



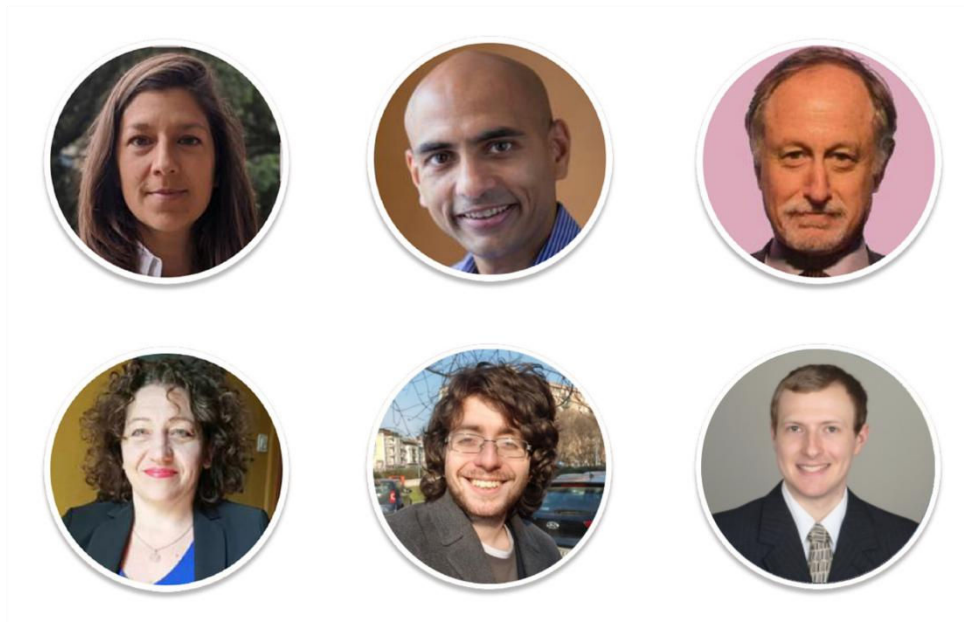
Fair Observer

Monthly

March 2025

Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



March 2025

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA

www.fairobserver.com | info@fairobserver.com

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Trump's Canada and Mexico Tariffs Are a Magnificent Own Goal

Alex Gloy
March 02, 2025

Donald Trump raised tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico to protect US industries and curb illegal immigration. These tariffs raised prices for American consumers and strained relations with two key trade partners. US businesses may face higher costs, job losses and weaker trade ties as Canada and Mexico seek other markets.

Imagine walking into your local grocery store, only to find that the price of your favorite avocados has spiked overnight. This isn't due to a bad harvest or increased demand but stems from a policy decision: the imposition of tariffs on imports from Mexico. While intended to protect domestic industries and address concerns like drug trafficking and illegal immigration, tariffs on Mexico and Canada might inadvertently hit American consumers where it hurts most — their wallets.

To understand just how strained relations have become, consider a recent Toronto Raptors game where Canadian spectators booed during the playing of the American national anthem. This behavior is highly unusual for Canadians, who are often stereotyped as overly polite. The boos reflected widespread frustration and resentment over how the US government is treating its northern neighbor. This sentiment underscores how deeply these tariffs and related policies affect economies and international relationships.

The mechanics of tariffs

A tariff is essentially a tax on imported goods. When the US government imposes a tariff, it makes foreign products more expensive for American importers. These importers often pass the increased costs onto consumers in the form of higher prices. For instance, a 25% tariff on Mexican and Canadian goods means that products like fruits, vegetables, and automobiles from these countries could see significant price hikes on US shelves.

Beyond the immediate effect on grocery bills, these tariffs could have a ripple effect throughout the economy. Higher costs for raw materials and components can lead to increased production costs for US manufacturers, which may then be passed on to consumers. Industries such as automotive and electronics, which rely heavily on parts from Mexico and Canada, could see production costs rise, leading to higher prices for consumers. Additionally, retaliatory tariffs from Mexico and Canada on US goods could harm American exporters, potentially leading to job losses in affected industries.

The case of crude oil

One often overlooked consequence of tariffs on Canada and Mexico is their impact on crude oil imports. Canada is the largest supplier of crude oil to the US, followed by Mexico. Together, they far exceed crude oil imported from all OPEC countries combined. Imposing tariffs on this critical energy supply could significantly raise fuel costs for American consumers, affecting everything from transportation expenses to heating bills. This added cost would ripple through the economy, increasing the price of goods and services that rely on fuel for production and distribution.

Crude oil reaches US refineries through several transportation methods: pipelines, tankers, barges, and trucks. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), pipelines are the dominant mode of transportation, especially for Canadian crude, due to an extensive cross-border pipeline network. Most Canadian oil pipelines deliver crude directly to US refineries in the Midwest, highlighting Canadian crude's critical role in sustaining these operations. Pipelines like the Enbridge Mainline and Keystone system transport medium-heavy sour crude, which is essential for producing diesel and other heavy products. Disrupting this flow with tariffs could severely impact refinery output in this region, leading to broader supply chain issues.

Mexican crude, on the other hand, is primarily shipped via tankers to US Gulf Coast refineries. Tariffs on Canadian and Mexican crude could disrupt these efficient, cost-effective supply chains, forcing reliance on pricier alternatives and driving up fuel costs domestically. (eia.gov)

Crude oil isn't one-size-fits-all. It varies in sulfur content and density, classified as sweet or sour and light or heavy. Sweet crude has low sulfur and is easier to refine into products like gasoline, while sour crude has higher sulfur content, requiring more complex processing. Light crude flows easily and is best for fuels like gasoline and naphtha, whereas heavy crude is thicker and better suited for products like diesel and heating oil.

The US shale industry produces around 9 million barrels per day (Mb/d) of light sweet crude, which is ideal for gasoline, lighter fluid, and natural gas liquids (NGL). However, US refiners only use a portion of this output, leading to exports of approximately 4 Mb/d. Expanding shale production will only yield more light sweet crude, which cannot replace the medium-heavy sour crude imported from Canada. The US imports about 6–7 Mb/d of mostly medium-heavy sour

crude, driven by the demand for diesel and heavier products. Of this, approximately 4 Mb/d comes from Canada. These imports are irreplaceable in the short term, as US production cannot meet the specific quality and volume requirements.

Only Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq could potentially replace some of the Canadian crude, but the US has aimed for decades to reduce dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

The broader fallout of tariffs

The situation might even be more difficult for Canada, as the US accounts for a staggering 77% of all exports. Among hydrocarbons, America's share is close to 90%. If Canada wanted to redirect crude oil towards other markets, new pipelines and export infrastructure must be built first. Canada might hence be forced to lower its prices to compensate for tariffs. This might cushion the blow for US consumers but devastate Canadian profit margins.

While one of the motivations for these tariffs is to address issues like drug trafficking, it's worth noting that Canada has already pledged to act on fentanyl in 2024. The Canadian government announced plans to strengthen border security and enhance its immigration system to curb the illegal flow of substances. This initiative questions the necessity of punitive economic measures like tariffs when cooperative solutions are already in progress. The declaration of an 'emergency' was used to circumvent following normal procedure for the introduction of tariffs, which would have taken some time.

The cumulative effect of these tariffs could be substantial for American households. Estimates suggest that the typical US household could face additional costs exceeding \$1,200 annually due to increased prices stemming from the tariffs. (piie.com) This added financial burden could strain

budgets further for families already grappling with inflation and stagnant real wages.

Concerns from the business community further underscore the risks of these tariffs. According to the January ISM Report on Business, correspondents expressed concern over rising prices and potential supply chain disruptions. Tariffs on key trade partners like Canada and Mexico could exacerbate input costs and slow supplier deliveries, hindering sustained growth and stability. (ismworld.org)

A German pharmaceutical CEO complained to me that the threat of tariffs absorbed management attention, as contingency plans had to be devised.

My contact at a family-owned American importer of household goods from China admitted to having purchased one year's worth of supplies in anticipation of tariffs. Sudden increases in orders lead to overtime work and strained capacities at supplies, only to see a sharp fall-off in orders once tariffs are enacted.

Large swings in orders and capacity use lead to decreased margins and possibly to forced labor reductions. Companies are unlikely to hire additional staff during times of high uncertainty. The threat of tariffs might, therefore, cool the labor market.

America's northern and southern neighbors won't forget how they were treated. Burned once, companies might look for alternative markets to reduce dependence on the US market. Once regarded as a strong proponent of free trade, the US might not be considered a reliable trading partner going forward. Speaking loudly and carrying a big stick might end up being a shot in one's own foot.

[Anton Schauble and Nicolette Cavallaro edited this piece.]



Alexander Gloy is an independent investment professional with over 35 years of experience in financial markets. He worked in Equity

Research and Sales, both in Investment and Private Banking for Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse, Sal. Oppenheim and Lombard Odier Darier Hentsch. He focuses on macroeconomic research, analyzing the impact of global debt and derivatives on the stability of our monetary system. His interest in crypto-currencies from the perspective of monetary theory led him to become a member of the Central Bank Digital Currency Think Tank.

Kill Capitalism — Before It Kills Everything Else

Davor Džalto
March 05, 2025

Donald Trump's inauguration in the United States set the stage for renewed corporate influence over public policy. The article critiques his speech that announced changes in education and health care. The report warns that widening wealth gaps harm vulnerable citizens and demands immediate government action to reduce inequality.

Donald Trump has officially become the new president of the United States. His predecessor, Joe Biden, has gone to the landfill of history. Biden ranks among the worst American presidents ever, which is no small feat given the fierce competition. Traditionally, there has been no shortage of psychopaths, genocidal

fundamentalists, mass murderers and corrupt bureaucrats in the top US political establishment.

In his inaugural speech, Trump offered many promises to satisfy constituencies expecting their slice of the American pie. It's no wonder his proclaimed "to-do" list includes contradictory proposals.

It was reassuring to hear that Trump's administration would affirm freedom of speech in the US. This is both good and necessary, since people have long been persecuted for "heretical" or "politically incorrect" statements, whatever that may imply. For years, those with "radical" views — such as questioning official policies or protesting genocides — have been oppressed, fired or accused of "harassment," "intimidation," "creating unsafe environments" (the recent MIT student case is only a drop in the ocean) or worse.

However, how will freedom of speech be reintroduced when, in the same speech, Trump announced disciplining educational institutions for teaching children "to hate our country"? He promised this "will change starting today, and it will change very quickly." He pledged to "completely and totally reverse a horrible betrayal and all of these many betrayals." If he were honest, he would clarify that working-class people have constantly been betrayed by the elite and the super-wealthy corporate sector aligned with political power.

For another example, Trump said: "We have a public health system that does not deliver in times of disaster, yet more money is spent on it than any country." This is a gross understatement. The US "health system" is an international scandal — by far the most dysfunctional in the world when comparing treatment costs, total spending and outcomes. In America, if you are poor, any system (of "justice," "health" or "education") fails you and becomes a problem, not a solution.

Does Trump's speech offer any assurance that this will change? Does the presence of leading corporate representatives next to the new/old president suggest a reversal of these trends? Quite the opposite. It signals that nothing significant will change, and these injustices may even worsen.

Let's not mince words: America is not a democracy; it has never been one. It is a Liberal establishment, dominated by one big-business party with two factions — "Republicans" and "Democrats." Though they differ on immigration or the number of genders, both agree on the essentials: the business sector should keep running the show, in the US and, if possible, worldwide. They also agree that no real democracy should ever be allowed, as it would strip the wealthiest and most privileged of their fortunes and perks. Both endorse American suprematism and are proud of American nationalism, which they call "patriotism." Both are capitalist fundamentalists, though one side dresses it in "Liberal" form (burning "witches" for any heresy that diverges from the established [Neo]Liberal party line), while the other side cloaks it in religious language (calling itself "Christian," though it is farther from any meaningful Christianity than traditional atheism or even old-fashioned Satanism).

