live in cemeteries, and practice occult and tantric rituals. They participate in only six holy baths during the

festival, with the most holy date being January 29, 2025.

A testament to human devotion

The Kumbh Mela is an emotional and spiritual phenomenon — one grand festival, a congregation of humanity united in peaceful celebration. It fosters an inward journey, encouraging participants to cleanse their sins by taking a holy dip and chanting hymns.

A friend once summed up the experience perfectly: “It's the largest collection of the devoted, the gullible, touts, conjurers, tricksters charlatans, the disillusioned, the opportunists (including photographers), derelicts, the underprivileged, the privileged and more. But all things considered, the brotherhood and love all around diminishes everything else... It's a mad and fantastic churning of humanity. The true India. A circus one must witness to believe, and I am glad I did.”

The Kumbh Mela stands as a testament to the devotion of millions of poor pilgrims, sadhus and sadhvis. It encapsulates the heart and soul of India and embodies the brotherhood of humanity. To truly grasp its significance, one must witness it firsthand in all its grandeur and totality.

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



Mudit Jain is third generation member of his family-owned company, which manufactures industrial chemicals. He has played an active role in various chambers of commerce. In addition to his business responsibilities, Mudit is actively engaged in various activities and organizations. Outside of his

business endeavors, Mudit Jain was a former Director on the board of the Rotary Club of Bombay. Additionally, he has been a part of the executive committee of the Museum Society of Bombay. Mudit's interests include wildlife and traveling, going to the theater, attending book and film festivals, and reading non-fiction books. He keeps fit by brisk walking daily.

Why Trade Is Critical and Tariffs Fail

John Manzella
February 12, 2025

International trade greatly benefits the United States and supports 41 million American jobs, contributing to higher wages in export-intensive industries. History shows that tariffs are not just ineffective, but often backfire by raising prices and reducing competitiveness. The US needs to adopt smart policies to ensure its long-term prosperity.

International trade has lifted millions of people out of poverty, boosted standards of living, and benefited the United States more than most other countries. Why? The American economic engine thrives on economies of scale, designed to produce solutions for the world's eight billion consumers, not just America's 340 million customers. And the benefits are tremendous. But the US is moving down a protectionist path that will weaken our economic growth and competitiveness while hurting consumers and businesses.

Trade is essential to US prosperity

Today, trade supports 41 million American jobs, or about one in four workers. And those in export-intensive industries earn approximately 18% more than the average wage. Currently, markets outside the US represent 80% of the world's purchasing power and 95% of consumers. But by 2030, the number of global middle-class consumers will rise from 3.5 billion to nearly five billion. And virtually all of them will live outside the US.

Exporting goods and services to fast-growing foreign markets is critical, but it's only part of the equation. Every year, US multinationals operating abroad produce and sell two-and-a-half times more in foreign markets than is exported from the homeland. This provides tremendous benefits, including significantly more revenue for American-based operations, their research and development initiatives, and US-based jobs in a variety of sectors.

Looking forward, it will be increasingly important to maintain positive relationships with foreign governments that invite American multinationals to operate in their countries and to ensure US exporters have secure access to their markets. Unfortunately, the winds are against us.

Why trade agreements matter

The US currently has 14 free trade agreements with 20 countries. Remarkably, these partners account for nearly half of all US exports despite representing just 6% of the world's consumers. This demonstrates that when trade barriers are reduced, American businesses and workers can compete anywhere with great success.

However, the US is falling way behind in securing new agreements. There are 359 regional trade agreements without US participation, according to the World Trade Organization. And a flurry of new ones are currently being negotiated that give foreign companies preferential treatment

over US businesses. This will put US firms in an increasingly less competitive position, leading to a loss of market share. Despite bipartisan support for trade in the past, today's protectionist political climate makes negotiating new trade deals extremely challenging.

Imports don't weaken the economy

A common misperception of imports has led to policies that attempt to restrict them. Imports offer a greater selection of consumer and industrial products, a wider range of quality and access to lower-cost goods and services that effectively subsidize the quality of life for lower- and middle-income Americans. Imports also help keep inflation down, one of the most essential factors in sustaining our standard of living.

Imports create millions of American jobs in marketing, sales, retail, wholesale and transportation. And since more than half of all US imports are intermediate inputs used in the final production of US products, they also help American manufacturers remain globally competitive.

When considering reducing imports in hopes of stimulating what some speculate is a hollowed-out manufacturing sector, consider this: According to various metrics, including industrial production in manufacturing published by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis and inflation adjusted value added in manufacturing published by the Bureau of Economic analysis, US manufacturing output is at near or all-time high.

It's also important to understand that due to demographic trends, our labor shortage is projected to worsen. Currently, there are approximately eight million American jobs that are not filled, the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates. Reducing imports or backshoring low-technology, low-value goods where the manufacturing

processes cannot be automated makes little sense. Finding American workers to make goods that were previously imported is extremely difficult, and pulling them from other sectors will only drive prices up, hurting consumers and industry. This will result in less output and economic growth.

Don't blame imports for declining manufacturing jobs

Also misguided is the blaming of imports as a primary cause for declining jobs in the manufacturing sector. As productivity rises due to the introduction of new technologies and automation, the same output simply requires fewer people. For example, look at American agriculture. In 1940, there were 9.4 million farm jobs; today, there are approximately 2.3 million, yet US agricultural output has skyrocketed.

Declining jobs in the manufacturing sector is not new. According to data published by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, American manufacturing jobs as a percentage of total US employment have been declining since 1944. In the CSIS report, "Do Not Blame Trade for the Decline in Manufacturing Jobs," labor economist Stephen Rose states: "Almost the entire decline from 32% of the labor force in 1955 to 8% in 2019 was not caused by imports but by higher productivity. This is a world-wide phenomenon, as even Germany and other countries with positive trade balances also had their shares of manufacturing employment suffer comparable declines."

Tariffs don't eliminate trade deficits

A popular assumption is that by raising or implementing new tariffs, a country will eliminate its trade deficit. This is not true. Trade deficits are not simply a function of exports and imports, but reflect a combination of factors, including savings rates and investment flows.

Surprising to many, Germany, Switzerland and Singapore consistently run a trade surplus, yet maintain low tariff levels. And India, which is highly protectionist, consistently runs trade deficits, according to data from the World Bank and United Nations. Based on a study of 183 countries published by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, author Caroline Freund said, “Countries with higher tariffs have, if anything, larger deficits.”

Tariffs typically don’t work and often backfire

For decades, US policymakers have turned to tariffs as a tool to protect industries and workers from foreign competition and increase domestic production. Import tariffs, which are paid by the importer and typically passed on to buyers, do not achieve these goals and often backfire, causing prices to increase and inflation to rise — a consideration that may keep the Federal Reserve from lowering interest rates and even raising them. Once implemented, tariffs typically create more losses than gains in terms of production levels, economic growth and jobs.

During his first term in March 2018, US President Donald Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from various countries. The intention was to boost US steel and aluminum production while increasing employment. The opposite happened. Tariffs placed on China also were hoped to change Chinese bad behavior. They did not.

