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The Party That Failed

An Insider Breaks With Beijing

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When Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, I was full of hope for China. As a professor at the prestigious school that educates top leaders in the Chinese Communist Party, I knew enough about history to conclude that it was past time for China to open up its political system. After a decade of stagnation, the CCP needed reform more than ever, and Xi, who had hinted at his proclivity for change, seemed like the man to lead it.

By then, I was midway through a decades-long process of grappling with China's official ideology, even as I was responsible for indoctrinating officials in it. Once a fervent Marxist, I had parted ways with Marxism and increasingly looked to Western thought for answers to China's problems. Once a proud defender of official policy, I had begun to make the case for liberalization. Once a loyal member of the CCP, I was secretly harboring doubts about the sincerity of its beliefs and its concern for the Chinese people.

So I should not have been surprised when it turned out that Xi was no reformer. Over the course of his tenure, the regime has degenerated further into a political oligarchy bent on holding on to power through brutality and ruthlessness. It has grown even more repressive and dictatorial. A personality cult now surrounds Xi,

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who has tightened the party's grip on ideology and eliminated what little space there was for political speech and civil society. People who haven't lived in mainland China for the past eight years can hardly understand how brutal the regime has become, how many quiet tragedies it has authored. After speaking out against the system, I learned it was no longer safe for me to live in China.

THE EDUCATION OF A COMMUNIST

I was born into a Communist military family. In 1928, at the beginning of the Chinese Civil War, my maternal grandfather joined a peasant uprising led by Mao Zedong. When the Communists and the Nationalists put hostilities on hold during World War II, my parents and much of my mother's family fought against the Japanese invaders in armies led by the CCP.

After the Communists' victory, in 1949, life was good for a revolutionary family such as ours. My father commanded a People's Liberation Army unit near Nanjing, and my mother ran an office in that city's government. My parents forbade my two sisters and me from taking advantage of the privileges of their offices, lest we become "spoiled bourgeois ladies." We could not ride in our father's official car, and his security guards never ran family errands. Still, I benefited from my parents' status and never suffered the privations that so many Chinese did in the Mao years. I knew nothing of the tens of millions of people who starved to death during the Great Leap Forward.

All I could see was socialism's bright future. My family's bookshelves were stocked with Marxist titles such as *The Selected Works of Stalin* and *Required Reading for Cadres*. As a teenager, I turned to these books for extracurricular reading. Whenever I opened them, I was filled with reverence. Even though I could not grasp the complexity of their arguments, my mission was clear: I must love the motherland, inherit my parents' revolutionary legacy, and build a communist society free of exploitation. I was a true believer.

I gained a more sophisticated understanding of communist thought after joining the People's Liberation Army in 1969, at age 17. With the Cultural Revolution in full swing, Mao required everyone to read six works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, including *The Communist Manifesto*. One utopian passage from that book left a lasting impression on me: "In place of the old bourgeois society,

with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Although I didn't really understand the concept of freedom at that point, those words stuck in my head.

The People's Liberation Army assigned me to a military medical school. My job was to manage its library, which happened to carry Chinese translations of "reactionary" works, mostly Western literature and political philosophy. Distinguished by their gray covers, these books were restricted to regime insiders for the purpose of familiarizing themselves with China's ideological opponents, but in secret, I read them, too. I was most impressed by *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by the American journalist William Shirer, and a collection of Soviet fiction. There was a world of ideas outside of the Marxist classics, I realized. But I still believed that Marxism was the only truth.

I left the military in 1978 and got a job in the party-run trade union of a state-owned fertilizer factory on the outskirts of the city of Suzhou. By then, Mao was dead and the Cultural Revolution was over. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, was ushering in a period of reform and opening, and as part of this effort, he was recruiting a new generation of reform-minded cadres who could run the party in the future. Each local party organization had to choose a few members to serve in this group, and the Suzhou party organization picked me. I was sent to a two-year program at the Suzhou Municipal Party School, where my fellow students and I studied Marxist theory and the history of the CCP. We also received some training in the Chinese classics, a subject we had missed on account of the disruption of education during the Cultural Revolution.

I plowed through *Das Kapital* twice and learned the ins and outs of Marxist theory. What appealed to me most were Marx's ideas about labor and value—namely, that capitalists accrue wealth by taking advantage of workers. I was also impressed by Marx's philosophical approach, dialectical materialism, which allowed him to see capitalism's political, legal, cultural, and moral systems as built on a foundation of economic exploitation.

When I graduated, in 1986, I was invited to stay on as a faculty member at the school, which was short-staffed at the time. I accepted, which disappointed some of the city's leaders, who thought I had a promising future as a party apparatchik. Instead, my new job launched my career as an academic in the CCP's system of ideological indoctrination.

THE STUDENT BECOMES THE MASTER

At the top of that system sits the Central Party School in Beijing. Since 1933, it has trained generations of top-ranking CCP cadres, who run the Chinese bureaucracy at the municipal level and above. The school has close ties to the party elite and is always headed by a member of the Politburo. (Its president from 2007 to 2012 was none other than Xi.)

In June 1989, the government cracked down on pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds. Privately, I was appalled that the People's Liberation Army had fired on college students, which ran contrary to the indoctrination I had received since my childhood that the army protected the people; only Japanese "devils" and Nationalist reactionaries killed them. Alarmed by the protests, plus the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the CCP's top leadership decided it had to counteract ideological laxity. It ordered local party schools to send some of their teachers to the Central Party School to brush up on the party's thinking. My school in Suzhou chose me. My brief stay at the Central Party School made me want to study there for much longer. After spending a year preparing for the entrance examinations, I was admitted to the master's program in the school's theory department. So devoted was I to the CCP's line that behind my back, my classmates called me "Old Mrs. Marx." In 1998, I received my Ph.D. and joined the school's faculty.

Some of my students were regular graduate students, who were taught a conventional curriculum in Marxist political theory and CCP history. But others were mid- and high-level party officials, including leading provincial and municipal administrators and cabinet-level ministers. Some of my students were members of the CCP's Central Committee, the body of a few hundred delegates that sits atop the party hierarchy and ratifies major decisions.

Teaching at the Central Party School was not easy. Video cameras in the classrooms recorded our lectures, which were then reviewed by our supervisors. We had to make the subject come alive for the high-level and experienced students in the class, without interpreting the doctrine too flexibly or drawing attention to its weak spots. Often, we had to come up with smart answers to tough questions asked by the officials in our classes.

Most of their questions revolved around puzzling contradictions within the official ideology, which had been crafted to justify the real-world policies implemented by the CCP. Amendments added in 2004

to China's constitution said that the government protects human rights and private property. But what about Marx's view that a communist system should abolish private property? Deng wanted to "let a part of the population get rich first" to motivate people and stimulate productivity. How did that square with Marx's promise that communism would provide to each according to his needs?

I remained loyal to the CCP, yet I was constantly questioning my own beliefs. In the 1980s, Chinese academic circles had engaged in a lively discussion of "Marxist humanism," a strain of Marxist thinking that emphasized the full development of the human personality. A few academics continued that discussion into the 1990s, even as the scope of acceptable discourse narrowed. I studied Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which said that the purpose of socialism was to liberate the individual. I identified with the Marxist philosophers who stressed freedom—above all, Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse.

Already in my master's thesis, I had criticized the idea that people should always sacrifice their individual interests in order to serve the party. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I had challenged the ancient Chinese slogan "rich country, strong army" by contending that China would be strong only if the party allowed its citizens to prosper. Now, I took this argument a step further. In papers and talks, I suggested that state enterprises were still too dominant in the Chinese economy and that further reform was needed to allow private companies to compete. Corruption, I stressed, should be seen not as a moral failing of individual cadres but as a systemic problem resulting from the government's grip on the economy.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

My thinking happened to align in part with that of Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin. Determined to develop China's economy, Jiang sought to stimulate private enterprise and bring China into the World Trade Organization. But these policies contradicted the CCP's long-held theories prizing the planned economy and national self-sufficiency. Since the ideology of neither Marx nor Mao nor Deng could resolve these contradictions, Jiang felt compelled to come up with something new. He called it "the Three Represents."

I first heard of this new theory when everyone else did. On the evening of February 25, 2000, I watched as China Central Television (CCTV) broadcast a report on the Three Represents. The party, Jiang

said, had to represent three aspects of China: "the development requirements of advanced productive forces," cultural progress, and the interests of the majority. As a professor at the Central Party School, I immediately understood that this theory presaged a significant shift in CCP ideology. In particular, the first of the Three Represents implied that Jiang was abandoning the core Marxist belief that capitalists were an exploitative social group. Instead, Jiang was opening the party to their ranks—a decision I welcomed.

The Central Propaganda Department, the body in charge of the CCP's ideological work, was responsible for promoting Jiang's new theory, but they had a problem: the Three Represents had come under attack from the extreme left, which thought Jiang was going too far in wooing entrepreneurs. Hoping to skirt this dispute, the Propaganda Department chose to water down the theory. The *People's Daily* published a full-page article demonstrating the correctness of the Three Represents with cross-references to texts by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Deng.

I found this unconvincing. What was the purpose of the Three Represents if it merely restated existing ideology? I was disgusted by the superficial methods of the party's publicity apparatus. I grew determined to reveal the true meaning of the Three Represents, a theory that in fact marked a bold departure for China. This, it turned out, would bring me into conflict with the entrenched bureaucracy of the CCP.

THE UNLEARNED ELITES

My opportunity to promote a proper understanding of the Three Represents arrived in early 2001, when CCTV, hearing from a colleague that I was especially interested in Jiang's new theory, invited me to write a television program on it. I spent six months researching and writing the documentary and discussing it at length with producers at the network. My script emphasized the need for innovative new policies to meet the challenges of a new era. I stressed the same things Jiang did: that the government was now going to reduce its intervention in the economy and that the role of the party was no longer to make violent revolution against the exploitative capitalists—instead, it was to encourage the creation of wealth and balance the interests of different groups in society.

On the afternoon of June 16, four CCTV senior vice presidents gathered in a studio in the network's headquarters to review the three 30-minute episodes. As they watched it, their faces darkened. "Let's stop here," one of them said when the first episode ended.

"Professor Cai, do you know why you were invited to produce a program on the Three Represents?" he asked.

"The party has put forward a new ideological theory," I replied, "and we need to publicize it."

The official was unmoved. "Your research and innovation can be presented at the Central Party School, but only the safest things can be shown on TV," he said. At that point, nobody was quite sure what the Three Represents would ultimately be interpreted to mean, and he worried that my script might be out of step with the Propaganda Department's views. "If there's any discrepancy, the impact would be too great."

Another station administrator chimed in. "This year is the 80th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party!" he exclaimed. Such an anniversary demanded not a discussion of challenges facing the party but a heroic celebration of its triumphs. At that moment, I understood. The CCTV people weren't interested in the real implications of ideology. They just wanted to make the party look good and flatter their superiors.

Over the next ten days, we scrambled to remake the documentary. We edited out potentially offensive words and phrases, working day and night as my script went through several political reviews by teams from across the party bureaucracy. Finally, a dozen officials arrived for one last review, during which I learned even more about the party's hypocrisy. At one point, a high-level member of the vetting committee spoke up. In the program's second episode, I had quoted two of Deng's famous sayings, which are often strung together: "Poverty is not socialism; development is the hard truth."

"Poverty isn't socialism?" the official asked dubiously. "So what is socialism?" His critique went on, growing louder. "And development is the hard truth? How are those two sentences related? Tell me!"

I was dumbfounded. These were Deng's exact words, and this senior official—the head of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, the powerful agency overseeing all broadcast media—didn't know it? I thought immediately of Mao's criticism of bureaucrats during the Cultural Revolution: "They don't read books, and they don't read newspapers."

AN EMPTY IDEOLOGY

Over the course of 2001, as part of its efforts to promote Jiang's signature theory, the Propaganda Department began work on a study outline for the Three Represents, a summary that would be

issued as a Central Committee document for the entire party to read and implement. Perhaps because I had worked on the CCTV program and had given a speech on the Three Represents at an academic conference, I was asked to help.

Along with another scholar and 18 propaganda officials, I was sent to the Propaganda Department's training center near the foothills west of Beijing. The department had settled on a general framework for the outline, and now it was asking us to fill the framework with content. My task was to write the section on building the party.

Drafting documents for the Central Committee is a highly confidential process. My colleagues and I were forbidden from leaving the premises or receiving guests. When the Propaganda Department convened a meeting, those who weren't invited weren't allowed to ask about it. We writers could eat and take walks together, but we were prohibited from discussing our work. I was the only woman in the group. At dinner, the men gossiped and cracked jokes. I found the off-color, alcohol-fueled conversation vulgar and would always slink out after a few bites of food. Finally, another participant took me aside. Talk of official business would only get us in trouble, he explained; it was safer and more enjoyable to confine the conversation to sex.

Helping with the study outline was the most important writing assignment of my life, but it was also the most ridiculous. My job was to read through a stack of documents cataloging Jiang's thoughts, including confidential speeches and articles intended for the party's internal consumption. I would then extract relevant quotations and place them under various topic subheadings, annotating the source. I couldn't add or subtract text, but I could change a period to a comma and connect one quote to another. I was amazed that the formal explanation of one of the party's most important ideological campaigns in the post-Mao era would be little more than a cut-and-paste job.

Because the task was so easy, I spent a lot of time waiting in boredom for my work to be vetted. One day, I sounded out another participant, a professor from Renmin University of China. "Aren't we just creating another version of *Quotations From Chairman Mao*?" I asked, referring to the Little Red Book, a pocket volume of out-of-context aphorisms that circulated during the Cultural Revolution. He looked around and smiled wryly. "Don't worry about it," he told me. "We're in a lovely scenic location with good food and pleasant walks. Where

else could we convalesce so comfortably? Just go fetch a book to read. All that matters is that you're here when they call you for a meeting."

In June 2003, a high-profile press conference was held at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, to unveil the study outline, and all of us who had helped write it were told to attend. Liu Yunshan, a Politburo member and the head of the Propaganda Department, presented the report. As he and other officials took to the stage, I felt a sinking feeling. My understanding of the Three Represents as an important pivot in the ruling party's ideology had been completely squeezed out of the document and replaced with pablum. Remembering the lewd chatter around the dinner table every night, I felt for the first time that the system I had long considered sacred was in fact unbearably absurd.

IDEAS FOR SALE

My experience with the study outline taught me that the ideas the party sanctimoniously promoted were in fact self-serving tools used to deceive the Chinese people. I soon learned that they were also a way of making money. An official I came to know at the General Administration of Press and Publication, which controls the right to publish books and magazines, told me of a disturbing episode involving a turf war over publishing revenues within the CCP.

For many years, Red Flag Press had been one of three organizations responsible for publishing the party's educational books. In 2005, the press was in the process of publishing a routine book of readings when an official from the Central Organization Department, the powerful agency in charge of the CCP's personnel decisions, stepped in to insist that only his department had the authority to publish such a book. He tried to get the General Administration of Press and Publication to prevent the book from being published. But Red Flag Press's main job was precisely to publish works on ideology. To get out of this fix, the agency vetted the book in the hopes of finding problems that would justify banning it—but awkwardly, it came up empty.

Why was the Organization Department so territorial about publishing? It all came down to money. Many departments have slush funds, which are used for the lavish enjoyment of senior officials and divided among personnel as "welfare subsidies." The easiest way to replenish those funds is to publish books. At that time, the CCP had more than 3.6 million grassroots organizations, each of which was expected to

buy a copy of a new publication. If the book was priced at ten yuan per copy, that meant a minimum of 36 million yuan in sales revenue—equivalent to more than $5 million today. Since that money was coming from the budgets of the party branches, the scheme was essentially an exercise in forcing one public entity to transfer money to another. No wonder the Organization Department promoted a new political education topic every year. And no wonder almost every institution within the CCP had a publishing arm. With nearly every unit inventing new ways to make money, venality has permeated the regime.

Despite my growing disillusionment, I didn't completely reject the party. Along with many other scholars inside it, I still hoped that the CCP could embrace reform and move in the direction of some form of democracy. In the later years of the Jiang era, the party started tolerating a relatively relaxed discussion of sensitive issues within the party, as long as the discussions never went public. At the Central Party School, my fellow professors and I felt free to raise deep-seated problems with China's political system among ourselves. We talked about reducing the role of party officials in deciding administrative issues that were best handled by government officials. We discussed the idea of judicial independence, which had been written into the constitution but never really practiced.

To our delight, the party was in fact experimenting with democracy, both within its own operations and in society at the grassroots level. I saw all of this as hopeful signs of progress. But subsequent events would only cement my disillusionment.

ANOTHER WAY

A key turning point came in 2008, when I took a brief but fateful trip to Spain. Visiting the country as part of an academic exchange, I learned how Spain had transitioned from autocracy to democracy after the death of its dictator, Francisco Franco, in 1975. I could not help but compare Spain's experience to China's. Mao died just ten months after Franco, and both countries underwent tremendous changes in the ensuing three decades. But whereas Spain quickly and peacefully made the leap to democracy and achieved social stability and economic prosperity, China accomplished only a partial transition, moving from a planned economy to a mixed economy without liberalizing its politics. What could Spain teach China?

I came to the pessimistic conclusion that the CCP was unlikely to reform politically. For one thing, Spain's transition was initiated by re-

formist forces within the post-Franco regime, such as King Juan Carlos I, who placed national interests above their personal interests. The CCP, having come to power in 1949 through violence, was deeply wedded to the idea that it had earned a permanent monopoly on political power. The party's record, particularly its crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests, demonstrated that it would not give up that monopoly peacefully. And none of the post-Deng leaders had the courage to push for political reform; they simply wanted to pass the buck to future leaders.

I also learned that after Franco's death, Spain quickly created a favorable environment for reform, consolidating judicial independence and expanding freedom of the press. It even incorporated opposition forces into the transition process. The CCP, by contrast, has treated demands for social and economic justice as threats to its power, suppressing civil society and restricting people's liberties. The regime and the people have been locked in confrontation for decades, making reconciliation unthinkable.

My newly acquired understanding of the democratic transition in Spain, along with what I already knew about those in the former Soviet bloc, led me to fundamentally reject the Marxist ideology in which I once had unshakable faith. I came to realize that the theories Marx advanced in the nineteenth century were limited by his own intellect and the historical circumstances of his time. Moreover, I saw that the highly centralized, oppressive version of Marxism promoted by the CCP owed more to Stalin than to Marx himself. I increasingly recognized it as an ideology formed to serve a self-interested dictatorship. Marxism, I began to hint in publications and lectures, should not be worshiped as an absolute truth, and China had to start the journey to democracy. In 2010, when some liberal scholars published an edited volume called *Toward Constitutionalism*, I contributed an article that discussed the Spanish experience.

My vision—shared with other liberal scholars—was that China would start by implementing democracy within the party, which, over the long run, would lead to a constitutional democracy. China would have a parliament, even a real opposition party. In my heart, I worried that the CCP might violently resist such a transition, but I kept that thought to myself. Instead, when speaking with colleagues and students, I argued that such a transition would be good for China and even for the party itself, which could consolidate its legitimacy by making itself more accountable to the people. Many of

the officials I taught acknowledged that the party faced problems, but they could not say so themselves. Instead, they cautiously urged me to persuade their superiors.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF XI

The problem was that at that very time, Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, was moving in the opposite direction. In 2003, while in the process of taking over the reins of power, Hu had put forward "the Scientific Outlook on Development," his substitute for Jiang's Three Represents. The concept was another attempt to justify China's mixed development model with a thin cover of Marxist-sounding ideology, and it avoided the big questions facing China. China's breakneck development was producing social conflict as farmers' land was seized for development and factories squeezed workers for more profits. The number of petitioners seeking redress from the government increased dramatically, and nationwide, demonstrations eventually exceeded 100,000 per year. To me, the discontent showed that it was becoming harder for China to develop its economy without liberalizing its politics.

Hu thought otherwise. "Don't muck up things," he said in 2008, at a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the policy of reform and opening. I understood this to mean that the economic, political, and ideological reforms the party had made so far should be maintained but not pushed forward. Hu was defending himself against accusations from both sides: from conservatives who thought that reform had gone too far and from liberals who thought it hadn't gone far enough. So China, under his watch, entered a period of political stagnation, a decline similar to what the Soviet Union experienced under Leonid Brezhnev.

Thus it was with optimism that I looked to Xi when it became clear that he was going to take power. The easy reforms had all been made 30 years ago; now it was time for the hard ones. Given the reputation of Xi's father, a former CCP leader with liberal inclinations, and the flexible style that Xi himself had displayed in previous posts, I and other advocates of reform hoped that our new leader would have the courage to enact bold changes to China's political system. But not everyone had such confidence in Xi. The skeptics I knew fell into two categories. Both proved prescient.

The first group consisted of princelings—descendants of the party's founders. Xi was a princeling, as was Bo Xilai, the dynamic party chief of Chongqing. Xi and Bo rose to senior provincial and ministe-

rial positions at almost the same time, and both were expected to join the highest body in the CCP, the Politburo Standing Committee, and were considered top contenders to lead China. But Bo fell out of the leadership competition early in 2012, when he was implicated in his wife's murder of a British businessman, and the party's senior statesmen backed the safe and steady Xi. The princelings I knew, familiar with Xi's ruthlessness, predicted that the rivalry would not end there. Indeed, after Xi took power, Bo was convicted of corruption, stripped of all his assets, and sentenced to life in prison.

The other group of skeptics consisted of establishment scholars. More than a month before the 18th Party Congress of November 2012, when Xi would be formally unveiled as the CCP's new general secretary, I was chatting with a veteran reporter from a major Chinese magazine and a leading professor at my school who had observed Xi's career for a long time. The two had just wrapped up an interview, and before leaving, the reporter tossed out a question: "I hear that Xi Jinping lived in the Central Party School compound for a period of time. Now he's about to become the party's general secretary. What do you think of him?" The professor's lip twitched, and he said with disdain that Xi suffered from "inadequate knowledge." The reporter and I were stunned at this blunt pronouncement.

In spite of these negative views, I willingly suspended disbelief and put my hopes in Xi. But shortly after Xi's ascension, I started to have my doubts. A December 2012 speech he gave suggested a reformist and progressive mentality, but other statements hinted at a throwback to the pre-reform era. Was Xi headed left or right? I had just retired from the Central Party School, but I still kept in touch with my former colleagues. Once when I was talking to some of them about Xi's plans, one of them said, "It's not a question of whether Xi is going left or right but rather that he lacks basic judgment and speaks illogically." Everyone fell silent. A chill ran down my spine. With deficiencies like these, how could we expect him to lead a struggle for political reform?

I soon concluded that we probably could not. After Xi released his comprehensive reform plan in late 2013, business and academic circles excitedly predicted that he would push ahead with major reforms. My feeling was just the opposite. The plan avoided all the key issues of political reform. China's long-standing problems of corruption, excessive debt, and unprofitable state enterprises are rooted in party officials' power to meddle in economic decisions without pub-

lic supervision. Trying to liberalize the economy while tightening political control was a contradiction. Yet Xi was launching the biggest ideological campaign since Mao's death to revive Maoist rule. His plan called for intensified societal surveillance and a clampdown on free expression. A ban on any discussion of constitutional democracy and universal values was shamelessly promoted under the banner of "governance, management, service, and law."

This trend continued with a package of legal reforms passed in 2014, which further exposed the party's intent to use the law as a tool for maintaining totalitarian rule. At this point, Xi's perverse tendencies and the CCP's political regression were clear. If I once had a vague hope for Xi and the party, my illusions were now shattered. Subsequent events would only confirm that when it came to reform, Xi was taking China from stagnation to regression. In 2015, the party rounded up hundreds of defense lawyers. The next year, it launched a Cultural Revolution–style campaign against an outspoken real estate tycoon. It was my reaction to that episode that landed me in hot water.

THE LAST STRAW

The tycoon, Ren Zhiqiang, had increasingly come into conflict with Xi, whom he criticized for censoring Chinese media. In February 2016, a CCP website labeled Ren as "anti-party." I didn't know Ren personally, but his case struck me as especially disturbing because I had long relied on the principle that within the CCP, we were allowed—even encouraged—to speak freely in order to help the party correct its own mistakes. Here was a longtime party member who had been demonized for doing just that. Having lived through the Cultural Revolution, I knew that people branded with the label "anti-party" were deprived of their rights and subjected to harsh persecution. Since a defense of Ren could never be published in censored media outlets, I wrote one up and sent it to a WeChat group, hoping my friends would share it with their contacts. My article went viral.

Although most of my article simply quoted the party's constitution and code of conduct, the Central Party School's disciplinary committee accused me of serious errors. I faced a series of intimidating interviews in which my interrogators applied psychological pressure and laid word traps in an effort to induce a false confession of wrongdoing. It was uncomfortable, but I recognized the process as a psychological contest. If I didn't show fear, I realized, they would lose half the bat-

tle. And so a stalemate ensued: I kept publishing, and the authorities kept calling me in for questioning. Soon, I concluded that security agencies were tapping my phone, reading my digital correspondence, and following me to see where I went and with whom I met. Retired professors from the Central Party School usually need permission only from the school to travel to Hong Kong or abroad, but now the school hinted that I had to clear such trips with the Ministry of State Security in the future.

In April 2016, the text of a speech I had given a few months earlier at Tsinghua University—in which I argued that if ideology violates common sense, it deteriorates into lies—was published on an influential website in Hong Kong. The timing was bad: Xi had just announced that some of the free inquiry taking place at the Central Party School had gone too far and urged greater supervision of its professors. As a result, in early May, I was called in again by the school's disciplinary committee and accused of opposing Xi. From then on, the CCP blocked me from all media in China—print, online, television. Even my name could not be published. Then, one night in July, I was summoned again to a meeting at the Central Party School, where a member of the disciplinary committee placed a foot-tall pile of documents on the table in front of me. "There's already this much material on you," he said. "Think it over." It was clear that I was being warned to keep silent and that if I so much as tweeted a word, I would be subjected to disciplinary action, including reduced retirement benefits. I was indignant at my treatment, even though I understood that others had been dealt with even more harshly.

In all my years as a member of the CCP, I had never violated a single rule, nor had I ever been called in for a reprimand. But now, I was regularly interrogated by party officials. The school's disciplinary committee repeatedly threatened the humiliating prospect of holding a large public meeting and announcing a formal punishment. At the end of each conversation, my interrogators demanded I keep it a secret. It was all part of an underworld that couldn't be exposed to the light of day.

Then came a cover-up of police brutality that triggered my final break with Xi and the party. Earlier, in May 2016, Lei Yang, an environmental scientist, was on his way to the airport to pick up his mother-in-law when, in circumstances that remain murky, he died in the custody of the Beijing police. In order to evade responsibility for the crime, the police framed Lei, alleging that he had been soliciting a prostitute. His

classmates from his university days, outraged at this attempt at defamation, banded together to help his family seek justice, starting a campaign that reverberated throughout China. To quell the fury, the CCP's top leaders ordered an investigation. The prosecution agreed to an independent autopsy, and a trial was scheduled to argue the matter.

A strange thing happened next: Lei's parents, wife, and children were put under house arrest, and the local government offered them massive compensation, about $1 million, to give up their pursuit of the truth. When Lei's family refused, the payment was increased to $3 million. Even after a $3 million house was thrown in, Lei's wife insisted on clearing her late husband's name. The government then pressured Lei's parents, who knelt before their daughter-in-law and begged her to abandon the case. In December, prosecutors announced that they would not charge anyone for Lei's death, and his family's lawyer revealed that he had been forced to stand down.

When I learned of this outcome, I sat at my desk all night, overcome with grief and anger. Lei's death was a clear-cut case of wrongdoing, and instead of punishing the police officers responsible, their superiors had tried to use the people's hard-earned tax money to settle the matter out of court. Officials were closing ranks rather than serving the people. I asked myself, If the CCP's officials are capable of such despicable actions, how can the party be trusted? Most of all, I wondered how I could remain part of this system.

After 20 years of hesitation, confusion, and misery, I made the decision to emerge from the darkness and make a complete break with the party. Xi's great leap backward soon left me with no other choice. In 2018, Xi abolished presidential term limits, raising the prospect that I would have to live indefinitely under neo-Stalinist rule. The next summer, I was able to travel to the United States on a tourist visa. While there, I received a message from a friend telling me that the Chinese authorities, accusing me of "anti-China" activities, would arrest me if I returned. I decided to prolong my visit until things calmed down. Then the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, and flights to China were canceled, so I had to wait a little longer. At the same time, I was disgusted by Xi's mishandling of the outbreak and signed a petition supporting Li Wenliang, the Wuhan ophthalmologist who had been harassed by police for warning his friends about the new disease and eventually died of it. I received urgent phone calls from the authorities at the Central Party School demanding that I come home.

But the atmosphere in China was growing darker. Ren, the dissident real estate tycoon, disappeared in March and was soon expelled from the party and sentenced to 18 years in prison. Meanwhile, my problems with the authorities were compounded by the unauthorized release of a private talk I had given online to a small circle of friends in which I had called the CCP "a political zombie" and said that Xi should step down. When I sent friends a short article I had written denouncing Xi's repressive new national security law in Hong Kong, someone leaked that, too.

I knew I was in trouble. Soon, I was expelled from the party. The school stripped me of my retirement benefits. My bank account was frozen. I asked the authorities at the Central Party School for a guarantee of my personal safety if I returned. Officials there avoided answering the question and instead made vague threats against my daughter in China and her young son. It was at this point that I accepted the truth: there was no going back.

Accomplice to Carnage

How America Enables War in Yemen

Robert Malley and Stephen Pomper

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In late March 2015, Saudi officials came to the Obama administration with a message: Saudi Arabia and a coalition of partners were on the verge of intervening in neighboring Yemen, whose leader had recently been ousted by rebels. This wasn't exactly a bolt from the blue. The Saudis had been flagging their growing concerns about the insurgency on their southern border for months, arguing that the rebels were proxies for their archrival, Iran. Still, the message had what Obama administration officials characterized as a "five minutes to midnight" quality that they had not quite anticipated: Saudi Arabia was going to act imminently, with or without the United States. But it much preferred to proceed with American help.

President Barack Obama's advisers looked on the decision facing the administration with queasiness. Both of us were serving in senior positions at the National Security Council at the time, one advising on Middle East policy and the other on human rights and multilateral affairs. Everyone in the administration knew the checkered history of U.S. interventions in the Arab world, most recently in Libya, and was well aware of the president's strong distaste for another one. From

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Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, officials knew how hard it was to defeat an insurgency—how promises of a quick victory over a determined group of rebels have a way of disappointing. In this case, there was extra reason to be skeptical. U.S. officials thought Saudi Arabia was exaggerating Iran's role, and they had no illusions that the Saudi armed forces, although well supplied with modern U.S. weapons, were a precision instrument. In short, there was plenty that could go wrong. As a former senior official would later tell one of us, "We knew we might be getting into a car with a drunk driver."

And yet the United States climbed in anyway. Thinking that it could offer sober guidance and grab the wheel when necessary, Washington shared intelligence, refueled aircraft, sold weapons, and provided diplomatic cover. Now, almost six years after the Saudi intervention, the war in Yemen is nothing short of a disaster. It has further destabilized the Middle East, empowered Iran, and sullied the United States' global reputation. Above all, it has devastated the Yemeni people, who are now experiencing the world's worst ongoing humanitarian catastrophe. Close to a quarter of a million people have died as a result of the conflict, according to the UN, roughly half from indirect causes such as malnutrition and disease. Many millions more are starving or homeless. And with power fragmented among a growing number of Yemeni actors on the ground, the conflict has become even harder to resolve.

The United States has had a major hand in Yemen from the beginning and thus must answer for its part in the tragedy. For reasons both moral and strategic, the Biden administration should make it a priority to disentangle the United States from the war in Yemen and do what it can to bring the conflict to a long-overdue conclusion. But to prevent history from repeating itself, the administration should also make it a priority to learn from the conflict's sad lessons. The story of U.S. involvement in the war is one of entangling partnerships, wishful thinking, and expediency. Seeking to avoid a rift with a close ally, an administration that was determined to steer clear of another war in the Middle East ended up becoming complicit in one of the region's most horrific ones.

OBAMA'S CHOICE

How did the United States get pulled into this wretched mess? The tale begins in 2011, with the fall of Yemen's aging, corrupt, and authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was forced by protests to hand

over power to his vice president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Hadi was supposed to serve as a bridge between the old regime and a brighter future, but it didn't work out that way. A nine-month "national dialogue conference" delivered an aspirational, if flawed, blueprint for political reform in January 2014. But by then, the economy was near collapse, and a group of rebels that had been fighting the central government for the past decade was making rapid territorial gains. These were the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), followers of the Zaydi branch of Shiite Islam who were based in the country's north, near the Saudi border. In September 2014, riding a wave of antigovernment anger, the Houthis seized control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and eventually chased Hadi to the southern port city of Aden.

Saudi Arabia feared that its neighbor would be completely taken over by Iranian surrogates. In early 2015, it rallied a coalition of nine mostly Sunni Arab states, the United Arab Emirates chief among them, and prepared to launch a military intervention to restore Hadi to power and counter what it perceived as an expanding Iranian threat to the region. The decision came on the heels of a power transition in Saudi Arabia that resulted in the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS, who would become the face of the war in Yemen.

That was the context in which the Saudis made their request for American help. U.S. officials scrambled to consolidate their views and make a recommendation to the president. Many had concerns about the coalition's possible heavy-handedness and were of mixed minds about whether MBS should be seen as a potential rising star or a worrying hothead, but in the end, the decision was not an especially close call. Obama's senior national security team unanimously recommended proceeding with some measure of assistance for the Saudi campaign, and the president concurred. The White House announced that he had authorized "the provision of logistical and intelligence support" to the coalition and that the United States would work with its new partners to create a joint planning cell in Riyadh that would "coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support."

Why the Obama administration did this had much to do with Hadi. In its view, he was the legitimate leader of Yemen and a vast improvement over his much-disliked predecessor. Hadi was also seen as a reliable counterterrorism partner, someone who gave the United States wide berth in its operations against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which many U.S. officials rated as the most dangerous of

al Qaeda's franchises. When the Houthis, who were vehemently anti-American, ran Hadi out of Sanaa, the U.S. government saw their triumph as an affront to its interests in Yemen and to international law. For reasons that seemed to it both principled and pragmatic, Washington hoped for a restoration.

That was not all. U.S. officials also sought to improve relations with the Saudis and with Washington's other Gulf partners, most notably the United Arab Emirates. For decades, the United States had viewed its partnerships in the region as key to protecting its energy and security interests, and in the spring of 2015, those ties were under strain. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies saw the Iran nuclear deal, then nearing completion, as giving Iran a leg up at their expense. But they were nursing other grievances, too—notably about U.S. policy during the Arab Spring, particularly toward Egypt, where they thought the Obama administration had been too quick to abandon President Hosni Mubarak and then too willing to normalize relations with the Muslim Brotherhood government that replaced him. The Gulf states also believed that the United States was withdrawing from the region, leaving them vulnerable to Islamist attacks.

Thus, the watchword of U.S. policy became "reassurance." This meant reinforcing to the Saudis that Washington would stand behind a decades-old security assurance to defend their country against certain external threats, as well as spreading some of that feeling of steadfast support to other regional partners. When U.S. officials were planning a summit of Gulf leaders at Camp David for May 2015, they had one major deliverable in mind: a communiqué affirming the United States' readiness to come to their countries' aid in the event of external aggression. Now, the Saudis felt threatened by an Iranian-backed militia on their southern border. Giving them a flat no would have been off message, to say the least.

Another reason U.S. officials decided to support the Saudi-led coalition in 2015 was that they thought Washington could act as a moderating influence. The support that Obama authorized came with limits, caveats, and safety features. Obama's guidance was that American help should serve the purpose of protecting Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity, making the assistance essentially defensive in nature. The administration also hoped that the joint planning cell would act as a forum where American advisers could professionalize their Saudi counterparts, learn what they were doing, and, when necessary, rein them in.

REINING IN THE SAUDIS

As soon became apparent, and has since become incontrovertible, the United States greatly underestimated the challenge it would face in curbing Saudi operations and minimizing both humanitarian damage and civilian casualties. The coalition resorted to brass-knuckle tactics early on. First, it prevented imports from entering Houthi-held areas, strangling the flow of commodities into the country's largest and most important port, Hodeidah. Then, it bombed critical infrastructure, such as container cranes and food-production facilities. Strikes hit residential neighborhoods and weddings. In several instances, U.S. officials worried that the coalition was acting intentionally, perhaps perceiving these strikes to have a tactical benefit.

The U.S. response was to try to fix the problem. American diplomats backed an import-verification regime to help persuade Saudi Arabia to ease its restrictions on goods going into the country, but the flow of goods grew only slightly, and Yemenis struggled with increasing hardship. To reduce civilian casualties from the bombing campaign, U.S. officials developed "no strike" lists for Saudi pilots, but there was a giant loophole: the lists applied only to preplanned strikes, not to ones decided on while a pilot was in the air. As for the joint planning cell in Riyadh, the personnel that the Pentagon assigned to it tended to specialize in logistics and intelligence, not in techniques for avoiding civilian harm during airstrikes. On top of that, most (if not all) of them were seated away from the operations floor where targeting decisions were made; they were either on a separate floor or in a separate building. The State Department eventually sent its own expert to work with the cell, but after a spike in civilian casualties in August 2016, it reversed its decision, worried that the adviser's presence would give an American imprimatur to irresponsible targeting practices.

Amid this blur of effort to contain a worsening humanitarian disaster, what the United States did not do was walk away. American planes continued to refuel Saudi jets on their way to bomb Yemeni targets, without necessarily knowing what those targets were. Washington provided intelligence, shipped weapons, and sent contractors to help keep the Saudi air force flying. It did all of this in part out of deference to the same interests that had led to its involvement in the conflict in the first place, and in part because it continued to believe that its position at the coalition's side allowed it to do some good—steer-

ing the coalition away from even worse decisions than it was already making and coaxing it to the negotiating table.

In its last six months, the Obama administration took a number of steps that several former officials later said they wished it had taken earlier. In August 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry pushed peacemaking efforts into high gear by moving away from the unrealistic framework that had guided earlier diplomatic pushes. (A 2015 UN Security Council resolution had insisted that the Houthis hand over their heavy weapons and allow Hadi's government to return to Sanaa to rule; Kerry offered the Houthis and their allies a role in a power-sharing arrangement in return for handing over weapons and territory.) After an October 2016 airstrike on a funeral hall in Sanaa killed 155 people, the Obama administration also rethought its approach to arms sales to the Saudis. In December, it announced that it was halting a planned sale of precision-guided munitions.

It was too little, too late. For several months before this decision, as the U.S. presidential election loomed, it had become harder for U.S. diplomats to motivate the Saudis to focus on the peace plan. When Donald Trump won, it became impossible. The Saudis suspected that the administration waiting in the wings would be both more supportive of its anti-Iranian agenda and more willing to look the other way on civilian casualties. The suspension of weapons sales, for its part, barely stung. The Saudis correctly predicted that the Trump administration would reverse it. By the time the Obama administration started to toughen its approach somewhat, it was time to pass the torch to its successor. The worst was yet to come.

A BLANK CHECK

The Trump administration saw the Middle East through very different eyes. It shared the Saudis' fixation on Iran, and Trump himself displayed a particular affinity for strongmen in the mold of MBS. Although some senior U.S. officials, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis, had little appetite for the conflict in Yemen, seeing no feasible military solution, the new administration's priorities were clear, and they did not include peacemaking. The Trump team cared much more about making Saudi Arabia an even bigger purchaser of American weapons and a partner in a notional Israeli-Palestinian peace deal and turning Yemen into a front in its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.