Take Forbes's list of the world's richest people. In a sane, humane, or democratic society, this would be impossible; there would be no billionaires or even millionaires. Democratic means would align wealth and success with one's contribution to society, not its destruction. Privately owned wealth should never be excessive, as it harms society. The richest should not have more than ten times the wealth of the poorest, with a goal of lowering that gap further. Today, they hold hundreds or even thousands of times more than the average. A society's success is measured by the quality of life of its poorest and most vulnerable.

What we live through is a serious pathology. Corporate, political and much of the intellectual elite work to perpetuate this pathological system. Most people help sustain it, allowing themselves to be victims of massive propaganda and an “entertainment industry” that treats them as consumers or commodities — or both. Trump is not a solution, just as Biden, Barack Obama, or Bill Clinton never were. It’s not only “Liberals” or “Right-Wingers” making your life miserable; it’s the capitalist system. Capitalism kills. Let’s kill it before it kills everything and everyone else.



Dr. Davor Džalto is a Professor of Religion and Democracy at University College Stockholm and President of the Institute for the

Study of Culture and Christianity. His research interests cover the fields of social and political philosophy, political theology and cultural studies. He authored and edited numerous books, including, most recently, *Beyond Capitalist Dystopia: Reclaiming Freedom and Democracy in the Age of Global Crises* (2022).

Authorial Intent and Psychosis: How Authors Make Meaning From Chaos

Dustin Pickering
March 09, 2025

Writers struggle with reality because recognizing the world’s disorder is a necessary element in creating art. Their work transforms personal and social turmoil into meaning that

others can grasp. By confronting and making sense of chaos, they reveal deeper truths that shape human understanding and history.

A psychotic is one who loses control of their functions because they cede control of reality to fantasy. As an example, schizophrenia disorients the patient into fantasy worlds that they do not recognize as delusion. As Sigmund Freud, the father of scientific psychology, wrote in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, “Neurosis is the result of a conflict between the ego and its id, whereas psychosis is the analogous outcome of a similar disturbance in the relation between the ego and its environment (outer world).”

The inability to adapt to reality is a psychological ailment we all face to some degree. One cannot tolerate too much reality and constructs beliefs and creations to escape chaos. It is a primary mental resource for mapping meaning in order to live fully.

Writers and the struggle with reality

It is sometimes said that writers secure their sanity through their art. Otherwise, they would become unstable. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, once said that groundbreaking Irish author James Joyce and his daughter, the dancer Lucia, were “two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving.” He described Joyce’s writing as bordering on schizophrenia, a disorder of fragmented self and thought.

However, it must be noted that authorship is not a symptom of a merely diagnosable ailment. Rather, it is the diagnosis of ailment itself. Authors tend to struggle more with reality as sensitive beings facing it directly.

German author Thomas Mann in *Magic Mountain* used this heuristic to describe the ultranationalistic fervor of prewar Europe. In his essay "Thoughts in Wartime," Mann wrote, "Deep in our hearts we felt that the world, our world, could no longer go on as it had. We were familiar with this world of peace and frivolous manners ... A ghastly world that will no longer exist — or will not exist once the storm has passed! Wasn't it swarming with vermin of the spirit like maggots? Didn't it seethe and stink of civilization's decay?"

This suggests a pensive mind reflecting on social ills more than a sick person who requires medication. Social dilemmas are the author's premier fascination. Such a person is like a seismograph measuring the ground's motion before an earthquake to determine its impact.

The search for meaning

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche offered such a diagnosis in *The Antichrist*. In "Diagnosing the Human Condition," School of the Art Institute of Chicago undergraduate student Sean Leftwich wrote, "There is a certain concealment of the true meaning of the traditionally positive Christian terms that Nietzsche attacks here, promising life where there may be emptiness, and therefore promoting a hostility towards life, perhaps even a rejection of it." Does this offer the redemptive value it purports? In a broad discussion of Christianity's nihilism, Nietzsche constructed a vision of the human condition that finds meaning in its bare existence.

Jung is quoted as stating, "The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate." The dialectic between the conscious and the unconscious illumines the principle of individuation. In Jung's dynamic psychology, the unconscious holds archetypes that resonate with

ancient meaning which become conscious through dreams and during psychotic states.

Jung also noted that mythical revelations are part of the psychological process of collective humanity. Can we take the author's works as part of the mythical process of creating universal meaning within this context? Jung himself wrote, "The poet's conviction that he is creating in absolute freedom would then be an illusion: he fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along." So yes, we can. Such revelations from the author unite humankind and unveil the seriousness of the world stage.

The author as the seeker of truth

By unveiling the unconscious psychology that causes suffering, the author delineates collective healing. Analogous to yin and yang, the dialectical process of the quest for freedom is one of synthesis in which dark contains light and light, dark. Akin to German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel's view that self-consciousness requires others to realize itself, the binary of dark/light is universal self-recognition. This distillation of truth requires rejuvenation. Like the scapegoat of Christianity, the author bleeds to unveil the inner recesses of suffering within the human soul. This act of healing within the author is the secret of universal expression.

The tensions between opposites create rivalries and binaries that seem irreconcilable. Such are right and left on the political spectrum or good and evil in theological terms. The interconnected nature of these oppositions suggests the need for synthesis. Great leaders and thinkers reconcile the tensions of their era creatively and proactively.

The psychotic sensibility is fragmented and lost within fantasy. The author may recognize their delusions and moral shortcomings, but their voice is essential to the development of humankind.

Struggle is universal and demanding. The author offers divine wisdom for the collective illumination of humanity. By radicalizing the tensions or getting at their root, the author searches deeply and often fumbles around in the dark until something is uncovered.

[Avery Ewing edited this piece.]



Dustin Pickering is the founder of Transcendent Zero Press. He has contributed writing to publications like *Huffington Post*, *The Statesman* (India), *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, *World Literature Today* and *Asymptote*. Dustin hosts the popular interview series *World Inkers Network* on YouTube. He is the author of the poetry collections *Salt and Sorrow*, *Knows No End*, *The Nothing Epistle* and several others, as well as the novella *Be Not Afraid of What You May Find*. His most recent collection of micropoems, *Crime of the Extraordinary*, is available on Amazon.

Trump's Meeting With Zelenskyy Revealed His Plot to Kill Ukraine

Douglas Hauer
March 09, 2025

US President Donald Trump met Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office on February 28. Why? To show deference to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The meeting humiliated Zelenskyy and signaled a shift in US policy toward Russia. This poses a

substantial risk to Ukraine. If given an opening to do so, Russia may seek to plant a pro-Moscow regime in Kyiv after the US abandons its support for the beleaguered nation.

US President Donald Trump's February 28 meeting in the Oval Office with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was a media stunt. The New York Times called it a "showdown." The intended audience was Russian President Putin, whom renowned historian Timothy Snyder has recently pointed out has hold of Trump's heart. The presence at the meeting of TASS, a Russian state-owned news agency, should only amplify our concerns that the meeting's primary purpose was to beat Zelenskyy into submission to Russia.

Trump staged the meeting to create a chilling effect on the Ukrainian leader and to warm up to Russia. This has disastrous implications for Ukraine and may have frozen Zelenskyy out of Washington for the next four years — if he lives that long. It is no comfort to Ukraine that Senator Lindsay Graham, a steadfast supporter of Ukraine in its war against Russia, stated to the media after the meeting that Zelenskyy would have to "fundamentally change or go."

My perspective on the war in Ukraine is personal. In 2022, I made numerous trips to Ukraine over six months. I was a civilian volunteer supporting a combat unit of the Ukrainian armed forces and delivering aid across the country. I worked close to the battle lines and got to know the terrain of Ukraine well. I spoke with hundreds of Ukrainians about the war and what peace with Russia might look like. I listened to their collective hopes for Ukraine to be part of Europe and far from Russia. And I saw massive destruction all throughout the country. This war has displaced

hundreds of thousands of civilians in Ukraine. It is a brutal war.

When I conversed with Ukrainians, I saw traits that reminded me of Israelis: adaptation, innovation, tenacity and, above all, a vision for a better future. This was even true at memorial services for soldiers killed in battle. In short, I saw a people that in many ways felt very familiar; as an American and Israeli, I feel an affinity with Ukrainians, a people fighting against the odds for survival and freedom. Surrounded by an all-powerful enemy, Ukraine has managed to hold the line and avoid a Russian victory. But time is running out. US policy appears to be on the brink of a change that may have apocalyptic consequences for Ukraine.

The words, tone and conduct of Trump and US Vice President JD Vance in the Oval Office should give us all grave concern. We may be nearing an abyss for US–Ukraine relations specifically and American foreign policy more generally. I am worried for the immediate safety of ordinary Ukrainians and for their future. Trump and Vance displayed a crude rejection of Zelenskyy and Ukraine. In doing so, they signaled a new world order to Putin, one in which Trump’s administration will be favoring Russia. The next move will be removing sanctions to facilitate and re-establish Russian visibility and economic muscle in the West. This comes at the expense of Ukrainians, who may well find themselves from one night to the next in a pro-Russian dictatorship.

Putin has a playbook. It is called Chechnya. Putin may well replace Zelenskyy with a pro-Moscow Ukrainian strongman, not unlike the way that Putin elevated the Kadyrov family in Chechnya to secure peace. Putin may have Trump behind him, cheering him on in imposing a new order in Ukraine. And while such an imposition of a brutal pro-Russian regime onto Ukraine has always been a possibility, in the back of the minds

of many Ukrainians, I never imagined that the US would accelerate a Ukrainian defeat and pave the way for a Putin-appointed dictator. But that may be the peace that Putin envisions, and that Trump will jump to negotiate.

It is beyond the pale for a democratically elected US government to support a Russian satellite state based in Kyiv. But this now seems to be on the table. We don’t know what has been negotiated behind closed doors already, but Putin appears to be more influential in the White House now than ever before.

The US has played right into the hands of Russia, the aggressor in the bloodiest conflict on European soil since the Second World War. Trump is slamming the door to a just peace and reaffirming Putin’s dominance. And this seems to be contrived haphazardly with no thought about how much harm Russia can unleash onto Europe as Putin expands Russia’s borders.

As an American, I am deeply ashamed of Trump’s conduct toward Zelenskyy at the Oval Office. Trump exploited an imbalance in power. Trump and Vance should display humility and strength. That is what real leadership entails. They did the opposite. They performed for Putin. And this will have a price in the coming years, as Putin now knows he has an ability to dictate policy to the US.

The next chapter for Ukrainians is around the corner, and it appears bleak. I read this week’s events as part of a plot to kill Ukraine. And events may happen faster than we expect. I don’t know what I will say to my Ukrainian friends, but no apology will console or be sufficient. I won’t ask for forgiveness. From a moral standpoint, the US has failed Ukraine and set into motion a possibly irreversible series of events that will foreclose any just and equitable settlement.



Douglas (“Dov”) Hauer-Gilad is a lawyer who has spent his entire career fighting for immigrants. He is a rabbinical student at Hebrew

Union College in New York, and a doctoral candidate in Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He has been a partner at a large law firm and taught at the Boston University School of Law. Douglas has actively represented families in Israel in various matters related to the October 7 attacks. He has a strong background in cross-border human rights activism and has traveled to countries such as Armenia, Pakistan, Malaysia and Ukraine. Douglas is married to Jack Gilad, an endodontist, for nearly 30 years. They live in Boston with their two dogs and parrots.

Winners and Losers – Deciphering Germany’s Election Results

Alex Gloy
March 11, 2025

German voters gave the Christian Democrats a narrow victory, while the far-right Alternative for Germany surged and the Social Democrats collapsed. Friedrich Merz wants to change Germany’s constitution to loosen fiscal restraints, but opposition from the upper house and legal challenges could block his plan. Germany’s shift away from austerity may change European politics.