According to a May 2024 report published by the Tax Foundation, a Washington, DC think tank, as prices increased, downstream industries that use steel and aluminum were negatively affected, experiencing an annual \$3.4 billion loss in production from 2018 to 2021. Analysis by the Trade Partnership Worldwide, a US-based research and consulting firm, estimated that for every job

gained in the production of steel and aluminum, 16 were lost in steel-using industries.

This loss of jobs shouldn’t have been a surprise. In March 2002, President George W. Bush imposed tariffs on a variety of steel products for three years. The result: Higher prices led to a loss of nearly 200,000 jobs in American steel-consuming sectors — a loss larger than the total employment of 187,500 in the steel-producing sector at that time.

Each job created due to Trump’s March 2018 steel tariffs came at a steep price: an extra \$650,000 per job paid by steel users, according to the Peterson Institute for International Economics, a nonpartisan research organization. This was hardly a model of economic efficiency, but not unusual. Overall, US industries exposed to the 2018–2019 tariff increases experienced relative reductions in employment, a January 2025 Federal Reserve study confirms.

Tariffs on Canada and Mexico will hurt North America

On February 1, 2025, Trump escalated trade tensions by threatening to impose 25% tariffs on goods from Mexico and Canada, and an additional 10% tariff on Chinese imports. He justified the potential Mexican and Canadian tariffs by criticizing what he described as their inadequate efforts to control illegal drug trafficking and immigration into the US.

On February 10, 2025, Trump announced he would impose 25% tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from all countries effective early March. Canada and Mexico are two of the United States’ biggest suppliers. Trump’s longstanding concerns about trade deficits may be a key motivating factor behind these protectionist measures.

If this is the case, consider these facts. On average, 40% of Mexican exports to the US are components, parts and materials that were originally exported from the US and incorporated in the Mexican production process. For Canada, 25%; for China 4%, according to the Dallas Federal Reserve. Thus, trade deficit figures do not always accurately reflect what's happening on the ground and may be poor data to base policy decisions.

To understand the depth of the US–Canada–Mexico relationship, perhaps the most telling is this: The US exports more to Canada and Mexico than to our next nine biggest country destinations combined. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was updated by the Trump-negotiated United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) in 2020, has stimulated the development of sophisticated supply chains, increased capital flows, advanced the spread of technology and enhanced productivity. Additionally, it has increased the number of low-priced product choices for consumers and created more good-paying jobs. Crucially, it has elevated North American competitiveness.

If implemented, the result of these tariffs will undoubtedly hurt North America by pushing prices and inflation up and economic growth down. The extent of the potential damage, which could be massive, will depend on a number of factors not known at this time.

Our auto industry will become less competitive

Although we can't predict the extent of Trump's protectionist positions, what we do know is this: Because the North American auto industry is so deeply integrated, the introduction of tariffs will make it less competitive worldwide. It also will raise the price of automobiles hurting American Canadian and Mexican consumers, workers and companies.

Auto materials, components and parts made on the continent are supplied by all three countries. They cross the border several times during the manufacturing process. For example, it's not uncommon for auto parts to begin manufacturing in the US and Mexico, be shipped to a plant in Canada where valuable components are added and tested, be trucked back to a US facility for completion, then be exported to an Asian buyer. As a result, a tariff would not be applied once, but multiple times, boosting costs significantly.

Our trade partners may look for better partners

Noted earlier, there are nearly 360 regional trade agreements around the world without US participation and many more are currently being negotiated. As our trade partners become more disillusioned and uncertain of their future trading relationship with the US, they will be more incentivized to forge ahead with new bilateral and multilateral trade agreements without US participation.

Also consider the fact that there are more than 150 developing countries that represent 6.9 billion people, or approximately 86% of the world's population. Currently, China is the world's largest exporter and the biggest trade partner with many of these countries. With both the US and China competing for their hearts, minds and markets, the US may be perceived as a less trustworthy partner due to its growing tensions with longstanding allies.

A smarter approach

History demonstrates that broad tariffs typically hurt more than they help and can quickly escalate, creating unbearable damage. The most severe example is the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act implemented on June 17, 1930, by US President Herbert Hoover. It raised US import tariffs nearly

60%. In anticipation of Act's passage, France, Italy, India and Australia passed their own protectionist legislation. Others, such as Spain, Switzerland and Canada, followed suit. The result: Export markets dried up, domestic industries slowed down and the unemployment rate in the US rose to 25% in 1933. Protectionism may have put the "Great" in the Great Depression.

While some protectionist measures can be useful when narrowly applied, long-term prosperity depends on expanding trade opportunities, ensuring competitive industries, and balancing economic security with economic growth. The best way to support American workers and businesses is not through trade wars, but through smart, forward-thinking trade policy that enhances US competitiveness in a rapidly changing world.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



John Manzella is a world-recognized speaker, author of several books, and an international columnist on global business, trade policy, labor, capitalism, and the latest economic trends. His views have appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Bloomberg, NPR and many other publications in the US and across the globe. John also is founder of ManzellaReport.com, a premier source for global business and economic analysis, and Manzella Trade Communications, a public affairs, publishing and consulting firm. Additionally, he is chair of the Upstate New York District Export Council, a position appointed by the US Secretary of Commerce.

Is the Defunding of USAID the Prelude to the Apocalypse?

Peter Isackson
February 13, 2025

Donald Trump is doing his damndest to make both America and the Gaza Riviera great again. His sidekick, the creator of the much coveted Cybertruck, is clearly one of the horsemen of a new apocalypse. Together they are clarifying the issues as they engage in the Herculean task of cleaning out the Augean stables of USAID.

A majority of voting US citizens last November elected a familiar face as their 47th president, familiar because he had already made himself known as their 45th president. Of course, his initial election in 2016 came about at least in part because he was already a familiar face as a multi-faceted TV celebrity and real estate mogul.

The people Donald Trump appointed to his inner circle in 2017 were not, for the most part, familiar faces. The non-political person endowed with the most power to act and change the world was none other than the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Nobody knew who he was, other than the president's son-in-law. They did know something about Kushner's wife and Trump's daughter, Ivanka, because The Donald had repeatedly made a point of appearing on television to express his incestuous desires concerning Ivanka.

As the 47th president, Trump has changed his political vision. Instead of confiding political power in a formerly invisible member of his own family, Trump has chosen a hyperreal hero and the

world's richest man, Elon Musk, to play the role of what can legitimately be described as the co-president of the US. He has granted Musk the authority to undo, override and basically exercise powers over the federal budget, a task the US Constitution clearly attributes exclusively to the legislative branch of government: Congress.

Many Trump voters regard the US Constitution as a missing chapter of the Christian Bible, mediated and transcribed by a group of prophets known as "The Founders." Some prominent evangelical Christians have claimed that Trump may deserve the status of a latter-day Founder, who has been sent by God to put the nation back on the right track. We may wonder whether they are not troubled by the fact that the sacred text of 1787 failed to prescribe the creation of an immensely wealthy co-president with the power to short-circuit Congress in case of need? Apparently not. Trump has been called by God to fill the gaps left by the founders.