Under Trump, the U.S. approach to the war in Yemen zigged and zagged. At first, attention to the peace process withered, as it was left in the hands of subcabinet officials, while operational support for the military campaign grew. The United States opened the taps on sharing intelligence that enabled strikes on Houthi targets, and in June 2017, the Trump administration unlocked the delivery of arms that the Obama administration had suspended. Trump's team also sent mixed signals about whether it might approve of a renewed attack on the port of Hodeidah—this time by land rather than sea—something that the prior administration had said was categorically unacceptable. In a particularly jarring act, in September 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo formally notified Congress that the coalition was doing enough to protect civilians, a prerequisite for continuing refueling operations, mere weeks after an errant Saudi strike hit a school bus and killed 40 children.

U.S. policy took another turn after the Saudis murdered the *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi at their consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. With Congress outraged, the Trump administration pushed for renewed peace talks between the Hadi government and the Houthis. Thanks in part to personal outreach by Mattis to members of the coalition, in December 2018, negotiations took place outside Stockholm under the auspices of the UN. These talks resulted in a cease-fire around Hodeidah and created what might have been a foundation for a broader effort to reach peace. But later that month, Mattis stepped down, and U.S. attention to the peace process once again waned.

As time passed, the confluence of an escalating conflict in Yemen and intensifying U.S. pressure on Iran turned the war into an increasingly central arena in a regional power struggle. On one side were the United States and its regional partners, and on the other were Iran and its allies. How much the Houthis depend on Iranian support and to what extent their actions reflect Iranian desires have been matters of intense debate. But two things seem clear: first, that Iran saw the conflict from the start as a low-cost, high-reward opportunity to bog down and bleed its Saudi rival, and second, that as the war has persisted, ties between the rebels and Tehran have deepened, with the Houthis becoming progressively more willing to turn to Iran for succor, whether in the form of training or material assistance.

Thanks in part to this support, the Houthis upped their drone and missile attacks against Saudi territory. Iran itself seemed to jump into

the fray. In September 2019, a complex drone attack was carried out against oil facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia. Although the Houthis claimed responsibility, the sophistication of the strikes and the flight paths of the drones suggested an Iranian hand. In part, the attack was Iran's way of responding to Washington's maximum pressure campaign and discouraging Gulf countries from participating in it. The war in Yemen has given Iran both the motivation and the opportunity to flex its muscles, and it has obliged.

Over the course of 2020, Saudi Arabia recognized that the quick war it envisaged had turned into a long slog, coming at a heavy cost, both materially and reputationally. MBS has been keen to repair his seriously damaged standing in Washington, which has suffered as a result of the Khashoggi murder and the brutal campaign in Yemen. In the wake of the drone attack on its oil facilities, Saudi Arabia revitalized talks with the Houthis, and Riyadh has worked hard to bring the fissiparous anti-Houthi bloc under a single umbrella. But ending the war has proved far more difficult than launching it. As of January 2021, the Houthis had consolidated their control over northwestern Yemen, with 70 to 80 percent of the country's people falling under their rule, and were threatening the government stronghold of Marib, near the northeastern corner of their zone of control. The rest of the country is a political patchwork, variously dominated by government forces, sundry militias, and local authorities.

THE CASE FOR CARING

Joe Biden has signaled that the issues he will focus on as U.S. president will be those with tangible domestic impacts: climate change, the pandemic, China. Why, given his overflowing plate, should he even care about solving the crisis in Yemen?

Three reasons stand out. First is the United States' responsibility in what has unfolded. Saudi Arabia almost certainly would have intervened in Yemen even if the Obama administration had rejected its call for help, and it may well have prosecuted its campaign with even less regard for the laws of war absent the United States' defective supervision. But without U.S. support, Saudi Arabia would have found it harder to wage war and, arguably, would have been more eager to find a way out. Washington has a responsibility to help clean up the mess it helped create.

Second is the sheer magnitude of Yemen's humanitarian crisis. According to UN statistics, as of mid-2020, some 24 million Yemenis, 80

percent of the country's population, needed some form of assistance. Roughly 20 million were teetering on the brink of starvation. In November 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that Yemen was "now in imminent danger of the worst famine the world has seen for decades." The conflict is not alone to blame—Yemen was the region's poorest country even before the conflict began—but the collapse of the economy and the loss of access to or the closure of airports and seaports, all byproducts of the war, are primarily responsible.

Third is the potential for regional spillover. As long as the conflict endures, so does the risk that it could provoke a direct confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a candidate, Biden committed to steering the United States away from adventurism in the Middle East. But such commitments can be difficult to keep at moments of crisis. Should conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia begin to escalate on the Arabian Peninsula, the Biden administration could come under enormous pressure to get involved, despite its better judgment. That risk alone should be reason enough for Biden, at the beginning of his administration, to both disentangle the United States from the conflict in Yemen and seek to end it.

There's one big problem with this plan, however: it may not work.

GIVING PEACE A CHANCE

Biden faces a conundrum in Yemen. Senior members of his team, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, signed a letter in 2018 (which we also signed) acknowledging the failure of the Obama administration's Yemen policy. As a candidate, Biden himself pledged to "end U.S. support for the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen and order a reassessment of our relationship with Saudi Arabia." He has also vowed to rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran. Those moves will inevitably raise tensions with Saudi Arabia. Yet the Biden administration is also committed to ending the war in Yemen and negotiating a follow-on deal with Iran on regional issues, steps that by definition will require working closely with Riyadh. Further complicating matters, the administration will have to somehow make sure that the Houthis, who are likely to feel as buoyed by any reduction in U.S. backing for the war effort as Saudi Arabia will feel forsaken, nonetheless come under enough pressure to agree to a peace deal. Deft diplomatic juggling will be needed for the United States to do several things at once: step back from the war while help-

ing end it, squeeze Saudi Arabia but not overly alienate it, and engage directly with the Houthis without excessively emboldening them.

Any U.S. official trying to navigate this terrain might construct the following road map. First, Biden would reverse the Trump administration's last-minute decision to designate the Houthis a terrorist organization. Far from creating leverage over the Houthis, as Trump officials maintained, that move triggered sanctions that could have catastrophic humanitarian implications and severely complicate diplomatic efforts. Second, he would announce a halt to U.S. military assistance to the Saudi war effort. To avoid estranging Riyadh to the point where it refuses to cooperate, Washington would also reiterate its commitment to help the kingdom and its partners defend their territorial integrity, while making clear that this promise applies only to threats of a certain magnitude. In Sullivan's words, the goal should be "to balance anxiety with reassurance." The administration might also make clear that the direction of bilateral relations would depend in large part on whether the Saudis worked with it to come up with a practical way to end the war. In parallel, Washington would intensify its support for the UN-led peace process and perhaps name a U.S. special envoy for Yemen to that end. Finally, on the margins of discussions with Iran over a mutual return to the nuclear deal, the administration would press Tehran to convince the Houthis to cease hostilities and show flexibility in peace talks—not as a condition for rejoining the deal but as a step that would lower regional tensions and build trust.

Among the items on the new administration's Middle East to-do list, Yemen is one of those that may be ripest for progress, although that is not the same thing as saying that the effort will succeed. One likely problem involves calibrating how much reassurance Washington should extend to Saudi Arabia and its partners. History suggests that the very concept of reassurance invites trouble. After all, that was the rationale that led the Obama administration to support the Saudis' campaign in the first place. As much as the Biden administration should try to make clear what it is and isn't willing to do, with a shooting war underway, that exercise is sure to be fraught.

That is largely because it will be challenging to figure out which elements of U.S. support for the Saudi-led campaign to continue and which to halt. What constitutes defense, and what offense? On what side of the line does interdicting arms shipments to the Houthis fall? What about sharing intelligence that the Saudis could use to target

Houthi missile launch sites, or helping the Saudis maintain their aircraft? The Houthis have crossed the border into Saudi Arabia and control territory there. When Washington provides intelligence or weapons to counter the Houthis, is it fulfilling its commitment to defend Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity or merely entangling itself further in the war in Yemen? Deciding to end support for the war in Yemen doesn't answer these questions. It is just another way of posing them. It is sobering to remember that Obama also sought to draw such distinctions yet ended up getting sucked into a broader fight anyway. But the Biden team at least has the benefit of seeing what did not work for the Obama administration, and it can prepare itself to be far more restrained about the circumstances in which it is prepared to lend assistance.

Moreover, however much the Saudis may cooperate on the peace process, at this late date, it may prove insufficient. Obstacles to peace abound. The Houthis will have to accept that given the resistance of large portions of the Yemeni population, a viable deal will not simply convert territorial realities into international recognition of their rule. But having been ascendant for the past two years, they are unlikely to show interest in compromise. Hadi will have to accept that his demands for a return to power in Sanaa through a Houthi surrender are wholly unrealistic. But the embattled president has proved remarkably stubborn, and he is likely to see the formation of a new government as a sign that the tide is finally turning in his favor. The United States and Iran, for their part, may find themselves struggling to come to an accommodation on Yemen even if they reach agreement on the nuclear deal. Although the end of the maximum pressure campaign should diminish Iran's incentive to act aggressively in the Gulf, it might not be reason enough for the country to seriously pressure the Houthis to compromise—something it might not even be able to do anyway.

A final obstacle: Yemen is no longer the country it was when the war began. As the conflict has ground on, power has become diffused across a multitude of armed actors on the ground—not just the Houthis and the Hadi government but also separatist forces in the south and militias under the authority of Tareq Saleh, a nephew of Hadi's predecessor. The war now rages on multiple fronts, each with its own political dynamics and lines of command and control. Absent the buy-in of all these actors, a peace settlement is unlikely to be sustainable. And getting their buy-in will be difficult: many of the groups in Yemen have developed economic incentives to prolong the conflict.

Further complicating matters, multiple regional players have taken an interest in backing different groups on the ground.

The Biden administration should not allow these considerations to dissuade it from making a major push for peace in Yemen. The stakes are too high not to try. But the administration should also bear in mind that whatever it does, it will have to be firm with Saudi Arabia about its decision to pull the United States back from most activities relating to the war, however difficult that may be. Ending the war may prove to be beyond the new administration's influence. Ending U.S. complicity in it is not.

PREVENTING FUTURE YEMENS

The intractability of the war in Yemen should serve as a stark reminder of the costs of entering such conflicts to begin with. It should also, then, compel the Biden administration to come to grips with a crucial question: How can the United States avoid becoming complicit in similar disasters?

A good place to start would be with the fundamentals of U.S. security partnerships in the Gulf. Washington has given far-reaching assurances that it will come to the defense of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and has arranged to place in their hands a large arsenal of American weapons, sustained by American parts and personnel. Because of the way in which these partnerships are structured, when one of these states chooses to launch an unwise war, especially when there is a defensive rationale, the United States will face a hard choice. Should it join the effort to demonstrate fealty to its assurances and try to influence how its weapons are used? Should it refuse to participate but continue to allow arms and assistance to flow? Or should it cut off support and risk rupturing its relations with a regional partner, recognizing that other would-be weapons suppliers, such as China, Russia, or Turkey, might well step in?

These are the sorts of questions that ought to be examined in the reassessment of U.S.-Saudi relations that Biden has promised. At the heart of that review will be a calculation of which of two paths would better serve U.S. interests. The United States could reaffirm its steadfast commitment to a long-standing partner, even if it risks drawing the United States into future wars of precisely the sort that a growing number of both Democratic and Republican leaders appear set on avoiding. Alternatively, it could lessen that commitment in an effort to reduce the danger of damaging entanglements, even if that means

loosening a bond long seen as key to protecting U.S. energy and security interests in the Gulf. If the balance of the risks leads the administration down the second path, which seems the right one to us, it will likely want to revise U.S. security assurances so as to provide more room for maneuver in Yemen-like situations, which, although serious, fall far short of an existential threat.

The soul-searching should extend beyond the executive branch. Congress has a role to play in preventing future Yemens, and indeed, it appears to recognize as much. In 2019, both the House and the Senate, outraged by the killing of Khashoggi, passed a resolution that would have required the United States to withdraw from the hostilities in Yemen, but Trump vetoed it. The bill invoked the 1973 War Powers Resolution, which was designed to limit the executive branch's power to enter armed conflicts, but even if it had passed, it would likely have been ignored by the administration because of the latitude that the executive branch has given itself over the years to interpret key terms in the 1973 resolution flexibly. If Congress wants to play a bigger role in decisions about whether to involve the United States in future misadventures, it will have to amend that act. In its current form, the War Powers Resolution applies only to conflicts in which U.S. troops are either giving or receiving fire, not ones in which the United States is merely providing arms and advisers. Congress should change the law so that a president must obtain approval—and periodic reapproval—if he or she wants the United States to give support at levels that would effectively make it a party to a conflict. A reform like this would do nothing if Congress were more bellicose than the president, of course, but even so, it would be wise if it took the consent of two branches of government, rather than one, to enter a war. Such a change would make it less likely that the United States would get drawn into quagmires in the first place and more likely that it would correct course if it did.

The war in Yemen is a tragedy for its people, an enduring source of instability for the region, and an open wound for the United States. At this point, however it ends, it is unlikely to end well. At the very least, the United States owes it to itself and to the victims of the war to learn something from the disaster. That would be one way in which the precedent in Yemen might do Washington and the world some good: if it forced U.S. officials to candidly reexamine the United States' posture in the Gulf and recognize how easy it can be, despite the best of intentions, to get pulled into a disaster.

The Price of Nostalgia

America's Self-Defeating Economic Retreat

Adam S. Posen

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A new consensus has emerged in American politics: that the United States has recklessly pursued international economic openness at the expense of workers and the result has been economic inequality, social pain, and political strife. Both Democrats and Republicans are now advocating "a trade policy for the middle class." In practice, this seems to mean tariffs and "Buy American" programs aimed at saving jobs from unfair foreign competition.

Any presidency that cares about the survival of American democracy, let alone social justice, must assess its economic policies in terms of overcoming populism. The protectionist instinct rests on a syllogism: the populist anger that elected President Donald Trump was largely the product of economic displacement, economic displacement is largely the product of a laissez-faire approach to global competition, and therefore the best way to capture the support of populist voters is to firmly stand up against unfettered global competition. This syllogism is embraced by many Democrats, who are determined to recapture an industrial working-class base, and many Republicans, who use it as evidence that the government has sold out American workers in the heartland. For politicians of any stripe, playing to districts where deindustrialization has taken place seems to offer a sure path to election.

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Every step of this syllogism, however, is wrong. Populist anger is the result not of economic anxiety but of perceived declines in relative status. The U.S. government has not been pursuing openness and integration over the last two decades. To the contrary, it has increasingly insulated the economy from foreign competition, while the rest of the world has continued to open up and integrate. Protecting manufacturing jobs benefits only a small percentage of the workforce, while imposing substantial costs on the rest. Nor will there be any political payoff from trying to do so: after all, even as the United States has stepped back from global commerce, anger and extremism have mounted.

In reality, the path to justice and political stability is also the path to prosperity. What the U.S. economy needs now is greater exposure to pressure from abroad, not protectionist barriers or attempts to rescue specific industries in specific places. Instead of demonizing the changes brought about by international competition, the U.S. government needs to enact domestic policies that credibly enable workers to believe in a future that is not tied to their local employment prospects. The safety net should be broader and apply to people regardless of whether they have a job and no matter where they live. Internationally, Washington should enter into agreements that increase competition in the United States and raise taxation, labor, and environmental standards. It is the self-deluding withdrawal from the international economy over the last 20 years that has failed American workers, not globalization itself.

GLOBALIZATION UNDONE

Contrary to popular belief, the United States has, on balance, been withdrawing from the international economy for the past two decades. For all the claims that globalization is the source of the country's political woes, the reality is the opposite: tensions have risen as international competition has fallen. In fact, the country suffers from greater economic inequality and political extremism than most other high-income democracies—countries that have generally increased their global economic exposure. That is not to say that competition from China and other countries has had no effect on U.S. workers. What it does say, however, is that the effect has occurred even as the U.S. government has swum against the tide of globalization, suggesting that more protectionism is not the answer.

Global trade has been growing for decades as countries have opened up their economies. As a share of global GDP, total imports plus total

exports rose from 39 percent in 1990 to 61 percent in 2008. Trade then fell sharply as a result of the global financial crisis, but it crept upward afterward, nearing its pre-meltdown level in 2019. The United States has bucked this trend, however. Its trade-to-GDP ratio has risen more slowly than that of other countries—growing from 20 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 2008—all the while staying well below the global average. It fell at the same rate as the world at large's during the financial crisis, but it has yet to recover. Of course, as a country that has a large, advanced, and diverse economy and is separated by oceans from much of the rest of the world, it is only natural that the United States has a lower trade share than the average economy. There is no fundamental reason, however, for it not to be opening up at roughly the same rate as the rest of the world—especially considering that the entry of China, India, eastern Europe, and parts of Latin America into global markets ran its course long ago.

These trends run counter to the oft-told story that American workers suffered gravely after China joined the World Trade Organization. After much debate, economists have agreed on an upper-bound estimate of the number of U.S. manufacturing jobs that were lost as a result of Chinese competition after 1999: two million, at most, out of a workforce of 150 million. In other words, from 2000 to 2015, the China shock was responsible for displacing roughly 130,000 workers a year. That amounts to a sliver of the average churn in the U.S. labor market, where about 60 million job separations typically take place each year. Although approximately a third of those total job separations are voluntary in an average year, and others are due to individual circumstances, at least 20 million a year are due to business closures, restructurings, or employers moving locations. Think of the flight of jobs from inner cities or the displacement of secretarial and office workers due to technology—losses that, for the workers affected, are no different in terms of local impact and finality than the manufacturing job losses resulting from foreign competition. In other words, for each manufacturing job lost to Chinese competition, there were roughly 150 jobs lost to similar-feeling shocks in other industries. But these displaced workers got less than a hundredth of the public mourning.

An American who loses his job to Chinese competition is no more or less deserving of support than one who loses his job to automation or the relocation of a plant to another state. Many jobs are unsteady. The disproportionate outcry about the effect of Chinese trade ignores the experiences of the many more lower-wage workers who experi-

ence ongoing churn, and it forgets the way that previous generations of workers were able to adapt when they lost their jobs to foreign competition. Why the outsize political attention? It may have to do with the fact that the China-shocked workers are predominantly white and live in exurban areas or small towns, fitting a nostalgic image of men doing heavy work on big stuff in the heartland.

Concern for such workers has been highly successful in preventing new free-trade agreements. Since 2000, the U.S. government has brought into force deals with a number of extremely small economies, primarily for foreign policy, rather than economic, reasons—with Bahrain and Jordan in the Middle East and with Colombia, Panama, Peru and a group of Central American states in Latin America. Cumulatively, these have had essentially no impact on the openness of the U.S. economy. In the last 20 years, only the 2012 U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, a deal with South Korea, has required any measurable liberalization, and even it included greater protections for U.S. manufacturers of light trucks. A U.S.-Japanese agreement concluded in 2019 was so limited that it required no congressional approval. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) would have significantly opened the United States up, but it was rejected by Trump on the third day of his administration, to the cheers of many Democrats. The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement put up more protections for U.S. auto production than its predecessor, the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The rest of the world has been moving in the opposite direction. The EU has added 13 new member states since 2000, thereby achieving the deepest economic integration anywhere, including the largely free movement of labor. It has also matched the United States in concluding comparable trade deals with Japan and South Korea and has struck additional agreements with Canada, Singapore, and Vietnam. Japan has not only joined the TPP's successor but also opened up its economy to China and South Korea by joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore have also signed on to both deals. The only high-income democracy to retreat from trade more than the United States is the United Kingdom, whose exit from the EU has gone about as badly as most economists predicted. But even it promptly sought to join the TPP's successor.

The U.S. economy has retreated from global economic integration in another way, too: by discouraging foreign companies from building new plants, offices, research facilities, or outlets in the United

States. "Greenfield investment," as this type of activity is known, is much more desirable than corporate takeovers, mergers, or the cross-border sale of businesses—forms of foreign investment that may entail only a change of ownership, without creating any new jobs. In fact, foreign greenfield investment is generally associated with increases in higher-paying jobs and R & D spending. But since 2000, the inflow of greenfield investment to the United States has been trending down sharply, from $13 billion annually in 2000 to $4 billion annually in 2019. Blame goes to a succession of nationalist policies that have increased the threat of arbitrary restrictions on technology transfers and foreign ownership.

Immigration tells the same story of U.S. disengagement from the global economy. The trend started well before Trump took office. Net immigration to the United States has been declining since the 1990s. In that decade, the U.S. immigrant population (including undocumented people) was growing at 4.6 percent annually; in the next decade, it grew at 2.5 percent annually; and in the decade after that, it grew at 1.3 percent annually. Some of the decline is owing to weaker "push" factors, such as the diminished incentive for Mexicans to head north as wages in Mexico have increased, and some of it is the result of weaker "pull" factors, such as the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. Whatever the reason, the fact is that the U.S. labor market has been increasingly insulated from the arrival of foreign workers.

The trends tell a clear story about the United States over the past two decades: even as trade barriers have accumulated and immigration has more than halved, inequality and nativism have risen. Washington has given the angry, mostly white and male swing voters much of what they wanted on the international front, and they are still angry. Meanwhile, the lot of the United States' lower-wage service workers—predominantly female and disproportionately nonwhite—has worsened.

THE MANUFACTURING OBSESSION

Nostalgia is not a good look for a progressive agenda. That is just as true for economic policy as it is for social policy; nostalgia privileges a status quo that locks in incumbents' advantages and ignores the difficulties that many people are already suffering. Politicians' sentimental obsession with "good jobs" in manufacturing is doomed to fail politically as well as economically, while failing to address long-standing injustices.

For more than 50 years, ever since German and Japanese exports began seriously competing with U.S. goods, pundits and politicians have bemoaned the decline of American manufacturing. If only the government supported American producers, the argument went, they could stave off competition from the Germans and the Japanese, then the Mexicans and the South Koreans, and now the Chinese. The notion that elites betrayed the common man has echoes in the stabbed-in-the-back myths that recur in nationalist politics. It is just as misguided.

Germany and Japan have indeed run manufacturing trade and overall trade surpluses for decades, and yet over the past 40 years, their manufacturing workforces have also shrunk as a share of their total workforces, and at about the same rate as the United States' has. In fact, manufacturing employment has been falling sharply in all high-income economies, irrespective of their trade balances. It is true that the share of manufacturing in total employment remains higher in some of these countries than it is in the United States, but even in the top manufacturing countries, the current share is below 19 percent. (The last time the share in the United States stood at 19 percent was in 1982; today, it is around ten percent.) In China, the share peaked at 30 percent in 2012 and has been falling ever since—even though the country boasts the world's most extensive subsidies and government protections for manufacturing.

Only about 16 percent of non-college-educated Americans work in manufacturing. What about the remainder, who are not blessed with those "good" manufacturing jobs? This is not an idle question. Even after assuming a massive change in government priorities, it is completely unrealistic to think that a country can raise the share of employment in manufacturing by more than a small fraction; no country has ever done so after becoming a developed economy. Sustainable growth in desired employment is not a matter of wishing. Nor is it costless to pursue more manufacturing jobs. Like any industry, manufacturing responds to incentives, and trade protectionism imposes substantial costs on manufacturers. These costs are passed on to those U.S. firms that pay more for tariffed inputs. As a result, these companies have a harder time competing against other producers or find their goods subject to retaliatory foreign tariffs, and so jobs are destroyed. The costs to American consumers from protectionism are substantial, as well. They particularly hit poorer households, which spend a larger portion of their income on affected goods such as cars,

clothing, food, and housewares. As three economists who worked in the Obama White House—Jason Furman, Katheryn Russ, and Jay Shambaugh—have put it, "tariffs function as a regressive tax that weighs most heavily on women and single parents."

Protectionism distorts incentives in another way, too. Manufacturing companies that feel politically protected because they are "too big to fail" engage in moral hazard every bit as much as the banks did before the financial crisis, whether that takes the form of Volkswagen and other German automakers cheating on emission tests and poisoning the air or Boeing denying the design flaws in the 737 MAX airplane and causing crashes. As the U.S. auto industry proved in the 1970s, and as Chinese heavy industry is proving today, corporate political privilege destroys productivity, at a minimum, and usually the environment, too.

Moreover, the fetishization of manufacturing jobs is hardly a neutral policy. The image of men doing dangerous things to produce heavy stuff seems to resonate with nostalgic voters in a way that women providing human services does not. This is a fiercely gendered view: only 30 percent of manufacturing workers in the United States are women, and the overwhelming majority of manufacturing workers have always been men (even during the wartime days of Rosie the Riveter). When manufacturing contracted, the jobs hit first and hardest were the already less well-paid jobs in the garment industry, a higher proportion of which were held by women.

Manufacturing also favors white men over men of color. Black and Latino workers make up more than a third of the non-college-educated workforce, and so one would expect that they would have a higher share than the less than 25 percent of manufacturing jobs they do. Black and Latino workers are also paid less, on average, than white workers for the same jobs. Whatever the causes of these disparities, to favor manufacturing jobs is to favor white male workers—which is part of the reason the policy is so popular among this demographic.

Ultimately, the worst thing about holding up the ideal of "good jobs"—whether in factories, as coders, or in the trades—is that it distracts from the reality facing most lower-wage American workers. Many people, not just undocumented immigrants, effectively work in the informal sector, holding unstable jobs that offer limited protections and few guaranteed hours, let alone any prospects for advancement. It is unrealistic to make "good jobs" a central aspiration when they simply cannot be delivered for a significant minority of the pop-

ulation. It is wrong to focus on those who already have advantages rather than pursue economic policies that would also improve the lot of service-sector and part-time workers.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Overlapping with those who worry about trade dislocation are those who express concern for the communities hit hardest by it. The archetype is one of those towns in Ohio or Pennsylvania whose main manufacturing plant moves its work offshore, devastating the local economy that has been built around that employer. The suffering of less educated workers in such communities is real, profound, and mounting. Some of this suffering has been exacerbated by the opioid epidemic and by the lasting harm of combat faced by the significant number of military veterans and their families in these communities.

The natural instinct of any compassionate human being, let alone any responsive politician, is to try to fix this situation. Preventing job loss in the first place seems to be the way to do so, and when that cannot be done, what comes next are efforts to revive the hard-hit communities. Accordingly, much of the writing from policy wonks in recent years has called for plans to recognize the importance of local communities and build them back up. Elected officials, for their part, make a pilgrimage to these places of suffering to show their concern and empathy and then follow up with targeted government assistance.

The problem is that there are precious few examples of a government successfully reviving a community suffering from industrial decline. Geography is not destiny, but it is the embodiment of economic history in many ways, and accumulated history is difficult to overcome. Growing up near Boston in the 1970s, I remember my elementary school teaching me about the jobs lost in the textile mills of Lawrence and Lowell and the efforts to bring back those towns. To this day, the towns remain shells of their former selves—and that is in Massachusetts, a state with a generous mindset and senior representatives in Congress who can deliver federal funds. The same remains true for cities in the Midwest. True, Pittsburgh has transitioned back to vitality, and Detroit is past the worst of its horrible economic and social lows, but the former had to experience a nearly complete turnover of industries and to some degree a turnover of population, and the latter is still a long way from full employment and prosperity. And those two cities are vastly outnumbered by the cities and towns that have not come back at all.

The international story is even more cautionary. In Germany and Italy, fiscal transfers to depressed regions—the former East Germany, the Italian South—went on for decades at a scale unseen in U.S. history, buttressed by EU funding. Yet cities and towns in the depressed regions of Germany and Italy have still not caught up with their more prosperous counterparts in terms of employment or per capita income. Japan, which has a political system that is built on the dominant party funneling pork-barrel projects to exurban districts, has also failed to revive its depressed regions. In fact, more and more Japanese have moved from smaller cities and the countryside to Tokyo, Osaka, and other megalopolises. In the United Kingdom, the miseries of northern England, which lost coal mines and shipyards, have been the focus of successive government efforts to "level up" that region to match the wealthy Southeast and London. Instead—just as in Germany, Italy, and Japan—the younger and more skilled have left for places of greater opportunity.

The picture is largely the same even in China. Its zones of prosperity along its eastern and southern coasts are a magnet for workers from the rest of the country. The lower-income northern and western interior has failed to catch up in income or employment. And this is in a country that has protected heavy industry on an unprecedented scale for years on end, has run substantial manufacturing trade surpluses, and has a government willing to restrict internal migration and locate industries by edict.

No one should be abandoned simply because of where they live, and no community deserves to decline. But governments should not lie to their citizens, either. There simply is no reliable method of saving local communities when they lose their dominant employer or industry, even with a massive amount of resources devoted to the effort. Any promises made to revive particular communities through government action are likely to lead to disappointment, frustration, and outright anger when they fail.

Like fixating on manufacturing jobs, holding out the hope that workers can always find the same kind of work in the same place as the economy changes also requires willfully ignoring the reality for most lower-wage workers in the United States. It treats as normal and attainable the privilege of not having to change jobs or homes for economic reasons, a luxury that in recent decades has been enjoyed primarily by white workers living in rural or exurban areas. The creation of the Black middle class in the United States over the course of

the twentieth century was in large part the product of massive migration out of the South. Latinos, too, are no strangers to moving across the country in pursuit of work and opportunity. (It is a small irony that almost all of those who wish to remain undisturbed are themselves the descendants of immigrants who traveled even further.) The suffering in the United States' rural areas and Rust Belt today should not be ignored, nor should one make light of the social ties that people moving out of those places would leave behind. But it is time to acknowledge the reality that movement is sometimes a necessity and often benefits lower-wage workers.

The dangers of the current attitude go further. Economists have found that in many parts of the United States, there is just one dominant employment option, or only a few. Just as having a monopoly over production gives companies the power to push up prices at households' expense, having a monopsony over local labor gives companies the power to push down wages—and they exercise it. Thus, government policies to prop up a local employer may enable that employer to exploit the workforce, and as studies have shown, minorities and women will be taken advantage of the most. The broader community can be exploited, too: companies that know their departure would ruin a town can also extract generous protections and subsidies from local governments, and in some cases a de facto exemption from environmental and safety regulations.

Even if place-based aid policies ever worked, now is not the time to ramp them up, when there are accumulating forces making them more likely to fail. Climate change will radically alter which parts of the country are viable for various industries and occupations: agricultural zones will shift, and carbon-intensive industries will shed jobs. Pandemics will likely be persistent and more frequent, perhaps changing patterns of schooling, transportation, and health care. The impact of technology is less certain. The surge in remote work, jumpstarted by the COVID-19 pandemic, may make it more possible for people in depressed cities to find employment. (The widespread acceptance of virtual meetings, meanwhile, has made it easier to sustain social ties at a distance, and so it may also make it easier for people to move for work.) Still, the rise of remote work is probably irrelevant for lower-wage and less educated workers: whether in services or manufacturing, their occupations for the most part require them to be in person to earn their pay.

PROTECTING PEOPLE, NOT JOBS

A government's duty to its people is to them as individual human beings. The state can help people and their families move to where there are jobs. It can subsidize faster transportation so that people can commute over longer distances feasibly. It can help people prepare for jobs in growing industries and match them with jobs, too. It can change zoning laws to encourage more affordable housing near where there is job growth. It can provide a safety net for those who are too old, too unwell, or just too anchored to move. It can copy the active labor-market policies of most European countries, putting in place government programs that enhance incentives to seek employment, improve job readiness, and help people find work.

Where U.S. economic policy has been too neoliberal is not on trade but on domestic issues. The government has worried too much that a stronger safety net might disincentivize people to find work, relied too much on finely tuned incentives and nudges as the mainstay of policies, and, as a result, done far too little to directly pay for individuals' health care, education and training, transportation, and childcare. It has failed to seriously enforce laws against tax evasion, environmental dumping, the underpayment of wages, and unsafe workplaces. The American Rescue Plan, passed by Congress in March, includes some measures in the right spirit, notably the expansion of the child tax credit, which is now universal for couples making less than $150,000 a year and for individuals making less than $75,000 a year. Too few of these provisions, however, are set to last beyond the recovery from the pandemic.

What is needed are universal benefits that protect individuals and families, rather than jobs and places. Instead of reinforcing the partitioning of the country into districts that define people's identities, policies should help people see their security as independent of their current location. The United States would be better off economically and politically. To that end, the Affordable Care Act should be expanded so that health insurance is truly portable. Pension programs should be consolidated across employers to reduce the cost of changing jobs. Gig, temporary, and part-time workers should receive most of the same legal protections that full-time employees do, and they should be allowed to accumulate seniority, savings, and benefits just as many full-time workers do. These policies would level the playing field for various types of American workers and make it easier for

them to move between jobs. They would also force employers to compete for workers on the basis of better wages by removing their ability to entrap employees in a given spot or through their irregular status.

Just as is true with minimum-wage hikes, these changes would raise labor costs and reduce some demand for lower-wage workers. But the net benefits for workers and the economy would be ample. There is little evidence to suggest that millions of jobs would be lost if the federal government simply raised labor standards to the level of some U.S. states and almost all competing high-income economies. Australia, Canada, and most western European countries have stricter labor regulations and more generous health insurance and pension programs—and have prime-age labor-force participation rates that are comparable to or higher than that of the United States and far better wages for lower-skilled workers. Given that in the United States, the share of income accruing to those owning capital, as opposed to performing labor, has risen sharply for more than two decades, and given that corporate profit margins are extremely high, there is plenty of room for the government to redistribute income without significantly damaging employment.

Another key element is the enforcement of existing regulations. The agencies charged with enforcing health, safety, labor, and environmental regulations have been chronically underfunded, and the fines they hand out for violations have been set too low. As a result, polluters and wage cheats treat them as just a cost of doing business. As the scholar Anna Stansbury has argued, the deficient enforcement of labor regulations has not only significantly reduced low-wage workers' income and worsened their treatment; it would also interfere with the implementation of a minimum-wage hike since employers would have greater incentives to cheat.

Hand in hand with stronger enforcement of existing regulations and higher penalties, the U.S. government should put an end to Trade Adjustment Assistance and other programs designed to help people who have lost their jobs specifically to trade alone. These programs have failed on multiple fronts: there is little evidence that they have helped workers find new jobs faster, they clearly have not blunted the anger about trade, they have not succeeded in revitalizing declining industrial towns, and they have not created any lasting political coalitions in Congress either for workers or for trade. As an American Enterprise Institute report noted earlier this year, compared with

other developed countries, the United States is "unique in its focus on workers who have lost jobs due to trade, rather than other sources of job loss." Most European countries spend 0.5 to 1.0 percent of GDP annually on helping unemployed people find work; the United States spends a tenth of that amount. This is exactly the wrong approach: the U.S. government is stigmatizing trade-related career changes, to no real benefit, while shortchanging all American workers by depriving them of proven programs of retraining, job matching, and support.

Can the United States afford the European approach? Yes. U.S. federal tax rates on high earners, corporations, and inheritances are at or near all-time lows—substantially below the rates in almost all other high-income countries. Other countries have managed to enjoy sustained growth in per capita incomes with much higher tax rates, as did the United States in the past century. There is a point at which higher tax rates choke off investment and employment, but the United States is nowhere near it today. Raising taxes on those U.S. taxpayers who have seen their incomes and wealth rise substantially over the last 20 years would not only be just and politically stabilizing; it could also pay for an expansion of federal labor and social-benefit programs by three or four percent of GDP. During economic upturns, additional revenues could be gained through the payroll tax, giving workers the sense that, as with Social Security, they are paying into a program that they deserve to receive payment from in turn.

CHANGE IS GOOD

There is a popular notion that the United States has been sacrificing justice in the name of economic efficiency, and so it is time to correct the imbalance by stepping back from globalization. This is a largely false narrative. The United States has been withdrawing from the world economy for 20 years, and for most of that time, U.S. economic dynamism has been falling, and inequality in the country has risen more than it has in economies that were opening up. Workers are less mobile. Fewer businesses have been started. Corporate power has grown more concentrated. Innovation has slowed. Although many factors have contributed to this decline, it has likely been reinforced by the United States' retreat from global economic exposure. Since the takeover of the U.S. Capitol by a mob in January, the United States has had to recognize that after years of lecturing others on the importance of peaceful democratic elections, it is not exempt from

political failures. Similarly, after decades of lecturing others on the stagnation and corruption of closed economies, it now suffers from the same problems, to the cost of American workers.

Indeed, many countries have undertaken international opening to spur economic changes in stagnant and socially divided societies: consider the Meiji Restoration in Japan, Kemal Ataturk's reforms in Turkey, Deng Xiaoping's marketization in China, and the accession of southern and eastern European countries to the EU. These were deliberate campaigns of reform, not shock therapy, in which the markets are allowed to let rip. The countries had to be honest with themselves about their shortfalls in international comparison and admit that their previous arrangements were corrupt and prejudicial. They had to accept that economic change was empowering and liberating for the majority of their citizens, that the central government had to play a stronger role in social support, and that workers had to be allowed, if not encouraged, to migrate to cities, to move to where the opportunities are.

Although the United States is not, of course, a pre-market economy under an authoritarian government, it does need to recognize how far it has fallen short of its ideals and potential in the economic sphere, as well as how much better its peers and rivals around the world have done on many counts. Just as the statement "this is not who we are" in the face of racist violence lets Americans off too easily, talk about the United States as the most open, vibrant, competitive, or opportunity-rich economy in the world is a form of self-delusion. Some politicians may want to appeal to American leadership as a motivator for reengaging with the global economy, but what the U.S. economy needs now is a jolt of followership. The United States needs to be willing to conform to international standards, to learn lessons from other countries, to accept that competition should be a source of change.

Since World War II, the United States has approached international economic integration as something it encouraged others to do. Trade deals were framed as being about foreign countries opening their markets and reforming their economies through competition. For a long time, this narrative was largely true. It had the unfortunate effect domestically, however, of characterizing the United States as open and the rest of the world as protectionist. The competition that U.S. firms faced from abroad was seen as the result of unfair trade. Those perceptions have now outlasted the reality. It is the United States that needs foreign pressure and inspiration.

The United States should have a constructive international economic policy, rather than a defensive one that blames global forces for its ills. Such a policy would start with the recognition that the United States has not been subjected to reckless economic opening by Washington elites and that the rest of the world is continuing to further integrate without it. Globalization goes on no matter what, and trade in particular is more resilient to U.S. withdrawal than many would like to believe. Where there are real comparative advantages in production, yielding large cost or quality differentials, purchasers will find a way to get the goods and services they want. No single economy's tariff regime can ever control a significant part of world trade, even when leveraging a large internal market; the rest of the world is always larger, and the opportunities missed are always found by someone else. As technology makes international commerce ever more transparent and efficient, the U.S. economy's unilateral efforts to defensively withdraw from it will become only more futile.

Instead, the United States should actively seek to encourage the type of change in its own economy that it once sought to make other countries undertake through trade deals. Washington should agree to international standards defined by limited but strong and well-enforced rules, ones that focus on observable behaviors of companies and governments, not on numerical targets or institutional aspirations. Four areas of potential international agreement are particularly ripe for the United States to pursue.

The first is international corporate taxation. Corporations often evade taxes by shifting their profits to low-tax jurisdictions, a practice that erodes government capacity and the political legitimacy of market economies. The digital economy has made these distortions even greater, although large technology companies are far from the only firms to exploit the loopholes. On this front, progress may be imminent. Members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development are currently in negotiations on ways to combat corporate tax evasion, and some European governments have threatened to levy taxes on digital goods and services produced by Big Tech. Collective international action should give the United States an opportunity not only to raise its tax policies up to the standards of other advanced economies but also to prevent its own companies from evading taxes.

Another area to pursue involves carbon pricing. The United States needs a carbon tax, and the world needs it to have one, too. The U.S.

economy should accelerate its pace of decarbonization. Although technological advances and private investment decisions are generating meaningful progress, a high and rising carbon price offers the best prospects for slowing climate change while there's still time. In not having a national carbon tax, the United States lags behind the EU member states and a few other countries. If it does not catch up, those countries would be justified in instituting a carbon border adjustment—a tax on imports to offset the underpricing of carbon inputs in places such as the United States.