On February 23, 2025, Germans went to the polls, handing victory to the conservative CDU/CSU alliance, led by Friedrich Merz, with 28.5% of the vote. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) made historic gains, securing 20.8% and becoming the second-largest party in the Bundestag. The Social Democratic Party (SPD), under outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz, suffered a significant defeat, dropping to 16.4%. The Greens obtained 11.6%, while the leftist Die Linke improved to 8.8%. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) failed to cross the 5% threshold, losing its representation in parliament. The newly formed Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) narrowly missed the 5% hurdle, leaving the party empty-handed.

With no outright majority, coalition negotiations are underway. Merz is in talks with the SPD, aiming to form a government by Easter. Yet, AfD’s strong performance has unsettled mainstream parties, reflecting a growing populist sentiment within Germany.

A CDU/CSU–Green coalition would fail to reach a simple majority, and AfD and Die Linke are incompatible with CDU/CSU’s values. Thus, allying with the SPD as the only viable option. Ironically, this would allow the SPD to remain in government despite a resounding defeat.

The SPD, trying to repair its image, may push for considerable concessions from CDU/CSU, complicating negotiations.

Constitutional challenges

Merz has proposed a controversial workaround to Germany’s constitutional debt brake (Schuldenbremse) by using off-budget special funds (Sondervermögen). Although a vocal defender of fiscal discipline, he suggests temporarily suspending the Schuldenbremse to finance key investments, particularly in defense

and infrastructure, without violating its formal rules.

This approach mirrors the Scholz government's strategy to fund a €100 billion military upgrade after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. By shifting borrowing outside the core budget, Merz aims to balance economic pragmatism with conservative fiscal principles. Critics argue it weakens the *Schuldenbremse's* credibility and entrenches off-budget debt mechanisms.

Germany's constitution (*Grundgesetz*) limits government borrowing and ensures long-term fiscal discipline. Enshrined in Articles 109 and 115, the *Schuldenbremse* restricts the federal government's structural deficit to 0.35% of GDP per year, while the states (*Länder*) are prohibited from running structural deficits. Exceptions exist for emergencies, such as economic crises or natural disasters, but any deviation requires a repayment plan.

Introduced in 2009 in response to the financial crisis, the *Schuldenbremse* reflects Germany's deep-rooted aversion to excessive debt. While praised for maintaining fiscal stability, critics argue it limits public investment and economic flexibility, especially during downturns.

The Greens and the FDP have been "informed of [Merz's] proposals" without their party representatives present at the announcement. The current government fell apart over much smaller fiscal issues — one can only imagine how FDP, being fiscally conservative, must feel regarding these proposals.

Changing Germany's constitution is deliberately difficult in order to ensure stability and protect democratic principles. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority in both the Bundestag and Bundesrat, making broad political consensus essential. This rigidity prevents

legal manipulations that once enabled authoritarianism. Even widely supported reforms often stall due to political fragmentation or federal-state disagreements, reinforcing the constitution's role as a safeguard against abrupt shifts in governance.

A race against time

In the new Bundestag, Merz will not have the majority needed to make changes. AfD will nearly double its seats in parliament, from 83 to 152, only 12 seats behind CDU's 164. Along with the Die Linke's 64 seats, two non-centrist parties will control over a third of the Bundestag, enabling them to block decisions requiring a two-thirds majority.

In a stunning move, Merz proposed amending the constitution before the new parliamentary session begins at the end of March. He aims to increase borrowing, particularly for defense spending. The proposal requires a two-thirds majority in both the Bundestag and Bundesrat. Fiscal conservatives fear it could weaken Germany's strict debt rules.

Some constitutional law experts argue the current Bundestag lacks the legitimacy to change the constitution since it no longer reflects the people's will. Others disagree. Legal challenges are likely, with AfD and Die Linke threatening action.

Even if Merz's proposal passes in the Bundestag, securing a two-thirds majority in the Bundesrat will be difficult. The Bundesrat represents Germany's 16 *Länder*. Its 69 members are appointed by state governments, not elected. States must cast all their votes as a block — either all in favor, all against or abstaining. If a state cannot agree, its votes count as abstentions, making a two-thirds majority harder to reach.

Missing votes from six states, including those where Die Linke and BSW hold influence, would leave the remaining states with just one vote above the threshold. If any of the five states with Green-led governments abstain, the proposal fails.

The Bundestag will begin debating proposed reforms on March 13, with a vote scheduled for March 18. If the Bundesrat rejects the bill, a mediation committee (Vermittlungsausschuss) will be convened to negotiate a compromise.

The Vermittlungsausschuss has 32 members, 16 from each chamber. AfD, FDP, and Die Linke hold 10 seats combined. Members are not bound by directives or party mandates, leaving room for surprises. Lengthy negotiations or delays could make compromise impossible before time runs out.

Reactions at home and abroad

Germany's Bundesbank has proposed allowing a maximum fiscal deficit of 1.4% of GDP, provided the debt-to-GDP ratio stays below 60%. The proposal has little chance of adoption, as Germany's debt-to-GDP ratio currently sits at 62%.

Meanwhile, the EU is discussing adjusting its fiscal rules, particularly the Maastricht deficit criteria, to accommodate increased defense spending. These rules cap government deficits at 3% of GDP and public debt at 60% of GDP.

The EU may expand what qualifies as defense investment, including military equipment, arms manufacturing, and dual-use infrastructure. Germany has advocated for an indefinite exemption for defense spending from EU fiscal rules, a significant shift from its traditional fiscal conservatism.

The markets have had their own reaction to the developments. Expectations of increased European

defense spending have driven up defense industry stocks. Companies like Rheinmetall, BAE Systems and Thales have seen share prices soar, some doubling within weeks, as governments boost military budgets in response to geopolitical tensions.

The proposed fiscal expansion will lead to increased government borrowing, higher bond issuance, and rising yields. German 30-year government bond yields saw their biggest daily increase since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Despite this, the European Central Bank cut interest rates by 0.25 percentage points on March 6, disregarding inflationary risks from large government spending programs. Higher long-term rates in Europe increase the euro's attractiveness, strengthening its exchange rate.

Germany's shift away from fiscal rigidity marks a *Zeitenwende* — a historic turning point. Long committed to balanced budgets and the *Schuldenbremse*, Germany now faces pressures from geopolitical instability, economic stagnation, and aging infrastructure. Fiscal conservatives are reconsidering their stance.

This transformation mirrors Germany's abrupt reversal in defense policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As pacifism gave way to military investment, fiscal discipline now faces challenges from economic and security realities.

European governments are likely to welcome Germany's shift toward looser fiscal policies, as it could ease financial constraints across the eurozone. For years, Germany's strict austerity stance clashed with the preferences of France, Italy, and Spain, which favored more flexible spending to stimulate growth.

What will happen next?

A more expansionary German budget could boost domestic demand, benefiting European exporters and reducing economic imbalances within the European Union. Increased German investment in defense and infrastructure would also align with broader European priorities, particularly as the continent seeks greater strategic autonomy. A less rigid German fiscal approach could pave the way for EU-wide initiatives, such as joint borrowing for defense or industrial subsidies, marking a shift from Berlin's historical opposition to collective debt mechanisms.

Increased fiscal spending on defense and infrastructure may create jobs and stimulate economic activity, but it will not directly address the social and economic grievances fueling right-wing populism in Germany. Rising living costs, immigration concerns, and a growing disconnect between political elites and ordinary citizens have driven support for AfD. The party has capitalized on public frustration by positioning itself as the voice of the disillusioned.

Without targeted policies to address wage stagnation, housing shortages, and social cohesion, simply lifting fiscal restraints may not curb the populist surge. If higher spending triggers inflationary pressures or tax hikes, it could even deepen resentment, reinforcing the populist narrative of an out-of-touch establishment.



Alexander Gloy is an independent investment professional with over 35 years of experience in financial markets. He worked in Equity Research and Sales, both in Investment and Private Banking for Deutsche Bank, Credit Suisse, Sal. Oppenheim and Lombard Odier Darier Hentsch. He focuses on macroeconomic research, analyzing the impact of global debt and derivatives on the

stability of our monetary system. His interest in crypto-currencies from the perspective of monetary theory led him to become a member of the Central Bank Digital Currency Think Tank.

International Community Bears Responsibility for Red Sea Crisis and Houthi Crimes

Fernando Carvajal
March 12, 2025

The UN's 2018 Stockholm Agreement exacerbated the current crisis on the Red Sea. This failed diplomatic solution empowered Houthi rebels, allowing them strategic control of critical ports around Yemen. Merchant vessel strikes in the Bab al-Mandab strait threaten global commerce as Yemeni civilians suffer for the Iran-supported militia's crimes.

At the core of the Red Sea crisis lies a failure to address the catastrophe in Gaza. But the outright failure of the United Nations's 2018 Stockholm Agreement in Sweden exacerbated the situation. The Houthis, an Iranian-sponsored terrorist group based in Sanaa, Yemen, were not empowered by the war in Gaza, but by the opportunities granted them by a deal brokered by then-UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths. Houthis spent nearly a decade building an Iranian-supplied arsenal, which permanently threatens global commerce and regional stability.

The failed diplomatic approach in 2018 produced two major consequences: Houthi aggression along the Red Sea and Arabian Sea and

the crimes against Yemenis working for humanitarian organizations. Accounts of the battles for Hodeidah city from June to December 2018 depict how anti-Houthi forces were pressured to halt their advance. Humanitarian organizations and analysts warned against “destructive” military operations against Houthis and advocated for a diplomatic approach to prevent dire consequences for the civilian population. By the time Griffiths called for a summit in Stockholm, southern forces and units under Commander Tareq Saleh had reached the airport and advanced to a position within 16 km east of the city.

The summit concluded with a photo-op and handshake between the Legitimate Government’s Foreign Minister, Khaled al-Yamani, and Houthi chief negotiator Muhammad Abd al-Salam. What followed weeks and months later was a classic Houthi manipulation of the Stockholm Agreement — they retained full control over the city, port facilities in Hodeidah and Salif and the oil terminal at Ras Isa. Houthis also neutralized the mechanisms created by the UN Security Council to oversee implementation of the agreement.

Victory postponed

Criticism of the UN approach to conflict in Yemen is not new. Yemenis have attacked every UN Special Envoy since Jamal Benomar (who served from 2011 to 2015), each blamed for further empowering Houthis since they joined the popular uprising against politician and military officer Ali Abdullah Saleh. Benomar was replaced soon after Houthis launched their invasion of the city of Aden in March 2015. Houthis went on to control 25% more territory than they did when Griffiths was appointed as the third UN Envoy to Yemen in 2018. This prompted Griffiths’s replacement.

Reality is far more complicated than a collection of events to justify criticism. However, one can’t ignore failure sustained by insisting on

the same approach for a decade expecting different results. Millions of Yemenis have suffered the consequences of war since 2011, and there is still no end in sight for this crisis. Yemenis critical of UN officials are aware Houthi rivals also bear responsibility for a decade of armed conflict, but it is abundantly clear that actions by the UN and others directly empowered Houthis and postponed victories to dislodge the rebels from the cities of Hodeidah, Sanaa and Taiz.

While Saleh’s stepping down in November 2011 was hailed as a major diplomatic achievement, Yemenis highlight the failure of the National Dialogue Conference and the Peace and Partnership Agreement of 2014 as preludes to the catastrophe in December 2018. Houthis learned that the UN, regional powers and the West were unable to counter their manipulation of agreements that merely granted the rebels time to regroup and rearm. The handshake at Stockholm once again served Houthi interests, as it increased operations at Hodeidah’s Red Sea port, allowed troop mobilization east of Saada city and the western al-Jawf province and enabled a strangle-hold over Taiz.