Trump's second term has permitted the fusion into a single entity of the nation's two most authentically hyperreal personalities, Donald and Elon, who functioned separately during Trump's first sojourn at the White House. The two men share the unparalleled capacity to invent or attribute new meaning to elements of reality, while remaining unfazed if anyone dares to speak up to and point out they may be getting it wrong. Recently, Trump insisted that Spain was part of BRICS. No one in the room dared to clarify the facts, allowing him to close the conversation with, "You know what I'm saying." Yes, Donald, what you're saying is precisely what we call hyperreality.

One major controversy that has erupted as co-president Elon Musk takes over the business of Congress concerns the suppression of funding for USAID, an institution created by US President John F. Kennedy. The agency proved over time to

be a powerful toy in the hands of the same people in the CIA who, in all probability (i.e. in reality), had a hand in organizing and executing JFK's assassination. (The Warren Commission produced, on demand, its own notoriously ham-fisted version of hyperreality, which the corporate media still dares not question).

To justify the president and co-president's collective funding decision, Musk offered a simple explanation: "USAID was a viper's nest of radical-left marxists who hate America."

Today's **Weekly Devil's Dictionary** definition:

Radical-left Marxists:

Anyone who seeks to promote Washington's devious soft-power system crafted to support right-wing regimes aligned with the US by offering humanitarian aid instead of simply threatening such nations with crippling sanctions or even "fire and fury."

Contextual note

Just like Spain's membership in BRICS, a curious interlocutor might want to challenge the CEO of Tesla by asking him to produce examples. No one has had the temerity to do us. But Musk's meaning is clear. The idea that any agency funded by the government should be spending US taxpayer money on any form of assistance, especially out of humanitarian concern, even if it's a subterfuge for exercising covert power and engaging in the kind of manipulation designed to promote US business interests, falls into the dreaded category of "socialist," "communist" or "Marxist."

Clearly these people are communists hired to promote the interests of US capitalism, because that's what USAID was designed to do. And that's how it's performed since its creation. Whether that was Kennedy's intention or not is a moot point.

Those, like Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, understood how it was likely to be used.

But Musk didn't stop there. Marxists may be enemies of capitalism, revolutionaries and even terrorists, but Musk equally claimed, according to Politico, that USAID was a "criminal organization," while at the same time asserting that the agency is beyond repair due to pervasive corruption. It was a Marxist mafia. Trump added the one missing ingredient: USAID was run by "a bunch of radical lunatics."

Critics of USAID (count me among them) could not feel sad or disappointed about its programmed demise, but not many of us thought of its management as Marxist mafiosi escaped from a lunatic asylum. We needed a good dose of hyperreality on steroids to begin processing that illuminating vision of the organization.

Historical note

It was back in 2016, during Trump's first election campaign, that I began using French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality to account for a deformed state of the perception and representation of reality that becomes evident in the public discourse shared by a modern society, especially in the developed economies. There's a modern post-World War II tradition in France that seeks to look behind and beyond the façade and veneer of today's media-enhanced civilization to reveal its workings.

The concept of hyperreality is often paired with Guy Debord's notion of the "société du spectacle" but the tradition can be traced back to Roland Barthes's work, "Mythologies," that examines and to some extent deconstructs the language and beliefs of contemporary bourgeois French society. But some may prefer to trace the tradition back to

Flaubert's posthumous work, "Dictionnaire des idées reçues."

The closest thing in the US to any of these writers might be Ambrose Bierce's "Devil's Dictionary." We all know what became of Bierce. Or rather, we don't know what became of him because, after leaving as a journalist to cover the Mexican revolution possibly embedded in the forces of Pancho Villa, the last sentence he wrote to a friend before mysteriously disappearing was: "As to me, I leave here tomorrow for an unknown destination."

Other politically or socially minded humorists, from Dorothy Parker to Woody Allen and Lee Camp, have honed their wit while demythologizing US culture, but the concerted effort to build hyperreality by the majority of media has both provided the comics with grist for their mill while utterly dominating the culture itself.

The theology of hyperreal power has long been visible in a nation proclaimed by Eisenhower to be "under God," as well as being repeatedly described more recently as "indispensable" because of its "exceptionalism." Under US President George W. Bush, theology played a direct role in commanding his administration's invasion of Iraq. "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty," he announced, "have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them," and others reported that in private conversations, he claimed to have been advised by God.

If God created and blessed the indispensable order under more traditional secular Democratic presidents, such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, Trump's people claim a more direct connection with the deity than even Bush's. Trump's Senior Advisor, Paula White-Cain, has proclaimed, "To say no to President Trump would

be saying no to God,” and that he “will overcome every strategy from hell.”

Televangelist Lance Wallnau believes “Donald Trump is the chaos candidate, but he’s God’s chaos candidate,” and that “God is using Trump to tear down principalities and powers.” The pastor didn’t specify the governments of Greenland and Panama as the “powers” in question, probably because chaos has a tendency to spread everywhere immediately and reach all targets — just like hyperreality itself. And clearly nothing can beat a faith-based chaos as the actual final book of the Christian Bible, the Apocalypse, makes clear.

[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*.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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An Unheard Plea: Iran's Supreme Court Turns a Blind Eye to Child Rape

Faraz Firouzi Mandomi
February 14, 2025

The Iranian Supreme Court acquitted a man accused of raping a 7-year-old girl due to the lack of full penetration, despite his confession and evidence of sexual abuse. Iranian law defines rape narrowly insufficiently protects children against sexual violence, despite international agreements like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The case reflects broader issues of cultural and legal gaps in addressing sexual violence in Iran.

... **T**he members of the court unanimously confirmed the decision of the “First Class Criminal Court” of Kurdistan province, acquitting the accused of rape. The lower court's investigation, based on forensic evidence,

concluded that there was no evidence of penetration (*dukhūl*), as indicated by the intact hymen. Although there were some minor scratches on the labia, these were deemed insufficient to prove rape. As a result, the court determined that the act constituted an indecent act, but not adultery (*zinā*), under Article 637 of the Penal Code.

This is the verbatim language employed by the judges of the Iranian Supreme Court (Branch 4) in a case involving the alleged rape of a 7-year-old child by a 71-year-old man in Mariwan, Kurdistan, Iran, in October 2019. In accordance with criminal procedure law, investigations into such sensitive matters are generally conducted confidentially, thereby hindering public access to relevant information. Through serendipitous circumstances, I secured access to the court documents pertaining to this case during my field research in the Kurdistan region of Iran. The following paragraphs offer a critical analysis of the Supreme Court's decision to acquit the accused of rape in this case.

This tragic incident unfolded on a fateful day when concerned citizens reported a suspected case of child sexual abuse to the local authorities in Mariwan. Acting swiftly, the prosecutor ordered the arrest of the alleged perpetrator. During the investigation, the accused admitted to taking the child with the intent of committing a sexual act, although he claimed that penetration did not occur. Throughout the proceedings, the accused's statements were contradictory and inconsistent, at times denying any wrongdoing and attributing the incident to accidental contact. Despite the accused's confession and the existence of visual evidence, the "First Class Criminal Court" of Kurdistan Province acquitted him of rape, convicting him only for an indecent act. This decision sparked outrage and protests from human rights activists and the child's lawyer. The young victim, who had tragically lost both parents, was living under the care of her elderly grandfather, who was struggling financially. The accused, a

neighbor, was aware of the child's vulnerable situation and exploited it by enticing her with treats on the day of the incident.