Washington should also seek international agreement on labor standards. The updating of the North American Free Trade Agreement as the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement to protect worker representation and unions was positive in two senses: first, it helped secure rights for Mexican workers, and second, it demonstrated that the U.S. labor movement can at least tacitly support trade deals if their concerns about labor rights are addressed. Washington should now turn the tables on itself and pursue trade agreements with countries that have higher labor standards than it does. This would reinforce the changes in legislation and enforcement that it should also make. This move could be combined with an agreement among democracies to ban the import of products produced by unpaid prison labor, as in China's Xinjiang region.

Finally, U.S. officials should practice what I have called "principled plurilateralism." In this strategy, groups of countries come together to strike agreements on high standards for international commerce, with membership in the groups determined solely by compliance with those standards. American politicians are unlikely to advocate that the United States join trade deals in the near future, but there is something the country can do in the meantime: encourage such an approach by major democratic allies, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. Even progress undertaken without U.S. membership benefits the United States by making more visible its own deficiencies and pressuring it to up its own game.

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

The United States needs to embrace economic change rather than nostalgia. Telling voters that the "good jobs" of manufacturing are the key to restoring their prosperity and that the country must be protected from global competition is not only misleading; it is also de-

structive. That path will cost jobs overall, further entrench the bias against lower-wage service workers, and do little to lure voters away from right-wing populism. You cannot buy off nativists and populists by reinforcing their nostalgic sense of status. Similarly, even well-meaning efforts to repair rural and exurban communities by tying people to their local jobs will in fact make them more vulnerable economically, which in turn will fan the flames of reactionary politics.

Instead, the government should seek to protect people as individuals separately from their jobs or lack thereof. People's jobs should become less important both to their well-being and to their self-worth, as is already the case in most other high-income democracies. The U.S. government should promote better livings for all rather than scarce "good jobs" for a privileged few. Both the pandemic and climate change should serve as a reminder that the future will be even more about adaptability in work arrangements and stability at home. Most of all, instead of treating economic change induced by trade as inherently unfair, Washington should use international standards and competition to raise up U.S. workers and companies. Fixating on any one sector, let alone any one company in one place, only divides American society and burdens neglected workers with a disproportionate share of the costs of adjustment. Indeed, for the last 20 years, it already has.

Xi's Gamble

The Race to Consolidate Power and Stave Off Disaster

Jude Blanchette

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Xi Jinping is a man on a mission. After coming to power in late 2012, he moved rapidly to consolidate his political authority, purge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of rampant corruption, sideline his enemies, tame China's once highflying technology and financial conglomerates, crush internal dissent, and forcefully assert China's influence on the international stage. In the name of protecting China's "core interests," Xi has picked fights with many of his neighbors and antagonized countries farther away—especially the United States. Whereas his immediate predecessors believed China must continue to bide its time by overseeing rapid economic growth and the steady expansion of China's influence through tactical integration into the existing global order, Xi is impatient with the status quo, possesses a high tolerance for risk, and seems to feel a pronounced sense of urgency in challenging the international order.

Why is he in such a rush? Most observers have settled on one of two diametrically opposite hypotheses. The first holds that Xi is driving a wide range of policy initiatives aimed at nothing less than the remaking of the global order on terms favorable to the CCP. The other view asserts that he is the anxious overseer of a creaky and outdated Lenin-

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ist political system that is struggling to keep its grip on power. Both narratives contain elements of truth, but neither satisfactorily explains the source of Xi's sense of urgency.

A more accurate explanation is that Xi's calculations are determined not by his aspirations or fears but by his timeline. Put simply, Xi has consolidated so much power and upset the status quo with such force because he sees a narrow window of ten to 15 years during which Beijing can take advantage of a set of important technological and geopolitical transformations, which will also help it overcome significant internal challenges. Xi sees the convergence of strong demographic headwinds, a structural economic slowdown, rapid advances in digital technologies, and a perceived shift in the global balance of power away from the United States as what he has called "profound changes unseen in a century," demanding a bold set of immediate responses.

By narrowing his vision to the coming ten to 15 years, Xi has instilled a sense of focus and determination in the Chinese political system that may well enable China to overcome long-standing domestic challenges and achieve a new level of global centrality. If Xi succeeds, China will position itself as an architect of an emerging era of multipolarity, its economy will escape the so-called middle-income trap, and the technological capabilities of its manufacturing sector and military will rival those of more developed countries.

Yet ambition and execution are not the same thing, and Xi has now placed China on a risky trajectory, one that threatens the achievements his predecessors secured in the post-Mao era. His belief that the CCP must guide the economy and that Beijing should rein in the private sector will constrain the country's future economic growth. His demand that party cadres adhere to ideological orthodoxy and demonstrate personal loyalty to him will undermine the governance system's flexibility and competency. His emphasis on an expansive definition of national security will steer the country in a more inward and paranoid direction. His unleashing of "Wolf Warrior" nationalism will produce a more aggressive and isolated China. Finally, Xi's increasingly singular position within China's political system will forestall policy alternatives and course corrections, a problem made worse by his removal of term limits and the prospect of his indefinite rule.

Xi believes he can mold China's future as did the emperors of the country's storied past. He mistakes this hubris for confidence—and no one dares tell him otherwise. An environment in which an all-

powerful leader with a single-minded focus cannot hear uncomfortable truths is a recipe for disaster, as China's modern history has demonstrated all too well.

A MAN IN A HURRY

In retrospect, Xi's compressed timeline was clear from the start of his tenure. China had become accustomed to the pace of his predecessor, the slow and staid Hu Jintao, and many expected Xi to follow suit, albeit with a greater emphasis on economic reform. Yet within months of taking the reins in 2012, Xi began to reorder the domestic political and economic landscape. First came a top-to-bottom housecleaning of the CCP. The party had repeatedly demonstrated its ability to weather domestic storms, but pressures were building within the system. Corruption had become endemic, leading to popular dissatisfaction and the breakdown of organizational discipline. The party's ranks were growing rapidly but were increasingly filled with individuals who didn't share Xi's belief in the CCP's exceptionalism. Party cells in state-owned enterprises, private companies, and nongovernmental organizations were dormant and disorganized. Senior-level decision-making had become uncoordinated and siloed. The party's propaganda organs struggled to project their messages to an increasingly cynical and tech-savvy citizenry.

Xi took on all these problems simultaneously. In 2013 alone, he initiated a sweeping anticorruption drive, launched a "mass line" campaign to eliminate political pluralism and liberal ideologies from public discourse, announced new guidelines restricting the growth of the party's membership, and added new ideological requirements for would-be party members. The size of the party mattered little, he believed, if it was not made up of true believers. After all, he noted, when the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse in the early 1990s, "proportionally, the Soviet Communist Party had more members than [the CCP], but nobody was man enough to stand up and resist."

Next on Xi's agenda was the need to assert China's interests on the global stage. Xi quickly began land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea, established an air defense identification zone over disputed territory in the East China Sea, helped launch the New Development Bank (sometimes called the BRICS Bank), unveiled the massive international infrastructure project that came to be known as the Belt and Road Initiative, and proposed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Xi continued to slash his way through the status quo for the remainder of his first term and shows no signs of abating as he approaches the end of his second. His consolidation of power continues uninterrupted: he faces no genuine political rivals, has removed term limits on his tenure in office, and has installed allies and loyalists in key positions. New research centers are dedicated to studying his writings and speeches, party officials publicly extol his wisdom and virtue, and party regulations and government planning documents increasingly claim to be based on "Xi Jinping Thought." He has asserted the CCP's dominance over vast swaths of Chinese society and economic life, even forcing influential business and technology titans to beg forgiveness for their insufficient loyalty to the party. Meanwhile, he continues to expand China's international sphere of influence through the exercise of hard power, economic coercion, and deep integration into international and multilateral bodies.

Many outside observers, myself included, initially believed that the party's inability to contain the outbreak of COVID-19 highlighted the weaknesses of China's system. By the summer of 2020, however, Xi was able to extol the virtues of centralized control in checking the pandemic's domestic spread. Far from undermining his political authority, Beijing's iron-fisted approach to combating the virus has now become a point of national pride.

A UNIQUE MOMENT

Xi's fast pace was provoked by a convergence of geopolitical, demographic, economic, environmental, and technological changes. The risks they pose are daunting, but not yet existential; Beijing has a window of opportunity to address them before they become fatal. And the potential rewards they offer are considerable.

The first major change is Beijing's assessment that the power and influence of the West have entered a phase of accelerated decline, and as a result, a new era of multipolarity has begun, one that China could shape more to its liking. This view took hold as the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq became quagmires, and it solidified in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which the Chinese leadership saw as the death knell for U.S. global prestige. In 2016, the British vote to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as president in the United States fortified the consensus view that the United States, and the West more generally, was in decline. This might suggest that China

could opt for strategic patience and simply allow American power to wane. But the possibility of a renewal of U.S. leadership brought about by the advent of the Biden administration—and concerns about Xi's mortality (he will be 82 in 2035)—means that Beijing is unwilling to wait and see how long this phase of Western decline will last.

The second important force confronting Xi is China's deteriorating demographic and economic outlook. By the time he assumed office, China's population was simultaneously aging and shrinking, and the country was facing an imminent surge of retirees that would stress the country's relatively weak health-care and pension systems. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences now expects China's population to peak in 2029, and a recent study in *The Lancet* forecast that it will shrink by nearly 50 percent by the end of the century. Although Beijing ended its draconian one-child policy in 2016, the country has still recorded a 15 percent decline in births during the past 12 months. Meanwhile, the government estimates that by 2033, nearly one-third of the population will be over the age of 60.

Contributing to these woes is China's shrinking workforce and rising wages, which have increased by ten percent, on average, since 2005. Larger paychecks are good for workers, but global manufacturers are increasingly moving their operations out of China and to lower-cost countries, leaving a rising number of low-skilled workers in China unemployed or underemployed. And because only 12.5 percent of China's labor force has graduated from college (compared with 24 percent in the United States), positioning the bulk of the country's workforce to compete for the high-skilled jobs of the future will be an uphill battle.

Directly related to this worrying demographic picture is the slowdown of China's economy. With annual GDP growth having dropped from a high of 14 percent in 2007 to the mid-single digits today, many of the long-standing problems Beijing had been able to sweep under the rug now require attention and a willingness to accept economic and political pain, from unwinding the vast sea of indebted companies to demanding that firms and individuals pay more into the country's tax coffers. At the heart of China's growth woes is flagging productivity. Throughout the first several decades of the post-Mao reform period, realizing productivity gains was relatively straightforward, as the planned economy was dissolved in favor of market forces and droves of citizens voluntarily fled the countryside for urban and coastal areas and the promise of higher-wage jobs. Later, as foreign companies brought

investment, technology, and know-how to the country, industrial efficiency continued to improve. Finally, the massive amounts spent on infrastructure, especially roads and rail, boosted connectivity and thus productivity. All of this helped a poor and primarily agricultural economy rapidly catch up with more advanced economies.

Yet by the time Xi assumed power, policymakers were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain momentum without creating unsustainable levels of debt, just as they had done in response to the 2008 global financial crisis. What is more, the country was already saturated with transportation infrastructure, so an additional mile of road or high-speed rail wasn't going to add much to growth. And because almost all able-bodied workers had already moved from the countryside to urban areas, relocating labor wouldn't arrest the decline in productivity, either. Finally, the social and environmental costs of China's previous growth paradigm had become both unsustainable and destabilizing, as staggering air pollution and environmental devastation provoked acute anger among Chinese citizens.

Perhaps the most consequential shifts to have occurred on Xi's watch are advances in new technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and biomedical engineering, among others. Xi believes that dominating the "commanding heights" of these new tools will play a critical role in China's economic, military, and geopolitical fate, and he has mobilized the party to transform the country into a high-tech powerhouse. This includes expending vast sums to develop the country's R & D and production capabilities in technologies deemed critical to national security, from semiconductors to batteries. As Xi stated in 2014, first-mover advantage will go to "whoever holds the nose of the ox of science and technology innovation."

Xi also hopes that new technologies can help the CCP overcome, or at least circumvent, nearly all of China's domestic challenges. The negative impacts of a shrinking workforce, he believes, can be blunted by an aggressive push toward automation, and job losses in traditional industries can be offset by opportunities in newer, high-tech sectors. "Whether we can stiffen our back in the international arena and cross the 'middle-income trap' depends to a large extent on the improvement of science and technology innovation capability," Xi said in 2014.

New technologies serve other purposes, as well. Facial recognition tools and artificial intelligence give China's internal security organs new ways to surveil citizens and suppress dissent. The party's "military-

civil fusion" strategy strives to harness these new technologies to significantly bolster the Chinese military's warfighting capabilities. And advances in green technology offer the prospect of simultaneously pursuing economic growth and pollution abatement, two goals Beijing has generally seen as being in tension.

THE PARANOID STYLE IN CHINESE POLITICS

This convergence of changes and developments would have occurred regardless of who assumed power in China in 2012. Perhaps another leader would have undertaken a similarly bold agenda. Yet among contemporary Chinese political figures, Xi has demonstrated an unrivaled skill for bureaucratic infighting. And he clearly believes that he is a figure of historical significance, on whom the CCP's fate rests.

In order to push forward significant change, Xi has overseen the construction of a new political order, one underpinned by a massive increase in the power and authority of the CCP. Yet beyond this elevation of party power, perhaps Xi's most critical legacy will be his expansive redefinition of national security. His advocacy of a "comprehensive national security concept" emerged in early 2014, and in a speech that April, he announced that China faced "the most complicated internal and external factors in its history." Although this was clearly hyperbole—war with the United States in Korea and the nationwide famine of the late 1950s were more complicated—Xi's message to the political system was clear: a new era of risk and uncertainty confronts the party.

The CCP's long experience of defections, attempted coups, and subversion by outside actors predisposes it to acute paranoia, something that reached a fever pitch in the Mao era. Xi risks institutionalizing this paranoid style. One result of blurring the line between internal and external security has been threat inflation: party cadres in low-crime, low-risk areas now issue warnings of terrorism, "color revolutions," and "Christian infiltration." In Xinjiang, fears of separatism have been used to justify turning the entire region into a dystopian high-tech prison. And in Hong Kong, Xi has established a "national security" bureaucracy that can ignore local laws and operate in total secrecy as it weeds out perceived threats to Beijing's iron-fisted rule. In both places, Xi has demonstrated that he is willing to accept international opprobrium when he feels that the party's core interests are at stake.

At home, Xi stokes nationalist sentiment by framing China as surrounded and besieged by enemies, exploiting a deeply emotional (and

highly distorted) view of the past, and romanticizing China's battles against the Japanese in World War II and its "victory" over the United States in the Korean War. By warning that China has entered a period of heightened risk from "hostile foreign forces," Xi is attempting to accommodate Chinese citizens to the idea of more difficult times ahead and ensure that the party and he himself are viewed as stabilizing forces.

Meanwhile, to exploit a perceived window of opportunity during an American retreat from global affairs, Beijing has advanced aggressively on multiple foreign policy fronts. These include the use of "gray zone" tactics, such as employing commercial fishing boats to assert territorial interests in the South China Sea and establishing China's first overseas military base, in Djibouti. China's vast domestic market has allowed Xi to threaten countries that don't demonstrate political and diplomatic obedience, as evidenced by Beijing's recent campaign of economic coercion against Australia in response to Canberra's call for an independent investigation into the origins of the virus that causes COVID-19. Similarly, Xi has encouraged Chinese "Wolf Warrior" diplomats to intimidate and harass host countries that criticize or otherwise antagonize China. Earlier this year, Beijing levied sanctions against Jo Smith Finley, a British anthropologist and political scientist who studies Xinjiang, and the Mercator Institute for China Studies, a German think tank, whose work the CCP claimed had "severely harm[ed] China's sovereignty and interests."

Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping demonstrated strategic patience in asserting China's interests on the global stage. Indeed, Mao told U.S. President Richard Nixon that China could wait 100 years to reclaim Taiwan, and Deng negotiated the return of Hong Kong under the promise (since broken by Xi) of a 50-year period of local autonomy. Both leaders had a profound sense of China's relative fragility and the importance of careful, nuanced statesmanship. Xi does not share their equanimity, or their confidence in long-term solutions.

That has sparked concerns that Xi will attempt an extraordinarily risky gambit to take Taiwan by force by 2027, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army. It seems doubtful, however, that he would invite a possible military conflict with the United States just 110 miles from China's shoreline. Assuming the PLA were successful in overcoming Taiwan's defenses, to say nothing of surmounting possible U.S. involvement, Xi would then have to carry out a military occupation against sustained resistance for an indeterminate length of time. An attempted takeover of Taiwan would undermine

nearly all of Xi's other global and domestic ambitions. Nevertheless, although the more extreme scenarios might remain unlikely for the time being, Xi will continue to have China flaunt its strength in its neighborhood and push outward in pursuit of its interests. On many issues, he appears to want final resolution on his watch.

THE MAN OF THE SYSTEM

Xi's tendency to believe he can shape the precise course of China's trajectory calls to mind the economist Adam Smith's description of "the man of system": a leader "so enamored with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it." In order to realize his near-term goals, Xi has abandoned the invisible hand of the market and forged an economic system that relies on state actors to reach predetermined objectives.

Critical to this shift has been Xi's reliance on industrial policy, a tool of economic statecraft that had fallen out of favor until near the end of the tenure of Xi's predecessor, Hu, when it began to shape Beijing's approach to technological innovation. The year 2015 marked an important inflection point, with the introduction of supersized industrial policy programs that sought not just to advance a given technology or industry but also to remake the entire structure of the economy. These included the Made in China 2025 plan, which aims to upgrade China's manufacturing capabilities in a number of important sectors; the Internet Plus strategy, a scheme to integrate information technology into more traditional industries; and the 14th Five-Year Plan, which outlines an ambitious agenda to decrease China's reliance on foreign technology inputs. Through such policies, Beijing channels tens of trillions of yuan into companies, technologies, and sectors it considers strategically significant. It does this by means of direct subsidies, tax rebates, and quasi-market "government guidance funds," which resemble state-controlled venture capital firms.

Thus far, Beijing's track record in this area is decidedly mixed: in many cases, vast sums of investment have produced meager returns. But as the economist Barry Naughton has cautioned, "Chinese industrial policies are so large, and so new, that we are not yet in a position to evaluate them. They may turn out to be successful, but it is also possible that they will turn out to be disastrous."

Related to this industrial policy is Xi's approach to China's private-sector companies, including many of the technological and financial

giants that just a few years ago observers viewed as possible agents of political and social change. Technological innovation put firms such as Ant Group and Tencent in control of critical new data flows and financial technology. Xi clearly perceived this as an unacceptable threat, as demonstrated by the CCP's recent spiking of Ant Group's initial public offering in the wake of comments made by its founder, Jack Ma, that many perceived as critical of the party.

Xi is willing to forgo a boost in China's international financial prestige to protect the party's interests and send a signal to business elites: the party comes first. This is no David and Goliath story, however. It's more akin to a family feud, given the close and enduring connections between China's nominally private firms and its political system. Indeed, nearly all of China's most successful entrepreneurs are members of the CCP, and for many companies, success depends on favors granted by the party, including protection from foreign competition. But whereas previous Chinese leaders granted wide latitude to the private sector, Xi has forcefully drawn a line. Doing so has further restricted the country's ability to innovate. No matter how sophisticated Beijing's regulators and state investors may be, sustained innovation and gains in productivity cannot occur without a vibrant private sector.

GRAND STRATEGY OR GRAND TRAGEDY?

In order to seize temporary advantages and forestall domestic challenges, Xi has positioned himself for a 15-year race, one for which he has mobilized the awesome capabilities of a system that he now commands unchallenged. Xi's truncated time frame compels a sense of urgency that will define Beijing's policy agenda, risk tolerance, and willingness to compromise as it sprints ahead. This will narrow the options available to countries hoping to shape China's behavior or hoping that the "Wolf Warrior" attitude will naturally recede.

The United States can disprove Beijing's contention that its democracy has atrophied and that Washington's star is dimming by strengthening the resilience of American society and improving the competence of the U.S. government. If the United States and its allies invest in innovation and human capital, they can forestall Xi's efforts to gain first-mover advantage in emerging and critical technologies. Likewise, a more active and forward-looking U.S. role in shaping the global order would limit Beijing's ability to spread illiberal ideas beyond China's borders.

Unwittingly, Xi has put China into competition with itself, in a race to determine if its many strengths can outstrip the pathologies that Xi himself has introduced to the system. By the time he assumed power, the CCP had established a fairly predictable process for the regular and peaceful transition of power. Next fall, the 20th Party Congress will be held, and normally, a leader who has been in charge as long as Xi has would step aside. To date, however, there is no expectation that Xi will do so. This is an extraordinarily risky move, not just for the CCP itself but also for the future of China. With no successor in sight, if Xi dies unexpectedly in the next decade, the country could be thrown into chaos.

Even assuming that Xi remains healthy while in power, the longer his tenure persists, the more the CCP will resemble a cult of personality, as it did under Mao. Elements of this are already evident, with visible sycophancy among China's political class now the norm. Paeans to the greatness of "Xi Jinping Thought" may strike outsiders as merely curious or even comical, but they have a genuinely deleterious effect on the quality of decision-making and information flows within the party.

It would be ironic, and tragic, if Xi, a leader with a mission to save the party and the country, instead imperiled both. His current course threatens to undo the great progress China has made over the past four decades. In the end, Xi may be correct that the next decade will determine China's long-term success. What he likely does not understand is that he himself may be the biggest obstacle.

The Taiwan Temptation

Why Beijing Might Resort to Force

Oriana Skylar Mastro

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For more than 70 years, China and Taiwan have avoided coming to blows. The two entities have been separated since 1949, when the Chinese Civil War, which had begun in 1927, ended with the Communists' victory and the Nationalists' retreat to Taiwan. Ever since, the strait separating Taiwan from mainland China—81 miles wide at its narrowest—has been the site of habitual crises and everlasting tensions, but never outright war. For the past decade and a half, cross-strait relations have been relatively stable. In the hopes of persuading the Taiwanese people of the benefits to be gained through a long-overdue unification, China largely pursued its long-standing policy of "peaceful reunification," enhancing its economic, cultural, and social ties with the island.

To help the people of Taiwan see the light, Beijing sought to isolate Taipei internationally, offering economic inducements to the island's allies if they agreed to abandon Taipei for Beijing. It also used its growing economic leverage to weaken Taipei's position in international organizations and to ensure that countries, corporations, universities, and individuals—everyone, everywhere, really—adhered to its understanding of the "one China" policy. As sharp as these tactics

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were, they stopped well short of military action. And although Chinese officials always maintained that they had a right to use force, that option seemed off the table.

In recent months, however, there have been disturbing signals that Beijing is reconsidering its peaceful approach and contemplating armed unification. Chinese President Xi Jinping has made clear his ambition to resolve the Taiwan issue, grown markedly more aggressive on issues of sovereignty, and ordered the Chinese military to increase its activity near the island. He has also fanned the flames of Chinese nationalism and allowed discussion of a forceful takeover of Taiwan to creep into the mainstream of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The palpable shift in Beijing's thinking has been made possible by a decades-long military modernization effort, accelerated by Xi, aimed at allowing China to force Taiwan back into the fold. Chinese forces plan to prevail even if the United States, which has armed Taiwan but left open the question of whether it would defend it against an attack, intervenes militarily. Whereas Chinese leaders used to view a military campaign to take the island as a fantasy, now they consider it a real possibility.

U.S. policymakers may hope that Beijing will balk at the potential costs of such aggression, but there are many reasons to think it might not. Support for armed unification among the Chinese public and the military establishment is growing. Concern for international norms is subsiding. Many in Beijing also doubt that the United States has the military power to stop China from taking Taiwan—or the international clout to rally an effective coalition against China in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency. Although a Chinese invasion of Taiwan may not be imminent, for the first time in three decades, it is time to take seriously the possibility that China could soon use force to end its almost century-long civil war.

"NO OPTION IS EXCLUDED"

Those who doubt the immediacy of the threat to Taiwan argue that Xi has not publicly declared a timeline for unification—and may not even have a specific one in mind. Since 1979, when the United States stopped recognizing Taiwan, China's policy has been, in the words of John Culver, a retired U.S. intelligence officer and Asia analyst, "to preserve the possibility of political unification at some undefined point in the future." Implied in this formulation is that China can live with the status quo—a de facto, but not de jure, independent Taiwan—in perpetuity.

But although Xi may not have sent out a save-the-date card, he has clearly indicated that he feels differently about the status quo than his predecessors did. He has publicly called for progress toward unification, staking his legitimacy on movement in that direction. In 2017, for instance, he announced that "complete national reunification is an inevitable requirement for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," thus tying Taiwan's future to his primary political platform. Two years later, he stated explicitly that unification is a requirement for achieving the so-called Chinese dream.

Xi has also made clear that he is more willing than his predecessors to use force. In a major speech in January 2019, Xi called the current political arrangement "the root cause of cross-strait instability" and said that it "cannot go on generation to generation." Chinese scholars and strategists I have spoken to in Beijing say that although there is no explicit timeline, Xi wants unification with Taiwan to be part of his personal legacy. When asked about a possible timeline by an Associated Press journalist in April, Le Yucheng, China's vice foreign minister, did not attempt to assuage concerns of an imminent invasion or deny the shift in mood in Beijing. Instead, he took the opportunity to reiterate that national unification "will not be stopped by anyone or any force" and that while China will strive for peaceful unification, it does not "pledge to give up other options. No option is excluded."

Chinese leaders, including Xi, regularly extol the virtues of integration and cooperation with Taiwan, but the prospects for peaceful unification have been dwindling for years. Fewer and fewer Taiwanese see themselves as Chinese or desire to be a part of mainland China. The reelection in January 2020 of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who favors pursuing more cautious ties with China, reinforced Beijing's fears that the people of Taiwan will never willingly come back to the motherland. The death knell for peaceful unification came in June 2020, however, when China exerted sweeping new powers over Hong Kong through a new national security law. Hong Kong's "one country, two systems" formula was supposed to provide an attractive template for peaceful unification, but Beijing's crackdown there demonstrated clearly why the Taiwanese have been right to reject such an arrangement.

Chinese leaders will continue to pay lip service to peaceful unification until the day the war breaks out, but their actions increasingly suggest that they have something else in mind. As tensions with the

United States have heated up, China has accelerated its military operations in the vicinity of Taiwan, conducting 380 incursions into the island's air defense identification zone in 2020 alone. In April of this year, China sent its largest-ever fleet, 25 fighters and bombers, into Taiwan's air defense identification zone. Clearly, Xi is no longer trying to avoid escalation at all costs now that his military is capable of contesting the U.S. military presence in the region. Long gone are the days of the 1996 crisis over Taiwan, when the United States dispatched two aircraft carrier battle groups to sail near the strait and China backed off. Beijing did not like being deterred back then, and it spent the next 25 years modernizing its military so that it would not be so next time.

Much of that modernization, including updates to hardware, organization, force structure, and training, was designed to enable the People's Liberation Army to invade and occupy Taiwan. Xi expanded the military's capabilities further, undertaking the most ambitious restructuring of the PLA since its founding, aimed specifically at enabling Chinese forces to conduct joint operations in which the air force, the navy, the army, and the strategic rocket force fight seamlessly together, whether during an amphibious landing, a blockade, or a missile attack—exactly the kinds of operations needed for armed unification. Xi urgently pushed these risky reforms, many unpopular with the military, to ensure that the PLA could fight and win wars by 2020.

The voices in Beijing arguing that it is time to use these newfound military capabilities against Taiwan have grown louder, a telling development in an era of greater censorship. Several retired military officers have argued publicly that the longer China waits, the harder it will be to take control of Taiwan. Articles in state-run news outlets and on popular websites have likewise urged China to act swiftly. And if public opinion polls are to be believed, the Chinese people agree that the time has come to resolve the Taiwan issue once and for all. According to a survey by the state-run *Global Times*, 70 percent of mainlanders strongly support using force to unify Taiwan with the mainland, and 37 percent think it would be best if the war occurred in three to five years.

The Chinese analysts and officials I have spoken to have revealed similar sentiments. Even moderate voices have admitted that not only are calls for armed unification proliferating within the CCP but also they themselves have recommended military action to senior Chinese leadership. Others in Beijing dismiss concerns about a Chinese inva-

sion as overblown, but in the same breath, they acknowledge that Xi is surrounded by military advisers who tell him with confidence that China can now regain Taiwan by force at an acceptable cost.

BATTLE READY

Unless the United States or Taiwan moves first to alter the status quo, Xi will likely consider initiating armed unification only if he is confident that his military can successfully gain control of the island. Can it?

The answer is a matter of debate, and it depends on what it would take to compel Taiwan's capitulation. Beijing is preparing for four main campaigns that its military planners believe could be necessary to take control of the island. The first consists of joint PLA missile and airstrikes to disarm Taiwanese targets—initially military and government, then civilian—and thereby force Taipei's submission to Chinese demands. The second is a blockade operation in which China would attempt to cut the island off from the outside world with everything from naval raids to cyberattacks. The third involves missile and airstrikes against U.S. forces deployed nearby, with the aim of making it difficult for the United States to come to Taiwan's aid in the initial stages of the conflict. The fourth and final campaign is an island landing effort in which China would launch an amphibious assault on Taiwan—perhaps taking its offshore islands first as part of a phased invasion or carpet bombing them as the navy, the army, and the air force focused on Taiwan proper.

Among defense experts, there is little debate about China's ability to pull off the first three of these campaigns—the joint strike, the blockade, and the counterintervention mission. Neither U.S. efforts to make its regional bases more resilient nor Taiwanese missile defense systems are any match for China's ballistic and cruise missiles, which are the most advanced in the world. China could quickly destroy Taiwan's key infrastructure, block its oil imports, and cut off its Internet access—and sustain such a blockade indefinitely. According to Lonnie Henley, a retired U.S. intelligence officer and China specialist, "U.S. forces could probably push through a trickle of relief supplies, but not much more." And because China has such a sophisticated air defense system, the United States would have little hope of regaining air or naval superiority by attacking Chinese missile transporters, fighters, or ships.

But China's fourth and final campaign—an amphibious assault on the island itself—is far from guaranteed to succeed. According to a

2020 U.S. Department of Defense report, "China continues to build capabilities that would contribute to a full-scale invasion," but "an attempt to invade Taiwan would likely strain China's armed forces and invite international intervention." The then commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Philip Davidson, said in March that China will have the ability to successfully invade Taiwan in six years. Other observers think it will take longer, perhaps until around 2030 or 2035.

What everyone agrees is that China has made significant strides in its ability to conduct joint operations in recent years and that the United States needs adequate warning to mount a successful defense. As Beijing hones its spoofing and jamming technologies, it may be able to scramble U.S. early warning systems and thereby keep U.S. forces in the dark in the early hours of an attack. Xi's military reforms have improved China's cyberwarfare and electronic warfare capabilities, which could be trained on civilian, as well as military, targets. As Dan Coats, then the U.S. director of national intelligence, testified in 2019, Beijing is capable of offensive cyberattacks against the United States that would cause "localized, temporary disruptive effects on critical infrastructure." China's offensive weaponry, including ballistic and cruise missiles, could also destroy U.S. bases in the western Pacific in a matter of days.

In light of these enhanced capabilities, many U.S. experts worry that China could take control of Taiwan before the United States even had a chance to react. Recent war games conducted by the Pentagon and the RAND Corporation have shown that a military clash between the United States and China over Taiwan would likely result in a U.S. defeat, with China completing an all-out invasion in just days or weeks.

Ultimately, on the question of whether China will use force, Chinese leaders' perceptions of their chances of victory will matter more than their actual chances of victory. For that reason, it is bad news that Chinese analysts and officials increasingly express confidence that the PLA is well prepared for a military confrontation with the United States over Taiwan. Although Chinese strategists acknowledge the United States' general military superiority, many have come to believe that because China is closer to Taiwan and cares about it more, the local balance of power tips in Beijing's favor.

As U.S.-Chinese tensions have risen, China's state-sponsored media outlets have grown more vocal in their praise for the country's military capabilities. In April, the *Global Times* described an unnamed military expert saying that "the PLA exercises are not only warnings,

but also show real capabilities and pragmatically practicing reunifying the island if it comes to that." If China chooses to invade, the analyst added, the Taiwanese military "won't stand a chance."

GO FAST, GO SLOW

Once China has the military capabilities to finally solve its Taiwan problem, Xi could find it politically untenable not to do so, given the heightened nationalism of both the CCP and the public. At this point, Beijing will likely work its way up to a large-scale military campaign, beginning with "gray zone" tactics, such as increased air and naval patrols, and continuing on to coercive diplomacy aimed at forcing Taipei to negotiate a political resolution.

Psychological warfare will also be part of Beijing's playbook. Chinese exercises around Taiwan not only help train the PLA but also wear down Taiwan's military and demonstrate to the world that the United States cannot protect the island. The PLA wants to make its presence in the Taiwan Strait routine. The more common its activities there become, the harder it will be for the United States to determine when a Chinese attack is imminent, making it easier for the PLA to present the world with a fait accompli.

At the same time that it ramps up its military activities in the strait, China will continue its broader diplomatic campaign to eliminate international constraints on its ability to use force, privileging economic rights over political ones in its relations with other countries and within international bodies, downplaying human rights, and, above all, promoting the norms of sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs. Its goal is to create the narrative that any use of force against Taiwan would be defensive and justified given Taipei's and Washington's provocations. All these coercive and diplomatic efforts will move China closer to unification, but they won't get it all the way there. Taiwan is not some unoccupied atoll in the South China Sea that China can successfully claim so long as other countries do not respond militarily. China needs Taiwan's complete capitulation, and that will likely require a significant show of force.

If Beijing decides to initiate a campaign to forcibly bring Taiwan under Chinese sovereignty, it will try to calibrate its actions to discourage U.S. intervention. It might, for example, begin with low-cost military options, such as joint missile and airstrikes, and only escalate to a blockade, a seizure of offshore islands, and, finally, a full-blown

invasion if its earlier actions fail to compel Taiwan to capitulate. Conducted slowly over the course of many months, such a gradual approach to armed unification would make it difficult for the United States to mount a strong response, especially if U.S. allies and partners in the region wish to avoid a war at all costs. A gradual, coercive approach would also force Washington to initiate direct hostilities between the two powers. And if China has not fired a shot at U.S. forces, the United States would find it harder to make the case at home and in Asian capitals for a U.S. military intervention to turn back a slow-motion Chinese invasion. An incremental approach would have domestic political benefits for Beijing, as well. If China received more international pushback than expected or became embroiled in a campaign against the United States that started to go badly, it would have more opportunities to pull back and claim "mission accomplished."

But China could decide to escalate much more rapidly if it concluded that the United States was likely to intervene militarily regardless of whether Beijing moved swiftly or gradually. Chinese military strategists believe that if they give the United States time to mobilize and amass firepower in the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait, China's chances of victory will decrease substantially. As a result, they could decide to preemptively hit U.S. bases in the region, crippling Washington's ability to respond.

In other words, U.S. deterrence—to the extent that it is based on a credible threat to intervene militarily to protect Taiwan—could actually incentivize an attack on U.S. forces once Beijing has decided to act. The more credible the American threat to intervene, the more likely China would be to hit U.S. forces in the region in its opening salvo. But if China thought the United States might stay out of the conflict, it would decline to attack U.S. forces in the region, since doing so would inevitably bring the United States into the war.

WISHFUL THINKING

What might dissuade Xi from pursuing armed unification, if not U.S. military might? Most Western analysts believe that Xi's devotion to his signature plan to achieve the "Chinese dream" of "national rejuvenation," which requires him to maintain economic growth and improve China's international standing, will deter him from using military force and risking derailing his agenda. They argue that the economic costs of a military campaign against Taiwan would be too high, that China

would be left completely isolated internationally, and that Chinese occupation of the island would tie up Beijing for decades to come.

But these arguments about the cost of armed unification are based more on American projections and wishful thinking than on fact. A protracted, high-intensity conflict would indeed be costly for China, but Chinese war planners have set out to avoid this scenario; China is unlikely to attack Taiwan unless it is confident that it can achieve a quick victory, ideally before the United States can even respond.

Even if China found itself in a protracted war with the United States, however, Chinese leaders may believe they have social and economic advantages that would enable them to outlast the Americans. They see the Chinese people as more willing to make sacrifices for the cause of Taiwan than the American people. Some argue, too, that China's large domestic market makes it less reliant on international trade than many other countries. (The more China economically decouples from the United States and the closer it gets to technological self-sufficiency, the greater this advantage will be.) Chinese leaders could also take comfort in their ability to quickly transition to an industrial wartime footing. The United States has no such ability to rapidly produce military equipment.

International isolation and coordinated punishment of Beijing might seem like a greater threat to Xi's great Chinese experiment. Eight of China's top ten trading partners are democracies, and nearly 60 percent of China's exports go to the United States and its allies. If these countries responded to a Chinese assault on Taiwan by severing trade ties with China, the economic costs could threaten the developmental components of Xi's rejuvenation plan.

But Chinese leaders have good reason to suspect that international isolation and opprobrium would be relatively mild. When China began to cultivate strategic partnerships in the mid-1990s, it required other countries and organizations, including the European Union, to sign long-term agreements to prioritize these relationships and proactively manage any tensions or disruptions. All these agreements mention trade, investment, economic cooperation, and working together in the United Nations. Most include provisions in support of Beijing's position on Taiwan. (Since 1996, China has convinced more than a dozen countries to switch their diplomatic recognition to Beijing, leaving Taiwan with only 15 remaining allies.) In other words, many of China's most important trading partners have already sent a strong signal that they will not let Taiwan derail their relationships with Beijing.

Whether compelling airlines to take Taiwan off their maps or pressuring Paramount Pictures to remove the Taiwanese flag from the *Top Gun* hero Maverick's jacket, China has largely succeeded in convincing many countries that Taiwan is an internal matter that they should stay out of. Australia has been cautious about expanding its military cooperation with the United States and reluctant even to consider joint contingency planning over Taiwan (although the tide seems to be shifting in Canberra). Opinion polls show that most Europeans value their economic ties with China and the United States roughly the same and don't want to be caught in the middle. Southeast Asia feels similarly, with polls showing that the majority of policymakers and thought leaders from member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations believe the best approach to U.S.-Chinese sparring is for the association to "enhance its own resilience and unity to fend off their pressures." One South Korean official put it more memorably in an interview with *The Atlantic*, comparing the need to pick sides in the U.S.-Chinese dispute to "asking a child whether you like your dad or your mom." Such attitudes suggest that the United States would struggle to convince its allies to isolate China. And if the international reaction to Beijing's crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang is any indication, the most China can expect after an invasion of Taiwan are some symbolic sanctions and words of criticism.

The risk that a bloody insurgency in Taiwan will drag on for years and drain Beijing of resources is no more of a deterrent—and the idea that it would be says more about the United States' scars from Afghanistan and Iraq than about likely scenarios for Taiwan. The PLA's military textbooks assume the need for a significant campaign to consolidate power after its troops have landed and broken through Taiwan's coastal defenses, but they do not express much concern about it. This may be because although the PLA has not fought a war since 1979, China has ample experience with internal repression and dedicates more resources to that mission than to its military. The People's Armed Police boasts at least 1.5 million members, whose primary mission is suppressing opposition. Compared with the military task of invading and seizing Taiwan in the first place, occupying it probably looks like a piece of cake.