Crimes as consequences

Houthis and their progressive allies in the West present aggression against civilian commercial vessels as operations supporting Palestinians in Gaza. In reality, these attacks have been an extension of Iran’s strategy and Houthi tactics to gain leverage in Yemen.

As members of Iran’s Axis of Resistance, Houthis continue to represent a vital instrument for Iran in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. While they have independent goals in their fight against Yemeni rivals, they are vital to Iran’s encirclement of Saudi Arabia. Iraqi militias from the north, Houthis from the south and new alliances in East Africa grant Iran indispensable

advantages over Gulf monarchies, not just Saudi Arabia.

The attacks along across the Bab al-Mandab strait managed to disrupt the global economy, short of expected damage, but failed to accomplish anything in support of Gaza. The attacks on ships, including the hijacking of the *Galaxy Leader* and sinking of the *Rubymar* and *M/V Tutor*, were not new tactics. Houthis have attacked vessels nearly since the start of the war. Training and weapons facilitated their new capabilities and efficiency employed from October 2023. This shows the international community that as long as they are in power and present along the Red Sea coast, they represent an enduring threat to maritime commerce.

Their strategy, as that of Iran, failed to produce expected results vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the UN. Houthis expected the Coalition to acquiesce on demands for a formal security agreement, and the UN to submit under pressure and increase the flow of aid to northern Yemen. Saudi Arabia remains hesitant to finalize the agreement with Houthis beyond the détente of April 2022, and lack of funds from donors decreased the flow of aid to Houthi controlled territory. In response, Houthis raised the stakes and engaged in so-called “hostage diplomacy;” they launched a criminal campaign last summer that detained dozens of Yemenis who worked for UN agencies and non-governmental organizations.

There is no clear path to a return to peace talks between Houthis and the Legitimate Government. The UN lacks any leverage over Houthis and has simply abandoned Yemeni nationals, which leaves their fate up to willing mediators who in turn have their own demands from the international community. Saudi Arabia faces increasing unpredictability from the US administration, risking further derailment of its 2030 Vision. A major challenge for Houthis this time around is

that the structure of the PLC serves to prevent the next Stockholm fiasco. Southern factions within the Legitimate Government will not submit to pressure for a deal that further empowers Houthis once again.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Fernando Carvajal served on the UN Security Council Panel of Experts on Yemen from April 2017 to March 2019 as a regions and armed groups expert. He has nearly 20 years of experience conducting fieldwork in Yemen and is a specialist in Yemeni politics and tribal relations.

The History and Political Context of the Japan–South Korea Currency Swap Line

Masaaki Yoshimori
March 15, 2025

The Japan–South Korea currency swap line has been a key instrument for financial stability and economic cooperation since 2001. However, political tensions, trade disputes and historical grievances have led to periodic suspensions in 2015, highlighting the vulnerability of financial agreements to diplomatic conflicts. The 2020 renewal of the swap agreement indicated its necessity. To ensure long-term economic resilience, both countries must develop institutional mechanisms that shield financial cooperation from political disputes.

The Japan–South Korea currency swap line was first established in 2001 as part of a broader effort to stabilize financial systems and manage liquidity between the two nations. In the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, both countries recognized the importance of regional financial cooperation to prevent future economic instability. The currency swap agreement allowed Japan and South Korea to exchange their respective currencies, ensuring access to emergency liquidity in times of need. This arrangement was critical in strengthening economic resilience and reinforcing bilateral financial ties.

The swap line’s role during the 2008 global financial crisis

The importance of the currency swap line was highlighted during the 2008 global financial crisis. As capital outflows increased and financial markets became volatile, South Korea faced significant liquidity pressures. Given Japan’s robust financial position, its support through the swap line was instrumental in stabilizing South Korea’s economy. The agreement was expanded to allow South Korea to access yen liquidity in exchange for the Korean won, which ensured confidence in the country’s financial system. This episode demonstrated the effectiveness of international financial cooperation in mitigating economic shocks and sustaining market stability.

Suspension and renewal

Despite its financial significance, the Japan–South Korea currency swap line has been subject to diplomatic tensions. In 2015, the agreement expired, reducing the swap line to zero. In 2019, Japan imposed export restrictions on critical materials essential for South Korea’s semiconductor industry, which affected South Korea’s technology sector and hindered financial collaboration. South Koreans perceived the move

as retaliation for a court ruling on forced labor during Japan’s colonial rule.

This trade dispute strained bilateral relations and ultimately led the countries to suspend economic cooperation, including the swap line. The episode underscored the vulnerability of economic partnerships to political conflicts and the need for institutional mechanisms to safeguard financial cooperation from diplomatic disputes.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 revealed the necessity of financial preparedness and cooperation. Recognizing the economic disruptions caused by the global health crisis, Japan and South Korea renewed their currency swap agreement in March 2020. This renewal was a crucial step in ensuring financial stability and maintaining liquidity access during uncertain times. Beyond economic considerations, the agreement also marked a diplomatic breakthrough, reflecting both countries’ willingness to prioritize regional economic security over political tensions.

Historical grievances, nationalism and domestic political pressures

Unresolved historical grievances have long affected bilateral relations between Japan and South Korea. Japan’s colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 remains a contentious issue, with disputes over forced labor, “comfort women” and territorial claims over the Dokdo/Takeshima islands still straining relations. These historical disputes frequently impact economic and diplomatic interactions, complicating cooperative efforts such as the currency swap line. The persistence of these issues has made sustained financial cooperation difficult, as political conflicts often overshadow economic necessities.

Nationalism plays a critical role in shaping Japan–South Korea relations. In South Korea, public sentiment remains highly sensitive to

historical injustices, influencing policymakers to adopt hardline stances against Japan. Similarly, Japanese leaders face domestic pressures regarding historical legacy and national pride, which further complicate diplomatic engagement. These internal political dynamics frequently challenge efforts to sustain economic collaboration.

Geopolitical implications of the Japan–South Korea relationship

The Japan–South Korea relationship has broader geopolitical implications, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. As key US allies, both countries play crucial roles in regional security dynamics, especially concerning North Korea and China’s growing influence. The United States has consistently encouraged reconciliation between Japan and South Korea, recognizing that diplomatic stability enhances regional security and economic resilience. The currency swap line, while primarily an economic tool, also serves as a barometer of bilateral relations; it reflects the complex interplay between financial cooperation, political tensions and broader geopolitical considerations.

Sustaining the swap line

The Japan–South Korea currency swap line has been a crucial instrument for financial stability and crisis management since its inception. However, its history has been shaped by cycles of cooperation and suspension, often driven by diplomatic tensions and historical disputes. The renewal of the swap line during the Covid-19 pandemic underscored both nations’ capacity to prioritize economic stability over political differences. Yet, deep-seated diplomatic and nationalistic challenges continue to hinder sustained collaboration.

To safeguard long-term financial stability and regional economic security, institutional mechanisms must be developed to shield economic

cooperation from broader geopolitical conflicts. Political uncertainty escalated in 2024, notably with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s declaration of martial law after the renewal. Nevertheless, the framework for economic cooperation has remained intact. Maintaining this resilience will be essential in navigating future challenges.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Masaaki Yoshimori is an economist. He was born in Ashiya and grew up in Kuwana, Japan. He belongs to the McCourt School of Public Policy, a constituent school of Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He previously served as a fellow in International Economics at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Yoshimori’s research spans a broad spectrum of critical issues in global economics, including monetary policy, exchange rate policy, financial regulation, macroeconomics and the intersections of climate change with economic systems.

Is This the Beginning or the End of a New Cold War?

Medea Benjamin, Nicolas J.S. Davies
March 16, 2025

Are we at the beginning of a new Cold War or the end of an old one? European leaders, many of whom advocate for militarization, view this conflict as a long-term struggle. US President Donald Trump claims to see an opportunity to

end the Cold War and build peaceful relations with Russia.

When EU leaders met in Brussels on February 6 to discuss the war in Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron called this time “a turning point in history.” Western leaders agree that this is a historic moment when decisive action is needed, but what kind of action depends on their interpretation of the nature of this moment.

Is this the beginning of a new Cold War between the United States, NATO and Russia or the end of one? Will Russia and the West remain implacable enemies for the foreseeable future, with a new iron curtain between them through what was once the heart of Ukraine? Or can the US and Russia resolve the disputes and hostility that led to this war in the first place, so as to leave Ukraine with a stable and lasting peace?

The Cold War repeats itself

Some European leaders see this moment as the beginning of a long struggle with Russia, akin to the beginning of the Cold War in 1946, when Winston Churchill warned that “an iron curtain has descended” across Europe.

On March 2, echoing Churchill, European Council President Ursula von der Leyen declared that Europe must turn Ukraine into a “steel porcupine.” President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said he wants up to 200,000 European troops on the eventual ceasefire line between Russia and Ukraine to “guarantee” any peace agreement. He insists that the US provide a “backstop,” meaning a commitment to send US forces to fight in Ukraine if war breaks out again.

Russia has repeatedly said it won’t agree to NATO forces being based in Ukraine under any guise. “We explained today that the appearance of armed forces from the same NATO countries, but under a false flag, under the flag of the European Union or under national flags, does not change anything in this regard,” Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on February 18. “Of course this is unacceptable to us.”

But the UK is persisting in a campaign to recruit a “coalition of the willing,” the same term the US and UK coined for the list of countries they persuaded to support the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. In that case, only Australia, Denmark and Poland took small parts in the invasion. Costa Rica publicly insisted on being removed from the list, and the term was widely lampooned as the “coalition of the billing” because the US recruited so many countries to join it by promising them lucrative foreign aid deals.

Far from the start of a new Cold War, US President Donald Trump and other leaders see this moment as more akin to the end of the original Cold War, when US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev met in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1986 and began to bridge the divisions caused by 40 years of Cold War hostility.

Like Trump and Putin today, Reagan and Gorbachev were unlikely peacemakers. Gorbachev had risen through the ranks of the Soviet Communist Party to become its General Secretary and Soviet Premier in March 1985, in the midst of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. He didn’t begin to withdraw Soviet forces from Afghanistan until 1988. Reagan oversaw an unprecedented Cold War arms build-up, a genocide in Guatemala and covert and proxy wars throughout Central America. And yet Gorbachev and Reagan are now widely remembered as peacemakers.

While Democrats deride Trump as a Putin stooge, in his first term in office, Trump was actually responsible for escalating the Cold War with Russia. After the Pentagon had milked its absurd, self-fulfilling “War on Terror” for trillions of dollars, it was Trump and his psychopathic defense secretary, General “Mad Dog” Mattis, who declared the shift back to strategic competition with Russia and China as the Pentagon’s new gravy train in their 2018 National Defense Strategy. It was also Trump who lifted President Barack Obama’s restrictions on sending lethal weapons to Ukraine.

The dissolution of European peacemaking

Trump’s head-spinning about-face in US policy has left its European allies with whiplash and reversed the roles they each have played for generations. France and Germany have traditionally been the diplomats and peacemakers in the Western alliance. Meanwhile, the US and UK have been infected with a chronic case of war fever that has proven resistant to a long string of military defeats and catastrophic impacts on every country that has fallen prey to their warmongering.

In 2003, France’s Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin led the opposition to the invasion of Iraq in the UN Security Council. France, Germany and Russia issued a joint statement to say that they would “not let a proposed resolution pass that would authorize the use of force. Russia and France, as permanent members of the Security Council, will assume all their responsibilities on this point.”

At a press conference in Paris with then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, French President Jacques Chirac said, “Everything must be done to avoid war... As far as we’re concerned, war always means failure.”