Appeal to the Supreme Court

The victim's lawyer appealed the Kurdistan Criminal Court's decision to the Supreme Court. Despite presenting a comprehensive defense that provided compelling evidence supporting the allegations of rape, the Supreme Court ultimately rejected the appeal. Similar to the lower court, the Supreme Court characterized the accused's actions as an indecent act rather than rape. The court's rationale was primarily based on the absence of complete penetration, as evidenced by the intact hymen, despite the presence of minor injuries to the labia. This precedent reflects a prevailing trend in Iranian criminal law that often fails to recognize acts of sexual violence that do not involve complete penetration as rape. Notably, the Supreme Court completely disregarded the unique vulnerabilities and fundamental legal protections afforded to minor victims, failing to consider the broader context of the case and the potential long-term consequences for the child.

Generally, in Iranian criminal law, which is primarily based on Islamic jurisprudence, rape is not explicitly criminalized. Instead, the penal code focuses on the crime of *zinā*, defined in Article 221 as sexual intercourse between unmarried individuals that is not accidental. According to this definition, penetration is a key element of *zinā*, implying that acts of sexual violence that do not involve complete penetration may not be considered rape. Furthermore, the article narrowly defines penetration as occurring when the penis of a man, up to the point of circumcision, enters the vagina or anus of a woman.

In this case, the accused explicitly described the details of his sexual acts with the victim, including multiple instances of rubbing his [sexual organ]

against the victim's body [vagina]. Despite this clear confession and the supporting evidence from the victim's lawyer, the Supreme Court failed to classify these acts as rape. According to the accused's statement and the lawyer's account, the accused repeatedly engaged in this behavior, causing the child to experience severe fear and distress. However, the courts did not consider the severity of these acts to constitute rape.

Iran's international o

This narrow definition of rape excludes a broad range of sexual offenses from the category of rape, particularly those involving children.

Despite being a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Iran has failed to adequately fulfill its obligations to protect children and adolescents from sexual violence. Articles 19 and 34 of the UNCRC mandate that states take measures to protect children from all forms of violence, including sexual violence, and to explicitly commit to protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Despite these international obligations and widespread criticism from human rights advocates and children's rights organizations, Iranian law remains insufficient in providing adequate protection for children's rights against sexual violence.

Notably, even recent legislative reforms in Iran have failed to introduce specific legal measures for the protection of children in cases of rape. The ongoing prevalence of rape and sexual violence against children in Iran is a testament to the enduring cultural taboos and societal stigma that continue to endanger victims and perpetuate impunity.

[Tanisha Desai edited this piece.]



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explore the complex interplay between law, culture and international human rights law in pluri-legal contexts. His work particularly examines these dynamics through the lens of legal anthropology, with a focus on the Middle East and Islamic countries.

FIFA Under Fire: Trump's Transgender Ban Sparks Dilemma

Ellis Cashmore
February 17, 2025

The topic of transgender people competing in sports has been hotly debated recently. The new US President Donald Trump has signed an executive order banning transgender athletes from participating in women's sports, affecting various sports, players and organizations across the globe. However, none will feel the impact more than FIFA, who have in more recent times tried to be a champion of diversity.

The impact of Donald Trump's executive order banning transgender athletes from participating in women's sports will be felt by every sports governing organization, most forcefully by FIFA. Association football (soccer) is the most popular sport in the world, and it is run

by arguably the most powerful regulatory apparatus in history.

Non-Americans may not know the meaning of an executive order: It is an official directive issued by the President to federal agencies and departments and has the force of law. The ban on transgender athletes is US policy, but its effects will be felt everywhere. A number of sports organizations, including those that govern swimming, golf and even chess, have already banned transgender women from competing in female events if they have passed through male puberty. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the US's governing body for collegiate sports, reacted immediately, banning transgender women from competing in women's sports.

Inclusivity and the World Cup

But FIFA is sure to challenge Trump's ruling. The National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) is the top-tier professional women's soccer league in the US and operates under the jurisdiction of the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), which is a member of FIFA. As one of the world's major sports governing bodies to have pledged themselves to inclusivity and against discrimination, FIFA will be deeply compromised by the transgender ban. The NWSL currently permits athletes to participate in accordance with their gender identity, provided their testosterone levels are within typical limits for female athletes. The guidelines will presumably be superseded by the new restrictive provisions.

That's only one of FIFA's difficulties: equally as vexing is its commitment to holding its quadrennial World Cup competition in the USA, Canada and Mexico. FIFA faced criticism for granting hosting rights to the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia, where homosexual relations are outlawed and punishable by law. The criticism will

seem mild compared to the condemnation that will surely follow if FIFA remains silent on Trump's prohibition, which seems to undermine every feature of FIFA's credo. Some will argue it is hypocritical to stage an event that symbolizes inclusivity in a territory where inclusivity is now sneered at.

Trump's common sense

Since becoming president, Trump has ordered an end to federal government diversity efforts, including some dating back to Lyndon Johnson, and may expel transgender people from the US military. Trump blamed diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies for the collision of a commercial jet and military helicopter that killed 67 people just outside Washington in January. It was his "common sense" assessment rather than an evidence-based evaluation. The same common sense informs much of Trump's early initiatives. On his first day in office, he signed an order calling for the federal government to define sex as "only male or female" based on reproductive cells. This should be reflected on all official documents, such as passports.

Even the title of the transgender order echoes Trump's version of good sense and sound judgment: "Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports." Anything other than Trump's understanding is dismissed as dogma or fanaticism: an earlier Trump order has the insistent title, "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" and prescriptively instructs the federal government to remove "all radical gender ideology guidance, communication, policies, and forms."

All this jars with global trends that have affected many parts of the world since the rise of the #MeToo movement. Common sense, at least as

Trump defines it, is a kind of knowledge that seemed perfectly serviceable 40 or 50 years ago.

Women's football — an LGBTQ+ platform

Over recent years, FIFA has positioned itself as a champion of inclusivity, drawing short of activism but relaxing its strictures of mixing the association football it governs with social, cultural and political affairs. For example, following the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the ensuing protest, FIFA sanctioned football players to take a knee in shows of support for Black Lives Matter before games. Its effective elevation of the women's game to the most popular female sport in the world has drawn admiration.

Women's football is arguably the most effective crusader for LGBTQ+ rights in the world, perhaps eclipsing Stonewall, ILGA World and Outright International (remind yourself what the T in LGBTQ+ stands for). FIFA has symbolized its commitment by endorsing players and sometimes whole teams who wish to display their loyalties by wearing rainbow colors. Both female and male teams have worn rainbow armbands and shoe laces to exhibit their moral positions. Football as a sport stands squarely on the right side of history. It is barely imaginable that FIFA will stray to the other side.

What will FIFA do next?