For all these reasons, Xi may believe he can regain control of Taiwan without jeopardizing his Chinese dream. It is telling that in the flood of commentary on Taiwan that has come out of China in recent months, few articles have mentioned the costs of war or the potential

reaction from the international community. As one retired high-level military officer explained to me recently, China's main concern isn't the costs; it's sovereignty. Chinese leaders will always fight for what is theirs. And if China defeats the United States along the way, it will become the new dominant power in the Asia-Pacific. The prospects are tantalizing. The worst-case scenario, moreover, is that the United States reacts more quickly and effectively than expected, forcing China to declare victory after limited gains and go home. Beijing would live to capture Taiwan another day.

NO EXIT

These realities make it very difficult for the United States to alter China's calculus on Taiwan. Richard Haass and David Sacks of the Council on Foreign Relations have argued in *Foreign Affairs* that the United States could improve cross-strait deterrence by ending its long-standing policy of "strategic ambiguity"—that is, declining to state specifically whether and how it would come to Taiwan's defense. But the main problem is not U.S. resolve, since Chinese leaders already assume the United States will intervene. What matters to Xi and other top Chinese leaders is whether they think the PLA can prevail even in the face of U.S. intervention. For that reason, successful deterrence requires convincing China that the United States can prevent it from achieving its military objectives in Taiwan, a difficult undertaking that would come with its own downsides and potential risks.

One way to convince Beijing would be to develop the capabilities to physically stop it from taking Taiwan—deterrence by denial. This would involve positioning missile launchers and armed drones near Taiwan and more long-range munitions, especially antiship weapons, in places such as Guam, Japan, and the Philippines. These weapons would help repel a Chinese amphibious and air assault in the initial stages of an attack. If Chinese leaders knew their forces could not physically make it across the strait, they would not consider trying unless Taiwan took the truly unacceptable step of declaring independence.

The United States would also need to invest heavily in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in the region. The attractiveness of a full-on invasion from China's perspective lies in the possibility of surprise: the United States may not be able to respond militarily until after Beijing has taken control of the island and the war is over. Leav-

ing aside the operational challenges of such a response, it would be politically difficult for any U.S. president to authorize an attack on China when no shots were being fired at the time.

An enhanced U.S. military and intelligence presence in the Indo-Pacific would be sufficient to deter most forms of armed unification, but it wouldn't prevent China from using force altogether. Beijing could still try to use missile strikes to convince Taiwan to bend to its will. To deter all Chinese military aggression, the United States would therefore need to be prepared to destroy China's missile batteries—which would involve U.S. strikes on the Chinese mainland. Even if U.S. intelligence capabilities improve, the United States would risk mistaking Chinese military exercises for preparations for an invasion—and igniting a war by mistake. China knows this and may conclude the United States would not take the chance.

The most effective way to deter Chinese leaders from attacking Taiwan is also the most difficult: to convince them that armed unification would cost China its rejuvenation. And the United States cannot do this alone. Washington would need to persuade a large coalition of allies to commit to a coordinated economic, political, and military response to any Chinese aggression. And that, unfortunately, remains a remote possibility, since many countries are unwilling to risk their economic prospects, let alone a major-power war, in order to defend a small democratic island.

Ultimately, then, there is no quick and easy fix to the escalating tensions across the strait. The only way the United States can ensure Taiwan's security is to make an invasion impossible for Beijing or to convince Chinese leaders that using force will cause them to be pariahs. For the last 25 years, however, Beijing has sought to prevent Washington from doing either. Unfortunately for Taiwan, only now is the United States waking up to the new reality.

The Forever Virus

A Strategy for the Long Fight Against COVID-19

Larry Brilliant, Lisa Danzig, Karen Oppenheimer, Agastya Mondal, Rick Bright, and W. Ian Lipkin

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It is time to say it out loud: the virus behind the COVID-19 pandemic is not going away. SARS-CoV-2 cannot be eradicated, since it is already growing in more than a dozen different animal species. Among humans, global herd immunity, once promoted as a singular solution, is unreachable. Most countries simply don't have enough vaccines to go around, and even in the lucky few with an ample supply, too many people are refusing to get the shot. As a result, the world will not reach the point where enough people are im-

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mune to stop the virus's spread before the emergence of dangerous variants—ones that are more transmissible, vaccine resistant, and even able to evade current diagnostic tests. Such supervariants could bring the world back to square one. It might be 2020 all over again.

Rather than die out, the virus will likely ping-pong back and forth across the globe for years to come. Some of yesterday's success stories are now vulnerable to serious outbreaks. Many of these are places that kept the pandemic at bay through tight border controls and excellent testing, tracing, and isolation but have been unable to acquire good vaccines. Witness Taiwan and Vietnam, which experienced impressively few deaths until May 2021, when, owing to a lack of vaccination, they faced a reversal of fortune. But even countries that have vaccinated large proportions of their populations will be vulnerable to outbreaks caused by certain variants. That is what appears to have happened in several hot spots in Chile, Mongolia, the Seychelles, and the United Kingdom. The virus is here to stay. The question is, What do we need to do to ensure that we are, too?

Conquering a pandemic is not only about money and resources; it is also about ideas and strategy. In 1854, at a time when germ theory had yet to take hold, the physician John Snow stopped a cholera epidemic in London by tracing its source to an infected well; after he persuaded community leaders to remove the handle from the well's pump, the outbreak ended. In the 1970s, smallpox was rampant in Africa and India. The epidemiologist William Foege, working in a hospital in Nigeria, recognized that the small amount of vaccine he had been allocated was not enough to inoculate everyone. So he pioneered a new way of using vaccines, focusing not on volunteers or the well-connected but on the people most at risk of getting the disease next. By the end of the decade, thanks to this strategy—first called "surveillance and containment" and later "ring vaccination"—smallpox had been eradicated. It is a twenty-first-century version of this strategy, along with faster mass vaccination, that could help make COVID-19 history.

For this pandemic, epidemiology also has tools to return the world to a state of relative normalcy, to allow us to live with SARS-CoV-2 as we learned to deal with other diseases, such as influenza and measles. The key lies in treating vaccines as transferable resources that can be rapidly deployed where they are needed most: to hot spots where infection rates are high and vaccine supplies are low. The United States,

flush with vaccines, is well positioned to lead this effort, using a modernized version of the strategy employed to control smallpox.

Meanwhile, governments should exploit new technologies to get better at identifying and containing outbreaks. That means embracing exposure notification systems to alert people to their possible infection. And it means enhancing capabilities to sequence viral genomes, so that researchers can rapidly determine which variant is where and which vaccines work best against each. All this needs to happen as quickly as possible. The slower countries vaccinate people most at risk of spreading the disease, the more variants will emerge.

The international system for responding to pandemics must also be repaired. As the current crisis has laid bare, that system is dangerously underfunded, slow, and vulnerable to political interference. In a time of rising nationalism, countries need to find a way to work together to reform the global public health institutions that will be responsible for waging this long fight against COVID-19. These bodies must be protected and empowered so that they can work faster than they have.

The pandemic is in many ways a story of magical thinking. In the early days of 2020, many leaders denied that what began as a regional outbreak in Wuhan, China, could spread far and wide. As the months went on, governments imagined that the virus could be contained with border controls and that its spread would miraculously slow with warm weather. They believed that temperature checks could identify everyone who harbored the virus, that existing drugs could be repurposed to mitigate the disease, and that natural infection would result in durable immunity—all assumptions that proved wrong. As the body count rose, many leaders remained in a state of denial. Ignoring the scientific community, they failed to encourage mask wearing and social distancing, even as the evidence mounted. Now, governments must come to grips with another inconvenient truth: that what many hoped would be a short-lived crisis will instead be a long, slow fight against a remarkably resilient virus.

HOW WE GOT HERE

COVID-19 hit at an inauspicious geopolitical moment. An era of rising nationalism and populism made it frustratingly difficult to mount a collaborative response to a global pandemic. Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Xi Jinping of China, Narendra Modi of India, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Boris Johnson of the United

Kingdom, and Donald Trump of the United States—all these leaders evinced some combination of parochialism and political insecurity, which caused them to downplay the crisis, ignore the science, and reject international cooperation.

The two countries vying for global leadership are most to blame for allowing an outbreak of a novel disease to become a crippling pandemic: China and the United States. Even setting aside the question of whether the virus jumped to humans as a result of a lab accident or animal spillover, Beijing was less than forthright in sharing information about the scale of the problem in its early days. And although it may never be clear what Chinese decision-makers knew when, it was nonetheless irresponsible of them to allow international travel in and out of an epidemic area during a period of intense holiday travel—a decision that possibly created a superspreader event.

The United States, for its part, disregarded early warnings from dozens of epidemiological Cassandras and denied the gravity of the emerging crisis. The Trump administration treated COVID-19 as an abstract threat instead of the clear and present danger it was and failed to mount a coordinated national response. The U.S. government banned some but not all travel from China, waited way too long to control travel from Europe, refused diagnostic test kits developed abroad, and bungled the development of its own test kits. It failed to procure and distribute the personal protective equipment needed to safeguard frontline workers and the general population, leaving states to compete with one another for critical supplies. Politicians made mask wearing a matter of political identity. The result of all the chaos, delay, and stupidity was a largely uncontrolled spread and a heightened death toll. The United States is a rich, educated country that is home to the world's leading scientific institutions and just over four percent of the global population. Yet in the first year of this pandemic, it had an astounding 25 percent of the world's COVID-19 cases and 20 percent of deaths from the disease.

Some governments did take the threat seriously. At the beginning of the pandemic, the best predictor of a country's success against this coronavirus was recent experience with an outbreak caused by an earlier coronavirus—SARS or MERS. When COVID-19 appeared, Taiwan, which had been hit hard by SARS in 2003, rapidly implemented screenings, closed its borders to residents of Wuhan, and activated a command center to coordinate its response. Fortu-

nate to have an epidemiologist at the helm as vice president, the Taiwanese government acted transparently. It rolled out a program of comprehensive testing, tracing, and isolation and encouraged social distancing and mask wearing. As of May 1, 2021, Taiwan had reported just 12 deaths from COVID-19.

Vietnam had also learned from SARS. In the years following that epidemic, it built a robust public health infrastructure, including an emergency operations center and a national surveillance system to facilitate data sharing and case finding. When the current pandemic hit, the government was ready to implement a program of mass testing, contact tracing, quarantining, and business shutdowns. By April 2020, Vietnam had deployed a mobile app to over half its population that automatically notified users if they had been near someone with a confirmed case of COVID-19. Despite having a dense population of 96 million, the country reported no new deaths from September 2020 to May 2021. By early May, it had counted a total of just 35 deaths.

By contrast, the international response to COVID-19 was surprisingly inept, especially compared with previous campaigns to contain epidemics or eradicate diseases. With smallpox and polio, for example, governments and international organizations worked together to develop and fund cohesive strategies, around which response teams were organized worldwide. Not so for COVID-19. Politics undermined public health in a global crisis to an extent nobody had thought possible. The president of the United States silenced trusted public health leaders from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the respected disease-prevention agency that the world expected to take the lead in that very moment, and he withdrew the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO) just as global collaboration was needed most. Emboldened by Trump, self-interested leaders elsewhere followed suit, pursuing disease-denying policies that further amplified the death toll and suffering.

Vaccine development has been one of the few bright spots in this pandemic. Pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies worked hand in hand with governments to make powerful new vaccines in record time. The two vaccines based on messenger RNA, or mRNA—the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech ones—moved lightning fast. Just two months after the genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2 was published, the Moderna vaccine was being tested in a Phase 1 clinical trial, and not long after, it moved on to Phase 2. At the same time, a number

of actors—the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations; Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance; the WHO; and many governments, companies, and philanthropies—were investing massively in manufacturing capacity. As a result, the companies behind the two vaccines were able to rapidly scale up production and conduct Phase 3 trials over the summer. The trials demonstrated that the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines were not just safe but also far more effective than many had thought, and by the end of 2020, regulatory agencies around the world had authorized them for emergency use. Vaccines based on a modified adenovirus also moved quickly. The United Kingdom authorized the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine in December 2020, and the United States did the same for the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine in February 2021.

Although the creation of the vaccines was a triumph of international cooperation, their distribution has been anything but. Hedging their bets, the United States and other rich countries bought many times the number of doses they needed from several manufacturers, essentially cornering the vaccine market as if the product were a commodity. Making matters worse, some countries imposed restrictive export regulations that have prevented the wider manufacture and distribution of the vaccines. In May, pointing out that 75 percent of the vaccine doses had so far gone to just ten countries, the WHO's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, rightly called the distribution a "scandalous inequity that is perpetuating the pandemic."

In the absence of global coordination for the purchase and distribution of vaccines, governments struck bilateral deals, leaving some unlucky countries with less effective or untested vaccines. For instance, China has exported more than 200 million doses of four homegrown vaccines—more than any other country—and yet there is disturbingly little transparent data on the Chinese vaccines' safety. Anecdotal reports from Brazil, Chile, and the Seychelles have raised doubts about their efficacy. Meanwhile, India's devastating surge in COVID-19 cases has reduced exports of its locally produced vaccines, leaving the countries that were depending on them, such as Bhutan, Kenya, Nepal, and Rwanda, with inadequate supplies. The United States made a lot of promises, but as of late May, the only vaccine it had exported was the Oxford-AstraZeneca one—which the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had not yet authorized—sending four million doses to its neighbors, Canada and Mexico.

To provide at least a cushion of vaccines for less well-off countries, and to help the WHO manage the challenge of global vaccine distribution, a coalition of organizations created a unique consortium called COVAX. The body went on to develop an "advance market commitment" mechanism, through which governments have agreed to buy large numbers of doses at predetermined prices. The goal is to raise enough money to provide nearly one billion doses to 92 countries that are not able to pay for vaccines themselves, allowing each to meet 20 percent of its vaccine needs. As of May, however, reaching this target anytime in 2021 seemed a long shot.

In fact, the barriers to access have been so profound that many low- and middle-income countries won't have enough vaccines to inoculate even just their at-risk populations until 2023. This disparity has led to a jarring split-screen image. At the same time that Americans were taking off their masks and preparing for summer vacations, India, with only three percent of its 1.4 billion inhabitants fully vaccinated, was ablaze in funeral pyres.

THE CORONAVIRUS AT A CROSSROADS

Over a year and a half into the pandemic, it has become clear that the race to contain the virus is simultaneously a sprint and a marathon. Yes, the world needs to vaccinate as many people as possible as quickly as possible to slow the spread of the virus. But if every human on the planet were vaccinated tomorrow, SARS-CoV-2 would still live on in multiple animal species, including monkeys, cats, and deer. In Denmark, more than 200 people contracted COVID-19 from minks. Although there is no evidence yet of sustained transmission from humans to animals and then back to humans, the discovery of SARS-CoV-2 in so many species means that it is not just plausible but probable.

The dream of herd immunity has also died. Just a year ago, some newly minted experts were arguing that the virus should be given free rein to circulate in order for countries to reach herd immunity as soon as possible. Sweden famously followed this approach; predictably, it experienced dramatically higher rates of infection and death than nearby Denmark, Finland, and Norway (while suffering similar economic damage). Only after hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths occurred worldwide was this misguided strategy abandoned.

More recently, epidemiologists were debating what percentage of a population had to be vaccinated to reach herd immunity and when that

threshold would be reached. But now it is becoming clear that the world cannot wait for herd immunity to contain the pandemic. For one thing, vaccination is proceeding too slowly. It is taking too long to produce and deliver sufficient supplies of vaccines, and a sizable global anti-vaccine movement is dampening demand for them. For another thing, there has been a constant flow of new variants of the virus, threatening the progress that has been made with vaccines and diagnostics.

Variants are an unavoidable byproduct of the pandemic's exponential growth. More than half a million new cases of COVID-19 are reported every day. Each infected person harbors hundreds of billions of virus particles, all of which are constantly reproducing. Each round of replication of every viral particle yields an average of 30 mutations. The vast majority of mutations do not make the virus more transmissible or deadly. But with an astronomical number of mutations happening every day across the globe, there is an ever-growing risk that some of them will result in more dangerous viruses, becoming what epidemiologists call "variants of concern." Hyperintense outbreaks—such as the ones in New York City in March 2020, Brazil in March 2021, and India in May 2021—only increase the risk.

A number of variants have already emerged that spread more easily, cause more severe illness, or reduce the effectiveness of treatments or vaccines, such as the B.1.1.7 variant (first detected in the United Kingdom), B.1.351 (South Africa), B.1.429 (California), P.1 (Brazil), and B.1.617.2 (India). Although variants are often labeled with a geographic tag based on where they were first identified, they should be considered global threats. (In fact, given the uncertainty about where each variant emerged, as opposed to where it happened to be first reported, the geographic nomenclature would best be dropped altogether.)

To date, the three vaccines authorized in the United States—the Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines—are effective against the existing variants. But two variants, B.1.351 and B.1.617.2, have shown signs of impairing the efficacy of other vaccines and of therapeutic antibodies. Each new, more resistant or more transmissible variant may require additional booster shots, or perhaps new vaccines altogether, adding to the massive logistical challenge of vaccinating billions of people in nearly 200 countries. Other variants may even evade current diagnostic tests, making them more difficult to track and contain. The pandemic, in short, is hardly in its last throes.

AMERICA'S ROLE

As a wealthy, powerful, and scientifically advanced country, the United States is optimally positioned to help lead the long fight against COVID-19. To do so, the country must recover its reputation for global public health leadership. At a time of resurgent nationalism at home and abroad, it will need to rise above the forces of division and rally the rest of the world to join it in undertaking what may be the biggest experiment in global health cooperation ever.

To start, the United States must continue its trajectory toward zero COVID-19 cases at home. No country can help others if it is crippled itself. Extraordinarily effective vaccines, along with equally impressive vaccination campaigns in most U.S. states, have dramatically decreased the number of infections. When epidemiologists look at the United States now, they no longer see a blanket of disease covering the entire country; instead, they see scattered flare-ups. This means they can discern individual chains of transmission—a game-changer in terms of strategy.

One of the most important missing pieces of the U.S. vaccination program is an appreciation for the power of speedy, targeted deployment. Vaccines should be redistributed to the parts of the country with high infection rates to protect those most at risk of contracting the disease and reduce the potential for transmission. In many ways, this strategy represents a return to the basics of disease control. To eradicate smallpox in the 1970s, epidemiologists encouraged public health departments to report potential cases, looked for symptomatic people at large gatherings, maintained a "rumor register" to pick up new outbreaks, and offered cash rewards to people who found potential cases. They investigated every case, located the source of infection, and identified contacts who were likely to get the disease next. Those who were infected with smallpox, as well as the people they had exposed to the disease, were quickly isolated and vaccinated. By practicing "just in time" vaccination, epidemiologists were able to prevent new chains of transmission—quickly controlling the disease and saving as many as three-quarters of the vaccine doses as compared to if they had performed mass vaccination.

Of course, it was a different disease, a different vaccine, and a different time. Part of what makes COVID-19 so difficult to combat is that it is an airborne illness with so much asymptomatic transmission. Today, however, epidemiologists have the added benefit of powerful new tools for detecting outbreaks and developing vaccines. They can use

these innovations to build a twenty-first-century version of surveillance and containment for the battle against this pandemic. Adopting a strategy of "just in time" vaccination, the United States and other countries with moderate infection rates should prioritize the immunization of people known to have been exposed (for whom vaccination can still prevent or mitigate symptoms), along with their contacts and communities, using old-fashioned or modern-day methods.

If the United States solves the puzzle of controlling outbreaks of COVID-19 at home and shields itself against importations of the virus from abroad, it will have a blueprint that it can share globally. It should do so, turning outward to help lead what will be the largest and most complicated disease-control campaign in human history. To that end, it should support expanded manufacturing capacity for COVID-19 vaccines worldwide and get to work distributing enough of them to reach the last mile of each country in the world—and do so faster than new supervariants can emerge.

There is other work to be done domestically, as well. The $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, passed by Congress in March, provided $48 billion for diagnostic testing and additional public health personnel to contain outbreaks. Such efforts have become all the more important as demand for vaccinations has slowed. As of May, barely half of the country was fully immunized. Even allowing for those with natural immunity from prior infection, that leaves about 125 million Americans susceptible to COVID-19. Thus, there is even more reason to build the capacity to protect these Americans from the inevitable importations of the virus, doubling down on efforts to find, manage, and contain all outbreaks.

Part of this effort will require building a stronger disease surveillance system in the United States. Hospitals, testing labs, and local public health agencies already routinely report data about COVID-19 to the CDC. But the CDC must continue adding more innovative ways to detect outbreaks early on. Already, epidemiologists around the world are experimenting with digital disease detection, combing through data on pharmacy purchases and scouring social media and online news stories for clues of new outbreaks. Taking advantage of electronic medical records, they are tracking the symptoms of emergency room patients in real time. And they have created participatory surveillance systems, such as the apps Outbreaks Near Me in the United States and DoctorMe in Thailand, which allow people to voluntarily disclose symptoms online.

Together, these reporting systems could capture a high percentage of symptomatic cases. To find missed infections, epidemiologists can monitor sewage for virus shed in feces to detect unreported outbreaks. And to capture asymptomatic cases, an especially important task for interrupting the transmission of SARS-CoV-2, exposure notification systems will prove key. With these systems, users are alerted through their cell phones if they have come into close contact with someone infected with the virus, without that person's identity being divulged—thus informing people who do not feel sick that they may in fact be carrying the virus. At the same time as they are notified of possible infection, users can be advised to get tested, vaccinated, or learn about government support for isolation. Although such systems are still in their infancy, early reports from Ireland and the United Kingdom, where they have taken off, are encouraging.

Adding newer forms of disease detection to conventional reporting systems would give public health officials the kind of situational awareness that battlefield commanders and CEOs have long been accustomed to. That, in turn, would allow them to act much more quickly to contain outbreaks. So would faster and cheaper viral sequencing, which would enable scientists to rapidly identify infections and variants. They could use that information to update diagnostic tests to ensure accurate surveillance and modify vaccines to maintain their efficacy. If a particular variant was found to be vulnerable to one vaccine and not others, the vaccine that worked best could be rushed to the areas where the variant was prevalent. Such a custom-tailored approach will become yet more important as new vaccines are created for new variants; those vaccines will inevitably be in short supply.

Everyone should be grateful for the remarkable vaccines that won the race to be first. But the United States and other wealthy countries must nonetheless invest in the next generation of COVID-19 vaccines, ones that are less expensive to manufacture, require no refrigeration, and can be given in a single dose by untrained personnel. This is no pipe dream: researchers are already developing vaccines that can survive heat, take effect more quickly, and can be administered through a nasal spray, oral drops, or a transdermal patch. Thanks to these innovations, the world could soon have vaccines that are as practical to distribute in rural India or Zimbabwe as they are in London or Tokyo.

SYSTEM REBOOT

Even though the United States must play a leading role in getting this pandemic under control, that will not be enough without efforts to reform the global framework for pandemic response. The current system is broken. For all the debates about who should have made what decisions differently, a simple fact remains: what began as an outbreak of a novel coronavirus could have been contained, even when it was a moderately sized epidemic. In a report released in May, an independent panel chaired by two former heads of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Helen Clark of New Zealand, did not assign blame for that failure. But the panel did offer suggestions for how to prevent the same mistake from happening again.

Its headline recommendation was to elevate pandemic preparedness and response to the highest levels of the UN through the creation of a "global health threats council." This council would be separate from the WHO, led by heads of state, and charged with holding countries accountable for containing epidemics. In order to rebuild public trust in global health institutions, it would have to be immune from political interference. The report envisioned the council as supporting and overseeing a WHO that had more resources, autonomy, and authority. One vital contribution it could make would be to identify those diagnostic tests, drugs, and vaccines for COVID-19 that merit investment most and allocate resources accordingly, so that they can be rapidly developed and efficiently distributed. Although many details remain to be worked out, the recommendation of such a council represents a brave attempt in the middle of a pandemic to reform how pandemics are managed—akin to rebuilding a plane while flying it.

The most urgent need for global public health is speed. With a viral epidemic, timing is nearly everything. The faster an outbreak is discovered, the better chance it can be stopped. In the case of COVID-19, early and rapid detection would let decision-makers around the world know where to surge appropriate vaccines, what variants are circulating, and how to triage resources based on risk. Fortunately, when the next novel pathogen emerges—and it is a question of when, not if—scientific advances will allow global public health institutions to move faster than ever before. Scientists at the CDC and at the WHO's Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network, or GOARN, have made huge strides in compiling a range of data streams to quickly learn of new

outbreaks. Twenty years ago, it took six months to detect a new virus with pandemic potential; today, it can be done in a matter of weeks.

But the global system for disease surveillance has ample room for improvement. The latest surveillance technologies—digital disease detection, participatory surveillance systems, and exposure notification systems—should be available everywhere, not just in the richest countries. So should viral-sequencing technologies. It is time to move beyond the old model of global health, in which samples of pathogens were sent from poor countries to rich ones to be sequenced, with the countries that sent the samples rarely sharing in the test kits, vaccines, and therapeutics that were developed as a result. This is a matter not only of fairness but also of epidemiological necessity, since the closer to its origin a new epidemic can be detected, the faster the world can respond.

Even if a novel pathogen escapes national borders, there is still time to contain it regionally. Governments should encourage the sharing of data about emerging diseases among neighboring countries. To that end, they should back Connecting Organizations for Regional Disease Surveillance, or CORDS, a group that brings together three dozen countries, several UN agencies (including the WHO), and a number of foundations, all in an effort to share early warning signals of infectious diseases and coordinate responses to them. In the same spirit, the WHO should work with governments and nongovernmental organizations to put anonymized case-level demographic, epidemiological, and sequencing data all in a single database. The end goal is a global health intelligence network that would bring together scientists who can collect, analyze, and share the data needed to inform the development of diagnostic tests, drugs, and vaccines, as well as make decisions about where to surge vaccines to control outbreaks.

FINISHING THE JOB

COVID-19 is not yet the worst pandemic in history. But we should not tempt fate. The past year and a half revealed how globalization, air travel, and the growing proximity between people and animals—in a word, modernity—have made humanity more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Sustaining our way of life thus requires deep changes in the way we interact with the natural world, the way we think about prevention, and the way we respond to global health emergencies. It also requires even populist leaders to think globally. Self-interest and nationalism don't work when it comes to a lethal

infectious disease that moves across the globe at the speed of a jet plane and spreads at an exponential pace. In a pandemic, domestic and foreign priorities converge.

Most of the planet is still mourning for what has been lost since this pandemic began. At least three and a half million people have died. Many more are suffering from lingering effects of the disease. The financial toll of the pandemic has been estimated at some $20 trillion. Virtually no one has been spared from some grieving or some loss. People are ready for the long nightmare to be over. But in most places, it is not. Huge disparities have led to a Dickensian tale of two worlds, in which some countries are experiencing a respite from the disease while others are still on fire.

The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross famously and controversially outlined the stages of grief that people go through as they learn to live with what has been lost: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Almost everyone has experienced at least one of these stages during the pandemic, although in many ways, the world is still stuck in the first stage, denial, refusing to accept that the pandemic is far from over. To these five stages, the bioethicist David Kessler has added one more that is crucial: finding meaning. From the devastation of COVID-19, the world must work together to build an enduring system for mitigating this pandemic and preventing the next one. Figuring out how to do that might be the most meaningful challenge of our lifetime.

Myanmar's Coming Revolution

What Will Emerge From Collapse?

Thant Myint-U

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Myanmar is at a point of no return. The army's February coup, meant to surgically shift power within the existing constitutional framework, has instead unleashed a revolutionary energy that will be nearly impossible to contain.

Over the past four months, protests and strikes have continued despite the killing of more than 800 people and the arrest of nearly 5,000 more. On April 1, elected members of parliament from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), together with leaders from other political parties and organizations, declared a "national unity government" to challenge the authority of the recently established military junta. And through April and May, as fighting flared between the junta and ethnic minority armies, a new generation of pro-democracy fighters attacked military positions and administrative offices across the country.

The junta could partially consolidate its rule over the coming year, but that would not lead to stability. Myanmar's pressing economic and social challenges are too complex, and the depth of animosity toward the military too great, for an isolated and anachronistic institution to manage. At the same time, the revolutionaries will not be able to deal a knockout blow anytime soon.

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As the stalemate continues, the economy will crumble, extreme poverty will skyrocket, the health-care system will collapse, and armed violence will intensify, sending waves of refugees into neighboring China, India, and Thailand. Myanmar will become a failed state, and new forces will appear to take advantage of that failure: to grow the country's multibillion-dollar-a-year methamphetamine business, to cut down the forests that are home to some of the world's most precious zones of biodiversity, and to expand wildlife-trafficking networks, including the very ones possibly responsible for the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in neighboring China. The pandemic itself will fester unabated.

The task now is to shorten this period of state failure, protect the poorest and most vulnerable, and begin building a new state and a freer, fairer, and more prosperous society. A future peaceful Myanmar can only be based on both an entirely different conception of its national identity, free of the ethnonationalist narratives of the past, and a transformed political economy. The weight of history makes this the only acceptable outcome but also a herculean task to achieve. The alternative, however, is not dictatorship, which can no longer achieve stability, but rather ever-deepening state failure and the prospect of a violent, anarchic Myanmar at the heart of Asia for decades to come.

A COLONIAL INHERITANCE

Myanmar is a colonial creation. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United Kingdom conquered the coastline from Bengal to the Malay Peninsula, the valley of the Irrawaddy River (home for a millennium to Burmese-speaking Buddhist kingdoms), and then the surrounding uplands (regions that had never before come under external control). Myanmar—then called Burma—was forged through a military occupation and governed as a racial hierarchy. Imperial census administrators complained that the many and varied identities of its inhabitants were too fluid and contingent and that the country was "a zone of racial instability." They nonetheless divided everyone into neat racial categories, with some races deemed "indigenous" and others "alien." The British also established an incredibly unequal and exploitative colonial political economy, based on the large-scale immigration of Indian labor and the export of primary commodities—mainly rice, oil, and timber—to global markets.

Modern Burmese politics emerged a century ago, and at its core was an ethnonationalism rooted in the notion of a Burmese-speaking

Buddhist racial identity. In 1937, ten years before Pakistan was partitioned from India along religious lines, the British partitioned Burma from India on the basis of perceived racial difference. After winning independence in 1948, the new Burmese state tried to incorporate those non-Burmese peoples of the country also deemed indigenous, such as the Karens and the Shans, but within a framework of Burmese racial and cultural supremacy. Those peoples categorized as "aliens," such as the more than 700,000 people from the Rohingya Muslim community viciously expelled to Bangladesh in 2016 and 2017, have fared worse. Myanmar's nation-building project has failed for decades, leaving behind a landscape of endemic armed conflict and a country that has never truly been whole.

The Burmese army has been the self-appointed guardian of this ethnonationalism. It is the only army in the world that has been fighting nonstop since World War II: against the British and then the Japanese, and, after independence, against an extraordinary array of opponents, including Washington-backed Chinese nationalist armies in the 1950s, Beijing-backed communist forces in the 1960s, drug lords, and ethnic armed forces struggling for self-determination, all the while taking as well as inflicting enormous casualties. Since the 1970s, most of the fighting has been confined to the uplands, where the army became an occupation force imposing central rule on ethnic minority populations. But every now and then, the army would descend into the cities of the Irrawaddy River valley to crush dissent. The ranks of the armed forces have grown to over 300,000 personnel. In recent years, the military has acquired new Chinese and Russian combat aircraft, drones, and rocket artillery. It is led by an officer corps that cannot imagine a Myanmar in which the military is not ultimately in control.

For four decades after independence, successive civilian and military governments embraced socialism in response to colonial-era economic inequalities. The main opposition to ruling governments was communist. During the 1960s, the military junta of the time combined the nationalization of major businesses with extreme isolation from the rest of the world. But that orientation shifted in 1988, when a new army junta seized power, rejected socialism, and began encouraging private business, foreign trade, and foreign investment. Over the following years, however, Western countries began to impose sanctions in solidarity with a nascent democracy movement. At the same time, the army's principal battlefield enemy, the Beijing-backed communist

insurgency in the northeast, collapsed, making trade with China possible for the first time in decades. The net result was a Burmese capitalism intimately tied to China's giant industrial revolution next door.

The political economy that emerged during the 1990s and early years of this century was the most unequal since colonial times. Illicit narcotics syndicates flourished, especially in areas where the junta had reached cease-fires with local militias. Timber and mining (especially of jade) enriched a cohort of generals, militia leaders, and their business partners, who invested these profits in real estate in the country's biggest city, Yangon, sending housing prices into the millions of dollars. By 2008, newly discovered offshore gas fields were providing the junta with over $3 billion a year, money that those with the right connections could access at ludicrously low exchange rates. Not all army officers accumulated much wealth, but all enjoyed access to patronage networks that could transform power into wealth.

No one paid taxes, and the state provided next to no social services, with the World Health Organization listing Myanmar's health system at the absolute bottom of its table of national health systems in 2000. The army confiscated land on an enormous scale from ordinary people. Then, in 2008, a cyclone killed 140,000 people. Landlessness, the cyclone, and other environmental threats relating to climate change fueled an epic migration from west to east, from lowland ethnic Burmese areas to Yangon and upland minority areas, and from everywhere around the country to Thailand, where three million to four million unskilled laborers from Myanmar work today. Myanmar's ethnic demographics became further jumbled, separating identity from place.

Ethnonationalism had no ideological rivals. In 1989, the generals changed the name of the country from Burma, a geographic term used by Europeans since the sixteenth century to mean the area around the Irrawaddy valley, to Myanmar, an ethnonym for the Burmese-speaking majority. Socialism and communism had been discredited, and in their place came a nationalist narrative rooted in a conception of the country as a union of indigenous "national races," with the Burmese-speaking Buddhist people—the Myanmar people—and their culture at the unquestioned center.

THE DEMOCRATIC OPENING

A decade ago, Myanmar began opening up both its political system and its economy. The reforms came about not because of sanctions or

diplomatic engagement but because the country's aging autocrat, General Than Shwe, believed that a new constitutional setup would help ensure him a safe and comfortable retirement. He didn't want to hand power to a new military dictator, who might one day turn against him, and he believed the more prudent option was to split power between an army under a younger cohort of generals and a government led by the pro-army party he had created, the Union Solidarity and Development Party. But in 2011, the reformist ex-generals leading the USDP went off script, releasing political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, ending media censorship, freeing the Internet, and ushering in a level of political freedom unknown for half a century. Western governments, hoping democracy might be just around the corner, rolled back sanctions, and the country's economy boomed. The opening of the telecommunications sector sparked a revolution in connectivity: in 2011, almost no one in Myanmar had a phone; by 2016, most people had smartphones and were on Facebook. A new generation came of age in a period of relative freedom and wanted desperately for their country to succeed as a prosperous and peaceful democracy.

The army, however, was left in its own universe. When Than Shwe retired, he promoted a relatively junior officer, Min Aung Hlaing, to be the new commander in chief, with the explicit task of safeguarding the army's preeminence. But Min Aung Hlaing and the new crop of generals below him were decades younger than the men of the old junta, and they had little access to the moneymaking networks of prior decades. At the same time, the reforms begun in 2011 shrank the army's role in the economy considerably. It lost its privileged access to foreign currency and corporate monopolies. Its share of the national budget was reduced. Moreover, the army no longer had a say in economic policy. Some of its former business partners lost out to newly arrived foreign competition; others thrived in the open environment. But few companies were any longer dependent on the military's largess.

In the 2010s, the army placed less emphasis on moneymaking and more on the exercise of violence. The generals wanted to upgrade their weaponry and become, in their own words, a "standard modern army." They dreamed of ending the country's endless internal armed conflicts on their own terms, using a mix of pressure and persuasion to disarm and demobilize the many and varied forces fighting on behalf of ethnic minority communities. Their focus over the past ten years has been campaigns against new ethnic minority forces, in particular the Arakan, Ko-

kang, and Ta'ang armies, all linked to China, as well the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. To some extent, their uncompromising stance found support among the public, as Burmese ethnonationalism flourished on social media, as well as among Buddhist organizations that saw Islam and all things foreign as threats to the conservative order they espoused.

From 2011 to 2015, the army shared power with the reformist ex-generals of the USDP in what was more or less an amicable relationship. But in 2016, after Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won a landslide election victory, they found themselves in government with their longtime political foes. Under the constitution, the army held three ministries—Defense, Home Affairs (which controlled the police), and Border Affairs—as well as a quarter of the seats in parliament. But Aung San Suu Kyi enjoyed real power. Her supermajority meant she could pass any law she wished, as well as control the country's budget and the entire range of government policy apart from the security issues directly under the military's purview.

She and the generals shared conservative values, including a respect for age, self-discipline, and the Buddhist establishment, and had a similar ethnonationalist worldview. They were united in believing that the Western reaction to the Rohingya expulsions was unfair. In 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi acted out of conviction, not expediency, when she went to The Hague to defend the army before the International Court of Justice. But her relationship with the generals was testy at best. The NLD feared a coup. The army feared a conspiracy between Aung San Suu Kyi and the West to remove it from the government altogether. Min Aung Hlaing worried that Aung San Suu Kyi might one day throw him under the bus to placate her erstwhile international supporters, many of whom had disavowed her after the violent displacement of the Rohingya.

As political tensions grew, the country's economy reached a tipping point. In 2016, the central bank, following advice from the International Monetary Fund, introduced new prudential regulations for Myanmar's private banks at a time when as many as half of all loans in the country were nonperforming and the once white-hot real estate market had just nose-dived. Aung San Suu Kyi suddenly found that she had leverage over a business class that many of her supporters loathed. The cronies who had become rich under the old junta now vied for her attention. Her technocrats pushed for further liberalization. At the same time, Beijing, which had nurtured close ties with

Aung San Suu Kyi, was proposing multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects through its Belt and Road Initiative, including the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which would stretch from China's southwestern province of Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Its impact on public health was minimal, but lockdowns and disruptions to foreign trade sent the economy into a tailspin. The government's response was anemic at best, offering virtually no cash support to those hardest hit. According to one survey conducted in October 2020, the proportion of the population living in poverty (those making less than $1.90 a day) had risen from 16 percent to 63 percent over the previous eight months, with a third of people polled reporting no income since August 2020. Public trust in Aung San Suu Kyi, however, only grew, as she appeared on Facebook for the first time, live-streaming conversations with health-care workers and others. Millions didn't blame her for the economy's ills and instead felt that they finally had a leader who was looking out for them.

But alarm bells were already ringing, especially outside the Burmese-majority heartland. After the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims, an entirely new dynamic emerged in Rakhine State, in the west of the country: the rise of the Arakan Army, set on achieving self-determination for the state's Rakhine-speaking Buddhist community. In 2018, the Arakan Army began large-scale attacks on government positions. It was the most significant armed insurrection in Myanmar in a generation. By late 2020, it had pinned down several army divisions and had gained de facto authority over vast swaths of the Rakhine countryside.

At the other end of the country, the methamphetamine industry, which supplied markets as far afield as Japan and New Zealand, was thriving as never before. The drugs were produced in areas controlled by militias near the Chinese border, with the bulk of profits going not to anyone in Myanmar but to powerful transnational syndicates, such as the one headed by the Chinese Canadian Tse Chi Lop, who was arrested in January in Amsterdam and is purported to have made as much as $17 billion in revenue annually. Drugs encouraged a growing ecosystem of money laundering and other illicit industries, with over a hundred casinos in the northeast, near the Chinese province of Yunnan, and plans for a giant gambling and cryptocurrency hub on the border with Thailand.

National elections took place last November in the feverish context of rising conflict and economic woes. But people still voted overwhelmingly for Aung San Suu Kyi. The army leadership was shocked, having believed that the NLD would fare poorly, given the state of the economy, and that the military top brass would have at least a say in choosing the next president. Instead, Aung San Suu Kyi, thanks to the scale of her win, seemed set to be more powerful still. Efforts by Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing to reach an understanding went nowhere. He fixated on allegations of electoral fraud and demanded an investigation into the election. She refused to consider this. The army felt humiliated. But ordinary people, thrilled by her victory, could only imagine better times ahead.