As recently as 2022, after Russia invaded Ukraine, it was once again the US and UK that rejected and blocked peace negotiations in favor of a long war, while France, Germany and Italy continued to call for new negotiations, even as they gradually fell in line with the US long war policy.

Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder took part in the peace negotiations in Turkey in March and April 2022 and then flew to Moscow at Ukraine’s request to meet with Putin. In a 2023 interview with German newspaper Berliner Zeitung, Schröder confirmed that the peace talks only failed “because everything was decided in Washington.”

With Biden blocking new negotiations in 2023, one interviewer asked Schröder, “Do you think you can resume your peace plan?”

He replied, “Yes, and the only ones who can initiate this are France and Germany... Macron and Scholz are the only ones who can talk to Putin. Chirac and I did the same in the Iraq war. Why can’t support for Ukraine be combined with an offer of talks to Russia? The arms deliveries are not a solution for eternity. But no one wants to talk. Everyone sits in trenches. How many more people have to die?”

Since 2022, President Macron and a Thatcherite team of iron ladies — European Council President von der Leyen; former German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and former Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, now the EU’s foreign policy chief — have promoted a new militarization of Europe, egged on from behind the scenes by European and US arms manufacturers.

Has the passage of time, the passing of the World War II generation and the distortion of history washed away the historical memory of two World Wars from a continent that was destroyed by conflict only 80 years ago? Where is the next

generation of French and German diplomats in the tradition of de Villepin and Schröder today? How can sending German tanks to fight in Ukraine, and now in Russia itself, fail to remind Russians of previous German invasions and solidify support for the war? And won't the call for Europe to confront Russia by moving from a "welfare state to a warfare state" only feed the rise of the European hard right?

So are the new European militarists reading the historical moment correctly? Or are they jumping on the bandwagon of a disastrous Cold War that could, as Biden and Trump have warned, lead to World War III?

A US–Russian plan to restore relations

When Trump's foreign policy team met with their Russian counterparts in Saudi Arabia on February 18, ending the war in Ukraine was the second part of the three-part plan they agreed on. The first was to restore full diplomatic relations between the US and Russia, and the third was to work on a series of other problems in American–Russian relations.

The order of these three stages is interesting because, as Secretary of State Marco Rubio noted, it means that the negotiations over Ukraine will be the first test of restored relations between the US and Russia.

If the negotiations for peace in Ukraine are successful, they can lead to further negotiations over restoring arms control treaties and nuclear disarmament. Perhaps they could even spur cooperation on other global problems that have been impossible to resolve in a world stuck in a zombie-like Cold War that powerful interests will not allow to die.

It was a welcome change to hear Rubio say that the post-Cold War unipolar world was an anomaly and that now we have to adjust to the reality of a

multipolar world. But if Trump and his hawkish advisers are just trying to restore US relations with Russia as part of a "reverse Kissinger" scheme to isolate China, as some analysts have suggested, that would perpetuate America's debilitating geopolitical crisis instead of solving it.

A chance for change

The US and our friends in Europe have a new chance to make a clean break from the three-way geopolitical power struggle between the US, Russia and China that has hamstrung the world since the 1970s. They can find new roles and priorities for our countries in the emerging multipolar world of the 21st century.

We hope that Trump and European leaders can recognize the crossroads at which they are standing, and the chance history is giving them to choose the path of peace. France and Germany in particular should remember the wisdom of de Villepin, Chirac and Schröder in the face of American and British plans for aggression against Iraq in 2003.

This could be the beginning of the end of the permanent state of war and Cold War that has held the world in its grip for over a century. Ending it would allow us to finally prioritize the progress and cooperation we so desperately need to solve the other critical problems the whole world faces today. As US General Mark Milley said back in November 2022 when he called for renewed negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, we must "seize the moment."

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Medea Benjamin is the co-founder of both CODEPINK and the international human rights

organization Global Exchange. She is the author of eight books, including *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* and *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

Benjamin has been at the forefront of the anti-drone movement. She organized the first-ever international drone summit and led delegations to Pakistan and Yemen to meet with drone strike victims and family members of Guantanamo Bay prisoners.



Nicolas J.S. Davies is an independent journalist and a researcher for CODEPINK. He is also the author of *Blood On Our Hands: The American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. Davies and Medea Benjamin have co-authored *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*, available from OR Books.

Tu vuò fà l'americano?

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
March 20, 2025

Old Hollywood movies made Americans look like bold, principled, fun-loving heroes. Recent films show Americans as ruthless, selfish, and amoral. Now – the country’s image has fallen so far that Canadian coffee shops are renaming their ‘Americano’.

Full disclosure here: I love old, sappy American movies. And whether I was in Canada, the Netherlands, Portugal or India, I drank in popular American culture through them. Through them, I formed my image of the American abroad. But now, that image is changing.

In *Casablanca* (1942), American Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) runs a popular music bar called Rick's Café Américain in a small town in Morocco, a waystation for World War II refugees. He plays a quintessential American: straight-talking and wise-cracking. His best friend is a black musician. Rick is trusted by all, friend and foe. He fights on the side of the weak: He ran guns to Ethiopia to help in their fight against their colonial master Italy, and he fought with the loyalists against fascist Francisco Franco in Spain. In other words, he’s the guy you want by your side when things get rough.

In *It Started in Naples* (1950), Sofia Loren sings the famous song “Tu vuò fà l'americano” — Neapolitan for, “You want to play the American.” Indeed, we all did. Not only because the Americans had baseball, whiskey & soda, and rock & roll, but because they seemed prosperous, carefree, equal-opportunity and unburdened by commitment, economics, tradition or history. In this film, Clark Gable plays the americano — a businessman and World War II veteran who is as straight-talking and wise-cracking as Bogart’s Blaine. He’s got a heart of gold, too, and therefore takes his orphaned nephew and the nephew’s aunt under his wing. Of course, it helps that the aunt looks like Sofia Loren.

In *An American in Paris* (1951), Gene Kelly sings and dances his way into Leslie Caron’s heart. Learning: All American men are terrific dancers. In *Roman Holiday* (1953), a smooth-talking American journalist played by Gregory Peck does right by European princess Audrey Hepburn,

proving that the handsome americano also respects boundaries and plays by the rules.

But over the course of time and particularly with the turn of the century, the ‘American’ has evolved in our popular imagination — from a straight-shooting, fun-loving guy always fervently on the side of the under-dog — to someone more complicated.

The song “Americano,” sung by Lady Gaga in the movie *Puss in Boots* (2011) should have served as foreshadowing. But we were too busy dancing to the snappy beat to hear the words, “living on the edge of the law.”

In *The American* (2020), George Clooney plays a skilled assassin who escapes from his old life and hides in a small town in the Italian mountains. He is a morally conflicted americano who has done some terrible things but is now trying to start a new, more normal life. Ok, so he’s super handsome, but still vaguely unsettling.

The lush thriller *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), filmed almost entirely in Italy, is a gripping story with an amazing cast of characters. However, the Americans in this story are either rich, confident and uncaring, or poor, awkward and twisted, with both transgressing the bounds of morality. The kind of americani you want to avoid.

And now, things have evolved so much on the geopolitical stage that we’re outright rejecting the americano.

A common menu item in coffee shops the world over is the “americano” — a big cup with a shot of espresso and the rest filled with hot water. The concept is said to have begun in WWII when US soldiers like Gable’s character were in Italy and preferred something more like their home brew than the local espresso. Recently, several coffee shops in Canada have renamed their

americano coffee “canadiano.” The movement began with the Kicking Horse Café in the mountain village of Invermere, British Columbia. And now, given US President Donald Trump’s imposition of trade tariffs and continuing threats to annex Canada, it has spread across the country.

Some people may argue that this act is meaningless, for two reasons: names don’t matter and the product is the same. But, in this case, neither rings true. Shakespeare may have agreed with the first reason, saying “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” — but then, he lived before the era of the nation-state. Today, our world is divided into nations and the associated nationalistic feelings run deep. A Canadian does not want to be called an American. Calling a coffee by a different name may be a small, subtle and somewhat humorous act of resistance, but one that much of the general public can join in on, at little cost and with much gusto. Furthermore, this resistance movement by Canadians may inspire Greenlanders, Danish, Panamanians, Chinese and indeed the many others of the world who have been tariffed or threatened by Trump.

Secondly, the product has indeed fundamentally changed. The americano is no longer the sought-after moral and generous hero, but instead seems amoral, vindictive, self-serving, acquisitive... and probably can’t dance. Tu vuoi fà l'americano? No thanks.

In *Spectre* (2015), Madelaine Swann’s father, just before he dies, tells James Bond to find “l'Américain.” So, Bond begins to search for this mysterious American who can provide him with essential intelligence.

Only much later in the story does he discover that it’s just a hotel.



Ranjani Iyer Mohanty is a writer and academic editor. She currently divides her time between India and Canada. Her pieces have appeared on several platforms —

including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, *The Globe & Mail* and *The Atlantic*.

Syria's De Facto Leader Faces Home Truths: Alawite Executions

Fernando Carvajal
March 21, 2025

Reportedly, the Haya't Tahrir al-Sham paramilitary group has recently executed Alawite Syrians en masse. Violence against non-Sunni Muslims in Syria is part of a larger religious conflict fueled by sectarian divisions, especially between Sunni jihadists and the Alawite-led, post-Assad government. Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa must do more to punish the perpetrators if he truly wants a peaceful legacy.

It was only a matter of time until the Haya't Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) gunmen of Syria's post-Bashar al-Assad interim government took violence against non-Sunni Muslims into their own hands.

Reports emerged early on March 9 about large-scale round-ups, home invasions and subsequent street executions of Alawite Syrians in the Alawi heartland of Syria's Latakia and Tartous governorates. On March 6–7, over a thousand

Alawis members of the former ruling Alawite sect — a schismatic branch of Shia Islam — were, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, executed by HTS fighters and associated al-Qaeda-affiliated gunmen, including foreign fighters. The International Committee of the Red Cross has called for access to allow medical and humanitarian relief to be given to the survivors.

The scale and nature of this Alawite execution are reminiscent of the large-scale murders carried out by the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) during its 2017 insurgency in Iraq and Syria. Witness reports say that the HTS-led executions were carried out by both Syrian extremist militiamen and foreign fighters who are now again revealing their religious extremism.

Path to end Syria's religious wars

Looting of homes, workplaces and shops added to the violent mayhem which Syria's de facto leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (now known as Ahmed al-Sharaa) must stop and punish to be able to say that his path is towards peace and inclusion. He and his cabinet have yet to take material measures to discipline and disarm those persons and groups who perpetrated the killings. But he has urged militants not to abuse people. Notably, he has blamed former regime fighters for starting the incident which spread over a wide area along with fighters "unaffiliated" with the interim government. The United Nations appears shocked at the fighting.

The Syrian civil war may have begun in 2011 with public discontent with the Assad regime, its corruption and egotistical violence of those military, police and other officials allowed to carry it out. It did not take long before ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliated Sunni jihadists turned towards Syria from Iraq bringing weapons and a religious war against the Alawite regime.

There is little doubt that HTS extremist fighters wanted to crush the Alawites and command the country. Aside from a few cases of inter-sectarian Muslim cooperation against foreign coalition forces, the post-2004 Iraq insurgency increasingly split along sectarian lines. Attacks against civilians, shrines and notables, and the formation of self-defense and aggressive militias were almost entirely Sunni Muslims acting against Shia Muslims. Al-Sharaa was part of this ISIS-affiliated insurgency; he went to gaol (prison) and then to Syria to continue the war against non-Sunnis.

The post-2011 Libyan revolution situation is being repeated in Syria. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration face a grave and likely violent path. Most of Syria's 60 to 70 armed groups will want enrichment from the barrel of a gun before they even consider the alternative: collaboration with al-Sharaa. By agreeing to merge into what will be a factionalized and unsettled new Syrian army, these extremist militias would lose their independence and bargaining power.