World sport has no uniform policy on transgender athletes. The eligibility rules are different for different sports and in different countries. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has a laissez-faire framework that allows for sports-specific eligibility criteria. It, too, will be challenged to respond to Trump's initiative, but not nearly as much as FIFA. Association football has managed to steer clear of major controversies. The organization's existing gender verification regulations, established in 2011, state simply that

only men are eligible to play in men's competitions, and the same applies to women. In 2022, following policy changes in other sports, FIFA announced it was reviewing its gender eligibility regulations in consultation with expert stakeholders. No updated policy has yet been published. In the absence of explicit guidance from FIFA, some leagues developed their own policies. Spain, for example, has a team comprising only transgender players.

Now, FIFA must confront Trump's ban and decide whether or not to oppose it. It's conceivable that American teams could face exclusion from international tournaments if US sports organizations are unable to field teams that comply with more inclusive international rules. But this is massively complicated by the fact that games at the 2026 FIFA World Cup are scheduled to take place in the USA, as well as Canada and Mexico. A robust response would be to threaten to rearrange games scheduled for New York, Dallas, Atlanta and elsewhere in the USA. But it would be a logistical nightmare and, in any case, media groups would protest. Ridiculous as it seems, FIFA could disqualify the US team from the competition. Trump himself would probably intervene and threaten FIFA.

FIFA can hardly avoid becoming involved in the furor. It will express misgivings about the ban and emphasize the organization's continuing commitment to inclusivity. It may allow individual players or entire national teams to stage protests or articulate their disagreement with the order. It could even endorse some sort of protest at the World Cup, though this is unlikely. In 2022, England team captain Harry Kane was prevented from wearing a rainbow armband, presumably to avoid embarrassing Qatar, where the World Cup tournament was being held. FIFA clearly did not wish to upset the tournament hosts.

Monstrous dilemma

Yet, if FIFA needed to bare its teeth, now is the time: Transgenderism is likely to be the single most intensely debated issue in sports over the next decade or so. The arguments on both sides are persuasive: Women complain the hard-earned advances they have made in sports since the 1990s are under threat because athletes assigned male at birth are allowed to compete against natal females. Athletes who have experienced gender dysphoria and transitioned in a way they feel reflects them intellectually and emotionally complain they are excluded from competition or forced to compete in a hybrid class. For example, The New York City Marathon has a non-binary division for runners who do not identify as either men or women. There are other variations in other sports.

FIFA faces a monstrous dilemma. It would probably love to reassert its position as sport's most enlightened, progressive and reformist governor. But the first of 104 games that will comprise the next World Cup will take place on June 11, 2026, so any threats are bound to appear empty.

The next women's World Cup is not until 2027. There is likely to be change between now and then, but if there isn't and the ban remains in place, the USA will not have a team in Brazil: It will either withdraw voluntarily or be disqualified. Women's football is more activist and a lot less conciliatory than its male counterpart and will use Trump's ban to dramatize the transphobia it opposes, along with any other form of bigotry.

[Ellis Cashmore's new book *Sport and Crime* (with Kevin Dixon and Jamie Cleland) will be published in March.]

[Will Sherriff edited this piece.]



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

Donald Trump's Two-Pronged Strategy To Gut the "Deep State"

Alfredo Toro Hardy
February 18, 2025

Donald Trump believes the "deep state" within the US government robbed him of reelection in 2020. He now aims to destabilize the federal bureaucracy with a pincer strategy: appoint his loyalists to control departments from the inside and threaten bureaucrats from the outside. How will this affect the country?

US President Donald Trump is convinced that the "deep state" thwarted his first term, robbing him of the 2020 election. Expunging it seems to have become his main priority of this second term. But, is there such a thing as a deep state? There certainly is. It would be enough to read the memoirs of former US presidents or secretaries to discover their frustration in face of the bureaucratic resistance

confronted while in office. In this regard, those of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, written a few decades ago, were particularly enlightening.

The following excerpts from his Memoirs speak volumes. They referred to the interaction between the White House and the Pentagon: “Orders were given in that respect, but our military bureaucracy resists intrusions in strategic doctrine even if they come from the White House (...) When I assumed my functions, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told me that he too had tried to give more options to the President in strategic matters, but he finally desisted given the bureaucratic resistance (...) A 1969 presidential request demanding a reasoned explanation on the naval programs was never satisfactorily answered during the eight years that I served in Washington. The responses given were always close to insubordination and far from being useful.”

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis had also much to tell in this regard. One of the main reasons that led Nikita Khrushchev, the Secretary General of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party, to install missiles in Cuba was the presence of American missiles in Turkey, bordering the Soviet Union. US President John F. Kennedy understood the risks involved therein. Several months before the crisis, he had ordered that the US’s missiles be removed, as they represented an unnecessary provocation. However, bureaucratic resistance both within the State Department and the Department of Defense thwarted the implementation of such orders, which were never carried out.

Moreover, during the infamous 13 days of the crisis, the US Navy was reluctant to obey the president’s orders with regard to the Cuban naval blockade. While Kennedy wanted to give Khrushchev time to see, think and blink, bureaucracy within the Navy did all it could to

circumvent those orders and put in place its own book of procedures. Additionally, when tensions between both countries peaked, and war could have ensued at any moment, an American spy plane crashed in Siberia. The Air Force bureaucracy had kept its regular procedures in place, notwithstanding Kennedy’s insistence on acting with the utmost prudence.

The deep state, indeed, exists. It represents the natural impulse of the federal bureaucracy to act in accordance with its own institutional aims, set of rules and particular subculture. Seeing presidents and secretaries as simple snowbirds, bureaucratic loyalties are entrenched within their own institutions. For someone like Trump who, more than requiring loyalty for his agenda demands fealty to his person, this represents the worst of sins. Indeed, “he demands personal loyalty—or what John Bolton, Trump’s longest-serving national security adviser in his first term, has called ‘fealty, a medieval concept implying not mere loyalty but submission.’” The interaction of complete opposites such as these can only lead to a trainwreck.

Trump’s pincers: destabilizing federal departments from both sides

In his second term, Trump aims to bend the federal bureaucracy into submission through a pincer strategy. One jaw pursues its destabilization from the inside by putting federal departments and offices under the control of well-known disrupters. The other jaw harasses and destabilizes these organizations from the outside.

The avowed intention of this dual process is taming bureaucrats by making them feel vulnerable and insecure, by demolishing their sense of entitlement and career safety. In the words of Russell Vought, the new Director of the Office of Management and Budget: “We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. When

they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains.”

The first jaw, thus, is entrusted to people that have “sworn” personal allegiance to Trump. Experience or knowledge regarding their assigned area is not an employment requisite, though. An important historical precedent in this regard dates back to 12th-century England. Faced with the Church’s resistance to his rule, Henry II of Plantagenet decided to appoint his closest friend, the conspicuous dissolute Thomas Becket, as Archbishop of Canterbury.

The problem ended up being that Becket realized that his true base of power resided in the Church that he was supposed to “rule,” and not in the king that had put him in charge. As the king’s man, he was fated to be institutionally resisted, thus becoming feeble and ineffectual. Contrariwise, by submitting to the Church’s interests and organizational subculture, he could personify the political might of that institution. Hence, he sided with the Church.