THE COUP AND THE UPRISING

On February 1, the army seized power, arresting Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders. It was billed not as a coup d'état but as a state of emergency under the constitution, with the new junta composed of members of several political parties (other than the NLD) as well as top generals. Min Aung Hlaing stacked his cabinet with senior technocrats and, in his first public appearances, promised to prioritize the post-pandemic economic recovery and even suggested a multibillion-dollar stimulus package. He seems to have thought that he could take over without much of a fuss, sideline the NLD, focus on fixing the economy, and then hold fresh elections skewed to his advantage. If so, he completely misread the public mood.

The reaction to the coup was spontaneous and visceral. Within days, hundreds of thousands of people poured onto the streets demanding an end to military rule, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other civilian leaders, and the restoration of the elected government. At the same time, a civil disobedience movement began, with medics leaving government hospitals, and quickly spread across the public sector, from ministerial departments down to local administrative bodies. On February 22, a general strike shut down businesses, including banks, all around the country. And a campaign on Facebook meted out "social punishment" in the form of orchestrated public attacks on any person or business thought to have links to the army or the junta.

The army cracked down mercilessly. It had held back at first, perhaps in the hope that the protests would melt away on their own. But over the last week of February, battle-hardened troops of the army's

elite light infantry divisions, including the units responsible for the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, began moving into Yangon and other cities. A campaign of terror accompanied the lethal use of force: as night fell, the Internet went dark, and soldiers began firing indiscriminately in residential neighborhoods, setting off sound grenades, breaking down doors, and hauling people away. The large crowds dissipated, but smaller and even more determined protests persisted. Young men and women erected makeshift barricades and wielded shields and occasionally improvised weapons to defend themselves against the soldiers' automatic fire. On March 14 alone, dozens were killed in Yangon's industrial suburb of Hlaingthaya. On March 27, over a hundred died as the army opened fire on crowds across Myanmar.

The carnage radicalized the resistance. With videos of the beating and killing of civilians shared over the Internet, the popular desire to simply reverse the coup transformed into a determination in some quarters to see an end to the army altogether. Protesters raised signs calling for "R2P," referring to the principle of "the responsibility to protect," which obliges the international community to intervene in a country to defend its people from crimes against humanity, even if such an action violates that country's national sovereignty. For a while, many in Myanmar genuinely expected that the world would save them from a new dictatorship. But by late March, with no armed international intervention in sight, many young protesters turned to armed insurrection. In the city of Kalay, near India, for example, local residents resolved to fight back as the "Kalay Civil Army," arming themselves with homemade hunting rifles, killing several soldiers, and holding out for ten days before the army overran their positions. Dozens of new groups, locally organized and lightly armed, began appearing in different parts of the country over the following months. In May, another militia called the Chinland Defense Force held the town of Mindat, in the rugged western uplands, for three weeks before the army, using artillery and helicopter gunships, forced them to withdraw. All the while, hundreds of young men and women made their way to territories controlled by ethnic minority armies to receive training, including in explosives. By late May, there had been dozens of arson and other attacks on police and administrative offices and nearly a hundred small bombings against junta-linked targets, including in Yangon.

These new guerrilla movements can certainly keep the junta off balance. But the insurrectionists will not be able to build a new army to

challenge the existing one without significant help from a neighboring country, which seems next to impossible. And nothing in the history of Myanmar's army suggests that a sizable chunk of its forces would break away and join a rebellion. That leaves the ethnic minority armies as the only other possible agents of a broader uprising. The Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Liberation Army, in the far north and southeast of the country, respectively, have already mounted new attacks on army positions. Other groups, too, may move from statements of political support to armed action. But even the combined might of the ethnic armed organizations—numbering perhaps 75,000 fighters in total—would be no match for a military that has far superior artillery and a monopoly on airpower. Moreover, the most powerful ethnic armed organization, the United Wa State Army, with 30,000 troops, has deep links to China, having emerged from the old communist insurgency. It will heed the advice of Beijing, which has no love for the Myanmar army but does not want to see an all-out civil war.

MYANMAR AS A FAILED STATE

More than anything that happens on the battlefield, it is the ongoing implosion of the economy that will turn Myanmar into a failed state. Industries on which ordinary households rely, such as tourism, have collapsed, as have other sources of income, such as remittances from overseas, which totaled as much as $2.4 billion in 2019, a result of income lost by migrant workers abroad during the global pandemic. The garment industry employed over a million people, many of them young women, and was a success story during the past decade, but it has been devastated as orders from Europe have dried up. The future of the agricultural sector, the biggest employer in the country, remains uncertain, with logistics disrupted by strikes and China now closing border crossings out of fear of COVID-19. What is most critical is that the financial sector has been paralyzed by a mix of strikes, the unwillingness or inability of the central bank to provide added liquidity, and a general collapse in confidence. Closed banks mean no cash at ATMs and thousands of businesses unable to make payroll, taking trillions of kyats (equal to billions of dollars) each month out of circulation. The knock-on effect across all sectors has been catastrophic.

The economy may be on its knees, but the junta will likely not suffer. Revenues from natural gas and mining will continue to flow into its coffers. The army-owned conglomerates provide at most a fraction

of the $2.5 billion or so the military receives annually from the regular budget, and so foreign sanctions on those firms won't have much effect. In any case, the junta now controls the country's entire $25 billion budget: the first cuts won't be to defense in any fiscal squeeze.

But the people of Myanmar will suffer enormously. The UN Development Program expects half of Myanmar's population of 55 million to fall into poverty over the coming six months, and the World Food Program worries that 3.5 million more people will face hunger. Lifesaving medicines and treatments are in extremely short supply, and over the course of 2021, 950,000 infants will not receive the vaccines that they would normally get for diseases such as tuberculosis and polio. Those who suffer most will include those who have always been the most vulnerable, including landless villagers, upland farmers, migrant workers, the Rohingya, people of South Asian descent, and the internally displaced. The economy will collapse not with a bang but with a whimper, as a new generation grows up severely malnourished and uneducated.

Myanmar as a failed state may look something like this: The army holds the cities and the Irrawaddy valley, but urban guerrilla attacks and a spreading insurrection prevent any firm consolidation of junta rule. The strikes end, but millions remain unemployed, and the vast majority of people have little or no access to basic services. Some ethnic armed groups are able to carve out additional territory, while others come under withering air and land assault. In Rakhine State, the Arakan Army expands its de facto administration, and in the eastern uplands, old and new militia groups strengthen their ties to transnational organized crime networks. Extractive and illicit industries become a bigger piece of Myanmar's economic pie. As armed fighting intensifies, Beijing, fearing instability above all, feels compelled to increase its sway over all territories east of the Salween River. Myanmar becomes a center for the spread of disease, criminality, and environmental destruction, with human rights atrocities continuing unchecked.

BREAKING FREE FROM THE PAST

A deep crisis can be an opportunity for radical change. Ongoing efforts by elected members of parliament, civil society groups, and emerging protest networks across the country to break through entrenched ethnic divides represent a seismic shift, one that might eventually do what the democratic thaw of the last decade could not:

overcome the legacy of colonial-era racism and a century of ethnonationalist politics, end discrimination, and foster a new multicultural national identity. Equally important will be a reimagining of the economy, turning it away from a reliance on the market liberalization that yielded the extreme inequality of past decades and toward a new welfare state and the kinds of structural transformations that could create inclusive, dynamic development.

Myanmar's future need not be bleak. Successful change must come from within, and there is absolutely no doubt, given what has happened since February, that Myanmar's young people are determined to alter the course of their country's history. It is they who must chart a path forward. But global action now could alleviate some of the suffering in the country and help it more swiftly escape impending disaster.

First, the international community needs to agree to a resolution in the UN Security Council that clearly demands a quick and peaceful transition back to an elected civilian government. China must be on board; there is simply no substitute for China's involvement because of its economic clout in Myanmar and its deep ties to many of the country's ethnic armed organizations. International sanctions that do not involve China may be symbolically important, but they will be just that: symbolic. The junta can survive with just China's tacit support. But Beijing can play a constructive role. It has always had difficult relations with the generals, is wary of instability, would prefer a return to civilian government, and remains uncertain of its next moves. Diplomacy between Beijing and Washington will be essential in achieving a Security Council resolution and thereby providing the needed framework for international cooperation on Myanmar. Several countries in the region are important, as well, especially India and Thailand, Myanmar's other key neighbors, and Japan, whose aid and investments have been a big part of the country's economic growth over the past decade. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the regional body, is far less significant; it initiated a process of dialogue with the junta in April that has yet to bear any fruit.

Second, outside powers must support and encourage all those working not only for democracy in Myanmar but also for the broad transformation of Myanmar politics and society. That includes serious efforts, possibly through an expanded UN civilian presence in Myanmar, to monitor human rights abuses and negotiate the release of political prisoners. It is critical, however, not to raise false hopes by

offering people in Myanmar the chimera of international salvation; that would only steer energy away from building the necessary and broadest possible coalitions at home.

Third, outside help needs to be based on an appreciation of Myanmar's unique history, one in which past army regimes have withstood the strictest international isolation, and the unique psychology of the generals themselves, molded by decades of unrelenting violence. The international community's usual carrots and sticks won't work.

Fourth, foreign governments should assist poor and vulnerable populations as much as possible, perhaps focusing initially on providing COVID-19 vaccinations. But such assistance must be handled with tremendous political skill and designed in collaboration with healthcare workers themselves, so as not to inadvertently entrench the grip of the junta. Many of the junta's opponents have wanted to crash the economy to help trigger revolution, but as weeks stretch into months and years, it will be necessary to protect the civilian economy as much as possible, to prevent a worsening humanitarian disaster. Responsible global firms that do not do business with the army should be encouraged to stay in the country. A population that is healthy and well fed is one that will be better able to push for political change.

Governments must try different initiatives with as much flexibility and international coordination as possible. There is no magic bullet, no single set of policies that will solve the crisis in Myanmar. That's because the crisis isn't just the result of the February coup; it is the outcome of decades of failed state building and nation building and an economy and a society that have been so unjust for so long to so many. The outside world has long tended to see Myanmar as a fairy tale, shorn of its complexities, in which an agreeable ending is just around the corner. The fairy tale must now end and be replaced with serious diplomacy and well-informed, practical strategies. With this, there is every chance that over a few years—not magically overnight—Myanmar can become the peaceful democracy so clearly desired by its people.

Bin Laden's Catastrophic Success

Al Qaeda Changed the World—but Not in the Way It Expected

Nelly Lahoud

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On September 11, 2001, al Qaeda carried out the deadliest foreign terrorist attack the United States had ever experienced. To Osama bin Laden and the other men who planned it, however, the assault was no mere act of terrorism. To them, it represented something far grander: the opening salvo of a campaign of revolutionary violence that would usher in a new historical era. Although bin Laden was inspired by religion, his aims were geopolitical. Al Qaeda's mission was to undermine the contemporary world order of nation-states and recreate the historical umma, the worldwide community of Muslims that was once held together by a common political authority. Bin Laden believed that he could achieve that goal by delivering what he described as a "decisive blow" that would force the United States to withdraw its military forces from Muslim-majority states, thus allowing jihadis to fight autocratic regimes in those places on a level playing field.

Bin Laden's worldview and the thinking behind the 9/11 attack are laid bare in a trove of internal communications that were recovered in May 2011, when U.S. special operations forces killed bin Laden during a raid on the compound in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad where he

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had spent his final years hiding. In the years that followed, the U.S. government declassified some of the documents, but the bulk of them remained under the exclusive purview of the intelligence community. In November 2017, the CIA declassified an additional 470,000 digital files, including audio, images, videos, and text. With the help of two research assistants, I pored over 96,000 of those files, including nearly 6,000 pages of Arabic text that form a record of al Qaeda's internal communications between 2000 and 2011, which I have spent the past three years analyzing. These documents consist of bin Laden's notes, his correspondence with associates, letters written by members of his family, and a particularly revealing 220-page handwritten notebook containing transcripts of discussions between members of bin Laden's immediate family that took place in the compound during the last two months of his life. The documents provide an unparalleled glimpse into bin Laden's mind and offer a portrait of the U.S. "war on terror" as it was seen through the eyes of its chief target.

By the time of 9/11, bin Laden had been contemplating an attack inside the United States for decades. Many years later, in conversations with family members, he recalled that it was in 1986 that he first suggested that jihadis "ought to strike inside America" to address the plight of the Palestinians, since, in bin Laden's mind, it was U.S. support that allowed for the creation of the state of Israel on Palestinian land. Bin Laden's concern for the Palestinians was genuine; their suffering, he often reminded his associates, was "the reason we started our jihad." But the Palestinians mostly served as a convenient stand-in for Muslims all over the world, whom bin Laden portrayed as the collective victims of foreign occupation and oppression. In his "Declaration of Jihad," a 1996 public communiqué that came to be known among jihadis as the "Ladenese Epistle," bin Laden grieved for Muslims whose "blood has been spilled" in places as far-flung as Chechnya, Iraq, Kashmir, and Somalia. "My Muslim brothers of the world," he declared, "your brothers in the land of the two holiest sites and Palestine are calling on you for help and asking you to take part in fighting against the enemy, your enemy: the Israelis and the Americans." This collective battle, bin Laden hoped, would be the first step in reviving the umma.

It soon became clear that bin Laden was ready to back his words with deeds. In 1998, al Qaeda carried out simultaneous bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 people and

wounding more than 4,000. Emboldened by the international attention those strikes received, bin Laden became more ambitious. On October 12, 2000, al Qaeda rammed a small boat filled with explosives into the USS *Cole* as it was refueling in the port of Aden, Yemen, killing 17 U.S. Navy personnel. Soon after that, bin Laden told a large gathering of supporters that the attacks represented "a critical turning point in the history of the umma's ascent toward greater eminence."

The Abbottabad papers include handwritten notes that bin Laden composed in 2002, disclosing "the birth of the idea of 11 September." They reveal that it was in late October 2000, within weeks of the USS *Cole* attack, that bin Laden decided to attack the American homeland. They also reveal his reasoning at the time: bin Laden believed that "the entire Muslim world is subjected to the reign of blasphemous regimes and to American hegemony." The 9/11 attack was intended to "break the fear of this false god and destroy the myth of American invincibility."

About two weeks after the attack, bin Laden released a short statement in the form of an ultimatum addressed to the United States. "I have only a few words for America and its people," he declared. "I swear by God almighty, who raised the heavens without effort, that neither America nor anyone who lives there will enjoy safety until safety becomes a reality for us living in Palestine and before all the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad." The attack had an electrifying effect, and in the years that immediately followed, thousands of young Muslims around the world committed themselves in various ways to bin Laden's cause. But a close reading of bin Laden's correspondence reveals that the world's most notorious terrorist was ignorant of the limits of his own métier.

Bin Laden was born in 1957 in Saudi Arabia. His father was a wealthy construction magnate whose company was renowned not just for the opulent palaces it built for the Saudi royal family but also for its restoration of the Islamic holy sites in Mecca and Medina. Bin Laden was raised in comfort, wanting for nothing. He grew into a poised young man who yearned to take part in political causes around the Muslim world. In his early jihadi exploits, which involved fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s and helping finance and coordinate the mujahideen battling the Soviet occupation of that country, he demonstrated that he had learned something about entrepreneurship and management from the family business. And yet, although bin Laden's correspondence in-

dicates that he was well versed in Islamic history, particularly the seventh-century military campaigns of the Prophet Muhammad, he had only a perfunctory understanding of modern international relations.

That was reflected in the 9/11 attack itself, which represented a severe miscalculation: bin Laden never anticipated that the United States would go to war in response to the assault. Indeed, he predicted that in the wake of the attack, the American people would take to the streets, replicating the protests against the Vietnam War and calling on their government to withdraw from Muslim-majority countries. Instead, Americans rallied behind U.S. President George W. Bush and his "war on terror." In October 2001, when a U.S.-led coalition invaded Afghanistan to hunt down al Qaeda and dislodge the Taliban regime, which had hosted the terrorist group since 1996, bin Laden had no plan to secure his organization's survival.

The 9/11 attack turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for al Qaeda. The group shattered in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban regime's collapse, and most of its top leaders were either killed or captured. The rest sought refuge in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, an autonomous area bordering Afghanistan. Hiding became a way of life for them. Their communications reveal that for the rest of bin Laden's life, the al Qaeda organization never recovered the ability to launch attacks abroad. (The group did carry out attacks in November 2002 in Kenya but was able to do so only because the operatives tasked with planning them had been dispatched to East Africa in late 2000 and early 2001, before everything fell apart for al Qaeda in Afghanistan.) By 2014, bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, found himself more preoccupied with delegitimizing the Islamic State (or ISIS), the jihadi group that eventually overtook al Qaeda, than with rallying Muslims against American hegemony. Still, it is impossible to look back at the past two decades and not be struck by the degree to which a small band of extremists led by a charismatic outlaw managed to influence global politics. Bin Laden did change the world—just not in the ways that he wanted.

LETTERS TO A MIDDLE-AGED TERRORIST

After fleeing to Pakistan following the Taliban's defeat, many al Qaeda fighters and operatives were arrested by authorities there. Fearing the same fate, the remaining al Qaeda leaders and many members of bin Laden's family covertly crossed the border into Iran in early 2002.

Once there, they were assisted by Sunni militants who helped them rent houses using forged documents. But by the end of 2002, the Iranian authorities had tracked down most of them and had placed them in a secret prison underground. They were later moved into a heavily guarded compound, along with their female relatives and children.

In 2008, bin Laden's son Saad escaped from Iran and wrote a letter to his father detailing how Iranian authorities had repeatedly ignored the al Qaeda detainees' medical conditions and how "the calamities piled up and the psychological problems increased." When Saad's pregnant wife needed to be induced, she was not taken to a hospital until after "the fetus stopped moving"; she was forced "to deliver him after he died." Saad was convinced that the Iranians "were masters at making us lose our nerve and took pleasure in torturing us psychologically." So desperate were their conditions that when a Libyan jihadi leader, Abu Uns al-Subayi, was eventually released in 2010, he wrote to bin Laden that Iran is where the "greatest Satan reigns." Detention there felt like being "exiled from religion," he wrote, admitting that he had even begged his Iranian captors to deport him to "any other country, even to Israel."

Bin Laden was completely unaware of these travails while they were happening. The Abbottabad papers show that in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, bin Laden disappeared from the scene and was not in command of al Qaeda for three years, even though he continued to release public statements cheering jihadi attacks in Indonesia, Kuwait, Pakistan, Russia, Tunisia, and Yemen. It was not until 2004 that bin Laden was finally able to resume contact with second-tier leaders of al Qaeda. He was eager to launch a new campaign of international terrorism. In one of the first letters he sent after reestablishing contact, he methodically outlined plans to carry out "martyrdom operations akin to the 9/11 New York attack." If these proved too difficult, he had alternative plans to target rail lines.

His associates quickly set him straight: al Qaeda had been crippled, and such operations were out of the question. In September 2004, a second-tier leader known as Tawfiq wrote a letter to bin Laden describing just how difficult things had been in the immediate aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. "Our afflictions and troubles were heart-rending, and the weakness, failure, and aimlessness that befell us were harrowing," he wrote. He lamented that bin Laden's "absence and inability to experience [their] painful reality" had itself fed the turmoil. "We Muslims were defiled, desecrated, and

our state was ripped asunder," he reported. "Our lands were occupied; our resources were plundered. . . . This is what happened to jihadis in general, and to us in al Qaeda in particular."

Another second-tier leader, Khalid al-Habib, explained in a letter to bin Laden that during his three-year absence, their "battlefield achievements were negligible." He counted a total of three "very modest operations, mostly with [rockets], and from a distance." Another correspondent told bin Laden that al Qaeda's "external work"—that is, attacks abroad—had been "halted" because of the unrelenting pressure that Pakistan was exerting on the jihadis. As if this weren't bad enough, bin Laden learned that al Qaeda had been sold out by most of their erstwhile Afghan sympathizers and the Taliban—"90 percent of whom," Habib complained, "had been lured by the shiny dollars."

A LIFELINE FOR AL QAEDA

But around the time that bin Laden was able to reestablish contact, things started looking up for al Qaeda. After the U.S.-led coalition had ousted the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, the next phase of Bush's war on terrorism was the 2003 invasion of Iraq, a country ruled by a secular tyrant, Saddam Hussein, who viewed jihadis with hostility. The U.S.-led invasion put a swift end to Saddam's brutal reign but also led to the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the hollowing out of other secular government institutions. Initially, Arab Sunnis, the minority group that had dominated Iraq under Saddam, bore the lion's share of the sectarian violence that followed the invasion. This proved to be a lifeline for al Qaeda and other jihadi groups, which were able to position themselves as the defenders of the Sunnis. As Habib put it in his 2004 letter to bin Laden: "When God knew of our afflictions and helplessness, he opened the door of jihad for us and for the entire umma in Iraq."

Habib was referring, specifically, to the rise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadi who had come to prominence in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion. By 2004, Zarqawi, and not bin Laden, was the leader of the world's most powerful jihadi group. Aside from their shared commitment to violent jihad, the two men had little in common. Bin Laden had enjoyed a privileged upbringing; Zarqawi had grown up poor, had done time in prison, and had emerged not just as a religious extremist but also as a hardened ex-convict and a brutal thug. Despite the vast gulf between the two men, Zarqawi was eager for his group, Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, to merge with

al Qaeda. In a series of missives to bin Laden, Zarqawi made clear that his followers were "the sons of the Father"—that is, bin Laden—and that his group was a mere "branch of the original." Zarqawi also assured al Qaeda's leaders that he was collaborating with and seeking to unite all the jihadi factions in Iraq.

Zarqawi's enthusiasm pleased bin Laden. "The merger of the group [Jamaat] al-Tawhid wal-Jihad [would be] tremendous," bin Laden wrote to his deputy Zawahiri and Tawfiq, urging them "to give this matter considerable attention, for it is a major step toward uniting the efforts of the jihadis." In December 2004, bin Laden formalized the merger by publicly appointing Zarqawi as the leader of a new group, al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (often referred to in Western media as al Qaeda in Iraq).

Zarqawi's initiative eventually spurred jihadi groups in Somalia, Yemen, and North Africa to formally align themselves with al Qaeda. These groups did not directly grow out of the original organization, but their leaders saw many benefits in acquiring the internationally feared al Qaeda brand, especially the chance to improve their standing in the eyes of their followers and to gain international media attention, which they hoped would help them raise money and recruit new adherents. It worked.

Fixated on al Qaeda, counterterrorist authorities all over the world often subsumed all jihadis under a single umbrella, unwittingly giving individuals who wanted to associate themselves with bin Laden a larger selection of groups to potentially join. Thus, although the al Qaeda organization was broken, its brand lived on through the deeds of groups that acted in its name. All of this flowed from Zarqawi's alliance with bin Laden. In early 2007, a Saudi jihadi cleric, Bishr al-Bishr, described the merger in a letter to a senior al Qaeda leader as an instance of God having "shown mercy on al Qaeda," which would have come to an end had it not been for "the amazing jihadi victories in Iraq, which raised the value of al Qaeda's stocks." It was a divine intervention, he assessed: "God's way of repaying the people of jihad for their sacrifices in his path."

THINGS FALL APART

Bin Laden had assumed that those who pledged their allegiance to him would pursue the kind of attacks against the United States that al Qaeda had pioneered. Their success, he hoped, would "raise the morale of Mus-

lims, who would, in turn, become more engaged and supportive of jihadis," as he put it in a letter to Zawahiri and Tawfiq in December 2004.

Once again, bin Laden had miscalculated. The decision to bestow the al Qaeda imprimatur on groups that he did not control soon backfired. Zarqawi failed to unite Iraq's jihadi groups under his banner, and the country's most established jihadi group, Ansar al-Sunna (also known as Ansar al-Islam) refused to merge with him. Before long, bin Laden and his followers found themselves at the receiving end of letters that chronicled the squabbles among their new associates. "Ansar al-Sunna have been spreading lies about me," Zarqawi complained in one. "They say that I have become like [Antar] al-Zawabiri," the leader of a notoriously extremist Algerian group who had been killed in 2002 and whom many jihadis had considered to be overzealous even by their standards. "Can you imagine?!" he fumed.

More disturbing for al Qaeda than Zarqawi's vain whining, however, were his group's indiscriminate attacks, which resulted in massive Iraqi casualties, particularly among Shiites. Bin Laden wanted al Qaeda to make headlines by killing and injuring Americans, not Iraqi civilians—even if they were Shiites, whom Sunni jihadis saw as heretics.

From their hideouts in Pakistan and the tribal areas, al Qaeda's leaders struggled to unify the militant groups in Iraq that were now at the center of global jihadism. But the divisions among them became even more entrenched. Zawahiri tried to mediate between Zarqawi and Ansar al-Sunna, but his efforts failed. Ansar al-Sunna made it clear to al Qaeda that unity with Zarqawi was conditional on "correcting the ways of al Qaeda in Mesopotamia." Atiyah Abd al-Rahman (generally referred to as Atiyah), who oversaw al Qaeda's external contacts and relations at the time, grew ever more dismayed with Zarqawi's leadership and wrote to bin Laden that "we cannot leave the brother to act on the basis of his judgment alone." In a December 2005 letter intercepted by U.S. intelligence, Atiyah urged Zarqawi "to lessen the number of attacks, even to cut the current daily attacks in half, even less," pointing out that "the most important thing is for jihad to continue, and a protracted war is to our advantage."

Things went from bad to worse for al Qaeda after Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006. His successors declared themselves the Islamic State of Iraq without consulting bin Laden, Zawahiri, or any other senior al Qaeda figures. In 2007, ISI leaders stopped responding to al Qaeda's letters altogether, a silence that reflected, in

part, the fact that the Iraqi jihadis had begun losing ground to what became known as the Sunni Awakening, which saw U.S. forces forge ties with Sunni tribal sheikhs in order to confront the terrorists.

ON THE SIDELINES

Al Qaeda's management struggles were hardly limited to Iraq. In 2009, a group of jihadis in Yemen dubbed themselves al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula without alerting the parent group or even publicly pledging allegiance to bin Laden. They were to prove a persistent source of headaches. In or around 2009, an AQAP leader named Qasim al-Raymi admitted in a letter to al Qaeda's leadership that he and the group's other top members suffered from inexperience and "deficiencies concerning leadership and administration." He conceded that he himself was not equipped "to judge when, how, and where to strike." But inexperience did not deter AQAP's top leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, from announcing in 2010 that he wanted to proclaim an Islamic state in Yemen. It took a great deal of finesse on the part of senior al Qaeda leaders to dissuade him.

For his part, bin Laden was dismayed that AQAP even considered itself a jihadi group at all, much less an affiliate of al Qaeda. "Did you actually plan and prepare for jihad?" he tartly asked in a draft letter to Wuhayshi. "Or is your presence a result of a few government attacks to which the brothers responded, and in the midst of this reactive battle, it occurred to you that you should persist?" Wuhayshi's letters to bin Laden show that he was vexed by the guidelines that the leadership had given him. Despite backing down from declaring an Islamic state, Wuhayshi defied senior al Qaeda leaders' instructions to refrain from sectarian attacks targeting Houthis in Yemen and to curb military confrontations with the Yemeni government.

For bin Laden, the least problematic of the new al Qaeda spinoffs was the North African group al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Unlike the other affiliates, it did not want to proclaim a state and instead focused on taking Westerners hostage for ransom or for the freeing of jihadi prisoners held by Western governments. Bin Laden saw this tactic's potential for influencing Western publics and seemed to appreciate the pragmatic approach of AQIM's leader, Abu Musab Abdul Wadud. Still, because bin Laden could not communicate with AQIM in a timely fashion (since his communications depended on the schedule of a courier), his interventions often arrived too late and sometimes

even proved counterproductive. On at least one occasion, negotiations over the release of Western hostages that could have benefited AQIM fell apart because of bin Laden's meddling.

By 2009, most of al Qaeda's senior leaders were fed up with their unruly affiliates. That year, bin Laden hardly rejoiced when Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, the leader of the Somali jihadi group al Shabab, sought a public merger with al Qaeda. Zubayr, too, wanted to proclaim an Islamic state. In a letter to Zubayr, Atiyah delicately explained that it would be best to "keep your allegiance to Sheikh Osama secret." For his part, bin Laden declined the public merger and suggested that Zubayr downsize from a state to an emirate, and do so quietly. "Our inclination," he wrote, "is that your emirate should be a reality to which the people grow attached without having to proclaim it." Zubayr complied with their wishes, but his response shows that he was troubled, rightly pointing out that he and his group were "already considered by both our enemies and our friends to be part of al Qaeda." A few years later, Zawahiri, who succeeded bin Laden after his death, finally admitted al Shabab into al Qaeda.

During the last year of his life, bin Laden lamented that his "brothers" had become a "liability" for global jihad. Some of their attacks, he bemoaned, resulted in "unnecessary civilian casualties." Worse yet, "the Muslim public was repulsed" by such attacks. The new generation of jihadis, he concluded, had lost their way.

In the winter of 2010–11, the revolts that became known as the Arab Spring initially gave bin Laden some hope. He reveled in the success of what he called the "revolutionaries" (*thuwar*) who brought down autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. But soon, he grew troubled. In conversations with his family, he worried that "the revolutions were born prematurely" and lamented that al Qaeda and other jihadi groups were mostly on the sidelines. He was resigned that "we cannot do anything except intensify our prayers."

Yet bin Laden was determined to "protect these revolutions" and intent on advising the protesters through his public statements. His one and only response to the Arab Spring went through at least 16 drafts before he made an initial recording of it. And his daughters Sumayya and Maryam, who had effectively co-authored most of the public messages that bin Laden delivered over the years, did much of the heavy lifting in composing the text. In late April 2011, they were planning to give it one more round of edits before the final recording, but they ran out of time:

U.S. Navy seals raided the Abbottabad compound before they had a chance to polish it. It was the U.S. government that ended up releasing the statement, probably to help establish that the raid had actually occurred and undermine the claims of conspiracy theorists to the contrary.

The raid was masterfully planned and executed. "Justice has been done," U.S. President Barack Obama declared in announcing bin Laden's death. With the man behind the 9/11 attack eliminated and with mostly peaceful and secular protesters on the march against Middle Eastern tyrants, it seemed for a moment that the jihadi movement had run its course. But that moment proved fleeting.

A SHORT-LIVED CALIPHATE

Back in Washington, the Obama administration had dropped Bush's "war on terror" moniker. But Obama maintained his predecessor's excessive focus on al Qaeda, and his team failed to discern divisions within jihadism that proved consequential. In choosing to go to war in Iraq, the Bush administration had exaggerated al Qaeda's connections to the country and overestimated the counterterrorism benefits of toppling Saddam's regime. The Obama administration, for its part, overestimated the positive effects that bin Laden's death and the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would have on the fight against jihadism. "The drawdown in Iraq allowed us to refocus our fight against al Qaeda and achieve major victories against its leadership, including Osama bin Laden," Obama claimed in October 2011. At that very moment, however, the ISI, al Qaeda's erstwhile ally in Iraq, was being energized by a new generation of leaders. The Obama administration and other Western governments failed to see the growing danger.

In 2010, the ISI had come under the leadership of a formerly obscure Iraqi who called himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Iraqi government's sectarianism and corruption offered fertile ground for the ISI to rebuild and grow. In 2010–11, Baghdadi unleashed a wave of terrorist assaults on Iraqi Christians and Shiites. This campaign enraged al Qaeda's leaders. "I do not understand," Zawahiri chafed in a letter he wrote to bin Laden a few months before the Abbottabad raid. "Are the brothers not content with the number of their current enemies? Are they eager to add new ones to their list?" He urged bin Laden to write to the ISI's leaders and instruct them to stop "targeting the Shiites indiscriminately" and to "end their attacks against Christians." But bin Laden no longer had any influence over the ISI. The Iraqi group had moved on.

Between 2011 and 2013, the ISI expanded into Syria, inserting itself into the bloody civil war that had begun there after the regime of Bashar al-Assad crushed an Arab Spring uprising. In June 2014, after the ISI had conquered vast swaths of territory in both Iraq and Syria, the group's spokesperson, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, proclaimed Baghdadi to be the leader of a new caliphate, and the group renamed itself the Islamic State, dropping all geographic references from its name. Its territorial expansion led jihadi groups in more than ten countries to pledge allegiance to the new caliph. In turn, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) designated these groups as either "provinces" or "soldiers of the caliphate."

After bin Laden's death, al Qaeda continued to operate under Zawahiri's command, but it had now been fully eclipsed by ISIS. Still, just as bin Laden had been ignorant of terrorism's limits, Baghdadi proved to be clueless when it came to running a state, let alone a "caliphate" that aimed to conquer other countries without possessing so much as a single fighter jet. In September 2014, the Obama administration formed a coalition of 83 countries "to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIS." By 2016, ISIS had begun to collapse. The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump kept up the fight, and the coalition eventually wrested control of all of ISIS's territory. Baghdadi had spurned bin Laden's strategy of fighting from the shadows in favor of empire building and had managed to replace bin Laden as the face of global jihadism. But the two men had similar fates. In October 2019, U.S. forces raided Baghdadi's compound in Idlib Province, in northwestern Syria. U.S. military dogs chased Baghdadi into a dead-end tunnel. Cornered, the caliph detonated a suicide vest. "The world is now a safer place," Trump declared.

THE FUTILITY OF TERROR

In the two years since Baghdadi's demise, Trump's pronouncement has held up. The jihadi landscape is still divided. Jihadi organizations continue to proliferate, but no group dominates in the way that al Qaeda and ISIS once did. Their capabilities range from merely howling threats, to throwing Molotov cocktails, to carrying out suicide operations or blowing up cars, to seizing control of territory—at least for a time.

When it comes to the next phase of the struggle, all eyes are on Afghanistan. Al Qaeda, ISIS, and a number of other groups maintain operations in the country, but they are overshadowed by the larger conflict

playing out between the Afghan government and the Taliban, which are both struggling for control of the country in the wake of the United States' withdrawal. In 2020, the United States and the Taliban reached a peace agreement in which the Taliban promised "to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qa'ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."

Will the Taliban make good on their promise? Judging by the Abbottabad papers, not all Taliban members were equal in the eyes of al Qaeda, which had long suspected that some Taliban factions had been seeking rapprochement with the United States. As early as 2007, Atiyah wrote to bin Laden that "forces within the Taliban are distancing themselves from al Qaeda to elude the terrorism accusation." And in 2010, Zawahiri expressed alarm in a letter to bin Laden that the Taliban seemed "psychologically prepared" to accept a deal that would render al Qaeda impotent. Owing to the Taliban's factionalism since 9/11, it may be difficult for the group's leaders to enforce compliance with the terms of their agreement with the United States.

The Taliban's factionalism may prove to be an intractable problem for the United States. But al Qaeda's experiences after 9/11 suggest that the same factionalism will also complicate matters for terrorists seeking refuge in Afghanistan. Even a sympathetic host regime is no guarantee of safe haven. Bin Laden learned that lesson the hard way, and Baghdadi later found out that controlling territory was even harder. But Washington and its allies have come to realize (or at least they should have) that an open-ended war on terrorism is futile and that a successful counterterrorism policy must address the legitimate political grievances that al Qaeda claims to champion—for example, U.S. support for dictatorships in the Middle East.

Washington cannot quite claim victory against al Qaeda and its ilk, which retain the ability to inspire deadly, if small-scale, attacks. The past two decades, however, have made clear just how little jihadi groups can hope to accomplish. They stand a far better chance of achieving eternal life in paradise than of bringing the United States to its knees.

Containment Beyond the Cold War

How Washington Lost the Post-Soviet Peace

M. E. Sarotte

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On December 15, 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker arrived in Moscow amid political chaos to meet with Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, who was at the time busy wresting power from his nemesis, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Yeltsin had recently made a shocking announcement that he and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine were dismantling the Soviet Union. Their motive was to render Gorbachev impotent by transforming him from the head of a massive country into the president of nothing.

In the short run, it was a brilliant move, and within ten days, it had succeeded completely. Gorbachev resigned, and the Soviet Union collapsed. The long-term consequences, however, were harder to grasp.

Even before Yeltsin's gambit, Baker had begun worrying about whether the desire of some Soviet republics to become independent might yield bloodshed. On November 19, 1991, he had asked one of Gorbachev's advisers, Alexander Yakovlev, if Ukraine's breaking away would prompt violent Russian resistance. Yakovlev was skeptical and

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responded that there were 12 million Russians in Ukraine, with "many in mixed marriages," so "what sort of war could it be?" Baker answered simply: "A normal war."

Now, with Yeltsin upping the ante by calling for the Soviet Union's complete destruction, Baker had a new fear. What would happen to the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal after the collapse of centralized command and control? As he counseled his boss, President George H. W. Bush, a disintegrating empire with "30,000 nuclear weapons presents an incredible danger to the American people—and they know it and will hold us accountable if we don't respond."

Baker's goal for his December 1991 journey was thus to ascertain who, after the Soviet Union's dissolution, would retain the power to authorize a nuclear launch and how that fateful order might be delivered. Soon after arriving, he cut to the chase: Would Yeltsin tell him?

Remarkably, the Russian president did. Yeltsin's openness to Baker was partly a gambit to win U.S. help in his struggle with Gorbachev and partly an attempt to secure financial aid. But it was also a sign that he wanted a fresh start in Moscow's relations with the West, one characterized by openness and trust. Yeltsin and Baker soon began working in tandem to ensure that only one nuclear successor state—Russia—would ultimately emerge from the Soviet collapse.

This collaboration survived Bush's 1992 election loss. Yeltsin continued the effort with President Bill Clinton, U.S. Secretaries of Defense Les Aspin and William Perry, and Strobe Talbott, Clinton's top Russia adviser, among others, to ensure that former Soviet atomic weapons in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and above all Ukraine were either destroyed or relocated to Russian soil. During a 1997 summit, Yeltsin even asked Clinton whether they could cease having nuclear triggers continually at hand: "What if we were to give up having to have our finger next to the button all the time?" Clinton responded, "Well, if we do the right thing in the next four years, maybe we won't have to think as much about this problem."

By the end of the 1990s, however, that trust had largely vanished. Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's handpicked successor, divulged little in grudging 1999 conversations with Clinton and Talbott. Instead of sharing Russia's launch protocols, Putin skillfully played up his perceived need for a harder Kremlin line by describing the grim consequences of reduced Russian power: in former Soviet regions, he said, terrorists now played soccer with decapitated heads of hostages.

As Putin later remarked, "By launching the sovereignty parade"—his term for the independence movements of Soviet republics in 1990–91—"Russia itself aided in the collapse of the Soviet Union," the outcome that had opened the door to such gruesome lawlessness. In his view, Moscow should have dug in, both within the union and abroad, instead of standing aside while former Soviet bloc states jumped ship to join the West. "We would have avoided a lot of problems if the Soviets had not made such a hasty exit from Eastern Europe," he said.

Once firmly in power, Putin began backtracking on the democratization of the Yeltsin era and on cooperative ventures with Washington. Although there were notable episodes reprising the spirit of the early 1990s—expressions of sympathy after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and a nuclear accord in 2010—the basic trend line was negative. The relationship reached frightening new lows during Russia's 2008 conflict with Georgia and its 2014 invasion of Ukraine, and it has sunk even further since 2016, owing to the revelation of Russia's cyberattacks on U.S. businesses, institutions, and elections.

Why did relations between Washington and Moscow deteriorate so badly? History is rarely monocausal, and the decay was the cumulative product of U.S. and Russian policies and politics over time. But it is hard to escape the fact that one particular U.S. policy added to the burdens on Russia's fragile young democracy when it was most in need of friends: the way that Washington expanded NATO.