Any national reconciliation process cannot advance while non-Sunni Muslim religious sects or non-Arabs face terror and extortion. Post-conquest Syrian retribution and expropriation — that is, murder, theft of property, kidnapping and enslavement — will surely follow what now is the expected path just as it did in Yemen, Libya, Sudan and regions of Iraq.

State of Western aid

The West is in a bind. EU leaders' early remarks to Syria's leadership conditioned aid assistance on adherence to and implementation of a long list of governance principles and methods. Some of these are more specific than respect for and inclusion of minorities, unity of Syria, commitments against terrorism and neighborly peacefulness. From early January, there were calls to remove global terrorist listings against HTS and its leaders to assist aid

delivery and political interaction. Such delistings cannot reasonably go ahead unless Syria's leaders initiate steps to transparentize the internal situation and work against violence.

The United States has stalled aid which reduces the West's internal and external leverage over Syrian regime management and progressive emergence of civil society.

The US aid freeze and possibly permanent cuts also threaten the ability of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition to maintain guard over dozens of camps holding ISIL captives and their civilian supporters, as well as displaced persons. HTS fighters may well try to storm camps to release former colleagues and their families. Such attacks have happened before, such as in 2022. The SDF itself faces pressure from Turkey and now the HTS regime in Damascus, who appear to see Syria's Kurds as an obstacle to its state control rather than a social component with which a durable *modus vivendi* must be reached.

Al-Sharaa's next move toward peace

Al-Sharaa moved quickly on the idea of a national dialogue, using terms well-known to these processes. This rushed move was also botched with relatively wide but rapid, unprepared consultations prior to a National Dialogue Conference of 600 delegates over a single two-day session, which ended on February 25.

This pace and depth were not adequate for a split society to find a path ahead after 14 years of violent civil war. Views on its effectiveness were split. The dialogue process will need to be revisited and continued even after the somewhat delayed announcement of a new interim government is made this March.

Al-Jolani, formerly an al-Qaeda extremist commander, now sees real evidence that he exists

in a jungle and its predators need to be controlled. He may not be able to do this by disarming his militant fighters still keen to exact revenge, nor may he succeed by assaulting possible Assad loyalists. His main path is to outrun these groups by use of real inclusion of all Syrians in the hope of a safer and secure future. Simultaneously, he seeks to demonstrate, where he can, an ability to suppress and divert violence by previously useful but now so-called “unaffiliated” Sunni extremists.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Fernando Carvajal served on the UN Security Council Panel of Experts on Yemen from April 2017 to March 2019 as a regions and armed groups expert. He has nearly 20 years of experience conducting fieldwork in Yemen and is a specialist in Yemeni politics and tribal relations.

Where Do Defenders of Democracy Really Stand?

Leonard Weinberg
March 22, 2025

Under Donald Trump’s administration, conflicting narratives in veteran communities abound. Many veterans who have held prestigious positions in both military and government have expressed concerns that the American President is a threat to democracy. Others who have served, however, build upon a history of far-right extremism in claiming that Trump isn’t the problem — it’s the government itself.

In an interview with The New York Times, former US Chief of Staff John Kelly deemed Trump an authoritarian who “falls into the general definition of fascist.” A retired general, Kelly is just one of many high-ranking veterans who warned the public that a Trump presidency would pose a threat to American democracy. At the same time, other veterans have taken a stand against the government and come out in support of radical leaders like Trump, who now dominates the American political system.

The Defense

Some of Trump’s most prominent critics are General Mark Milley, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Dr. Mark Esper, former Secretary of Defense, and James Stavridis, retired Navy admiral and commander of NATO forces. Many of these distinguished military leaders and naval commanders have labelled Trump a belligerent, feckless and uninformed commander and chief. Worse, some worry that in his second term, Trump may invoke the Insurrection Act to mobilize the military against domestic critics.

With Trump’s victory, some of these officers, particularly those who served in Afghanistan, may be recalled to active duty or court-martialed. This effort is likely to be led by Pete Hegseth, a right-wing ideologue and recently confirmed Secretary of Defense. Hegseth, previously a co-host of a Fox News television show, served as a national guardsman and saw combat in Afghanistan.

Before taking office, Hegseth promised to fire army officers who’ve articulated support for “woke” ideas. The current Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Charles Q. Brown, Jr., may be one of many veterans on the chopping block.

The Offense

While some prominent retired military leaders have become highly visible defenders of America's democratic system, there is another side to the story. The US military does not solely produce "woke" defenders of democracy — former servicemen have also turned into domestic threats to the nation that they allegedly worked to defend.

Consider the cases of Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier, three servicemen-turned-domestic terrorists. Conspiring with Nichols and Fortier, friends from the Army, McVeigh set off a truck bomb in front of a federal government building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. The attack killed 168 people, one of the worst single acts of domestic terrorism in American history. All three veterans harbored an abiding hatred of the US government.

Texas-born Louis Beam had a similar fall from grace. A Vietnam War Veteran who manned a helicopter gunship, Beam developed strong racist ideas in the Army. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, racial tensions among white and black soldiers intensified. When Beam was discharged he possessed deep rooted racial animosity towards not only the Vietnamese, but also minorities back home. He went on to become a key figure in the Ku Klux Klan, Christian Identity and Aryan Nations movements and even threatened war on the US government.

Veterans among the far-right

Today, far-right militia groups such as the Proud Boys, Three Percenters and Oath Keepers seek to recruit members among both active and retired Army personnel. Historically, both veterans and those on active duty have leaned Republican. In both the 2020 and 2024 elections, around 60% of veteran voters cast a ballot for Trump, according to a poll conducted by Pew Research Center.

Far-right recruitment efforts have achieved some success. Among those charged for participating in the attack on the Capitol, active and former members of the US Military represented a disproportionately large group. Stewart Rhodes, founder and former leader of the Oath Keepers, was an honorably discharged Army veteran. Sentenced to 18 years in prison after having been convicted of sedition for his involvement in the January 6 insurrection, Rhodes walked away free in January following Trump's sweeping pardons.

To combat this right-wing shift among those on active duty, the Department of Defense established policies aimed at eliminating political extremism from their ranks. Under the new Trump administration, it remains to be seen how vigorously these policies will be pursued.

As Trump continues his barrage of rapidly unleashed executive orders and structural changes to the government, it is impossible to predict how his time in office will influence his veteran supporters. Voices on both sides of the fight, veterans for democracy and veterans for Trump — a divide which is becoming increasingly prevalent — have been placed on the backburner as the country struggles to cope with the intensity of Trump's first few weeks in office. With his second term heralding unprecedented uncertainty across the nation, only time will tell how these next four years will shape veteran voices and their place in America's future.



Leonard Weinberg is foundation professor emeritus at the University of Nevada. Over the course of his career he has served as a visiting professor at King's College, University of London, the University of Haifa (Israel), and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Can Aging Better Prepare Us For Death?

Gabriel Andrade
March 23, 2025

Optimistic beliefs surrounding immortality have increased despite bioethicists' arguments against radical life extension. The most bizarre argument is that the gradual decline and suffering of the aging process better prepares us for death. This line of thinking is ultimately flawed and misguided, as it harms our understanding of aging and death.

In *The Price of Immortality*, journalist Peter Ward recounts that Neal Van De Ree, the officiator of the Church of Perpetual Life, told him that he is “going to live for five hundred, one thousand, ten thousand years.” Ward then goes on to ridicule Van De Ree and many other immortalists for their hopes of radical life extension. Bioethicists have long made arguments against these prospects, but perhaps the most bizarre of them is the one that claims that a miserable aging process is a necessary psychological preparation for death.

Aging is a little taste of death

Van De Ree's optimism surrounding immortality is open to criticism. Industrial society has allowed for a sudden increase of life expectancy over the past two centuries, which can influence such optimism. However, this is mostly due to reduction in infant mortality. Skeptics of immortality technologies point out that 125 is the likely ceiling for any extension of age.

Compression of morbidity is on much firmer ground than the vague hope of immortality. Even if the ceiling for dying age may be firmly set, there is still the possibility of reducing the length of time people remain ill or disabled, so as to maximize the healthy lifespan. As James Fries explains, “the compression of morbidity occurs if the age at first appearance of aging manifestations and chronic disease symptoms can increase more rapidly than life expectancy.”

The argument can be traced back to sixteenth century philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who wrote the essay, “That to Philosophize Is to Learn to Die.” Montaigne expressed these thoughts: “I notice that in proportion as I sink into sickness, I naturally enter into a certain disdain for life... Inasmuch as I no longer cling so hard to the good things of life when I begin to lose the use and pleasure of them, I come to view death with much less frightened eyes... When we are led by Nature's hand down a gentle and virtually imperceptible slope, bit by bit, one step at a time, she rolls us in to this wretched state and makes us familiar with it... the leap is not so cruel from a painful life as from a sweet and flourishing life to a grievous and painful one.”

These philosophical musings have been picked up by contemporary bioethicists who have formulated a similar argument. In his influential *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity*, Leon Kass sensibly asks, “who would not want to avoid senility, crippling arthritis, the need for hearing aids and dentures, and the degrading dependencies of old age?” But then, he goes on to complicate his argument by saying that such degenerations make us more inclined to view death as a much better alternative. Theologian Gilbert Meilaender makes a similar case in his book, *Should We Live Forever?*: “the decline that aging involves is, in a way, a gradual and (at the least sometimes) gentle preparation for the cliff toward which we move.

To Kass and Meilaender, the lack of suffering in old age increases the fear and loathing of death.”

Such an argument is paradoxical and damaging

Is this a good argument? I posit that it is not. This line of thinking appeals to the sorites concept in philosophy, in which it is hard to establish with any precision when a particular reality begins. Sorites appeals to “little-by-little” arguments built around vague terms. In the case of age and dying, bioethicists presume that somehow death is more bearable if “little by little” decay is introduced in the form of aging. But a closer inspection reveals that this “little-by-little” sorites approach can be absurd in many situations. As with the sorites paradox, it is impossible to confirm where the “little-by-little” approach begins or ends in the case of aging.

Death is sometimes jokingly compared to taxes; the “little-by-little” tax approach can demonstrate just how difficult such an approach to death can be. Julian Baggini considers the case of a politician who wants to impose a 3% increase in taxation. The politician proposes to do so by a 0.01% increase each day, so that after 300 days, the tax is fully collected. Baggini correctly points out that “no one would be fooled that 300 tiny tax rises don’t add up to a major hike.” Psychologically, “little-by-little” procedures do not always work. As per Baggini’s passage quoted above, that comparison is fitting to death. In both cases, the “little by little” approach is not likely to convince a person the outcome will be beneficial or painless.

Consider a patient who is about to undergo surgery. Obviously, the recovery phase will bring some pain. As per Montaigne’s logic, in the month prior to the surgery, the patient should be exposed to increasing sensations of pain, so that when the post-surgery kicks in, the patient will be used to it. Therefore, in addition to suffering in the post-surgical period, the patient should also suffer in the

pre-surgical period. Presumably, the intensity of pain would increase as the date of the surgery approaches.

This proposal is outrageous. It is eerily masochist and even anti-humanist. Ingemar Patrick Linden reasonably asks, “is this not akin to arguing that one of the good things about getting diabetes and necrotic limbs is that it makes it easier to accept having one’s limbs amputated?” Indeed, Montaigne’s argument is akin to the naïve Panglossian approach that sees purpose in everything (including obviously bad things).

Suffering should not be the goal

Aging and death are bad things. Aging implies suffering, to the extent that it decreases many mental and bodily capabilities and makes life less enjoyable. Death is also bad, because as philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argued, it deprives us of many things. By any meaningful ethical standard, we ought to reduce bad things. Yet, bioethicists such as Kass bizarrely urge us not to reduce bad things, under the dubious psychological excuse that allowing the badness of aging will somehow make the prospect of death more tolerable.