This phenomenon is well known in contemporary US politics. For a political appointee, siding with the bureaucratic organization is known as “going native.” When a secretary becomes a “native” of the Department that they were chosen to lead, they acquire real power. Otherwise, the risk of remaining as an ineffectual figurehead is always present.

Conscious of that reality, US presidents tend to choose figures with knowledge of the subjects involved, but at the same time with sufficient personal standing and integrity. The former is to avoid manipulation from the inside of the organization. The latter is for them to promote workable compromises between bureaucratic and political objectives. Although an imperfect solution, it is a pragmatic one.

Trump, however, searches for absolutes. He not only wants personal allegiance from his barons but for them to forcefully control their fiefs. This is why he places so much importance in choosing disruptive figures, people susceptible of exacting obedience under the continuous threat of chaos. This translates into management by fear.

However, installing fear from the inside may not be enough. That is why the second jaw of the pincer searches to project it from the outside as well. It does so through a blistering shake-up of federal bureaucracy: shutting down or dismantling agencies, ousting federal appointees before their term has ended, planning large-scale layoffs, reviewing the elimination or combination of bureaucratic divisions or entire agencies, transforming civil servants’ failure to implement the president’s will into cause for disciplining and separation. All this and more.

Much of the above is being done in overt violation of the US Constitution’s separation of power. Since the inception of the Republic, indeed, it has always been the legislative branch that decides how to structure the executive branch, creating departments, giving them functions and providing their funds. Not anymore. So far, though, judicial authority in this field has been respected. However, a furious rhetoric on challenging the judiciary builds up in the president’s camp. All of this, of course, must be sending shock waves of fright upon federal bureaucrats, who feel that they may no longer be protected by the rule of law.

Trump’s strategy may damage the US

No doubt about it, this pincer strategy could be utterly effective in domesticating the deep state, rendering it docile. The problem is that it can disassemble the State itself in the process. It can, indeed, make a big mess of federal institutions, procedures and civil service, degrading the

capacity for policy implementation and distorting institutional memory and governance know-how. Additionally, it can dangerously meddle with the Constitutional separation of power. Hammering the foundations upon which the federal government and the branches of government depend for their functioning, is indeed a risky business — one that could turn a global superpower upside down and set in motion a spiral of decline.

Frankly speaking, though, a good dose of pure deep state doesn't seem like such a bad thing, when faced with proposals such as turning Gaza into an American Riviera while permanently expelling the Palestinian population, retaking the Panama Canal or absorbing Greenland. And what about Trump's repeated questioning of Canada's viability as a nation and his threats to annex it through economic force? Indeed, the US might need its deep state.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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How Trump Wrong-Footed a Respected Historian Turned Blogger

Peter Isackson
February 19, 2025

By initiating negotiations for peace in Ukraine, Donald Trump has overturned Joe Biden's "as long as it takes" commitment to Kyiv. The turn to diplomacy has upset the formerly accepted modes of Beltway reasoning about geopolitics and morality. Although a polarizing figure himself, prone to simplistic binary thinking, Trump's policies highlight the irresponsible nature of the Biden administration's brand of thinking.

It all began with Trump 1.0 in November 2016, an earthquake that produced a deep rift in the political landscape. It shattered many of the precious objects that weren't fixed to the walls of our political palaces. Eight years later, our planet finds itself reeling under the tsunami we call Trump 2.0, provoked by that initial tremor but whose force has been amplified by the delay.

Earthquakes do monumental local damage, sometimes defacing entire cities. A powerful tsunami can be far more destructive. It can spread damage across the full expanse of an ocean and flood faraway shores. Who doesn't remember the drama in 2004 when a powerful earthquake located near Sumatra in Indonesia ended up wreaking havoc on the coast of Africa?

An ancient proverb informs us: "it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good." This sums up what every stock market wizard knows: Clever traders

profit most by buying after the market has crashed. For many, at least in the media, Trump 1.0 was the ill wind that would make their day.

Although the dominantly Democratic corporate media in the United States saw Trump's 2016 presidential election as an unparalleled catastrophe for the nation, its pundits and late-night comedians realized that for them it was a windfall. The public was aching to hear the worst about their newly elected leader. Hating, deriding, mocking and deconstructing Trump became a source of income and notoriety for a lot of people.

Heather Cox Richardson, a popular Substack author, stands out as an interesting example. Building on her reputation as a historian specialized in the 19th century and the American Civil War, she seized the opportunity to instruct devastated Democrats and moderates about the true meaning of the Trump tsunami. After some success with Facebook, when she moved to Substack she discovered a platform capable of turning her into an authentic influencer.

She quickly learned the trick of drawing on her historical knowledge to cite parallels across time. Trump had offered the nation the perspective of a new civil war, the perfect occasion for Richardson to offer her services as an indispensable illuminator of the Trump phenomenon. Her claim to gravitas as a published author led her followers to see in her a fountain of historical truth and accurate contemporary analysis.

But when she isn't dealing with history but ongoing events, how subtle are her observations, how refined her analysis? Not quite up to academic standards, it appears.

In Richardson's February 16 edition of "Letters from an American," she attempts to review the events surrounding US Vice President JD Vance's controversial speech at the Munich Security

Conference. In guise of a conclusion, rather than producing any original insight, she approvingly quotes political scientist Stathis Kalyvas. "The U.S. government has been taken over by a clique of extremists who have embarked on a process of regime change in the world's oldest democracy.... The arrogance on display is staggering."

A bit further on, in an attempt to clarify the question of war and peace that the Trump administration has dared to raise as a question deserving diplomatic attention, she cites Republican Senate Armed Services Chair Roger Wicker, with whom she clearly agrees.

"There are good guys and bad guys in this war, and the Russians are the bad guys. They invaded, contrary to almost every international law, and they should be defeated."

Today's **Weekly Devil's Dictionary** definition:

Bad guys:

People who have caused serious problems, often involving death and serious destruction, to the exclusion of ourselves.

Contextual note

Can a serious historian like Richardson really believe any conflict is reducible to a contest between "good guys" and "bad guys?" In her books, she blames the South for its commitment to the obviously immoral and anti-democratic institution of slavery, which allows her to frame the Confederates as the party whose actions justified a war initiated by US President Abraham Lincoln's government. In that sense, the Americans wearing gray uniforms were the bad guys.

But not all wars can be justified by such a stark contradiction with the purported values of a

democratic nation. Adolf Hitler's Nazi government provided an even more clear-cut case to justify going to battle against bad guys. For most citizens of the contemporary liberal democratic order the US Civil War and World War II, despite the obscene levels of destruction in both, stand as two feel-good conflicts in the minds. Both contain obvious examples of fighting to defeat political intentions easily recognizable not just as bad but as morally evil.

But does that mean that all the "guys" involved on one side and the other were respectively good or bad? Should all their actions and beliefs fall into one of those two categories? Propaganda tends to promote that idea. When a conflict is raging, it's reassuring to think of oneself and one's countrymen as the good guys. Ordinary citizens and even media pundits are likely to think that way. But historians?