Expansion itself was a justifiable response to the geopolitics of the 1990s. NATO had already been enlarged a number of times. Given that former Soviet bloc states were now clamoring to join the alliance, it was neither unprecedented nor unreasonable to let them in.

What was unwise was expanding the alliance in a way that took little account of the geopolitical reality. The closer NATO moved its infrastructure—foreign bases, troops, and, above all, nuclear weapons—to Moscow, the higher the political cost to the newly cooperative relationship with Russia. Some U.S. policymakers understood this problem at the time and proposed expanding in contingent phases to minimize the damage. That promising alternative mode of enlargement would have avoided drawing a new line across Europe, but it faced strong opposition within Washington.

Instead, advocates of a one-size-fits-all manner of expansion triumphed. Washington's error was not to enlarge the alliance but to do so in a way that maximized Moscow's aggravation and gave fuel

to Russian reactionaries. In 2014, Putin justified his takeover of Crimea as a necessary response to NATO's "deployment of military infrastructure at our borders."

Cold wars are not short-lived affairs, so thaws are precious. Neither country made the best possible use of the thaw in the 1990s. Today, as the United States and Russia spar over sanctions, cyberwarfare, and much else, the choices made three decades ago carry enduring significance. The two countries still possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads and thus the ability to kill nearly every living creature on earth. Yet between them, both states have shredded nearly every remaining arms control accord, and they have shown little willingness to replace them with new agreements.

Understanding the decay in U.S.-Russian relations—and how the manner of NATO expansion contributed to it—can help the United States better manage long-term strategic competition in the future. As the 1990s showed, the way that Washington competes can, over time, have just as profound an impact as the competition itself.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

To grasp what went wrong in U.S.-Russian relations, it is necessary to look beyond the familiar binary that categorizes NATO enlargement as either good or bad and instead focus on the manner in which the alliance grew. After the collapse of Soviet power in Europe—and in response to urgent requests from states emerging from Moscow's domination, now justifiably eager to choose a security alliance for themselves—NATO swelled in multiple rounds of enlargement to 30 states, which together were home to nearly one billion people.

New historical evidence shows that U.S. leaders were so focused on enlarging NATO in their preferred manner that they did not sufficiently consider the perils of the path they were taking or how their choices would magnify Russia's own self-harming choices. Put simply, expansion was a reasonable policy; the problem was how it happened.

Although NATO is an alliance of many countries, it is ultimately the United States' views that matter most when the Article 5 guarantee—the pledge to treat an attack on one as "an attack against them all"—is at stake. Hence, a U.S.-centric, one-size-fits-all approach prevailed, despite the concerns of other members about a crucial geographic problem: the closer the alliance's borders moved to Russia, the greater the risk that NATO expansion would derail the

newfound cooperation with Moscow and endanger the dramatic progress being made on arms control.

Scandinavian alliance members, such as Norway, savvy about living in a neighborhood that was Soviet-adjacent but not Soviet-controlled, had in earlier decades wisely customized their NATO memberships. As the only original NATO member sharing a border with the Soviet Union, Norway had decided against either the stationing of foreign bases or the deployment of foreign forces on its territory in peacetime and had ruled out nuclear weapons either on its land or in its ports. All of this was done to keep long-term frictions with Moscow manageable. That approach could have been a model for central and eastern European states and the Baltics, since they, too, occupy a region close to but not controlled by Russia. Some policymakers understood this dynamic at the time and supported the creation of a framework under which new allies might gain contingent memberships in phases through the so-called Partnership for Peace (PfP), an organization launched in 1994 to allow non-NATO European and post-Soviet states to affiliate themselves with the alliance.

But American hubris, combined with tragic decisions by Yeltsin—most notably, to shed the blood of his opponents in Moscow in 1993 and in Chechnya in 1994—provided ammunition to those arguing that Washington did not need phased enlargement to manage Russia. Instead, they maintained, the United States needed to pursue the policy of containment beyond the Cold War.

By the mid-1990s, "not one inch"—a phrase originally intended to signal that NATO's jurisdiction would not move one inch eastward—had gained the opposite meaning: that no territory should be off-limits to full-membership enlargement and that there should be no binding limitations on infrastructure of any sort. And this happened just as Yeltsin was succumbing to illness and Putin was rising through the ranks in Russia. But U.S. leaders persisted, despite knowing, as Talbott put it in an internal U.S. memo on the alliance's role in quelling violence in Bosnia, that "the big babies in Moscow," although "a real head case," had immense "capacity for doing harm."

CROSSING THE LINE

Understanding the collapse in U.S.-Russian relations requires returning to a time when things were going right: the 1990s. The devil, in this case, really is in the details—specifically, in three choices that

Washington made about NATO expansion, one under Bush and two under Clinton, each of which cumulatively foreclosed other options for European security.

The first choice came early. By November 24, 1989, just two weeks after the Berlin Wall's unexpected fall, Bush was already sensing the magnitude of more changes yet to come. As protesters toppled one government after another in central and eastern Europe, it seemed clear to him that new leaders in that region would abandon the Warsaw Pact, the involuntary military alliance with the Soviet Union. But what then?

According to U.S. records, Bush put the issue to the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher: "What if [the] East European countries want to leave [the] Warsaw Pact. NATO must stay." Thatcher replied with her startling preferred option: she was in favor of "keeping . . . the Warsaw Pact." According to British records, she saw the pact as an essential "fig leaf for Gorbachev" amid the humiliation of the Soviet collapse. She also "discouraged [Bush] from coming out publicly at this stage in support of independence for the Baltic Republics," since now was not the time to question European borders.

Bush, however, was unconvinced. He "expressed concern about seeming to consign Eastern Europe indefinitely to membership of the Warsaw Pact." The West "could not assign countries to stay" in that pact "against their will." Bush preferred to solve this problem by pushing NATO beyond the old Cold War line.

The West German foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, subsequently proposed another option: combine NATO and the Warsaw Pact into a "composite of common, collective security," within which the two alliances "could both finally dissipate." Former dissidents in central Europe went even further, suggesting the most far-reaching option: their region's complete demilitarization.

All these options were anathema to Bush, who most certainly did not want NATO to dissipate or the United States' leading role in European security to disappear with it. In 1990, however, Gorbachev still had leverage. Thanks to the Soviet victory over the Nazis in World War II, Moscow had hundreds of thousands of troops in East Germany and the legal right to keep them there. Germany couldn't reunify without Gorbachev's permission. And the Soviet leader had another source of power: public opinion.

As the Cold War's frontline, a divided Germany had the highest concentration of nuclear arms per square mile anywhere on the planet.

The weapons in West Germany had been installed to deter a Soviet invasion, given how difficult it would have been for NATO's conventional forces alone to stop a massive advance. Had deterrence failed, the missiles' use would have rendered the heart of Europe uninhabitable—a terrifying prospect to Germans, who, because they were living at ground zero, arguably had more skin in the game than their NATO allies.

Hence, if Gorbachev had asked the Germans to trade those nuclear weapons for Soviet permission to reunify, a sizable number would have gladly agreed. Even better for Moscow, 1990 was an election year in West Germany. The chancellor, Helmut Kohl, had to be particularly attuned to voter sentiment on reunification and the nuclear issue. As Baker's top aide, Robert Zoellick, put it at the time, if Kohl decided to signal a willingness to pay Moscow's price, whatever that was, in advance of the election and "the Germans work[ed] out unification with the Soviets," NATO would get "dumped." This reality gave Moscow the ability to undermine the established order of transatlantic relations.

There were speculative discussions between the U.S. State Department and the West Germans on February 2, 1990, about how best to proceed in this delicate moment and what NATO might do beyond the Cold War line, such as "extend[ing] its territorial coverage to . . . eastern Europe." Genscher raised this idea in a negative sense, meaning he was certain that Moscow would not allow reunification unless such coverage was explicitly ruled out. But Bush and his National Security Council sensed that they might be able to finesse the way NATO moved eastward, namely by restricting what could happen on eastern German territory after Germany joined the alliance. Although they did not use the term, they were following the Scandinavian strategy.

But a week later, Baker—out of the loop with evolving White House thinking because of his extended travels—unwittingly overstepped his bounds by offering Gorbachev a now infamous hypothetical bargain that echoed Genscher's thinking, not Bush's: What if Gorbachev allowed reunification to proceed and Washington agreed "that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?"

The secretary soon had to drop this wording, however, after realizing that it was inconsistent with Bush's preferences. Within a couple of weeks, Baker was having to advise allies quietly that his use of "the term NATO 'jurisdiction' was creating some confusion" and "should probably be avoided in the future." It was a sign that NATO would shift

eastward after all, with a special status for eastern Germany, which ultimately would become Europe's only guaranteed nuclear-free zone.

Through this move to limit NATO infrastructure in eastern Germany, and by playing on Moscow's economic weakness, Bush shifted Gorbachev's attention away from the removal of nuclear weapons in the western territory and toward economic inducements to allow for German reunification. In exchange for billions of deutsche marks in various forms of support, the Soviet leader ultimately allowed Germany to reunify and its eastern regions to join NATO on October 3, 1990, thus permitting the alliance to expand across the old Cold War frontline.

By October 11, 1991, Bush could even indulge in speculation about a more ambitious goal. He asked Manfred Wörner, then NATO's secretary-general, whether the alliance's efforts to establish a liaison organization for central and eastern European states might also "include the Baltics." Wörner's feelings were clear, and Bush did not contradict him. "Yes," Wörner said, "if the Baltics apply they should be welcomed."

NO SECOND-TIER GUARANTEES

By December 1991, the Soviet Union was gone. Soon, Bush would be gone as well, after he lost to Clinton in the 1992 U.S. presidential election. By the time the new president got his team in place, in mid-1993, hyperinflation and corruption were already weakening the prospects of democracy in Russia. Worse, Yeltsin soon made a series of tragic decisions that cast doubt on the country's ability to develop into a peaceful, democratic neighbor to the new states on its borders.

In October 1993, clashing with anti-reform extremists in the parliament, Yeltsin had tanks fire on the parliamentary building. The fighting killed an estimated 145 people and wounded 800 more. Despite, or perhaps because of, the attack, extremists did well in the subsequent parliamentary elections, on December 12, 1993. The party that won the most votes was the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which was "neither liberal nor democratic, but by all appearances fascist," as the historian Sergey Radchenko has put it.

For a while, a budding friendship between "Bill and Boris" distracted the world from these troubling events. The two leaders developed the closest relationship ever to exist between an American president and a Russian leader, with Clinton visiting Moscow more times than any U.S. president before or since.

But Clinton also wanted to respond to demands from central and eastern European countries seeking to join NATO. In January 1994, he launched a novel plan for European security, one aimed at putting those countries on the path to NATO membership without antagonizing Russia. This was PfP, an idea largely conceived of by General John Shalikashvili, the Polish-born chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his advisers. It resembled the Scandinavian strategy—but writ large.

PfP's connection to NATO membership was intentionally left vague, but the idea was roughly that would-be NATO members could, through military-to-military contacts, training, and operations, put themselves on a path to full membership and the Article 5 guarantee. This strategy offered a compromise sufficiently acceptable to key players—even Poland, which wanted full membership and did not like the idea of having to spend time in the waiting room, but understood that it had to follow Washington's lead.

PfP also had the benefit of not immediately redrawing a line across Europe between states with Article 5 protection and those without. Instead, a host of countries in disparate locations could join the partnership and then progress at their own pace. This meant that PfP could incorporate post-Soviet states—including, crucially, Ukraine—even if they were unlikely to become NATO allies. As Clinton put it to the visiting German chancellor, Kohl, on January 31, 1994: "Ukraine is the linchpin of the whole idea." The president added that it would be catastrophic "if Ukraine collapses, because of Russian influence or because of militant nationalists within Ukraine." Clinton continued: "One reason why all the former Warsaw Pact states were willing to support [PfP] was because they understood" that it could provide space for Ukraine in a way that NATO could not.

The genius of PfP was that it balanced these competing interests and even opened its door to Russia as well, which would eventually join the partnership. Clinton later noted to NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana that PfP "has proven to be a bigger deal than we had expected—with more countries, and more substantive cooperation. It has grown into something significant in its own right."

Opponents of PfP within the Clinton administration complained that by making central and eastern European countries wait to gain the full Article 5 guarantee, the partnership gave Moscow a de facto veto over when, where, and how NATO would expand. They argued instead for extending the alliance as soon as possible to deserving new

democracies. And in late 1994, Yeltsin gave PfP critics ammunition by approving what he reportedly thought would be a high-precision police action to counter separatists in the Chechnya region. Instead, he started what became a brutal, protracted, and bloody conflict.

Central and eastern European states seized on the bloodshed to argue that they might be next if Washington and NATO did not protect them with Article 5. A new term arose internally in the Clinton administration: "neo-containment." Such thinking, along with the relationships that Polish President Lech Walesa and Czech President Vaclav Havel established with Clinton, increasingly made an impact on the American president.

So, too, did domestic political pressures. In the November 1994 U.S. midterm elections, the Republican Party took the Senate and the House. Voters had endorsed NATO enlargement as part of the Republicans' winning platform, the "Contract with America." Clinton wanted to win a second term in 1996, and the midterm results factored into his decision to abandon the option of expanding NATO through an individualized, gradual process involving PfP. He shifted instead to a one-size-fits-all enlargement with full guarantees from the start. Reflecting this strategy, NATO issued a public communiqué in December 1994 stating outright: "We expect and would welcome NATO enlargement that would reach to democratic states to our East." Yeltsin, conscious of these words' significance, was enraged.

Privately, the State Department sent the U.S. Mission to NATO a text "which the U.S. believes should emerge from the alliance's internal deliberations on enlargement." The text declared that "security must be equal for all allies" and that "there will be no second-tier security guarantees"—shorthand for contingent memberships or infrastructure limits. With that, although it continued to exist, PfP was marginalized.

Clinton's shift almost caused his secretary of defense to resign. In Perry's view, the progress on arms control in the early 1990s had been nothing short of astounding. A nuclear superpower had fallen apart, and only one nuclear-armed country had emerged from its ruins. Other post-Soviet successor states were joining the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. No weapons had detonated. There were new agreements on safeguards and transparency about the number and location of warheads. These were matters of existential importance, on which the United States and Russia had made historic progress, and now PfP's opponents were, in his view, throwing a

spanner into the works by pursuing a form of NATO expansion that Moscow would find far more threatening.

Perry held on but later regretted that he "didn't fight more effectively for the delay of the NATO decision." As he wrote in 2015, "The descent down the slippery slope began, I believe, with the premature NATO expansion," and the "downsides of early NATO membership for Eastern European nations were even worse than I had feared." As an unfortunate corollary, the Russians immediately concluded that PfP had been a ruse, even though it had not.

COST PER INCH

The significance of Clinton's shift would become apparent over time. On his first European trip as president, in January 1994, Clinton had asked NATO leaders, "Why should we now draw a new line through Europe just a little further east?" That would leave a "democratic Ukraine" sitting on the wrong side. The partnership was the best answer, because it opened a door but also gave the United States and its NATO allies "the time to reach out to Russia and to these other nations of the former Soviet Union, which have been almost ignored through this entire debate." Once PfP was abandoned, a new dividing line became inevitable.

Having jettisoned PfP's method of allowing a wide array of countries to join as loose affiliates, the Clinton administration now needed to decide how many countries to add as full NATO members. The math seemed simple: the more countries, the greater the damage to relations with Russia. But that deceptively simple calculation hid a deeper complication. Given Moscow's sensitivities, expansion to former Soviet republics, such as the Baltics and Ukraine, or to countries with particular features, such as bases that hosted foreign forces and nuclear weapons, would yield a much higher cost per inch.

This raised two questions: To decrease the cost per inch, should full-membership enlargement avoid moving beyond what Moscow considered to be a sensitive line, namely the former border of the Soviet Union? And should new members have any binding restrictions on what could happen on their territory, echoing the Scandinavian accommodations and the East German nuclear prohibition?

To both questions, the Clinton team's answer was a hard no. As early as June 1995, Talbott had already begun pointedly telling Baltic leaders that the first countries to enter NATO as new members would certainly not be the last. By June 1997, he could be blunter. The Clin-

ton administration "will not regard the process of NATO enlargement as finished or successful unless or until the aspirations of the Baltic states have been fulfilled." He was so consistent in this view that his staff christened it "the Talbott principle." The manner of enlargement was set: it should proceed without regard for the cost per inch—the opposite of the Scandinavian strategy.

In April 1999, at NATO's 50th anniversary summit in Washington, D.C., the alliance publicly welcomed the interest of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (along with six more countries) in full membership. The United States could insist, correctly, that it had never recognized the Soviet Union's 1940 occupation of the Baltics. But that did not change the significance of the move: full-membership expansion would not stop at the former Soviet border. Washington brushed aside quiet expressions of concern from Scandinavian leaders, who noted the desirability of sticking with more contingent solutions for their neighborhood.

Coming on top of the alliance's March 1999 military intervention in Kosovo—which Russia fiercely opposed—this turned 1999 into an inflection point for U.S.-Russian relations. Moscow's decision to again escalate the brutal combat in Chechnya later that year added to the sense that the post–Cold War moment of cooperation was collapsing. An ailing Yeltsin reacted with bitterness to U.S. criticism of the renewed violence in Chechnya, complaining to journalists that "Clinton permitted himself to put pressure on Russia" because he had forgotten "for a minute, for a second, for half a minute, forgotten that Russia has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons." And in Istanbul on November 19, 1999, on the margin of an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe summit, Yeltsin's verbal attacks on Clinton were so extreme that Talbott, as he recalled in his memoirs, decided that Yeltsin had become "unhinged." According to the U.S. transcript of a brief private conversation between Clinton and Yeltsin, the Russian leader made sweeping demands. "Just give Europe to Russia," Yeltsin said, because "the U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans."

Clinton tried to deflect the tirade, but Yeltsin kept pressing, adding, "Give Europe to itself. Europe never felt as close to Russia as it does now." Clinton replied, "I don't think the Europeans would like this very much." Abruptly, Yeltsin stood up and announced, "Bill, the meeting is up. . . . This meeting has gone on too long." Clinton would

not let his Russian counterpart go, however, without asking who would win the upcoming Russian election in 2000. A departing Yeltsin replied curtly, "Putin, of course."

The two presidents had patched up relations after spats before, but now Clinton was out of time. The meeting in Istanbul would be his last with Yeltsin as president. Returning home to Moscow, Yeltsin decided to exit the political scene. Serious heart disease, alcoholism, and fear of prosecution had worn the Russian president down.

Yeltsin had already decided that Putin was his preferred successor, because he believed that the younger man would, in the words of the Russia expert Stephen Kotkin, protect his interests, "and maybe those of Russia as well." On December 14, 1999, according to his memoirs, Yeltsin confided to Putin that, on the last day of the year, he would make the younger man acting president.

As promised, on New Year's Eve, Yeltsin shocked his nation with the broadcast of a brief, prerecorded resignation speech. The president's stiff, weak delivery of his scripted words intensified the atmosphere of melancholy. Seated against the backdrop of an indifferently decorated Christmas tree, he asked Russians for "forgiveness." He apologized, saying that "many of our shared dreams didn't come true" and that "what we thought would be easy turned out to be painfully difficult." Putin would subsequently uphold his end of the bargain by, in one of his first official acts, granting Yeltsin immunity.

Yeltsin left the Kremlin around 1 PM Moscow time, feeling immensely relieved to have no obligations for the first time in decades, and told his driver to take him to his family. En route, his limousine's phone rang. It was the president of the United States. Yeltsin told Clinton to call back at 5 PM, even though the American president was preparing to host hundreds of guests at the White House that day for a lavish millennial celebration.

Meanwhile, the new leader of Russia made Clinton wait a further 26 hours before making contact. On January 1, 2000, Putin finally found nine minutes for a call. Clinton tried to put a good face on the abrupt transition, saying, "I think you are off to a very good start."

DASHED HOPES

It soon became apparent that Putin's rise, in terms of Moscow's relations with Washington, was more an end than a start. The peak of U.S.-Russian cooperation was now in the past, not least as measured

in arms control. Letting a decades-long trend lapse, Washington and Moscow failed to conclude any major new accords in the Clinton era.

Instead, nuclear targeting of U.S. and European cities resumed under a Russian leader who, in December 1999, had started a reign that would be measured in decades. For U.S. relations with Russia, these events signaled, if not a return to Cold War conditions precluding all cooperation, then certainly the onset of a killing frost.

Of course, for central and eastern Europeans who had suffered decades of brutality, war, and suppression, entering NATO on the cusp of the twenty-first century was the fulfillment of a dream of partnership with the West. Yet the sense of celebration was muted. As U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright remarked, "A decade earlier, when the Berlin Wall had come down, there was dancing in the streets. Now the euphoria was gone."

The world created in the 1990s never fulfilled the hopes that arose after the collapse of both the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. Initially, there was a widespread belief that the tenets of liberal international order had succeeded and that residents of all the states between the Atlantic and the Pacific, not just the Western ones, could now cooperate within that order. But both U.S. and Russian leaders repeatedly made choices at odds with their stated intentions to promote that outcome. Bush talked about a Europe whole, free, and at peace; Clinton repeatedly proclaimed his wish to avoid drawing a line. Yet both ultimately helped create a new dividing line across post–Cold War Europe. Gorbachev sought to save the Soviet Union; Yeltsin sought lasting democratization for Russia. Neither one succeeded.

NATO expansion was not the sole source of these problems. But the manner of the alliance's enlargement—in interaction with tragic Russian choices—contributed to their extent and impact. Put differently, it is not possible to separate a serious assessment of enlargement's role in eroding U.S.-Russian relations from how it happened. Washington's error was not to expand the alliance but to do so in a way that maximized friction with Moscow. That error resulted from the United States misjudging both the permanence of cooperative relations with Moscow and the extent of Putin's willingness to damage those relations.

The all-or-nothing expansion strategy also incurred those costs without locking in democratization. Former Warsaw Pact states succeeded in joining NATO (and eventually the European Union), only to find that membership did not automatically guarantee their dem-

ocratic transformations. Subsequent research has shown that the prospect of incrementally gaining membership in international organizations—the process offered by PfP—would likely have more effectively solidified political and institutional reforms.

Even as strong a supporter of NATO enlargement as Joe Biden, then a U.S. senator, sensed in the 1990s that the way the alliance was enlarging would cause problems. As he put it in 1997, "Continuing the Partnership for Peace, which turned out to be much more robust and much more successful than I think anyone thought it would be at the outset, may arguably have been a better way to go."

FOCUS ON THE HOW

What should Washington learn from this history? One of the biggest contemporary challenges for the United States is the way that confrontation between the West and Russia has once again become the order of the day. During Donald Trump's divisive presidency, Democrats and Republicans agreed on little, but at least some segment of the GOP was never comfortable with Trump's embrace of Putin. A shared sense of mission in dealing with Moscow offers a path toward a rare U.S. domestic consensus—one that leads back to NATO, still standing despite Trump's toying with the idea of a U.S. withdrawal.

Even with Trump gone, however, critics continue to question the alliance's worth. Some, such as the historian Stephen Wertheim, do so in general terms, arguing that Washington should no longer "continue to fetishize military alliances" as if they were sacred obligations. Other critics have more specific complaints, particularly regarding the recent chaotic withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan. Even Armin Laschet, at the time the candidate for German chancellor from the right-of-center Christian Democratic Union (a party normally strongly supportive of the Atlantic alliance), condemned the withdrawal as "the biggest debacle that NATO has suffered since its founding." European allies lamented what they saw as an unconscionable lack of advance consultation, which eviscerated early hopes of a new, Biden-inspired golden age for the alliance.

Pundits should think twice about writing off NATO, however, or letting the chaos in Kabul derail post-Trump attempts at repairing transatlantic relations. European concerns are valid, and there is clearly a need for a vigorous debate over what went wrong in Afghanistan. But critics need to think about how a call to downgrade or

dismantle the alliance will land in a time of turmoil. The Trump years, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Biden's Afghan pullout have all damaged the structure of transatlantic relations. When a house is on fire, it is not time to start renovations—no matter how badly they were needed before the fire started.

There is also a larger takeaway from this history of NATO expansion, one relevant not just to U.S. relations with Russia but also to ties with China and other competitors. A flawed execution, both in terms of timing and in terms of process, can undermine even a reasonable strategy—as the withdrawal from Afghanistan has shown. Even worse, mistakes can yield cumulative damage and scar tissue when a strategy's implementation is measured in years rather than months. Success in long-term strategic competition requires getting the details right.

The Kremlin's Strange Victory

How Putin Exploits American Dysfunction and Fuels American Decline

Fiona Hill

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Donald Trump wanted his July 2018 meeting in Helsinki with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, to evoke memories of the momentous encounters that took place in the 1980s between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Those arms control summits had yielded the kind of iconic imagery that Trump loved: strong, serious men meeting in distant places to hash out the great issues of the day. What better way, in Trump's view, to showcase his prowess at the art of the deal?

That was the kind of show Trump wanted to put on in Helsinki. What emerged instead was an altogether different sort of spectacle.

By the time of the meeting, I had spent just over a year serving in the Trump administration as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council. Like everyone else who worked in the White House, I had, by then, learned a great deal about Trump's idiosyncrasies. We all knew, for instance, that Trump rarely read the detailed briefing materials his staff prepared for him and that in meetings or calls with other leaders, he

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could never stick to an agreed-on script or his cabinet members' recommendations. This had proved to be a major liability during those conversations, since it often seemed to his foreign counterparts as though Trump was hearing about the issues on the agenda for the first time.

When Trump was winging it, he could be persuaded of all kinds of things. If a foreign visitor or caller was one of his favored strongmen, Trump would always give the strongman's views and version of events the benefit of the doubt over those of his own advisers. During a cabinet meeting with a visiting Hungarian delegation in May 2019, for example, Trump cut off acting U.S. Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, who was trying to make a point about a critical European security issue. In front of everyone, Trump told Shanahan that the autocratic Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, had already explained it all to him when they had met in the Oval Office moments earlier—and that Orban knew the issue better than Shanahan did, anyway. In Trump's mind, the Hungarian strongman simply had more authority than the American officials who worked for Trump himself. The other leader was his equal, and his staff members were not. For Trump, all pertinent information trickled down from him, not up to him. This tendency of Trump's was lamentable when it played out behind closed doors, but it was inexcusable (and indeed impossible to explain or justify) when it spilled out into public view—which is precisely what happened during the now legendarily disastrous press conference after Trump's meeting with Putin in Helsinki.

Before the press conference, Trump was pleased with how things had gone in his one-on-one meeting with Putin. The optics in Finland's presidential palace were to Trump's liking. The two men had agreed to get U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations going again and to convene meetings between their countries' respective national security councils. Trump was keen to show that he and Putin could have a productive, normal relationship, partly to dispel the prevailing notion that there was something perverse about his ties to the Russian president. Trump was eager to brush away allegations that he had conspired with the Kremlin in its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or that the Russians had somehow compromised him—matters that at the time of the meeting, Special Counsel Robert Mueller was actively investigating.

Things went wrong as soon as the press conference began. Trump expected public praise for meeting with Putin and tackling the nuclear

threat. But the U.S. journalists in attendance were not interested in arms control. They wanted to know about the one-on-one meeting and what Putin might have said or not said regarding 2016 and election interference. Jonathan Lemire of the Associated Press asked Trump whether he believed Putin, who had repeatedly denied that his country had done anything to meddle in the election, or the U.S. intelligence agencies, which had concluded the opposite. Lemire pressed Trump: "Would you now, with the whole world watching, tell President Putin—would you denounce what happened in 2016 and would you warn him to never do it again?"

Trump balked. He really didn't want to answer. The only way that Trump could view Russia's broad-based attack on the U.S. democratic system was through the lens of his own ego and image. In my interactions with Trump and his closest staff in the White House, it had become clear to me that endorsing the conclusions of the U.S. intelligence agencies would be tantamount to admitting that Trump had not won the 2016 election. The questions got right to the heart of his insecurities. If Trump said, "Yes, the Russians interfered on my behalf," then he might as well have said outright, "I am illegitimate."

So as he often did in such situations, Trump tried to divert attention elsewhere. He went off on a tangent about a convoluted conspiracy theory involving Ukraine and the emails of his 2016 opponent, Hillary Clinton, and then produced a muddled, rambling answer to Lemire's question, the crux of which was this:

> My people came to me. . . . They said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it's not Russia. I will say this. I don't see any reason why it would be. . . . But I have confidence in both parties. . . . I have great confidence in my intelligence people, but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today.

The outcome of the Helsinki press conference was entirely predictable, which was why I and others had counseled against holding it at all. But it was still agonizing to watch. I was sitting in front of the podium as Trump spoke, immediately behind the U.S. national security adviser and the secretary of state. I saw them stiffen slightly, and I contemplated throwing a fit or faking a seizure and hurling myself backward into the row of journalists behind me. I just wanted to end the whole thing. Perhaps contrary to the expectations of many Amer-

ican observers, even Putin was somewhat dismayed. He reveled in the national and personal humiliation that Trump was courting, but he also knew that Trump's careless remarks would provoke a backlash in the United States and thus further constrain the U.S. president's already limited room to maneuver on Russia policy. The modest agreements for further high-level meetings were already out the window. As he exited the room, Putin told his press secretary, within earshot of our interpreter, that the press conference had been "bullshit."

Trump's critics immediately pounced on his bizarre conduct in Helsinki. It was more evidence that Trump was in league with Putin and that the Kremlin held sway over the American president. The following year, Mueller's final investigative report determined that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Trump campaign had in fact been willing to exploit any derogatory information about Clinton that came its way from whatever source, including Russia. In seeking to thwart Clinton's bid to become the first female American president, the Trump campaign and the Kremlin had been acting in parallel; their goals had aligned. Mueller concluded that although this did not amount to a criminal conspiracy, there was plenty of evidence of an extensive and sophisticated Russian political influence operation against the United States.

The Mueller report also sketched the contours of a different, arguably more pernicious kind of "Russian connection." In some crucial ways, Russia and the United States were not so different—and Putin, for one, knew it. In the very early years of the post–Cold War era, many analysts and observers had hoped that Russia would slowly but surely converge in some ways with the United States. They predicted that once the Soviet Union and communism had fallen away, Russia would move toward a form of liberal democracy. By the late 1990s, it was clear that such an outcome was not on the horizon. And in more recent years, quite the opposite has happened: the United States has begun to move closer to Russia, as populism, cronyism, and corruption have sapped the strength of American democracy. This is a development that few would have foreseen 20 years ago, but one that American leaders should be doing everything in their power to halt and reverse.

Indeed, over time, the United States and Russia have become subject to the same economic and social forces. Their populations have proved equally susceptible to political manipulation. Prior to the 2016 U.S. election, Putin recognized that the United States was on a path

similar to the one that Russia took in the 1990s, when economic dislocation and political upheaval after the collapse of the Soviet Union had left the Russian state weak and insolvent. In the United States, decades of fast-paced social and demographic changes and the Great Recession of 2008–9 had weakened the country and increased its vulnerability to subversion. Putin realized that despite the lofty rhetoric that flowed from Washington about democratic values and liberal norms, beneath the surface, the United States was beginning to resemble his own country: a place where self-dealing elites had hollowed out vital institutions and where alienated, frustrated people were increasingly open to populist and authoritarian appeals. The fire was already burning; all Putin had to do was pour on some gasoline.

A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

When Trump was elected, Putin and the Kremlin made no attempt to conceal their glee. They had thought that Clinton would become president and that she would focus on criticizing Putin's style of governance and constraining Russia. They had steeled themselves and prepared for the worst. Instead, they got the best possible outcome from their perspective—a populist, nativistic president with no prior experience in foreign policy and a huge, fragile ego. Putin recognized Trump as a type and grasped his political predilections immediately: Trump, after all, fit a mold that Putin himself had helped forge as the first populist leader to take power in a major country in the twenty-first century. Putin had blazed the trail that Trump would follow during his four years in office.

The essence of populism is creating a direct link with "the people" or with specific groups within a population, then offering them quick fixes for complex problems and bypassing or eliminating intermediaries such as political parties, parliamentary representatives, and established institutions. Referendums, plebiscites, and executive orders are the preferred tools of the populist leader, and Putin has used them all over the past 20 years. When he came to power on December 31, 1999, at the end of a decade of crisis and strife in Russia, Putin promised to fix everything. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin did not belong to a formal political party. He was the champion of a looser, personalized movement. After 2000, Putin turned Russian presidential elections into national referendums on himself by making sure his rivals were obscure (or wholly manufactured) oppo-

sition candidates. And at every critical juncture during his time in power, Putin has adjusted Russia's political system to entrench himself in the Kremlin. Finally, in 2020, he formally amended the constitution so that in theory (and health permitting), he can run for reelection and stay in power until 2036.

All of Putin's machinations greatly impressed Trump. He wanted to "get along" with Russia and with Putin personally. Practically the only thing Trump ever said to me during my time in his administration was to ask, in reference to Putin, "Am I going to like him?" Before I could answer, the other officials in the room got up to leave, and the president's attention shifted; such was life as a female adviser in the Trump White House.

Trump took at face value rumors that Putin was the richest man in the world and told close associates that he admired Putin for his presumed wealth and for the way he ran Russia as if it were his own private company. As Trump freely admitted, he wanted to do the same thing. He saw the United States as an extension of his other private enterprises: the Trump Organization, but with the world's largest military at its disposal. This was a troubling perspective for a U.S. president, and indeed, over the course of his time in office, Trump came to more closely resemble Putin in political practice than he resembled any of his American predecessors.

At times, the similarities between Trump and Putin were glaringly obvious: their shared manipulation and exploitation of the domestic media, their appeals to their own versions of their countries' "golden age," their compilation of personal lists of "national heroes" to appeal to their voters' nostalgia and conservatism—and their attendant compilation of personal lists of enemies to do the same for their voters' darker sides. Putin put statues of Soviet-era figures back on their pedestals and restored Soviet memorials that had been toppled under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Trump tried to prevent the removal of statues of Confederate leaders and the renaming of American military bases honoring Confederate generals. The two men also shared many of the same enemies: cosmopolitan, liberal elites; the American financier, philanthropist, and open society promoter George Soros; and anyone trying to expand voting rights, improve electoral systems, or cast a harsh light on corruption in their countries' respective executive branches.

Trump also aped Putin's willingness to abuse his executive power by going after his political adversaries; Trump's first impeachment was

provoked in part by his attempt to coerce the government of Ukraine into smearing one of his most formidable opponents, Joe Biden, ahead of the 2020 presidential election. And Trump imported Putin's style of personalist rule, bypassing the professional civil servants in the federal government—a nefarious "deep state," in Trump's eyes—to rely instead on the counsel and interventions of cronies. Foreign politicians called in chits with celebrities who had personal connections to the president and his family, avoiding their own embassies in the process. Lobbyists complained to whomever they could reach in the West Wing or the Trump family circle. They were quick to set attack dogs on anyone perceived as an obstacle and to rile up pro-Trump trolls on the Internet, because this always seemed to work. Influence peddlers both domestic and foreign courted the president to pursue their own priorities; the policymaking process became, in essence, privatized.

The event that most clearly revealed the convergence of politics in the United States and Russia during Trump's term was his disorganized but deadly serious attempt to stage a self-coup and halt the peaceful transfer of executive power after he lost the 2020 election to Biden. Russia, after all, has a long history of coups and succession crises, dating back to the tsarist era, including three during the past 30 years. In August 1991, hard-liners opposed to Gorbachev's reforms staged a brief putsch, declaring a state of emergency and placing Gorbachev under house arrest at his vacation home. The effort fizzled, and the coup was a debacle, but it helped bring down the Soviet Union. Two years later, violence erupted from a bitter dispute between the Russian parliament and Yeltsin over the respective powers of the legislature and the president in competing drafts of a new constitution. Yeltsin moved to dissolve parliament after it refused to confirm his choice for prime minister. His vice president and the Speaker of the parliament, in response, sought to impeach him. In the end, Yeltsin invoked "extraordinary powers" and called out the Russian army to shell the parliament building, thus settling the argument with brute force.

The next coup was a legal one and came in 2020, when Putin wanted to amend Yeltsin's version of the constitution to beef up his presidential powers—and, more important, to remove the existing term limits so that he could potentially stay on as president until 2036. As a proxy to propose the necessary constitutional amendments, Putin tapped Valentina Tereshkova, a loyal supporter in parliament and, as a cosmonaut and the first woman to travel to outer space, an iconic figure

in Russian society. Putin's means were subtler than Yeltsin's in 1993, but his methods were no less effective.

It would have been impossible for any close observer of recent Russian history to not recall those episodes on January 6, when a mob whipped up by Trump and his allies—who had spent weeks claiming that the 2020 election had been stolen from him—stormed the U.S. Capitol and tried to stop the formal certification of the election results. The attack on the Capitol was the culmination of four years of conspiracies and lies that Trump and his allies had fed to his supporters on social media platforms, in speeches, and on television. The "Big Lie" that Trump had won the election was built on the backs of the thousands of little lies that Trump uttered nearly every time he spoke and that were then nurtured within the dense ecosystem of Trumpist media outlets. This was yet one more way in which, under Trump, the United States came to resemble Russia, where Putin has long solidified his grip on power by manipulating the Russian media, fueling nationalist grievances, and peddling conspiracy theories.

I ALONE

Trump put the United States on a path to autocracy, all the while promising to "make America great again." Likewise, Putin took Russia back toward the authoritarianism of the Soviet Union under the guise of strengthening the state and restoring the country's global position. This striking convergence casts U.S.-Russian relations and the exigencies of Washington's approach to Moscow in a new light.

Historically, U.S. policies toward Russia have been premised on the idea that the two countries' paths and expectations diverged at the end of the Cold War. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western analysts had initially thought that Russia might embrace some of the international institutional arrangements that Washington and its allies had long championed. That, of course, did not happen. And under Putin, U.S.-Russian relations have become more frazzled and fraught than at any point in the 1990s.

There is something confounding about the ongoing confrontation between the two countries, which seems like an artifact from another era. During the Cold War, the stakes of the conflict were undeniable. The Soviet Union posed an existential threat to the United States and its allies, and vice versa. The two superpowers faced off in an ideological clash between capitalism and communism and a geopolitical

tussle over spheres of influence in Europe. Today, Russia maintains the capacity to obliterate the United States, but the Soviet Union and the communist system are gone. And even though foreign policy circles in Washington and Moscow still view U.S.-Russian relations through the lens of great-power competition, the struggle for Europe is over. For the United States, China, not Russia, poses the greatest foreign policy challenge of the twenty-first century, along with the urgent existential threats of climate change and global pandemics.

Yet a sense of confrontation and competition persists. Americans point to a pattern of Russian aggression and provocation: Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent assaults on Ukraine's territory and sovereignty, its intervention in Syria in 2015, the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the frequent ransomware attacks and email hacks attributed to Russian actors. Russians, for their part, point to the expansion of NATO into eastern Europe and the Baltic states, the U.S. bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo war in 1999, Washington's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, U.S. support for the "color revolutions" that took place in post-Soviet states such as Georgia and Ukraine in the first decade of this century, and the uprisings in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. In Moscow, all of these serve as proof that Washington is hell-bent on invasion and regime change and also has Russia and Putin in its cross hairs.

In truth, most American policymakers simply wish that Russia would just go away so they can refocus their attention on what really matters. For their Russian counterparts, however, the United States still represents the main opponent. That is because, as a populist leader, Putin sees the United States not just as a geopolitical threat to Russia but also as a personal threat to himself. For Putin, foreign policy and domestic policy have fused. His attempt to retain Russia's grip on the independent countries that were once part of the Soviet Union and to reassert Moscow's influence in other global arenas is inseparable from his effort to consolidate and expand his authority at home.