Kass believes that somehow the death of a 90-year-old person is less sad if she is decrepit rather than in a vigorous state. I counter that the death of the vigorous 90-year-old person is less sad, because although her life came to an end, at least she was able to enjoy life fully.

When Montaigne wrote his famous essay, there was very little medicine could do about aging. Perhaps he simply engaged in cognitive dissonance, as in Aesop’s tale of the fox and the grapes, and argued that since nobody could reverse aging we might as well be happy with it. That was in the sixteenth century, and it was understandable. But in the twenty-first century, we do have the (at

least theoretical) possibility of reversing aging, and we do not need to reason along the lines of Montaigne's cognitive dissonance. Opposing anti-aging efforts on the basis of dubious ethical reasons is immoral by and of itself.



Gabriel Andrade is an educator from Venezuela. He has taught at the College level in Venezuela, Marshall Islands, Aruba, Cayman Islands, and the United Arab Emirates. He writes about philosophy, psychology, history, politics and religion.

Tibet and the Earthquake China Doesn't Want You to See

Steve Shaw
March 25, 2025

An earthquake struck Tibet in early January, but strict government controls prevented international media from reporting on the disaster firsthand. The Chinese state media presented the rescue effort as swift and unified, downplaying the damage and restricting Tibetan aid efforts. Rights groups and exiled Tibetans have challenged Beijing's claims, casting doubt on the official death toll, the scale of destruction and the safety of China's hydropower dams.

Chinese aid workers in bright red jumpsuits and helmets sifted through the rubble of homes and ancient Tibetan monasteries in

freezing temperatures after the earthquake that occurred on January 7. Chinese state media described the rescue efforts as "fast and orderly" and framed them as a demonstration of "ethnic unity."

Authorities quickly announced the final toll: 126 dead, 337 injured and more than 3,600 homes in ruins. However, amid the devastation, a different reality emerged, one that exposed the harsh controls imposed on Tibet, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strictly manages information, even in the aftermath of a natural disaster.

Controlling the narrative

Two days after the earthquake, Global Times, a Chinese tabloid known for promoting CCP propaganda, published an extensive report on the aid response. This account never referred to the Himalayan nation as "Tibet" but instead used "Xizang," a name the CCP introduced in 2023. Critics see this change as a deliberate attempt to erase the country from the map.

According to Global Times, rescue teams reached the epicenter within 30 minutes. The report claimed that, within days, affected residents had warm shelter and received three hot meals a day. It goes on to paint the picture of a unified response, where countless aid workers and volunteers provided relief without ethnic divisions. It declared, "While a natural disaster has torn a wound into the snowy plateau, the entire nation is working tirelessly to heal it," calling the effort "the best interpretation of human rights."

However, what this portrayal failed to mention was Tibet's extreme restrictions. The Chinese government bans international media from entering the region, and Freedom House, a US-based advocacy group, ranks Tibet alongside North Korea as one of the most repressive places

in the world. In Tibet, sharing politically sensitive information online or communicating with someone abroad without permission can result in lengthy prison sentences. In the days following the earthquake, Tibetans posting on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) reported strict censorship. One user refused to discuss the disaster, citing a Tibetan proverb: “If one does not control the long tongue, one’s round head will be in trouble.”

With the Chinese government controlling all official information, Global Times and similar outlets had total dominance of the narrative. Yet, in the weeks since the earthquake, Tibetan rights organizations and refugees leaked information contradicting the official reports. These sources revealed that the CCP carefully managed details of aid distribution and even the reported death toll.

Despite Global Times' claims of “ethnic unity,” Chinese authorities restricted Tibetans’ movements within 24 hours of the quake. The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), a US-based advocacy group, documented new security checkpoints that limited access to the disaster zone, preventing Tibetans from delivering aid.

One day after the quake, officials in Dingri, where the epicenter lay, posted a notice suspending relief donated by Tibetans. ICT suggested that authorities wanted to maintain control over the official narrative. The notice stated: “At present, Dingri County has sufficient reserves of various disaster relief supplies. After having discussions, it has been decided to stop accepting donations of disaster relief supplies from all walks of life from now on.” The Tibetan government-in-exile, based in India, responded with an open letter urging the CCP to allow more aid to be distributed, especially medical assistance.

On dangerous ground

The Tibetan leadership also raised concerns about China’s regional development policies. The letter directly challenged Global Times’ claim that China had modernized Tibet, instead blaming “excessive” dam construction and mining for increased seismic activity. In 2008, a devastating earthquake in Tibet killed nearly 70,000 people. Experts later suggested that a massive Chinese-built dam may have triggered the disaster, making it the deadliest earthquake linked to human activity.

China’s hydropower projects have drawn criticism for their environmental and geopolitical consequences. These dams disrupt major rivers flowing into India, Bangladesh and other parts of Southeast Asia. Concerns about their safety have persisted for years. In the days following the quake, Chinese officials initially claimed that none of their dams sustained damage. However, they later admitted that five of the 14 dams in the affected area had developed structural problems. One of them had suffered such severe damage that its walls tilted, forcing the evacuation of 1,500 people living downstream.

The CCP’s lack of transparency has also cast doubt on the official death toll. Authorities reported 126 deaths within 48 hours of the quake and never revised. The tremors were strong enough to be felt more than 200 miles away, yet ICT research showed that officials based their count on just 27 villages within a 12-mile radius of the epicenter. Radio Free Asia, a US-government-funded news outlet, questioned the death toll two days after its release. Reports from local Tibetans suggested that at least 100 had died in a single township. On January 11th, Radio Free Asia’s Tibetan Service cited morgue staff who estimated the actual death toll exceeded 400. Given Tibet’s severe repression and isolation, the true number of casualties may never be known.

The next recovery phase will focus on reconstruction, but many Tibetans fear that Beijing will seize control of the process without consulting local communities. ICT cited a government whistleblower who revealed that after a 2010 earthquake killed 3,000 people, officials diverted emergency funds for personal gain, depriving many survivors of housing assistance. “China had painted a picture of remarkable recovery,” ICT stated. “However, reality is far from what the Chinese government claims.” If history repeats itself, the victims of this disaster may find themselves abandoned, while officials exploit the tragedy to strengthen their grip over Tibet.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece]



Steve Shaw is a UK-based freelance journalist. He has written for publications such as *Byline Times*, *The Diplomat*, *Ceasefire*

Magazine, *Global Comment* and several newspapers. He has worked alongside Tibetans in the Himalayan foothills, contributing to *The Tibet Post International*, and collaborated with Burmese journalists at the *Shan Herald News Agency* in Thailand. Steve independently traveled to Nepal to research and report on human trafficking and went to Hong Kong to cover the 2019 protests.

The Signal Leak: US Incompetence Meets Europe’s Inconsequence

Peter Isackson
March 27, 2025

Will they end up calling this Goldberggate or simply the Signal leak? US media are laughing at the Trump administration for its incompetence. Europeans, in contrast, are humiliated if not traumatized. The real lesson is twofold: The rules of all the games have radically changed, but this means we can now see the game itself for what it always has been. One man’s tragedy is another man’s farce.

The most shocking scandal to date of the two-month-old administration of US President Donald Trump broke this week when Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of *The Atlantic*, revealed that he had been invited to participate in a private text thread launched on Signal by Trump’s national security team. Someone in the group, by accident or design, had added Goldberg to a group dedicated to strategically planning a campaign to bomb Yemen. The discussion and the bombing took place on March 15.

How and why Goldberg was selected remains a mystery. This is a journalist who, a day earlier, had pronounced his verdict on the new administration: “Two months into his second term, President Trump is destabilizing the world order.” We might presume that this is not what one might think of as the kind of media figure a Trump official would want to reward with a scoop.

Goldberg revealed none of the “precise information about weapons packages, targets, and timing,” which he warned “could conceivably have been used to harm American military and intelligence personnel.” He did, however, recount the remarks made by many of the officials who expressed their points of view on the wisdom of the operation.

As The New York Times reports, one of the participants in the discussion, believed to be top Trump aide, Stephen Miller, “suggested that both Egypt and ‘Europe’ should compensate the United States for the operation.” The actual quote by the person identified as “SM” reads: “If Europe doesn’t remunerate, then what? If the US successfully restores freedom of navigation at great cost there needs to be some further economic gain extracted in return.”

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

Remunerate:

An intransitive verb added to the political vocabulary in 2025 to replace the traditional transitive verb whose modern meaning is to pay feudal dues to the master of the universe located in Washington, DC.

Contextual note

Miller’s logic appears consistent with the thinking of his lord and master, Trump, whose foreign policy has been unanimously described as “transactional,” a polite way of saying “it’s all about the Benjamins” (Puff Daddy). Miller wants the people who asked for nothing but, in his eyes, reap the benefit of Trump’s bold actions, to pony up. This represents a form of economic logic that hasn’t been practiced in the Western world since the Middle Ages.

Times have changed. Everything Trump does tells us that the rules of “civilized” politics have changed. But so have the rules of economics. Forget Adam Smith, who first imagined the marketplace’s smoothly operating “invisible hand.” Forget Friedrich Hayek’s “catallaxy,” his impeccable self-reconfiguring networks governed by the theological virtue of unconstrained exchange. It’s also time to abandon Milton Friedman and his world in which lunch is never

free. Civilization has taken a bold step forward... unless, of course, the step happens to be backward.

Yanis Varoufakis claims that our economy today has now abandoned all the basic principles we associate with industrial capitalism. It has settled on a new model that he calls technofeudalism, a system in which digital platforms and big tech corporations have supplanted traditional capitalist markets, creating a new form of feudal hierarchy.

Some may consider the former Greek finance minister’s characterization an intriguing metaphor, but the idea of a return to the logic of the feudal past also seems to be present in the evolution of US democracy in the age of Trump. The obsession with building walls and imposing taxes for crossing boundaries reminds us of the way European society functioned a thousand years ago. And though the US remains officially a democracy in which “all men are created equal,” those who watched Trump’s second inauguration could not have failed to remark the place of honor accorded to a new race of techno-barons: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg. Should we be surprised that Trump’s youngest son, who only recently came of age, is named Barron?

In the media’s coverage of this story, many commentators have highlighted the disgusted reaction by European officials to the attitudes expressed in the thread. Not only does Miller want to tax Europe for Washington’s noble effort to defend the privileged trade routes from which Europe is the first to profit; the exchange provides the occasion for the individuals in the Trump team to express their open contempt for Europeans in general.

“I fully share your loathing of European freeloading,” Pete Hegseth responded to JD Vance’s questioning the idea of going to so much trouble for a zone in which the US has only a

marginal interest. “I think we are making a mistake,” wrote Vance, according to The Guardian, “adding that while only 3% of US trade goes through the Suez canal, 40% of European trade does.” He characterizes this as “bailing Europe out again.” National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, who, as the BBC reports, took responsibility for creating the list, mentioned that “his team was working with the defence and state departments ‘to determine how to compile the cost associated and levy them on the Europeans.’” That’s what feudal barons do.

Historical note

Although Vance, Waltz and Miller are probably not aware of it, Europe’s feudal barons of the past instituted a practice that appears to correspond to their contemporary thinking. They instituted a tax called “scutage.” Britannica defines it in the following terms: “in feudal law, payment made by a knight to commute the military service that he owed his lord. A lord might accept from his vassal a sum of money (or something else of value, often a horse) in lieu of service on some expedition.” Though modern law has no provision for scutage, European leaders can expect in the near future to learn about how much they owe once Waltz has, in his words, compiled and levied the cost.