Many critics of the Biden administration's Ukraine policy have painstakingly pointed out that the US may have been guilty of a significant amount of "bad guy" behavior that has been playing out over decades. The most egregious piece of concrete evidence is the intercepted phone call in 2014 between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt in Kiev. Scott Horton's recent book, *Provoked*, recounts the entire concatenation of missteps over decades that led to the events of February 2022. Any honest observer who has examined the evidence will probably conclude that no group of either pristine good guys or committed bad guys emerges. If anything, and this might be the most embarrassing realization for someone like Richardson, both Ukraine and Russia emerge as victims, and therefore "good guys." In such a scenario, it isn't difficult to imagine who the bad guys might be.

After seemingly applauding Representative Wicker's assessment of who's good and who's

bad, Richardson seems to approve uncritically the congressman's complementary observation asserting that "Ukraine is entitled to the promises that the world made to it." Has she considered the meaning of such a claim? Can a historian seriously believe that any country is "entitled to promises?" Does the idea make sense, linguistically, politically or morally?

And what does Wicker or Richardson assume is the "world" that made those promises? An examination of the declarations and behavior of nations across the globe demonstrates that, at best, "the world" Wicker refers to is essentially the US and its European allies. Does Richardson equate NATO with the world? It would seem so.

Historical note

Most moral systems acknowledge that good and evil are two competing forces in the world that play out in actual human behavior. Which means that bad guys do exist, and not only as a pretext allowing the US to mount a new military adventure. If you followed the State Department's operating manual, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad were "bad guys." In their own time, so were Mohammad Mosaddegh, Jacobo Árbenz, Patrice Lumumba, Vietnamese Ngô Đình Diệm, Ho Chi Minh, Salvador Allende, Manuel Noriega, Manuel Zelaya and Evo Morales. Some paradoxically had been trusted friends of the good guys before seeing their identity changed to that of confirmed enemy or "bad guy."

Hitler and the Nazis had the merit of giving the distinction between good guys and bad guys some discernible meaning. The Fuhrer's unbridled territorial expansionism and overt racism provided a template for the image of an unequivocal bad guy. But think about this: Does it make sense to consider the forces that fire-bombed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Dresden and Tokyo before nuking Hiroshima and Nagasaki as "good

guys?” A Civil War general about whom Richardson has written proclaimed, “War is hell.” This presumably acknowledges that good guys may sometimes become bad guys in the process.

Historians are trained to look beyond jingoistic justifications nations put forward in times of war or preparation for war. Instead, they grapple with the context from which conflicts emerge. Such exploration rarely leads to a verdict permitting to separate the good guys from the bad guys. If Richardson truly wishes to maintain her standing as a respected historian, with her eye on the facts, she would seek to avoid appealing to such simplistic binary representations of reality. Apparently, she finds it more rewarding to hone her image as a newsletter blogger.

[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*.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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The Long-Term Dangers of China’s Expanding Swap Line Strategy: Financial Dependence and Geopolitical Influence

Masaaki Yoshimori
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China’s currency swap strategy expands its financial influence by creating economic dependencies. While these agreements provide liquidity to struggling economies, their opaque terms grant Beijing leverage over recipients. The renminbi’s limited convertibility, political conditions attached to swaps and growing concerns over debt entrapment cast doubt on the credibility of this strategy as a dollar alternative.

China has significantly expanded its currency swap agreements in recent years, using them as a strategic instrument of financial diplomacy to enhance the global standing of the renminbi (RMB). While these agreements offer short-term liquidity to partner nations, they also serve broader geopolitical objectives, particularly by challenging the US dollar's dominance in international finance. However, this strategy raises concerns, including the risks of economic dependency, the potential for political leverage and broader implications for global financial stability.

China's swap lines: structure and expansion

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) has established bilateral currency swap agreements with over 40 countries, which amount to an estimated \$500 billion in total commitments. These agreements provide foreign central banks with access to RMB liquidity in exchange for their local currency, ostensibly to facilitate trade and enhance financial stability. Unlike the US Federal Reserve's (or the Fed's) swap lines, which primarily support allied economies and major financial centers, China's swaps are frequently extended to emerging markets facing liquidity crises, such as Argentina, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

A key distinction between China's swap agreements and Western financial mechanisms lies in their structure and conditions. China strategically deploys these arrangements to countries with strong economic ties or significant reliance on Chinese investments, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, due to the RMB's limited convertibility, recipient nations often find that the funds must primarily be used for trade with China rather than broader financial needs. Additionally, there is growing evidence that these agreements serve as instruments of geopolitical influence, with financial support often

conditioned on diplomatic alignment with Beijing's interests.

Geopolitical implications: challenging the dollar-dominated system

For decades, the US dollar has been the world's primary reserve currency, with the Fed's swap lines acting as a financial lifeline for major economies. China's expansion of RMB swap agreements presents an alternative liquidity source, particularly for nations facing restricted access to dollar-based financial systems due to sanctions or economic instability. Argentina's use of a \$1.7 billion RMB swap in 2023 to meet its IMF debt obligations marked a significant precedent, as it demonstrated how an emerging economy could bypass dollar reserves in favor of RMB transactions. Similarly, Russia's increasing reliance on RMB for trade settlements following Western sanctions in response to the war in Ukraine illustrates how China's financial instruments can provide an alternative to US-led economic pressures.

China's financial leverage and Pakistan's sovereign risks

China's currency swap agreements provide emergency liquidity for struggling economies but often create financial dependencies that heighten economic vulnerabilities. Pakistan has repeatedly relied on Chinese swap lines to manage its balance-of-payments crisis, which has effectively tied its financial stability to Beijing. Similarly, Sri Lanka, after depleting its swap reserves, became increasingly dependent on Chinese financial goodwill. This has complicated its debt restructuring efforts with Western creditors.

Unlike the IMF, which mandates structural reforms for financial aid, China's swap agreements lack transparency, raising concerns about opaque debt arrangements and potential political leverage.

This opacity increases the risk of long-term financial instability for recipient nations, allowing China to exert greater influence over their economic and political decisions.

Pakistan's growing economic reliance on China is most evident in the \$65 billion China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has significantly eroded Pakistan's strategic autonomy. With \$26.6 billion in outstanding debt to China, Pakistan remains trapped in a cycle of borrowing, even as it struggles with IMF bailouts. Despite concerns over unsustainable debt, Islamabad continues to pursue new CPEC projects, deepening its financial entanglement.

Security threats to CPEC projects have further complicated this relationship. The Balochistan Liberation Army, a militant group operating in Pakistan, has targeted CPEC-related infrastructure — its attacks have killed over 60 Chinese workers since 2016. In response, Beijing has expanded its security role in Pakistan. China has pressured Islamabad to enforce its Global Security Initiative, which includes counterterrorism efforts, enhanced border security and joint security exercises in Gilgit-Baltistan and Xinjiang. These developments underscore the shifting nature of China–Pakistan relations, where economic cooperation increasingly overlaps with security and strategic interests.