Putin sits at the apex of a personalized and semi-privatized kleptocratic system that straddles the Russian state and its institutions and population. He has embedded loyalists in every important Russian institution, enterprise, and industry. If Putin wants to retain the presidency until 2036—by which time he will be 84 years old and will have become the longest-serving modern Russian ruler—he will have

to maintain this level of control or even increase it, since any slippage might be perceived as weakness. To do so, Putin has to deter or defeat any opponents, foreign or domestic, who have the capacity to undermine his regime. His hope is that leaders in the United States will get so bogged down with problems at home that they will cease criticizing his personalization of power and will eschew any efforts to transform Russia similar to those the U.S. government carried out in the 1990s.

Putin also blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy to distract the Russian population from the distortions and deficiencies of his rule. On the one hand, he stresses how decadent and dissolute the United States has become and how ill suited its leaders are to teach anyone a lesson on how to run a country. On the other hand, he stresses that the United States still poses a military threat and that it aims to bring Russia to its knees. Putin's constant refrain is that the contest between Russia and the United States is a perpetual Darwinian struggle and that without his leadership, Russia will not survive. Without Putin, there is no Russia. He does not want things to get completely out of hand and lead to war. But he also does not want the standoff to fade away or get resolved. As the sole true champion of his country and his people, he can never be seen to stand down or compromise when it comes to the Americans.

Similarly, Putin must intimidate, marginalize, defuse, or defeat any opposition to his rule. Anyone who might stand in his way must be crushed. In this sense, the jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny and Clinton fall into the same category. In Putin's view, if Clinton had become U.S. president, she would have continued to hound him and hold him to task, just as she did when she served as secretary of state in the Obama administration, by promoting democracy and civil society to root out corruption in Russia.

Of course, Navalny is far more dangerous to Putin than Clinton would have been. Navalny is a Russian, not a foreigner. He is a next-generation alternative to Putin: young, handsome, charismatic, patriotic, and defiant. He poses a threat to Putin not only owing to their differences but also because of a few key similarities: like Putin, Navalny is a populist who heads a movement rather than a party, and he has not been averse to playing on nationalist sentiments to appeal to the same Russian voters who form Putin's base. Navalny has survived an audacious assassination attempt and has humiliated Putin on numerous occasions. By skillfully using digital media and slick video

skills to highlight the excesses of the Russian leader's kleptocratic system, Navalny has gotten under Putin's skin. He has forced the Kremlin to pay attention to him. This is why Navalny is in jail and why Putin has moved swiftly to roll up his movement, forestalling any chance that Navalny might compete for the presidency in 2024.

THE TASK AT HAND

The current U.S.-Russian relationship no longer mirrors the Cold War challenge, even if some geopolitical contours and antagonisms persist. The old U.S. foreign policy approach of balancing deterrence with limited engagement is ill suited to the present task of dealing with Putin's insecurities. And after Trump's disastrous performance at Helsinki, it is also clear that the arms control summitry that took the edge off the acute phase of the Cold War and nuclear confrontation can provide little guidance for how to anchor the future relationship. The primary problem for the Biden administration in dealing with Russia is rooted in the domestic politics of the United States and Russia rather than their foreign policies. The two countries have been heading in the same political direction for some of the same reasons over the last several years. They have similar political susceptibilities. The United States will never change Putin and his threat perceptions, because they are deeply personal. Americans will have to change themselves to blunt the effects of Russian political interference campaigns for the foreseeable future. Achieving that goal will require Biden and his team to integrate their approach to Russia with their efforts to shore up American democracy, tackle inequality and racism, and lead the country out of a period of intense division.

The polarization of American society has become a national security threat, acting as a barrier to the collective action necessary for combating catastrophes and thwarting external dangers. Partisan spectacles during the global COVID-19 pandemic have undermined the country's international standing as a model of liberal democracy and eroded its authority on public health. The United States' inability to get its act together has hindered the projection of American soft power, or what Biden has called "the power of our example." During my time in the Trump administration, I watched as every peril was politicized and turned into fodder for personal gain and partisan games. Successive national security advisers, cabinet members, and their professional staffs were unable to mount coherent responses or

defenses to security issues in the face of personalized, chaotic, and opportunistic conduct at the top.

In this regard, Putin actually offers an instructive contrast. Trump railed against a mythological American deep state, whereas Putin—who spent decades as an intelligence operative before ascending to office—is a product of Russia's very real deep state. Unlike Trump, who saw the U.S. state apparatus as his enemy and wanted to rule the country as an outsider, Putin rules Russia as a state insider. Also unlike Trump, Putin rarely dives into Russia's social, class, racial, or religious divisions to gain political traction. Instead, although he targets individuals and social groups that enjoy little popular support, Putin tends to promote a single, synthetic Russian culture and identity to overcome the domestic conflicts of the past that destabilized and helped bring down both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. That Putin seeks one Russia while Trump wanted many Americas during his time in office is more than just a difference in political styles: it is a critical data point. It highlights the fact that a successful U.S. policy approach to Russia will rest in part on denying Putin and Russian operatives the possibility to exploit divisions in American society.

The United States' vulnerability to the Kremlin's subversion has been amplified by social media. American-made technology has magnified the impact of once fringe ideas and subversive actors around the world and become a tool in the hands of hostile states and criminal groups. Extremists can network and reach audiences as never before on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are designed to attract people's attention and divide them into affinity groups. Putin has weaponized this technology against the United States, taking advantage of the ways that social media undermines social cohesion and erodes Americans' sense of a shared purpose. Policymakers should step up their cooperation with the private sector in order to cast light on and deter Russian intelligence operations and other efforts to exploit social media platforms. They also need to figure out ways to educate the American public about the perils of posting personal and political information online.

Making the United States and its society more resilient and less vulnerable to manipulation by tackling inequality, corruption, and polarization will require innovative policies across a huge range of issues. Perhaps the highest priority should be given to investing in people where they reside, particularly through education. Education

can lower the barriers to opportunity and accurate information in a way that nothing else can. It can help people recognize the difference between fact and fiction. And it offers all people the chance not only to develop knowledge and learn skills but also to continue to transform themselves and their communities.

One thing U.S. leaders should avoid in seeking to foster domestic unity is attempting to mobilize Americans around the idea of a common enemy, such as China. Doing so risks backfiring by stirring up xenophobic anger toward Americans and immigrants of Asian heritage and thus fueling more divisions at home. Instead of trying to rally Americans against China, Biden should rally them in support of the democratic U.S. allies that Trump spurned and derided. Many of those countries, especially in Europe, find themselves in the same political predicament as the United States, as authoritarian leaders and powers seek to exploit socioeconomic strife and populist proclivities among their citizens. Biden should base a new transatlantic agenda on the mutual fight against populism at home and authoritarianism abroad through economic rebuilding and democratic renewal.

Most important, Biden must do everything in his power to restore trust in government and to promote fairness, equity, and justice. As many Americans learned during Trump's presidency, no country, no matter how advanced, is immune to flawed leadership, the erosion of political checks and balances, and the degradation of its institutions. Democracy is not self-repairing. It requires constant attention.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

THE BEST OF WWW

The Roots of Cultural Genocide in Xinjiang

China's Imperial Past Hangs Over the Uyghurs

Sean R. Roberts

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On January 19, one day before leaving office, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that China's actions against the Uyghur minority group constituted "genocide and crimes against humanity." Antony Blinken, Pompeo's successor, would later agree with this characterization in his confirmation hearing. The notion that a genocide is underway in the twenty-first century seems outlandish, especially in a country that produces the majority of consumer products in American homes. But whatever the merits of the term, the evidence of the atrocities that China has committed against Uyghurs is undeniable.

Over one million Uyghurs and other Muslim peoples in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang are in mass internment camps, prisons, and other penal institutions where they are subjected to psychological stress, torture, and, as recently reported by the BBC, systematic rape. Outside these penal institutions, the Chinese government has placed the indigenous people of the region under constant surveillance using cutting-edge technologies, involuntarily sterilizes women, strips children from their families and sends them to board-

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ing schools, and has dispatched hundreds of thousands of people into forced residential labor programs in factories throughout China. All the while, the Chinese state is erasing the Uyghur characteristics of the region, destroying mosques and sites of pilgrimage, bulldozing traditional neighborhoods, and suppressing the Uyghur language.

The Uyghurs are the main indigenous group in Xinjiang. They are mostly Muslim, speak their own Turkic language, and have maintained a culture distinct from that of the majority Han population of China. According to Chinese government figures, there are 12 million Uyghurs in Xinjiang—a drop in the bucket when set against China's overall population of 1.4 billion people. And yet this community has drawn the full force of the Chinese security apparatus, which seems bent on pummeling the minority group into submission.

China's brutal behavior in Xinjiang does not just reflect the country's increasingly authoritarian turn under President Xi Jinping or the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Rather, the repression of the Uyghurs arises out of a fundamentally colonial relationship between Beijing and a territory that it conquered long ago but neither fully incorporated into modern China nor allowed real autonomy. In the 1980s, it seemed for a moment that Beijing might reach a more tolerant modus vivendi with the Uyghurs. But China eventually opted to try to quash Xinjiang's distinct identity. In pleading with Beijing to change its policies in the region, outsiders are in effect asking China to be a very different nation-state than the one it has chosen to be.

COLONIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

China's actions against the Uyghur people over the last four years recall the cultural genocides carried out by other settler colonial powers in previous eras. Much like indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australasia, Uyghurs have faced mass incarceration and internment, the destruction of cultural sites and symbols, displacement, family separation, and forced assimilation. Beijing's recent policies in Xinjiang represent the culmination of a long and gradual colonization of the Uyghur homeland.

Xinjiang, which Uyghurs view as their homeland and which means "new frontier" in Chinese, was conquered by the Qing dynasty in the mid-eighteenth century and absorbed into the empire as a province in the late nineteenth century. When the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, the new Republic of China inherited this region as a distant colonial ap-

pendage, ruling over it through Han leaders who maintained a tenuous connection to central state power. The CCP took over in 1949 and sought to exert greater control over the region. Mimicking a Soviet-style system of ethnofederalism, Beijing renamed the territory the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

In the Soviet Union, the ruling Communist Party recognized the excesses of tsarist colonialism and gave formerly colonized peoples the opportunity to be at the forefront of Soviet culture and governance within national Soviet republics. These republics were even granted the right—however symbolic—to secede from the Soviet Union. But China never took the same steps in its imperially obtained territories in Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Unlike their Soviet counterparts, China's ethnic "autonomous regions" were hardly autonomous: they did not have the theoretical right to secede, and very few indigenous party members attained positions of meaningful power in government. Furthermore, by 1959, the CCP espoused the view that Xinjiang was a historical part of China—a position it emphatically maintains to this day, denying the colonial character of the region's entry into China.

By 1960, there was very little that was autonomous or Uyghur about the government in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. China had already rid the regional leadership of native cadres in the late 1950s and then began encouraging Han Chinese migration to the region, facilitating a marked demographic shift. In 1953, Han constituted only six percent of the population of Xinjiang. In 1982, they were 38 percent.

Despite this demographic transformation, the Uyghur homeland remained on the fringes of Chinese communist rule into the 1970s. Most Han migrants settled in the north of the region and lived apart from the Uyghur population centers in the south, such as Kashgar and Khotan. Mao Zedong's various social-engineering campaigns, deployed in this region as they were everywhere in China, had limited impact in transforming Uyghurs into loyal Maoists. Into the 1980s, Xinjiang was still very different culturally, linguistically, and in physical appearance from the rest of China, especially in the region's southern oases, which remained populated overwhelmingly by Uyghurs.

DECOLONIZATION DEFERRED

The period of reform under Deng Xiaoping that gained steam following the death of Mao in 1976 held a good deal of promise for the Uyghurs. Beijing tentatively adopted a strategy of partial decolonization

in Xinjiang. Deng's close associate Hu Yaobang, the general secretary of the CCP from 1982 to 1987, spearheaded liberalizing reforms in the region as he did elsewhere in China. He called for many of the Han migrants in Xinjiang to return to their hometowns and advocated for unprecedented cultural, religious, and political reform. The government allowed previously shuttered mosques to reopen and new mosques to be built. Uyghur-language publishing and artistic expression exploded. And Hu even suggested making the region more autonomous within the Chinese system of governance, mandating that the leaders of the region come from the indigenous ethnic groups and be allowed to cultivate their own culture and language in local state institutions. This aspiration for greater inclusion of ethnic minorities fit well with Hu's overall vision for democratization and liberalization.

But Hu's hope for a more autonomous Uyghur region and for a more democratic China was never realized. Conservatives in the party purged Hu in 1987, blaming his more liberal policies for stoking student agitation throughout the country. The crackdown on the mass student protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989—which sprang up partially in response to Hu's ouster—signaled an end to the era of political reform. The event that truly sealed the fate of the Uyghur region, however, was the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. China inaccurately viewed campaigns for ethnic self-determination as the driving force behind the dissolution of the Soviet Union and acted to ensure that China did not suffer a similar fate.

Throughout the 1990s, the CCP deployed numerous so-called anti-separatism campaigns aimed at snuffing out signs of agitation. The state saw Muslim piety as akin to a call for self-determination and targeted religious individuals. It also arrested numerous secular artists and writers. These aggressive campaigns involved significant state violence—mass arrests, torture, and executions. Occasionally, they also sparked violent retaliation from Uyghurs. Despite that sporadic bloody conflict, there was no organized Uyghur militant movement in the region, no genuine threat of secession, and no reason to believe that Xinjiang merited such heavy-handed treatment.

THE MIRAGE OF TERRORISM

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States and Washington's subsequent declaration of a global "war on terror" presented Beijing with an opportunity to reframe its suppression of the Uyghurs. China claimed that its actions were merely a response to a grave terrorist threat. In a

bid to fend off international criticism of its policies in Xinjiang, it claimed that Uyghur militants were linked to al Qaeda. The United States took the bait. In the summer of 2002, Washington claimed that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a small, previously unknown Uyghur group in Afghanistan, was aligned with al Qaeda. The United States branded the group a terrorist organization, citing Chinese claims that U.S. officials had denied only months earlier.

The U.S. government finally removed ETIM from the Terrorist Exclusion List in November 2020, acknowledging that it had not existed for over a decade. But the original designation did lasting damage, emboldening China's repression in Xinjiang. Under the guise of counterterrorism, China ramped up its suppression of dissent and repression of religion in the Uyghur homeland. It simultaneously furthered its goals of colonization by investing billions in building new infrastructure and industry in Xinjiang, in the process attracting more Han migrants to the region.

For a time, Chinese officials continued to court Uyghur elites to support the government's policies while focusing repression only on pious Uyghurs. But Beijing has taken a tougher line since 2017, in effect suspecting the region's entire indigenous population of complicity with terrorism or separatist militancy. A number of factors precipitated this hardening of Chinese policy: China's increasingly autocratic turn under Xi; the need to develop Xinjiang as an important land port in the vast infrastructure and development program known as the Belt and Road Initiative; Uyghur resistance to state policies; and China's growing confidence in itself as a global power unconcerned with international criticism. It was also abetted by the acceptance, in many quarters, of the logic of counterterrorism that can easily be used to demonize Muslim populations as an existential threat.

In the last four years, Chinese authorities have incarcerated or placed in mass internment camps over a tenth of the local indigenous population. They have subjected the remainder of the population to unprecedented surveillance, tracking their behavior, associations, and communications for any sign of disloyalty that could lead to their incarceration. As a result, those outside penal institutions are forced to comply with state campaigns designed to transform the local population, including forced labor programs, mandatory Chinese-language training, involuntary sterilization, coerced miscegenation campaigns, and the destruction of local cultural monuments or their sanitization for

tourist purposes (such as the stylized remodeling of Kashgar's old city). One public government document reviewed by Agence France-Presse in 2018 made the CCP's strategy abundantly clear. The overarching goal of these policies toward Uyghurs, it said, was to "break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins."

This strategy does not seek to counter a real or perceived terrorist threat. Beijing's true aim is cultural genocide. It hopes to scrub this territory of its Uyghur character, to crush the ethnic solidarity of the Uyghur people, and to turn their homeland into a Chinese commercial hub, another spoke in the wheel of the Belt and Road Initiative. China wants Xinjiang to resemble just another Han-dominated province of the country. In realizing this goal, it views the Uyghurs and their cultural identity at best as superfluous and at worst as obstacles that must be removed.

THE DAMAGE DONE

China will not shift course easily. U.S. President Joe Biden's administration will most likely continue the previous U.S. administration's vocal criticism of recent Chinese actions in Xinjiang. Congress has passed legislation that places sanctions on Chinese officials and companies involved in repressive actions in Xinjiang, and it is considering further legislation to ban products made with forced labor in the region. These measures are warranted given the scale of the humanitarian crisis, but they cannot exert the necessary pressure on Beijing as long as they appear to others as simply a plank of the great-power competition between China and the United States. As China has already demonstrated at the UN Human Rights Council—where 45 member states in 2020 signed on to a letter defending Chinese actions in Xinjiang—many countries are willing to take Beijing's side in such a dispute. The push to change Beijing's policies must have broad international support and apply sustained economic pressure. And, most important, external pressure can do only so much; real change will come only from within the CCP. Effective international pressure would aim to convince important decision-makers in China that the country's treatment of the Uyghurs will have substantial economic and reputational consequences.

Even if the CCP were to have an unlikely change of heart, it will be difficult to repair the damage to the Uyghur people and restore trust between them and the state. High-ranking officials, including Xi, would

need to accept responsibility for the atrocities committed, especially over the past four years. And there remains a much larger reckoning for China: the task of coming to terms with the ethnic diversity it inherited from the Qing dynasty. Beijing should take a page out of the books of other countries, including many in South America and Scandinavia, which have granted indigenous peoples at least limited sovereignty—as the CCP itself contemplated doing in the 1980s. But Chinese actions don't suggest any return to a more inclusive vision of the country that accepts Uyghurs on their own terms. That would require fundamental changes in the very character of the modern Chinese state. Instead, China seems committed to pressing ahead to a bleak endgame, the decimation of the Uyghur people and their culture.

China Is Not Ten Feet Tall

How Alarmism Undermines American Strategy

Ryan Hass

MARCH 3, 2021

China, the story goes, is inexorably rising and on the verge of overtaking a faltering United States. China has become the largest engine of global economic growth, the largest trading nation, and the largest destination for foreign investment. It has locked in major trade and investment deals in Asia and Europe and is using the Belt and Road Initiative—the largest development project of the twenty-first century—to win greater influence in every corner of the world. It is exporting surveillance tools, embedding technology in 5G communications networks, and using cyber-capabilities to both steal sensitive information and shape political discourse overseas. It is converting economic and political weight into military might, using civil-military fusion to develop cutting-edge capabilities and bullying its neighbors, including U.S. allies and partners such as Australia, India, and Taiwan. And at home, it is ruthlessly cracking down everywhere from Hong Kong to Xinjiang, with little concern about criticism from the United States and other democratic governments.

Among the most eager purveyors of this story line are China's government-affiliated media outlets. Projecting self-assurance, they have

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also gone out of their way to contrast their own achievements with plentiful examples of American dysfunction. They point to images of insurrectionists storming the U.S. Capitol and of American citizens standing in line for water during power outages in Texas as evidence of the decay of "Western democracy." They celebrate China's success in "defeating" COVID-19 and reopening the country, while the United States and other Western countries still struggle to stop the spread of the virus. "Time and momentum are on our side," Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in a speech at the Communist Party's Fifth Plenum last fall. In January, Chen Yixin, a top security official, told a Chinese Communist Party study session, "The rise of the East and decline of the West has become a trend."

Authoritarian systems excel at showcasing their strengths and concealing their weaknesses. But policymakers in Washington must be able to distinguish between the image Beijing presents and the realities it confronts. China is the second most powerful country in the world and the most formidable competitor the United States has faced in decades. Yet at the same time, and in spite of its many visible defects, the United States remains the stronger power in the U.S.-Chinese relationship—and it has good reason to think it can stay that way. For all the obstacles facing the United States, those facing China are considerably greater.

During the Cold War, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger cautioned against "ten-foot-tall syndrome": the tendency among U.S. policymakers to view their Soviet competitors as towering figures of immense strength and overwhelming intellect. A similar syndrome has taken hold in the United States today, and the harms are not just analytical. Concentrating on China's strengths without accounting for its vulnerabilities creates anxiety. Anxiety breeds insecurity. Insecurity leads to overreaction, and overreaction produces bad decisions that undermine the United States' own competitiveness. Seeing China clearly is the first step toward getting China policy right.

THE MISMEASURE OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

China poses the most direct test of U.S. foreign policy in decades. Not since the Cold War has a country seriously contested U.S. leadership in multiple regions of the world simultaneously. The combination of military strength, economic weight, and global ambition makes China a different—and more complex—challenge than the Soviet Union presented during the Cold War.

In recent years, Beijing has made plain its revisionist ambitions. It seeks adjustments to the distribution of power in the international system, the security order in Asia, the role and remit of international institutions, the free flow of uncensored information across borders, and the liberal nature of the existing international order. It wants its Leninist political model and state-led economic model to be accepted and respected. It has signaled that it will brook no challenges to its conception of its territorial boundaries or its management of domestic affairs. And it has declared a national goal of becoming the world leader in a growing number of advanced technologies, from artificial intelligence to electric vehicles.

But it is hardly a foregone conclusion that China will travel a linear path toward realizing its goals. For an accurate measure of the challenges China poses to U.S. interests, Beijing's strengths must be evaluated alongside its vulnerabilities. Xi and his advisers face as stiff a set of challenges as almost anyone else in the world.

Consider China's seemingly unstoppable economic ascent. In reality, the challenges over the medium term are significant. China is at risk of growing old before it grows rich, becoming a graying society with degrading economic fundamentals that impede growth. The working-age population is already shrinking; by 2050, China will go from having eight workers per retiree now to two workers per retiree. Moreover, it has already squeezed out most of the large productivity gains that come with a population becoming more educated and urban and adopting technologies to make manufacturing more efficient. China is running out of productive places to invest in infrastructure, and rising debt levels will further complicate its growth path. In the past decade alone, China's debt has more than doubled, from 141 percent of GDP in 2008 to over 300 percent in 2019. Ballooning debt will make it harder for China to buy its way up the ladder from low-end manufacturing to high value-added production, as South Korea and Taiwan did at similar levels of development.

Meanwhile, the political system is growing increasingly sclerotic as power becomes more concentrated around Xi. Once renowned for technocratic competence, the Chinese Communist Party is becoming better known for Leninist rigidity. Space for local policy experimentation appears to be shrinking, as more decisions become concentrated in Beijing. The top-down nature of the system has also made it more difficult for officials to revisit past decisions or report bad news to the top.

This dynamic likely contributed to the slow early response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan. Although the leadership has made notable gains in alleviating extreme poverty, it also has become increasingly anxious and uncompromising in clamping down on perceived challenges to its authority. Beijing's rigid ethos for imposing its will along the country's peripheral regions, including but not limited to Xinjiang, may bring future problems. Externally, China faces formidable obstacles to its ambitions. Beijing's repression at home, assertiveness abroad, and efforts to conceal critical initial details surrounding the coronavirus pandemic have contributed to rising negative views toward China. According to Pew polling from October 2020, unfavorable views of China have reached historic highs across a diverse set of countries. Beijing is also likely to encounter rising budgetary constraints on its massive overseas initiatives in the coming years, as it contends with both a cooling economy and rising demands from an aging society.

From a strategic perspective, China's military likely will remain relatively constrained for the foreseeable future in its ability to project force beyond its immediate periphery, let alone to marry power projection with political and economic influence on a global scale—definitional features of a superpower. China confronts a uniquely challenging geography. It is bordered by 14 countries, four of which are nuclear armed and five of which harbor unresolved territorial disputes with Beijing. These include an aging but wealthy Japan, a rising and nationalistic India, a revanchist Russia, a technologically powerful South Korea, and a dynamic and determined Vietnam. All these countries have national identities that resist subordination to China or its interests. And the United States maintains a constant forward-deployed military presence in the region, supported by basing and access agreements in countries along China's periphery.

China is also vulnerable when it comes to food and energy security. It lacks enough arable land to feed its population and imports roughly half its oil from the Middle East. In a conflict, Chinese naval capacity would be insufficient to prevent China from being cut off from vital supplies. Beijing is working to address this vulnerability, but there are no quick or easy solutions.

THE CASE FOR SELF-CONFIDENCE

Washington's bipartisan move in recent years to a hard-line approach to China has been driven above all by Beijing: Chinese leaders have

grown more impatiently aggressive in the pursuit of their ambitions and have increasingly leaned on nationalism, particularly as ideology and economic performance have become diminishing sources of social cohesion. But much of the shift in Washington has also been driven by a growing sense of panic about China's strengths, leading to a bout of American insecurity.

Such panic is unlikely to prove constructive: an alarmed focus on degrading China's strengths risks causing the United States to focus too little on the more essential task of bolstering its own. Any attempt to use the China threat to spur domestic reform or overcome domestic division is likely to do more harm than good. At home, inflating the China threat will encourage the political weaponization of the issue, with China serving as a tool for ambitious politicians to discredit opponents for being weak. Abroad, such an approach will widen divisions with allies and partners, almost none of whom share Washington's view that China is an existential threat. And it is likely to encourage policies that in an effort to harm China, end up doing equal or greater harm to the United States—including by foreclosing coordination with Beijing on issues of vital importance to Americans.

The Trump administration's trade policies offer a clear demonstration of this dynamic. Tariffs on Chinese imports were sold as a tool to compel Chinese capitulation to U.S. concerns about unfair trading practices. In fact, they had little success in forcing desired economic changes in China, and they triggered Chinese retaliation that did plenty of harm in the United States: a rising trade deficit, losses to U.S. farmers that resulted in a $28 billion bailout, and the elimination of an estimated 245,000 jobs.

The United States has good reason to be confident about its ability to compete with China. The U.S. economy is still $7 trillion larger than China's. The United States enjoys energy and food security, comparatively healthy demographics, the world's finest higher education system, and possession of the world's reserve currency. It benefits from peaceful borders and favorable geography. It boasts an economy that allocates capital efficiently and traditionally serves as a sponge for the brightest thinkers and the best ideas in the world. It has a transparent and predictable legal system and a political system that is designed to spur self-correction. China has none of these attributes.

Self-confidence should foster a steady, patient, and wise response to China's rise—one that can attract broad support at home and

abroad. Some elements of this approach will require standing up to Chinese actions that challenge U.S. interests and values even while pushing Beijing to contribute more to efforts to address transnational challenges, such as building a global disease surveillance network and decarbonizing the global economy. At the same time, U.S. policymakers will need to accept that coexistence means accepting competition as a condition to be managed rather than a problem to be solved, as Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan (now White House Asia coordinator and national security adviser, respectively) argued in these pages in 2019. Above all, the United States will need to "measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation," as George Kennan put it early in the Cold War.

The more the United States can restore confidence that it is the country best prepared in the world to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, the better it will be able to focus attention where it matters most: not on slowing China down but on strengthening itself. To compete effectively with China, Washington will need to focus on bolstering the United States' domestic dynamism, international prestige, and unmatched global network of alliances and partnerships. These are the real keys to the United States' strength, and China cannot take them away.

The Pandemic That Won't End

COVID-19 Variants and the Peril of Vaccine Inequity

Michael T. Osterholm and Mark Olshaker

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Every struggle against a pandemic is a race against time. Human intelligence, scientific know-how, and technology try to outstrip the microbe's capacity for rapid change. The human species produces a new generation on average about every 20 to 30 years; microbes produce a new generation in minutes to hours. Each of those reproductive cycles gives the virus the opportunity to mutate. Many of these inevitable mutations will be insignificant or even detrimental to the microbe's survival, but some will make the germ better suited to the pressures of its environment—and more dangerous to humans.

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its second year, variants of concern have been identified in Brazil, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. They will not be the last. Scientists fear that some of these new strains may be resistant to the recently produced COVID-19 vaccines. As a result, the development of novel coronavirus variants threatens to extend the pandemic even as the rollout of vaccines has promised to bring it to an end.

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This pressure makes vaccine access more important, not less. New mutations can develop when the virus is able to spread through unprotected populations. The best way to head off the development of dangerous variants is to have as many people as possible protected from infection in the first place. The current global COVID-19 vaccine regime, however, is not fit for that purpose. Millions of people in high-income countries may have already received vaccines, but many low- and middle-income countries have yet to issue a single dose.

Such inequity is not merely unjust but hazardous. Vaccine nationalism—the understandable desire to tend to one's own citizens first before worrying about others—won't save wealthy countries if new variants of the disease prolong suffering and disruption elsewhere. Collective action to immunize the world from COVID-19 may sound idealistic, but it is a practical necessity.

THE TROUBLE WITH VARIANTS

For many months, scientists assumed that the COVID-19 microbe was relatively stable. Its mutations seemed insignificant enough that a safe and effective vaccine might be able to quash the disease once and for all. But the emergence of the first variants of concern in November and December 2020 forced the scientific community to acknowledge, with a due degree of humility, that bringing the pandemic to an end will not be so straightforward.

Variants of diseases such as COVID-19 offer several grounds for concern. A variant may be more easily transmissible from person to person. It might cause more serious disease and greater mortality and therefore lead to a greater burden on already stretched hospitals and health-care facilities. And most troublingly, immunity acquired via vaccination or from previous exposure to COVID-19 may not prevent a new mutation of the disease from causing infection.

The surge in the United States of the COVID-19 variant first detected in the United Kingdom suggests the virus is adapting in ways that make it more transmissible and cause more serious disease. As long as the virus can continue to spread anywhere in the world, no one is safe from mutations that have the potential to render current vaccines and treatment regimens less effective or even ineffective. Two other variants—one first detected in South Africa and one in Brazil—are not spreading in the United States or around the world as alarmingly at present but seem able to evade the immune protec-

tion afforded by the current vaccines or by recent natural infection. These dangerous mutations could prolong the pandemic, extending all the concomitant suffering, hospitalization, death, and economic disruption of the past year.

The emergence of troubling COVID-19 variants becomes more likely as long as vast swaths of the world still lack access to vaccines. In February, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres announced that ten countries had administered 75 percent of the world's available COVID-19 vaccine supply. At that time, more than 130 countries, home to 2.5 billion people, had yet to receive a single dose of any vaccine, rendering them vulnerable to new variants. High-income countries could get close to herd immunity—the point at which enough people in a given population are immune that each infected case transmits to fewer than one other person so that the virus cannot spread easily—through vaccination in the coming months. But they will still be in danger from variants evolving in nonvaccinated or inadequately vaccinated countries that then make their way across international borders.

Such mutations could pose a major health threat to all countries and disrupt the interconnected global supply chain by damaging manufacturing and agriculture in regions still blighted by the virus. Countries could once again shut down borders and prevent travel. A January study published by the International Chamber of Commerce claimed that unequal access to vaccines could cost the global economy as much as $9.2 trillion, with around half of that total lost in wealthy countries. The continuing pandemic could also wreak havoc on already vulnerable and shaky governments, leading to greater geopolitical instability.

DECLARING WAR ON COVID-19

To stop the pandemic from dragging on another two to three years will require a global response that radically boosts vaccine production and distribution. One element of such a response is the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access program, known as COVAX, a World Health Organization (WHO) initiative to provide vaccines to 92 low- and middle-income countries, including many in Africa. The facility's initial goal was to cover just 20 percent of its target populations, and officials feared that reaching even that threshold would be difficult. In February, Ghana became the first nation to receive a COVAX supply, but it included only enough doses to vaccinate one percent of its pop-

ulation of 31 million people. Widespread immunization in Africa remains a distant prospect; the African Union hopes to have 60 percent of the continent's 1.3 billion individuals vaccinated within three years.

COVAX began as a humanitarian initiative, but it has rapidly morphed into a vital instrument of enlightened self-interest. In February, the G–7 nations pledged to increase their commitments to COVAX to $7.5 billion, with $4.0 billion coming from the United States. Yet Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO's director-general, insisted that sum is far less than what is needed. Wealthy countries must deliver greater funding to COVAX, with the knowledge that their donations represent a comparatively small insurance policy against the consequences of inaction.

Beyond supplying funds, governments and international aid institutions must figure out how to boost the supply of vaccines. Countries in Africa, Central and South America, and much of Asia have limited pharmaceutical manufacturing capability. To compensate for that lack, countries and corporations already making vaccines must coordinate in helping accelerate the production and distribution of the vaccines. This endeavor should include China, India, and Russia, as well as other Western countries, all of whom should work to develop capacity in allied or client countries. Member states of the World Trade Organization should consider its rules on intellectual property to see if special adjustments or waivers could be used to help increase supply. Private pharmaceutical companies must be willing to share knowledge and technology that in normal circumstances they might have kept to themselves. In an encouraging start, U.S. President Joe Biden announced in March that the pharmaceutical giant Merck has agreed to partner with traditional rival Johnson & Johnson to boost the supply of the latter's newly authorized single-dose vaccine.

Subsequently, the WHO, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and pharmaceutical companies should scour the entire world for additional production capability to increase the manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccines and the necessary supplies to administer them, including vials, syringes, and refrigerated storage units. Plants that produce veterinary vaccines, for instance, might be enlisted in this effort, and then wealthy countries, the WHO, and large foundations should support them with the right financial and technological backing to get up and running. These new facilities might serve a lasting role beyond the particular crisis of this pandemic, addressing existing

weaknesses and gaps in the international supply chain for generic drugs (at the moment most are manufactured in either China or India). And these facilities can help in the likely event of another pandemic, as governments can repurpose them to produce new vaccines to combat a novel disease outbreak.

Getting vast quantities of vaccine quickly to low-income countries will be immensely difficult, and even then, ensuring uptake will present another hurdle. Governments and international organizations must plan outreach and information campaigns to overcome vaccination resistance. These campaigns should enlist local political leaders, celebrities, and other known influencers. In parts of Africa and Asia, communities have viewed vaccination programs as suspicious or nefarious foreign schemes dating back at least to the worldwide smallpox eradication program of the 1960s and 1970s. Polio workers were murdered in Pakistan as recently as February in the misbegotten belief that they actually intended to control local populations through sterilization. Similar rumors, promulgated on social media, have filtered through sub-Saharan and West Africa regarding COVID-19 vaccines. Madagascar is promoting an herbal remedy to the disease, endorsed by President Andry Rajoelina, and Tanzanian President John Magufuli, until last year the chair of the Southern African Development Community, declared the pandemic over in his country, a claim numerous public health experts have denied. He recently reversed his stance and asked citizens to wear masks.

NO COUNTRY IS AN ISLAND

Vaccines and vaccine education will ultimately be the best way to fend off the emergence of new deadly variants of COVID-19. But until such programs can take root, governments and international health organizations must set up a far-reaching surveillance and reporting system to monitor changes in the virus, as the United Kingdom has done effectively. Researchers are already trying to expand the protection that current vaccines offer. But they must also look to developing second- and third-generation vaccines to contend with variants as they emerge. This coronavirus may well become endemic—much like influenza, which spreads each winter, sometimes with a new variant that reaches epidemic or pandemic proportions before it eventually attenuates into a less fearsome seasonal strain. The next generation of COVID-19 vaccines might therefore be multivalent—that is, able to combat more

than one variant. Ultimately, researchers should aim to develop a universal coronavirus vaccine that would target the pieces of the virus particle that all variants share. To get there may require an effort on the level of the Manhattan Project—but such labor will be well justified if it can neutralize the devastating potential of the virus's mutations.

Neither the United States nor any other global power can defeat a pandemic by thinking in national terms. COVID-19 vaccines are now a central component of the United States' national security and defense. But unlike other spheres of defense, this one involves protecting—not fighting—foreigners. As the poet John Donne noted centuries ago, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Never has that been truer than during the current worldwide plague. If the bell continues to toll, it will be tolling for us all.

America Can—and Should—Vaccinate the World

The Case for an All-Out Global Approach to Ending the Pandemic

Helene Gayle, Gordon LaForge, and Anne-Marie Slaughter

MARCH 19, 2021

After a virtual "Quad summit" last Friday, the leaders of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia announced that they would cooperate to deliver one billion vaccine doses in the Indo-Pacific, directly countering China's lead in distributing vaccines to the region. The agreement brings together Indian manufacturing and U.S., Japanese, and Australian financing, logistics, and technical assistance to help immunize hundreds of millions of people by the end of 2022. Headlines over the weekend proclaimed that the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden was preparing to catch up in global vaccine diplomacy. Yesterday the administration took a further step in this direction, leaking to reporters that it would lend four million AstraZeneca doses to Mexico and Canada.

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These initiatives come not a moment too soon. In tackling the worst global crisis of a lifetime, the United States has so far been upstaged. Russia and China have aggressively marketed and distributed their vaccines to foreign countries, largely to advance foreign policy goals. Russia is using the jab to bolster its image and investment prospects and to drive a wedge between EU countries. China is donating doses to gain leverage in territorial disputes and expand its influence under the Belt and Road Initiative. Both Moscow and Beijing have moved to undercut the United States in its own backyard by supplying vaccines to Latin America.

The Biden administration is right to want to take the lead in vaccinating the world, for a host of reasons both self-interested and altruistic. But it should not fall into the trap of trying to beat Russia and China at their own game—handing out vaccines to specific countries based on their geostrategic importance and the amount of attention they are receiving from rival powers.

Rather, Biden should pursue abroad the sort of "all in" unity approach that he has proclaimed at home. His administration should focus less on strategic advantage than on vaccinating the largest number of people worldwide in the shortest amount of time. In so doing, the United States would concentrate on what the world's peoples have in common—susceptibility to this and many other viruses—regardless of the nature of their governments.

ALL IN AND ALL OUT

The United States has successfully mobilized its own and international resources to respond to regional crises in the past. In 2003, President George W. Bush started the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the largest global health program focused on a single disease in history. PEPFAR brought together U.S. agencies, private companies, and local civil society groups to help sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia get the AIDS crisis under control, saving millions of lives. In 2004, a tsunami in the Indian Ocean caused more than 220,000 deaths and billions in damage, and the United States led an urgent, similarly inclusive humanitarian relief and recovery effort that rescued victims, hastened reconstruction, and built lasting goodwill in South and Southeast Asia.

Biden can improve on Bush's precedent by going global, and he has already taken steps toward doing so. Under President Donald Trump,

the United States refused to participate in the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, an international partnership that aims to guarantee COVID-19 vaccine access for the entire world. The Biden administration reversed this stance immediately and contributed $4 billion, making the United States the largest donor to the effort. Still, even if COVAX meets the ambitious target of delivering two billion doses to developing nations by the end of 2021, it will be able to vaccinate only 20 percent of those countries' populations.

Just imagine, however, what could happen if Washington were to treat COVID-19 as the equivalent of the enemy in a world war or the pandemic as a global version of the regional AIDS and Ebola epidemics of years past. Imagine, in other words, what all-out mobilization would look like if the United States treated the COVID-19 pandemic like the global threat that it is.

Washington would lead a multilateral, whole-of-society effort to help COVAX vaccinate the world. The government would activate the military and call upon allies in the G-7 and NATO for a major assistance operation that speeds the flow of vaccine supplies and strengthens delivery systems. As it has pledged to do in the Quad summit deal, the U.S. government would use the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other civilian agencies and development programs to help countries with their national vaccination programs. And it would enlist companies, nonprofits, and civil society organizations to help increase vaccine production, raise funding, and provide technical assistance to foreign counterparts.