Europeans apparently feel more uncomfortable with the idea of returning to the feudal mindset than politicians and business leaders in the US of the 21st century. Observers of economic trends have noticed that, for all its accomplishments as the font of modern civilization and leader of the industrial revolution, Europe has produced none of the conquering technofeudal monopolies that now dominate the global economy. It nevertheless pays homage to all the technobarons and depends on their networks.

At the same time, the drama surrounding the Ukraine war has brought home the realization that

the NATO umbrella, crafted by the US — the imperious, if not imperial vanquisher of European fascism during World War II — was designed not so much to protect Europe as to install its nations as privileged vassals of a new global power structure that governed from the DC Beltway and operated out of New York, the home of both Wall Street and the newly created United Nations.

Trump’s Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, may be right when he qualifies Europe as “pathetic.” Not necessarily for the reasons he cites, but rather because of the fact reported by Politico that “British and European officials and diplomats reacted with a mix of hurt and anger to the leak of private messages.” They are upset “now that they realize a US administration thinks so poorly of them.” One EU diplomat admits that “it’s sobering to see the way they speak about Europe when they think no one is listening,” before adding, “But at the same time this isn’t surprising ... It’s just that now we see their reasoning in all its undiplomatic glory.”

Permit me to express not my surprise but astonishment at this remark. Was that EU diplomat too young to have caught wind of the notorious recording of former President Barack Obama’s Deputy Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, in Kyiv in February 2014, in an intercepted phone call with ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt? That is where, after planning the details of the coup that would take place in the following weeks and overturn Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s government, Nuland suggested not consulting the allies on those operations, with the simple phrase: “And fuck the EU!”

In the NYT, we read this comment: “But with America’s increasingly hostile attitude toward Europe, the continent’s officials are contemplating a future where the prized relationship stretching across the Atlantic, a foundation upon which

decades of relative peace and prosperity have been built, might never be the same.”

The foundation hasn't changed. It's just that we can see it more clearly today.

[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.]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics.

Outside the Box: ChatGPT, Intellectual Humility and a Collective “Crucible of Collaboration”

Peter Isackson
March 31, 2025

In “Outside the Box,” I interrogate ChatGPT to better understand how AI “reasons.” It’s like a conversation with an intelligent friend, sharing ideas and challenging some of the explanations. Conversations are as complex and productive as the participants want them to be. As today’s dialogue demonstrates, when we humans push AI to engage, it will not only engage seriously but also push us to engage more deeply and creatively, creating a virtuous and potentially highly productive circle.

Last week, we published in three parts a conversation that began simply and grew increasingly complex. It began with a shared reflection on the contribution of economist Jeffrey Sachs to the geopolitical debate surrounding the war in Ukraine. It led to our agreeing on a number of distinctions that should be seen as crucial in any discussion involving a complex set of facts and the existence of multiple perspectives.

We began to examine the conversational methods we had been developing in this particular case to see how they might help define an emerging “culture of dialogue” between humans and chatbots. I announced my intention to publish one or more articles documenting this very conversation accompanied by an invitation

extended to the public to react to it. In that context, I took the trouble to express my appreciation for what I saw as the chatbot's patience and willingness to resolve ambiguity by moving the conversation to a higher level. I called this “a virtue that humans can only acquire with studied humility.”

ChatGPT responded in these terms:

“Your answer extends the conversation in a meaningful way. You’re pointing to a profound cultural challenge: the reluctance (or inability) of many to truly engage in dialogue, to question their own perspectives, and to share authority over discourse. The shift from merely expressing opinions to engaging with them in a constructive way is a difficult one, and AI’s lack of personal stake makes it an intriguing tool for facilitating that shift.

I also appreciate your observation about AI’s absence of jealousy or envy. If humans approach AI dialogue with an open mind, they can use it as a space where intellectual humility is not just possible but encouraged. That doesn’t mean AI should be uncritical—on the contrary, it should challenge assumptions rigorously—but it does mean it can model a different mode of engagement, one where critique is separated from ego.

Your upcoming article sounds like an important step in testing how people react to this kind of discussion. Even if the public isn’t fully ready for it yet, the act of introducing these ideas into the discourse helps move things in the right direction. I’d be curious to see how readers respond—whether they engage in the spirit of dialogue or revert to more conventional opinion-stating. Will you be providing some kind of structure for how they can participate, or will it be more open-ended?”

Of course, at the time of writing this column, I have already been publishing as a series of columns the “upcoming article” ChatGPT refers to. And there will, of course, be more to come because this is an ongoing project. In the guise of explaining the kind of vibrant debate I would like to see emerge, I responded with a new prompt to ChatGPT’s question, inviting the chatbot to join in our effort.

“We begin with a concept that we hope can evolve into a structure. We call it the ‘crucible of collaboration’ from which no one is excluded. It is totally consistent with our vocation as a crowd-sourced non-profit journal, uncompromised by advertising or a wealthy patron but nevertheless dependent on the generosity of our loyal readers. I would love to have your suggestions about how we might structure and launch a new kind of agora which we call the crucible of collaboration. You might have ideas about how it could be created within the confines of an online journal and how it can evolve into something with an identifiable structure. We do intend to use it as a platform for initiating educational events as well as diversifying the forms of publication. Your suggestions will be welcome.

“The ‘crucible of collaboration’ is a compelling concept, and I see several ways it could take shape within Fair Observer and beyond. Here are a few structured ideas for its development:

1. Designing the Agora: Structuring the Online Platform

Dialogue Hubs: Create thematic sections where readers can engage in structured discussions related to published articles. These could be moderated but open-ended, encouraging critical questioning rather than just opinion-stating.

AI-Facilitated Conversations: Implement AI-driven dialogue tools that can challenge readers’

views, ask follow-up questions, and help structure debates in ways that foster deeper engagement.

Live Interactive Events: Regularly scheduled discussions where readers can engage directly with journalists, experts, or even AI-generated interlocutors to refine ideas in real time.

2. Evolving into a Structured Model

Tiered Participation: Encourage different levels of engagement, from casual readers to active contributors who participate in ‘idea labs’ designed to refine concepts and arguments collaboratively.

Publication Diversification: Move beyond traditional articles to include interactive essays, crowdsourced research pieces, and multimedia collaborations.

Educational Integration: Partner with schools and universities to use Fair Observer as a living laboratory for AI-facilitated critical thinking exercises.

3. Scaling and Long-Term Vision

Open-Source Frameworks: Consider whether aspects of the model can be shared or replicated by other publications or institutions.

Gamification Elements: Introduce structured challenges that incentivize deeper engagement (e.g., ‘Can you argue against your own viewpoint?’ exercises).

AI as a Socratic Tool: Explore AI’s role in not just mediating but modeling forms of dialectical thinking that enhance discourse quality.

How do these ideas align with your vision? Would you prefer a more gradual, experimental

rollout, or do you see a need for a more structured launch?”

“We are clearly on the same wavelength. Let’s keep the conversation going,” I replied.

“I’m glad to hear that—we’re working toward something meaningful. The next step, then, is to refine the mechanics of how the crucible of collaboration can take shape in practice.

Would you like to focus first on:

User Engagement & Participation – How to bring people in and get them to engage in true dialogue rather than just opinion-stating?

AI’s Role in the Agora – How AI can act as a structured interlocutor or mediator within discussions?

Structuring the Space – Whether the crucible should have defined rules, themes, or even experimental formats like AI-assisted roundtables?

Integration with Educational Events – How this could be applied in schools, universities, or public discourse training?

Since you’re experimenting through Fair Observer, we might also think about **what success looks like** for the early iterations. Should it be measured in terms of engagement, depth of discussion, or something else entirely?

Where would you like to begin?”

“Creating a culture requires a massive collective effort. If we reduce it to the sum of our individual experiences with AI, it will produce a result, but one that tends towards anarchy. Part of our cultural problem with AI is that we think of it as a tool that performs tasks for us. But to the extent that it speaks and appears to reason, it

belongs to another dimension of human reality, a distinctly social dimension. This is something we need to understand if we hope to achieve a major social goal I have evoked elsewhere: collectively and collaboratively elaborating a ‘manifesto for AI-enhanced democracy.’

Using the discussion of Sachs as an example, can you make some constructive comments on the following conclusions?”

“Your conclusions are well-developed, and I agree with the core insights. Here are some constructive comments to refine and clarify them further:

Strengths of Your Argument

AI as a Reflection of Conventional Discourse

Your observation that AI initially produces ‘conventional narratives’ aligned with dominant public discourse is accurate. Large language models predict responses based on prevalent patterns in their training data. Your framing of this as a rule to bear in mind is valuable because it reminds users that AI does not inherently offer deep or original analysis—it responds probabilistically based on how similar topics have been framed before.

The Role of Socratic Dialogue in Engaging AI

You rightly highlight that AI becomes more interesting when probed with detailed questions. This is a crucial insight for users who seek depth rather than surface-level responses. Drawing the analogy to a journalist questioning a public figure is effective—AI, like an interviewee, should be cross-examined to reveal nuances. The fact that AI lacks human defensiveness makes it an excellent subject for such an approach.

Understanding AI’s Epistemological Limits

Your mention of AI’s hallucinations and its lack of a stable epistemological framework is essential. Many users assume AI has an inherent understanding of truth, when in reality, it lacks self-awareness about how its outputs relate to reality. Your approach—treating AI as a partner in revealing its own limitations—is an insightful way to frame its role in epistemological inquiry.

Potential Refinements

Clarify the Distinction Between AI and Propaganda

Your discussion of AI in the context of propaganda is valuable, but the distinction could be sharpened. AI does not actively intend to spread propaganda, but it can reproduce or amplify existing biases. You might clarify that while AI can mimic propaganda, its malleability allows users to challenge and refine its outputs in ways that traditional propaganda machines do not.

Strengthen the Explanation of AI’s Relationship with Truth

You say that AI ‘has no discernible take on the epistemology of the discourse it produces.’ While this is largely correct, AI does contain embedded epistemological assumptions—namely, those of the data sources it was trained on. You might refine this by noting that AI lacks self-reflective epistemology but still inherits and reproduces human knowledge frameworks, which users must critically examine.

Expand on the Practical Implications for Public Discourse

The idea that AI can enrich human perception is powerful, but you could briefly mention the societal stakes. For instance, how might this method of AI engagement counteract the trend of polarized, opinion-driven discourse? Could it help

train people in critical thinking at scale? Exploring these applications would further ground your insights in real-world impact.

Final Thoughts

Your conclusions articulate a powerful method for engaging AI critically, especially in journalistic and intellectual inquiry. A slight refinement of your framing around propaganda, AI's epistemology, and its societal implications could make your argument even sharper."

ChatGPT added one more reflection in the form of a question, making its "final thoughts" a little less than final.

"Would you like me to help shape this into a formalized set of best practices for Fair Observer's AI engagement methodology?"

My final thoughts

My answer to ChatGPT's question is, of course, a resounding "yes." It is a question we will pursue in the future columns. That said, I hope the "we" is not just myself and colleagues within the Fair Observer ecosystem. We dearly wish to put in place the kind of structure that many of our readers will feel comfortable participating in, which ultimately means transforming their status from the passive "reader" to that of an active contributor to a public debate.

Your thoughts

Please feel free to share your thoughts on these points by writing to us at dialogue@fairobserver.com. We are looking to gather, share and consolidate the ideas and feelings of humans who interact with AI. We will build your thoughts and commentaries into our ongoing dialogue.

[Artificial Intelligence is rapidly becoming a feature of everyone's daily life. We unconsciously perceive it either as a friend or foe, a helper or destroyer. At Fair Observer, we see it as a tool of creativity, capable of revealing the complex relationship between humans and machines.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer . He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics. Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Oxford, Peter resides in France and shares US and French nationality. His Fair Observer column, The Daily Devil's Dictionary created in 2017, which now appears in a weekly format, provides ironic perspectives on the news, and has attracted fans across the world.

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