China's leverage in Argentina and the future of the swap line

China's financial relationship with Argentina has been largely asymmetrical, with Beijing holding substantial control over when and how the swap line is utilized. While China has historically used this mechanism to strengthen its influence in Argentina, Argentinian President Javier Milei's strong anti-China rhetoric complicates future cooperation. If Milei aligns more closely with Washington, China may reconsider its financial

support and potentially cut off access to the swap line. Some Chinese analysts suggest that Beijing should take a firmer stance, demanding a shift in Argentina's political rhetoric before continuing financial support. Although an immediate termination of the swap agreement is unlikely, China could leverage its financial influence to pressure Argentina into maintaining pragmatic ties.

Since 2008, the PBOC has signed many currency swap agreements with foreign central banks, making China a key global lender. These agreements serve both economic and political purposes, increasing China's influence worldwide. This study looks at how these swaps affect public opinion in Argentina, which has used the swaps to manage economic crises. During the 2023 election period, a survey was conducted to see if informing people about China's financial aid would change their views. The results show that while some voters became more supportive of China, others, particularly opposition supporters, became more critical. They suggested that China's financial diplomacy has a mixed and polarized effect on public opinion.

A double-edged sword?

China's currency swap strategy represents a bold attempt to reshape global financial dynamics, offering an alternative to the US dollar while extending Beijing's geopolitical reach. However, structural limitations — such as the RMB's lack of full convertibility, concerns over transparency and fears of economic dependency — present significant challenges to its broader adoption. While China's swap lines provide immediate relief to financially distressed economies, they may also introduce long-term vulnerabilities, which would reinforce reliance on Beijing rather than foster sustainable economic independence.

If China seeks to establish the RMB as a true global alternative to the dollar, it must address

these critical deficiencies. Greater transparency in swap agreements, increased RMB liquidity in global markets and improved trust in Chinese financial institutions will be essential in achieving this goal. Otherwise, China's currency swap strategy may be viewed less as a stabilizing force and more as a mechanism for exerting financial dominance with political strings attached.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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Prabowo's Shift Toward China Is Worrying for Indonesia

Gufron Gozali, M. Habib Pashya
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Indonesia's new president, Prabowo Subianto, has deviated greatly from former President Jokowi's foreign policy. His appointment of the inexperienced Sugiono as foreign minister is worrying, as is his choice to join the BRICS+ organization. Indonesia could suffer economically for collaborating with China while distancing itself from the United States.

A month after Indonesia's 2024 general election, then-President-elect Prabowo Subianto sent a fresh signal on the country's foreign policy. It was potentially different from that of former President Joko Widodo (properly known as Jokowi) and dispelled the principle of *Bebas dan Aktif* — "independent and active." How has Prabowo redirected Indonesia's foreign policy, and how significantly could it impact Indonesia?

Prabowo has been keen on global issues since he was a minister of defense. In 2019, he actively engaged in various international forums, such as the Shangri-La Dialogue. He led Indonesian delegations in negotiations with multiple countries and has consistently demonstrated Indonesia's commitment to supporting Palestine. During his tenure, Prabowo visited 20 countries, most of which are strategic partners of Indonesia. He aims to convey that his presidency will prioritize multilateralism while simultaneously fostering strong and cooperative relations with those countries.

In early November 2024, Prabowo started his first international trip to China, followed by the United States, United Kingdom, Middle East and South America for the APEC meeting and G20 Summits. In his debut, Prabowo succeeded in dealing with these countries, including economic cooperation. With China, for example, Prabowo

brought over \$10 billion in investment after meeting with President Xi Jinping and others.

However, Prabowo's visit raises questions about Indonesia's stance toward China and the US. Some feel that Prabowo lacks the vision to maintain these rivals.

During his campaign, Prabowo pledged to implement a "good neighbor policy" guided by the principle that a thousand friends are too few and one enemy is too many. He wants Indonesia to foster good relations with many countries and promote peace across various regions. This policy objective is primarily driven by economic interests, with the aim to attract substantial investments.

Breaking from Jokowi's practices

Prabowo has been in office for over four months now. In that time, his foreign policy has undermined traditional practices. His approach is quite different from Jokowi's.

First, Prabowo chose Sugiono as Indonesia's foreign minister, replacing his predecessor, Retno Marsudi. Sugiono is viewed as a minister without experience on foreign agendas — Indonesia has not picked a foreign minister without a diplomatic career since former President Alwi Shihab in 1999. Some are concerned about Sugiono's view on responding to global issues.

Additionally, this indicates that Sugiono merely acts as an "ideological son" of Prabowo. Prabowo seems to be a "despot." For him, everything must proceed according to his framework, even if it leads to future disasters.

Second, under Prabowo's administration in Kazan, Russia, Sugiono argued that Indonesia would join BRICS+ — which it did this January — and participate in every forum. He stated that

the inclusion does not reflect Indonesia's stance on a particular bloc but rather kindles the principle of Bebas dan Aktif. Additionally, Sugiono declared Prabowo's message that Indonesia wishes to "eliminate colonization," and that it supports Palestine and Lebanon.

In the Jokowi era, instead of joining BRICS+ as Prabowo desired, Indonesia decided to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). While still in office, Jokowi attended a BRICS high-level summit in South Africa on August 23, 2024. There he argued that Indonesia did not reject joining BRICS+ but instead considered it. Although BRICS+ represents more than 25% of global trade and covers over 40% of oil, Indonesia pondered being a member of G20 and MIKTA — the alliance of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia. However, BRICS+ has problems, such as the continuous dispute between China and India.

Indonesia's desire to join BRICS+ broke Jokowi's habit. Some argue that it could omit the principle of Bebas dan Aktif and attract the US's attention. Indonesia's potential accession to BRICS+ poses economic risks, as US President Donald Trump's new administration plans to impose high tariffs on the organization due to its perceived opposition to using the US dollar.

Prabowo should recognize that BRICS+ is a "revisionist" group strategically designed to serve the interests of China and Russia.

Joint development with China

Prabowo should understand that Indonesia still requires the support of the US to effectively address China's actions in the North Natuna Sea.

The "joint development" between Indonesia and China in the North Natuna Sea began on November 9, 2024. In this area, China's claim of

nine-dash lines — nine dotted map lines that mark China’s claimed portion of the South China Sea — violates the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Indonesia argued that it could not be interpreted as recognizing China’s claim. Simultaneously, Indonesia and China reached an “important common understanding” and agreed to establish an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee to operate relevant cooperation.

Indonesia–China relations, Indonesian foreign policy, and Taiwan–China–US relations.

However, some are still concerned about the response. There is no bold statement or guarantee that Indonesia will not rely on China’s claim. Furthermore, Indonesia must negotiate maritime boundaries with China. As the proverb states, “The homeowner will not negotiate with the thief who has ransacked his house.”

Prabowo’s foreign policy is deeply concerning. As the world stands at a crossroads due to prolonged conflicts, Prabowo should place Indonesia on the right path, aligned with national interests. This can only happen if he dares to reconsider his foreign minister, reassess the plan to join BRICS+ and review the joint development of the North Natuna Sea with China.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



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