The U.S. government should undertake exactly such an effort, right now: an all-out response for an all-in global vaccination campaign. Such a campaign would advance U.S. economic and security interests and reboot American global leadership after years of decline. Rather than perpetuate the transactional, friend-by-friend vaccine diplomacy of China and Russia, a U.S.-led vaccine effort could invigorate a new multilateralism that is more pragmatic and inclusive than the twentieth-century international order and better adapted to tackling twenty-first-century global threats. Washington would do well to remember that if COVID-19 does come back, authoritarian governments will be able to lock down their populations more quickly and effectively than democracies will, so even in competitive terms, America's best bet really is to eradicate the novel coronavirus.

The United States has a momentous opportunity to prove both that democracy can deliver and that American ideals truly are universal. By offering a model of global cooperation that draws on a far wider range of resources than any one government can provide, the United States can lead a vaccine effort that builds on the strengths of its open and pluralist society. President Biden would demonstrate unequivocally that the United States is not only "back" but looking—and leading—far ahead.

THE CASE FOR GOING REALLY BIG

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most extensive humanitarian and economic catastrophe of modern times. Though it lacks the cataclysmic impact of a natural disaster, its toll is far worse and more widespread. A reported 2.6 million have died from COVID-19, though that is certainly an undercount; one analysis of premature and excess mortality estimates 20.5 million years of life have been lost. According to the World Bank, the pandemic pushed as many as 124 million into extreme poverty in 2020, the first year of increase in two decades. The Economist estimates that two years of COVID-19 will cost the world $10.3 trillion—a downturn the World Bank says is twice as deep as the Great Recession. Ultimately, the only way to arrest, let alone reverse, this collapse is global vaccination.

The Biden administration learned an important lesson from the government's response to the 2008 financial crisis: do not be afraid to go big. The American Rescue Plan does just that, funneling $1.9 trillion into many different parts of the economy. The administration should heed the same advice when it comes to vaccinating the world. An all-out effort will have the greatest and quickest impact on the fight against COVID-19—and the impact it will have is squarely in America's self-interest.

The United States has much to gain from an accelerated recovery of the global economy. A study from the Eurasia Group estimated that vaccinating low- and middle-income nations would generate at least $153 billion for the United States and nine other developed economies in 2021 and up to $466 billion by 2025. Even if the United States vaccinates its entire population, its economic recovery will still drag so long as its trading partners don't have full access to the vaccine and the pandemic continues.

As Biden has said, "We're not going to be ultimately safe until the world is safe." Moreover, today's pandemic will not be the last. The partnerships and public health infrastructure that the United States

builds to inoculate the world from this coronavirus will also defend it against the next deadly pathogen or health threat. Protecting the nation against disease cannot be separated from protecting the world.

In 2018, the United States issued a National Biodefense Strategy that seemed to recognize this interdependence. The strategy called for developing agreements and partnerships to help foreign countries prepare for and respond to bio-incidents. Such collaborations not only prevent emerging threats but also contribute to a spirit of openness that can pay off in profound ways. There was no such openness between China and the United States when COVID-19 emerged in 2019. Had China swiftly shared its data and genome information with the World Health Organization and other countries, the initial outbreak might have been slowed.

HOW TO END A PANDEMIC

Ending a pandemic and vaccinating the entire world is an extraordinary undertaking. It will depend a great deal on the COVAX Facility and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which is the facility's execution arm. Gavi was established with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation two decades ago and is a crowning achievement of a whole-of-society approach to global problem-solving. It was specifically designed to deliver vaccines globally by combining the speed and flexibility of the private and civic sectors with the scale of the public sector. Still, the job before it is monumental and will require the kind of networked support that the United States brought into play in earlier humanitarian crises, such as the AIDS pandemic, the Ebola epidemic in 2014, and the Indian Ocean tsunami.

The United States could bring the formidable logistics capabilities of its military to bear on the effort to supply and deliver vaccines globally, including in difficult and remote locations. The U.S. military excels at exactly such tasks and has a global footprint, along with longstanding partnerships in countries ranging from Colombia to Egypt to the Philippines. As was the case in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami relief effort, U.S. forces could partner with foreign militaries to help expand and administer national vaccination programs. Washington could call upon allies in the G-7 and NATO to build a broad coalition that shares the costs. And in contrast to the interminable stabilization operations in the Middle East, this humanitarian assistance mission would be straightforward, with concrete objectives.

The United States already has thousands of civilian officials and locally employed staff with experience in humanitarian assistance operations and immunization campaigns stationed around the world, representing such agencies as USAID, the CDC, and the State Department. Because of past initiatives, such as PEPFAR and the Global Health Security Agenda, the United States has strong public health partnerships in dozens of low- and middle-income nations. As Samantha Power, former ambassador to the United Nations, has argued in these pages, that presence could be directed toward helping countries manage logistics and supply chains, initiate public information campaigns, train local health-care workers, and increase vaccine access for marginalized and isolated communities.

In the same spirit, the United States should work with countries to help develop and increase local vaccine-manufacturing capacity. Several Latin American countries turned to China and Russia for vaccines because they could not meet the strict terms or pay the high prices that Western drug companies demanded. Just as the Biden administration brokered a deal between Johnson & Johnson and Merck—two fierce industry competitors—to increase production of the one-shot vaccine, so should it push U.S. companies to establish production arrangements with foreign manufacturers. China and Russia have already made deals for local manufacturers to produce their vaccines. Companies in Argentina, Brazil, and Italy all plan to begin producing the Sputnik V vaccine.

Open, democratic societies have tremendous resources to mobilize in the effort to vaccinate the world. Sister cities, universities, religious denominations, corporations with global supply chains, charities with global networks, diaspora groups—all could be encouraged to reach out to partners abroad and figure out how best to contribute. Involving such diverse actors would help animate a new, more dynamic multilateralism.

The Biden administration is right to prioritize vaccinating every American. Ending the pandemic abroad won't matter if the United States doesn't vaccinate everyone at home, any more than the reverse. But the country absolutely has the ability to do both at the same time.

A serious global campaign to vaccinate everyone as soon as possible would mark the beginning of a very different era of American leadership. The United States would demonstrate its ability to lead through global institutions rather than against them—and those institutions would include more nimble ones than the bureaucratic behemoths of the twentieth century. The United States, alongside as many nations

as it can convince to join it, would lead with all its resources and talent, whether public, private, or civic. It would focus more on people than on power games and measure its success in lives saved more than in governments recruited to "our side." Call it a strategy of all for all.

The success of such an effort would undoubtedly confer enormous strategic advantage on the United States. PEPFAR, for example, dramatically improved the perception of the United States in many African and Asian countries. But the United States will have earned that advantage by living up to the universal commitments in its highest ideals—by being, in the words of Biden's inaugural address, "a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress, and security" for everyone.

China's Inconvenient Truth

Official Triumphalism Conceals Societal Fragmentation

Elizabeth Economy

MAY 28, 2021

Xi Jinping is in a race against time. The glow of China's early economic rebound and containment of COVID-19 is fading. The international media have moved on to celebrate vaccine efficacy and vaccination rates elsewhere, and other economies have started posting solid growth rates. Yet President Xi continues to advance a narrative of Chinese exceptionalism and superiority. "The East is rising and the West is declining," he trumpeted in a speech last year. Senior Chinese officials and analysts have adopted and amplified Xi's message, pointing out the relative decline in Europe's and Japan's shares of the global economy and stressing the United States' racial and political polarization. Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs He Yafei has asserted starkly that the United States will "find that its strength increasingly falls short of its ambitions, both domestically and internationally. . . . This is the grand trend of history. . . . The global balance of power and world order will continue to tilt in favor of China, and China's development will become unstoppable."

But behind such triumphalist rhetoric lurks an inconvenient truth: China's own society is fracturing in complex and challenging ways.

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Discrimination based on gender and ethnicity is rampant, reinforced by increasingly nationalistic and hate-filled online rhetoric. The creative class is at loggerheads with petty bureaucrats. And severe rural-urban inequality persists. These divides prevent the full participation of important sectors of society in China's intellectual and political life and, if left unaddressed, have the potential to sap the country's economic vitality. As Xi seeks to bolster indigenous innovation and domestic consumption, his success depends on the intellectual and economic support of the very constituencies his policies are disenfranchising. And as he promotes the "China model" as worthy of emulation, these same divides dim China's appeal and undermine China's influence. Unless Xi moves quickly to heal the rifts, his Chinese dream of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" will remain just that.

BLAMING THE VICTIM

While Chinese officials frequently reference the racial divisiveness that plagues the United States, they are less forthcoming about the growing polarization they have fostered in their own country, across ethnic and geographic lines. They have sought to strip several of the countries' autonomous regions—Xinjiang, Tibet, and to a lesser extent Inner Mongolia—of their religious and cultural practices and subjected them (as well as the special administrative region of Hong Kong) to extraordinary levels of surveillance and policing in an effort to maintain political stability. In 2019, China spent $216 billion on domestic public security, including state security, police, domestic surveillance, and armed civil militia—more than three times government spending a decade earlier and roughly $30 billion more than is designated for the People's Liberation Army.

In Xinjiang, as many as one million Uyghur Muslims are imprisoned in labor and reeducation camps. The province is China's 21st largest by population but ranks third in public security spending. Xinjiang's Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim groups have long suffered from various forms of discrimination, such as being barred from hotels or certain jobs outside the region. Only rarely do Chinese experts speak out. As one scholar noted in an interview with the *South China Morning Post*, "Sometimes our policies were too generous, offering a lot of preferential treatment, but the effects were not good. But then sometimes we were too harsh in our crackdown. So we have not had a good grasp of the policies and the execution was poor."

Xi's tenure has been similarly unkind to women. Only one woman sits within the top echelon of Chinese Communist Party leadership (which includes the 25 members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee), and women make up only 4.9 percent of the next 204 most powerful members of the Central Committee. Even among the 90-odd million CCP members, women constitute just 27.9 percent.

The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*, which assesses gender disparity across a range of economic, political, educational, and health criteria, ranks China 107th out of 144 countries—down from 69th in 2013, Xi's first full year in power. Women's participation in the labor force has also dropped precipitously. As a report by the Peterson Institute for International Economics reveals, China's gender gap in labor force participation increased from 9.4 percent in 1990 to 14.1 percent in 2020, and Chinese women earn approximately 20 percent less than their male colleagues. More than 80 percent of female college graduates report encountering gender discrimination in job searches; jobs not infrequently advertise for men only or require applicants to be married women with children, so their tenure will not be interrupted by pregnancy.

National discourse around such issues is increasingly polarized. Feminist commentary is often met with vitriolic nationalist attacks. The news anchor Bai Ge accused feminists of "infiltrating the country and provoking conflict between the people and the government . . . and push[ing] their anti-China agenda." In April, the social networking platform Douban closed the accounts of ten feminist groups—some of whose members advocated not getting married, having children, or having relationships with men—for putting forth supposedly extremist ideas. China's largest messaging platform, Weibo, has also shut down the accounts of feminists, arguing that they were publishing "illegal and harmful information." Wang Gaofei, the CEO of Weibo, took up the call personally, claiming that feminists were "inciting hatred and gender discrimination."

Chinese feminists remain unbowed. Several have taken Weibo to court—a few have won back their accounts—and the hashtag "women stick together" earned almost 50 million views when it circulated on Weibo. Earlier this year, a group of women artists created an installation in which they covered a hill with more than 1,000 abusive Internet messages that had been sent to feminists—an "internet violence museum." But the government's failure to counter the threatening

online behavior is broadly understood as tacit support for the rhetoric. Indeed, as Leta Hong Fincher has noted, women who say they don't want to get married or have children are viewed as acting against the interests of the Chinese state, which is avidly promoting reproduction in the face of dramatically declining birthrates.

THE DEPRESSION OF THE CREATIVE CLASS

A similar polarizing dynamic has arisen between China's bureaucrats and creative class. Xi's determination to ensure that all thought serve the interests of the CCP constrains the ability of the country's most creative people, including its scholars and entrepreneurs, to pursue ideas and products that extend beyond narrow CCP strictures. Xi has called on universities to be "strongholds of the Party's leadership," and the Ministry of Education has made clear that "ideological and political performance" are the most important elements of faculty evaluation. The CCP has even encouraged university students to turn in their professors for speech that challenges party orthodoxy; numerous academics have been criticized or fired for publishing "incorrect speech" on issues related to Hong Kong, Japan, and COVID-19. By constraining the range of voices, Beijing limits its ability to make informed decisions.

Some intellectuals have pushed back. The noted economist Chen Wenling, for example, has argued that if China is to become a global ideological and intellectual powerhouse, it needs greater "tolerance, flexibility and freedom for China's academics." Jia Qingguo, a Peking University professor (and a member of a senior CCP advisory body), has proposed lifting some of the bureaucratic restrictions on Chinese scholars' engagement with their foreign counterparts. "The existing management of overseas exchanges has gone beyond a reasonable limit," Jia argued, noting that it "will affect the quality of experts' assessment of international issues and policy suggestions." Most boldly, in two letters to Xi penned at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, former CCP Central Committee member Zhao Shilin eloquently criticized the practice of reporting only good news, warning of the destruction of individual "initiative, flexibility, focus, and responsibility" in Chinese society because everything centers on the power at the top.

This same political purification process is underway in China's technology sector. Xi has cracked down on video game content; criticized tech companies for inadequately censoring illicit material on

their platforms; and sought to ensure that the country's tech leaders do not become independent sources of political influence. A few of China's most well-known technology industry leaders have openly criticized government intervention and been met with draconian responses. When, in late 2020, Alibaba founder Jack Ma criticized the Chinese bureaucracy for its ham-handed efforts to regulate complex problems and for stifling innovation, the planned initial public offering of his fintech company, Ant Financial, was pulled just days later. Then, in May 2021, Beijing moved against Ma's university, a competitive business training program for entrepreneurs, removing him as president and pledging to change the curriculum. (According to one report, the CCP was concerned that Ma was creating an exclusive network that might somehow challenge the CCP.) When Wang Xing, CEO of the food delivery service Meituan, shared a Tang dynasty poem pointing out the foolishness of China's first emperor for attempting to secure his power by burning books and suppressing intellectuals (veiled criticism of Xi, allegedly), Meituan's stock plummeted. One by one, the country's foremost technology entrepreneurs—Ma, ByteDance's Zhang Yiming, Pinduoduo's Huang Zheng, Tencent's Pony Ma—have either retreated from leading the companies they founded or removed themselves from the media spotlight.

TWO CHINAS

Chinese leaders have adopted an air of inevitability around the country's continued economic rise. China certainly has achieved impressive levels of economic growth over the past four decades, including 16 years of double-digit growth. In February, Xi Jinping declared victory in eliminating absolute poverty (defined as those living on $28 per month or less). Yet not long before, Premier Li Keqiang had shocked Chinese citizens by revealing that the country had more than 600 million people—40 percent of the population—living on $140 per month or less. Whatever Xi's claims, Beijing has been unable to address the persistent inequality that characterizes the country's socioeconomic landscape: China in fact consists of two Chinas.

The top one percent in China has a greater share of wealth than the bottom 50 percent, and a 2019 Chinese central bank report revealed that among 30,000 urban families surveyed, 20 percent held 63 percent of total assets while the bottom 20 percent owned just 2.6 percent. Across China, the top 20 percent earn 10.2 times what the

poorest 20 percent earn. As a result, China's Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality that ranges from zero to one) has reached 0.47, among the highest in the world and far beyond the level that Chinese officials themselves have claimed would be destabilizing.

International Monetary Fund analysis suggests that such inequality stems from educational disparities and continued limits on freedom of movement (as well as technological changes that have increased the wages of more skilled workers). The Stanford economist Scott Rozelle has detailed Beijing's failures to put in place the educational opportunities—in terms of both access and quality—necessary for many in rural China to be able to participate effectively in the country's rapidly emerging technological revolution. The long-term ramifications are significant: high levels of income inequality can limit economic growth and sustainability, weaken investment in health and education, and slow economic reform.

THE COSTS

The costs of such political and economic disenfranchisement of important sectors of Chinese society may be subtle, but over the long term, they will be profound. By refusing to address the challenges faced by women and denying them the ability to choose their own path, Beijing risks a future of lower GDP, lower birthrates, and greater societal conflict. Persistent income inequality limits the ability of Chinese officials to drive healthy domestic consumption and growth. Demand for ideological loyalty risks driving a prolonged brain drain. A survey of Hong Kongers between the ages of 15 and 30 revealed that 57.5 percent wanted to emigrate if possible; a separate survey of adults in Hong Kong found that 42.3 percent would emigrate. In 2019, more than 50,000 left Hong Kong because of political concerns. And Beijing's ability to attract topflight scientific and other intellectual talent, already limited, will suffer further as foreigners witness the attacks on China's leading entrepreneurs and scholars.

Beijing's polarizing domestic situation also has implications for its relations with other countries. Its regressive treatment of women undermines its soft power and undercuts any notion of a "China model" that many others will be inclined to follow. Its human rights abuses in Xinjiang have led multinationals to seek alternative supply chain sources, and its political repression in Hong Kong has encouraged foreign firms to move their operations to other Asian locations such as

Singapore. Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States have all imposed sanctions against individuals deemed directly responsible for such policies and against businesses that rely on forced labor in Xinjiang; the EU has also determined that it will not consider passing the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with Beijing unless Chinese officials lift countersanctions. And any hope Xi may have had of reprising China's 2008 Olympics triumph at the 2022 Winter Olympics has been dashed by a growing consensus among many countries to at least partially boycott the games.

If Xi does not course correct, his China dream may be on the cusp of becoming his nightmare.

America Is Back—but for How Long?

Political Polarization and the End of U.S. Credibility

Rachel Myrick

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During his first address to a joint session of Congress on April 28, U.S. President Joe Biden noted that in the dozens of conversations with world leaders he'd had since taking office in January, one comment kept coming up: "We see America is back, but for how long?" This skepticism on the part of other heads of state is a direct response to the recent past. Under President Donald Trump, Washington seriously challenged or outright withdrew from more than a dozen international agreements or institutions, including the Paris climate accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Iran nuclear deal, and the World Health Organization.

But concerns about the nature and longevity of American commitments extend beyond Trump's legacy overseas. Allies of the United States are also reacting to its internal politics and, in particular, to a deepening partisan divide that creates uncertainty about the future of U.S. foreign policy. Observing the polarized politics on display in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland noted that many European leaders will "no longer take for granted that they can trust the U.S., even on basic things."

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The fears are valid. Although foreign policy has traditionally been insulated from political polarization, that is no longer true. On such issues as multilateralism, climate change, and terrorism, Americans are more divided than ever. The bipartisan foreign policy consensus among both voters and the politicians they elect is eroding. But even worse, polarization has created broader, underappreciated consequences for the United States' ability to enact foreign policy in the first place by chipping away at a key pillar of its power: its reputation for stability, credibility, and reliability.

THE DEMOCRATIC ADVANTAGE

International relations scholars have long recognized that democracies enjoy several advantages when it comes to making foreign policy. For one thing, they are stable. In autocracies, when leaders are removed from power irregularly—such as through revolutions or military coups—the transitions often herald dramatic swings in foreign policy. By contrast, in democracies, where leader turnover occurs in the context of regular elections, foreign policy tends to remain fairly consistent during political transitions.

As domestic polarization increases, however, partisan conflict is more likely to extend into foreign policy. In the United States, foreign policy remains less polarized than domestic policy. Even so, public opinion polls and patterns of congressional roll call votes show an increasing divergence between Democrats and Republicans on foreign affairs. As these preferences harden, one should anticipate more dramatic changes in foreign policy when the party controlling the White House changes.

But it isn't just diverging foreign policy preferences that lead to instability in foreign policy; a rise in the tendency to dislike the opposite party—or "negative partisanship"—also does. This sentiment gives leaders incentives to undo the policies of their predecessors from the opposite party. Some described Trump's foreign policy agenda as "incoherent" and lacking in a grand strategic vision, yet his agenda did have one unifying theme: dismantling the accomplishments of President Barack Obama. Positioning himself as the "anti-Obama" in foreign affairs, Trump moved quickly to undo his predecessor's policies on immigration, trade, and climate.

Another advantage democracies have over their autocratic counterparts concerns credibility. Because democratic leaders are constrained

domestically, they are less likely to issue threats or make promises that they do not intend to keep. In international negotiations and crises, this means that the signals democracies send to foreign adversaries are more reliable. As the political scientist Kenneth Schultz has argued, bipartisan support of a leader's foreign policy is an especially credible signal in international politics. For example, few doubt the resolve of the U.S. government when a substantial number of legislators from both parties vote to authorize the use of military force.

As polarization increases, these displays of bipartisanship in foreign policy become less common. Instead, the out-of-power party is rewarded for undermining the credibility of the head of state. During the Obama administration's negotiation of the Iran nuclear deal, for example, congressional Republicans took unprecedented steps to signal their opposition to the agreement. Forty-seven of them went so far as to sign an open letter to Iranian leaders, arguing that the White House did not have the authority to enter into a nuclear deal and instead must resort to "a mere executive agreement." In response, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif noted that the letter "undermines the credibility of thousands of such mere executive agreements that have been or will be entered into by the U.S. with various other governments."

It is easy to imagine how similar partisan dynamics could derail tenuous negotiations or even deter leaders from undertaking ambitious or complex negotiations in the first place. As the current administration weighs how to proceed with the Iran nuclear deal, it is unsurprising that Biden is inclined to keep his cards close to his chest. Of course, doing so is sure to further increase distrust between the White House and its opponents in Congress.

A third advantage that democracies enjoy is that they tend to be better at committing to and complying with international agreements, making them more reliable allies and partners. Although there are exceptions, domestic ratification processes make it more difficult for democracies to renege on their global commitments. The political scientist Lisa Martin has shown that when a country's legislature participates in an international negotiation, the country is more likely to implement the resulting agreement. Using the case of European integration, Martin found that parliaments involved in the early stages of the EU negotiation process better implemented EU directives, regardless of their initial skepticism toward integration.

In highly polarized democracies, however, it becomes difficult to achieve the bipartisan consensus needed to ratify agreements. In the United States, where the treaty ratification process requires a two-thirds majority in the Senate, partisan gridlock has led to a precipitous decline in international treaties. Anticipating partisan opposition, presidents now usually avoid the congressional approval process altogether by entering into political commitments or executive agreements instead. Although this strategy allows leaders to enact their preferred policies, there is a cost: agreements that are not ratified by Congress are more easily undone by subsequent administrations.

Consider the United States' recent climate commitments. Knowing that nearly all the Republicans (and some of the Democrats) would reject an international climate agreement, Obama did not submit the Paris accord to Congress as a treaty. When Trump took office, he promptly reversed course by announcing that the United States would withdraw from the agreement—a decision that Biden reversed on day one of his administration. Given the sharply partisan nature of climate policy in the United States, its allies are naturally skeptical that these commitments will last.

THE END OF UNITY

It is becoming possible to imagine a world in which the Democratic and Republican parties not only have orthogonal foreign policy priorities but also maintain different relationships with key foreign allies and adversaries. Given the importance of long-term commitments in successful foreign-policy making, alternating party control of the presidency could pose major problems.

Although such a scenario still seems distant, there are early indicators of what is to come should partisan divisions in foreign policy continue to deepen. Consider the different lenses through which Democrats and Republicans saw Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election: although reports of electoral interference should have been condemned by both parties, polarization prevented a swift, bipartisan response. And despite the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to influence the election to advantage Trump, only one-third of Republicans believe this to be true. Or look at the partisan debates over the Trump administration's ties to Saudi Arabia: Trump was close to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and failed to punish him for ordering the murder of the journalist

Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. In response, congressional Democrats have become increasingly vocal opponents of the Saudi regime.

Of course, some degree of partisan disagreement over how the United States engages with its allies and adversaries is natural in a healthy democracy. U.S. foreign policy should be subject to scrutiny and debate, and excessive bipartisanship in foreign policy may be emblematic of other pathologies. Groupthink in the national security establishment, for example, may leave key assumptions unquestioned.

But in a highly polarized environment, debates about the future of U.S. foreign policy are unlikely to be constructive. As polarization increases, it becomes difficult to distinguish between sincere disagreement and partisan politics. Many Republican legislators have legitimate concerns about Biden's foreign policy, but they also have incentives to grandstand and obstruct the White House in order to appease their political base. More extreme voices will make the Biden administration less inclined to attempt to win over moderate legislators and more likely to shut Congress out of major foreign policy decisions. These actions reinforce the perception that the administration is unwilling to reach across the aisle, intensifying mutual distrust between the White House and its opponents in Congress.

A more optimistic perspective sees foreign policy as less susceptible to such partisan antics. Political scientists note ample opportunities for bipartisanship on issues ranging from national defense to human rights. Many experts view the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China as a critical chance to bridge the partisan divide in Washington. The evidence, however, suggests that important foreign policy questions will not remain above the partisan fray. As I have found in my research, responses to national security challenges in the United States have historically reflected existing levels of domestic polarization. When new security threats enter into an environment that is already polarized, they are often quickly politicized. In the current era, this means that the toughest and most consequential foreign policy problems are more likely to be divisive than unifying.

POLARIZATION EVER AFTER

It would be tempting to believe that Biden can overcome the polarization problem by moving swiftly on his foreign policy agenda. While public attention is focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and the country's fraying infrastructure, one might argue, the White House could

quickly mend fences with allies and develop smarter and tougher policies against adversaries such as China and Russia. With many months to go before the 2024 electoral cycle, the thinking goes, partisan responses to these actions may be muted or short-lived.

Yet this approach still cannot address the structural problems that arise from polarization. The current political environment prevents policymakers from tackling the most important foreign policy problems in a bipartisan manner. And without bipartisan support, the Biden administration runs the risk that any consequential decisions will be politicized and short-lived. This includes many priorities outlined in Biden's first foreign policy speech in February, such as expanding the refugee admissions program, investing in overseas alliances, and spearheading global cooperation around climate and public health.

While polarization will ebb and flow with the electoral cycles, it is likely to remain a persistent feature of contemporary American politics. This is because many of the factors sustaining polarization—the ideological sorting of the parties, growing economic inequality, a fragmented media environment, and the general decline of bipartisan norms in Washington—will not disappear any time soon.

There are few scenarios in which hyperpolarization will not harm U.S. foreign policy. At the very least, polarization will introduce uncertainty in foreign affairs and exasperate U.S. allies. And if continued polarization leads the United States to abandon tricky negotiations or renege on existing commitments every time a new party is in power, Washington's reputation as a credible adversary and a reliable ally could be in serious jeopardy.

A World Without American Democracy?

The Global Consequences of the United States' Democratic Backsliding

Larry Diamond

JULY 2, 2021

A prolonged global democratic recession has, in recent years, morphed into something even more troubling: the "third reverse wave" of democratic breakdowns that the political scientist Samuel Huntington warned could follow the remarkable burst of "third wave" democratic progress in the 1980s and the 1990s. Every year for the past 15 years, according to Freedom House, significantly more countries have seen declines in political rights and civil liberties than have seen gains. But since 2015, that already ominous trend has turned sharply worse: 2015–19 was the first five-year period since the beginning of the third wave in 1974 when more countries abandoned democracy—twelve—than transitioned to it—seven.

And the trend continues. Illiberal populist leaders are degrading democracy in countries including Brazil, India, Mexico, and Poland, and creeping authoritarianism has already moved Hungary, the Philippines, Turkey, and Venezuela out of the category of democracies altogether. In Georgia, the dominance of the Georgian Dream Party has led to the steady decline of electoral processes and a breakdown

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in the rule of law. In Myanmar, the military overthrew the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, ending an experiment in partial democracy. In El Salvador, president Nayib Bukele staged an executive coup by removing the attorney general and Supreme Court justices who were obstacles to his consolidation of power. In Peru, democracy hangs from a thread as the right-wing autocrat Keiko Fujimori advances vague claims of election fraud in a bid to overturn her narrow electoral defeat to left-wing opponent Pedro Castillo.

What is especially striking about this last case is that Fujimori's gambit bears a grim resemblance to the lie perpetuated by former U.S. President Donald Trump and his followers about the 2020 presidential election. This is no coincidence. As the journalist and historian Anne Applebaum has observed, fictitious claims of fraud and "stop the steal" tactics are becoming a common means by which autocratic populists try to obstruct democracy. Such tactics have long been a source of instability in countries struggling to develop democracy. But the fact that the most recent iteration of the antidemocrat's playbook draws heavily on precedents in the world's most important and powerful democracy marks the start of a dangerous new era.

Today, the United States confronts a growing antidemocratic movement, not just from the ranks of fringe extremists but also from a substantial group of officeholders—a movement that is challenging the very foundations of electoral democracy. Should this effort succeed, the United States could become the first ever advanced industrial democracy to fail—that is, to no longer meet the minimum conditions for free and fair elections as political scientists and other scholars of democracy define them.

The failure of American democracy would be catastrophic not only for the United States; it would also have profound global consequences at a time when freedom and democracy are already under siege. As Huntington noted, the diffusion of democratic movements and ideas from one country to another has helped drive positive democratic change. Antidemocratic norms and practices can spread in a similar fashion—especially when they emanate from powerful countries. That is why the acceleration of a democratic recession into a democratic depression happened largely on Trump's watch. And it is why no development would more gravely damage the global democratic cause than the democratic backsliding of its most important champion.

THE DEMOCRATIC TRIAD

A democratic system of government stands on three legs. The first leg is popular sovereignty—rule by the people. Democracy demands that people are able to choose and replace their leaders in regular, free, and fair elections; that all adult citizens are able to vote free from intimidation and obstruction; and that candidates and parties are free to compete and campaign. Crucially, elections must be administered impartially, so that valid ballots are counted accurately and power is granted to those who win.

Liberty is the second leg of liberal democracy. A fully democratic system provides strong protections for freedom of speech, the press, association, and assembly. It ensures that these rights are equally protected for all social groups. And it promotes a culture of mutual tolerance and respect for the rights of political opponents.

The third leg—the rule of law—defends and strengthens the other two. It ensures that democratic procedures are impartially enforced by an independent judiciary and other regulatory bodies that check the abuse of power. In most advanced democracies, excluding the United States, these instruments of accountability include national bodies to administer elections and to monitor corruption.

Trump was the first U.S. president to demonstrate contempt for all three legs of the triad of liberal democracy. He attacked the media as "fake news" and "absolute scum" and called for his election opponent to be "locked up." He invited his followers to commit acts of violence against protesting opponents. Upon his defeat, he insisted that the election results were fraudulent and had to be overturned. Throughout his presidency, he waged war on an independent judiciary, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, his own attorney general, the Office of Government Ethics, the civil service, and a host of other actors who refused to bend to his political will or sought to enforce the rule of law.

Many scholars of democracy perceived an unprecedented threat to U.S. democracy when Trump entered office in 2017 and feared grave assaults on the second and third legs of the democratic triad, in particular. This assessment was partially correct. Not since President Richard Nixon and rarely in U.S. history has there been such a determined effort to misuse and subvert administrative and rule-of-law institutions for nakedly political ends—but these attempts achieved only limited effect. The bulk of the press and the judiciary remained independent. The FBI avoided political capture. Outside the Republi-

can Party and Trump's own administration, freedom of speech thrived. From 2017 through 2020, liberty and the rule of law more or less held.

In three respects, however, most scholars misjudged the nature of the peril—and underestimated its gravity. First, many assumed that Trump himself constituted the biggest threat to U.S. democracy and that his defeat would lance the poisonous boil on the body politic. Second, with notable exceptions, including the Yale historian Timothy Snyder and the Carnegie Endowment scholar Rachel Kleinfeld, many underestimated the potential for violence on the part of Trump's true-believing followers. And third, most underestimated the extent to which Trump would remake the Republican Party as an institution not only slavishly loyal to him but also hostile to democracy.

Fortunately, leading up to the 2020 election, democracy scholars and civic organizations correctly anticipated the threats to electoral integrity posed by zealous Trump partisans, as well as the staggering logistical challenges presented by the pandemic. As a result, they launched one of the most energetic civic campaigns in U.S. history to register an unprecedented number of voters, to give them safe and early access to the ballot, to ensure that local electoral administrations had the resources necessary to administer the vote, and to prepare to combat any potential efforts to overturn the legitimate results of the presidential election. The election was not a nightmare scenario, as some had feared. In fact, it proved to be one of the best-administered elections in U.S. history, leading election experts Nathaniel Persily and Charles Stewart III to call it a "miracle."

IT COULD STILL HAPPEN HERE

Yet what followed was, in the words of Persily and Stewart, a "tragedy," with "lies about vote fraud and the performance of the system [cementing] a perception among tens of millions of Americans that the election was 'rigged.'" Such "manufactured distrust" has extended past the January 6 insurrection in Washington. Although President Joe Biden's inauguration has deescalated imminent threats to civil liberties and the rule of law, the core element of electoral democracy—free and fair elections—is now under relentless partisan assault. Republican state legislatures are accelerating efforts to make it more difficult for African Americans, Latinos, and other Democratic-leaning constituencies to vote by passing laws that make it more difficult to vote by mail and to vote early, and that make it easier to purge vot-

ers from voting rolls. These changes are driven not by documented evidence of malfeasance associated with these practices but by deliberately false narratives about election fraud.

Now, the greatest threat to American democracy is posed by legislative initiatives seeking to subvert the independence of electoral administration, including the counting and certification of the vote. As the election law expert Richard Hasen has observed, "At stake is something I never expected to worry about in the United States: the integrity of the vote count." A recent law passed in Georgia, for example, removes the secretary of state (currently Brad Raffensperger, who refused to manufacture the 11,780 votes Trump needed to win the state) as chair of the state Election Board and gives the state legislature—a highly partisan institution—the ability to name the new chair. Representatives in Michigan have politicized the Board of State Canvassers, which certifies election results, by replacing a Republican who voted to certify Biden's election victory with a movement conservative. In Michigan and in Nevada, Trump loyalists are seeking to consolidate control over election supervision by running candidates for secretary of state—giving them the authority to preside over election administration and the tools to try to block Democratic votes. And at the federal level, Republicans could take back control of the House of Representatives (helped by their unilateral ability to redraw 187 congressional districts following the most recent census) and use their majority to manipulate the 2024 presidential results in their favor—especially if the 2024 election resembles 2020, when Democrats won a decisive popular vote victory but relied on narrow margins in a handful of states for an Electoral College majority.

Once a political system loses bipartisan consensus respecting the rules of the democratic game, it can be a short slide to autocracy. The world has watched this happen in Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela. It is not inconceivable that it could happen in the United States.

THE GATHERING STORM

To warn of the failure of American democracy is not hyperbole or simply a slogan meant to motivate action. Political scientists may differ on the minimum conditions for democracy, but they agree on this: a country cannot be considered a democracy if it does not broadly ensure the neutral and fair administration of elections. If the outcome of a major national election in the United States were to be deter-

mined by fraudulent exclusion or the manipulation of votes, the country would cease to be a democracy, no matter how much freedom of expression might survive (for a time).

More than 100 prominent democracy scholars recently warned in a collective statement that Republican assaults on electoral integrity could bring about the demise of U.S. democracy. They appealed to Congress to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and to adopt other measures to "ensure the sanctity and independence of election administration." But with broad national legislation to ban partisan gerrymandering and strengthen voting standards unlikely in the near term, it will also be up to civil society to defend American democracy.

That defense is made more urgent by the gathering storm of democratic backsliding around the world. The United States' outsize importance as a source of political diffusion, for good or ill, makes it an example that will influence struggling democracies and embattled autocracies alike. Both in backsliding democracies such as the Philippines and Poland and in deepening autocracies such as Turkey and Venezuela, Trump's mantra of "fake news" emboldened strongman leaders in their assaults on the media. If the United States winds up disfiguring its democracy by politicizing electoral administration and suppressing minority votes, autocrats will gleefully seize upon the American precedent as justification for their methods of blocking democratic change. And in declining democracies, politically vulnerable incumbents will embrace similar methods of violating electoral integrity in order to hang on to power.

In short, what happens to democracy in the United States is likely to determine the fate of democracy around the world: whether this third wave of democratic reversals is turned back or gains horrific new momentum.

Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America

How Self-Dealing Elites Failed in Both Countries

Sarah Chayes

SEPTEMBER 3, 2021

In 2005, I visited a branch of Afghanistan's national bank in Kandahar to make a deposit. I was launching a cooperative that would craft skin-care products for export, using oils extracted from local almonds and apricot kernels and fragrant botanicals gathered from the desert or the stony hills north of town. In order to register with the authorities and be able to operate legally, we had to make a deposit in the national bank.

The cooperative's chief financial officer, an Afghan, had been trying to achieve this formality for the past nine months—without paying a bribe. I had agreed to accompany him this time, knowing that together we would fare better. (I'm withholding his name because until a few weeks ago, he was a minister in the Afghan government and his family is now a target for retaliation by the Taliban, as are all Afghans who refuse to transfer their allegiance from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the newly declared Islamic Emirate.)

"Come back tomorrow," barked the clerk, with a toss of his head, just as clerks had been telling my colleague for the past nine months. The subtext was clear: "Come back tomorrow—with the money."

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Abruptly, I found myself on top of the clerk's desk, sitting cross-legged amid all the documents and paperwork. "Fine," I told him. "Take as long as you want. But I'm staying right here until you complete our forms." Eyes wide, the clerk got to work.

This is how life was for Afghans on the United States' watch. Almost every interaction with a government official, including teachers and doctors, involved extortion. And most Afghans weren't able to take the risk I took in making a scene. They would have landed in jail. Instead, they just paid—and their hearts took the blows.

"The police are supposed to be upholding the law," complained another cooperative member a few years later, a former police officer himself. "And they're the ones breaking the law." These officials—the police and the clerks—did not extort people politely. Afghans paid not just in cash but also in a far more valuable commodity: their dignity.

In the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban's swift reconquest of the country, and the chaotic, bloody exodus that has followed, U.S. officials have lamented that the Afghans failed to put up a fight. But how did the Americans ever expect Afghans to keep risking their lives on behalf of a government that had abused them—with Washington's permission—for decades?

There is also another, deeper truth to grasp. The disaster in Afghanistan—and the United States' complicity in allowing corruption to cripple the Afghan state and make it loathsome to its own people—is not only a failure of U.S. foreign policymaking. It is also a mirror, reflecting back a more florid version of the type of corruption that has long been undermining American democracy, as well.

ON THE TAKE

Corruption in U.S.-occupied Afghanistan wasn't just a matter of constant street-level shakedowns. It was a system. No cops or customs agents got to put all their illicit gains in their own pockets. Some of that money flowed upward, in trickles that joined to form a mighty river of cash. Two surveys conducted in 2010 estimated the total amount paid in bribes each year in Afghanistan at between $2 billion and $5 billion—an amount equal to at least 13 percent of the country's GDP. In return for the kickbacks, officials at the top sent protection back down the line.

The networks that ran Afghanistan were flexible and dynamic, beset by internal rivalries as well as alliances. They spanned what West-

erners often misperceive as an impermeable wall between the public sector and the supposedly private businesspeople and heads of local "nonprofits" who corralled most of the international assistance that found its way to Afghanistan. These networks often operated like diversified family businesses: the nephew of a provincial governor would get a major reconstruction contract, the son of the governor's brother-in-law would get a plum job as an interpreter for U.S. officials, and the governor's cousin would drive opium shipments to the Iranian border. All three were ultimately part of the same enterprise.

Westerners often scratched their heads at the persistent lack of capacity in Afghan governing institutions. But the sophisticated networks controlling those institutions never intended to govern. Their objective was self-enrichment. And at that task, they proved spectacularly successful.

The errors that enabled this kind of government to take hold date back to the very beginning of the U.S.-led intervention, when American forces armed rag-tag proxy militias to serve as ersatz ground troops in the fight against the Taliban. The militias received spiffy new battle fatigues and automatic rifles but no training or oversight. In recent weeks, pictures of Taliban fighters wielding batons against desperate crowds at the airport in Kabul have horrified the world. But in the summer of 2002, similar scenes took place, with little subsequent outrage, when U.S.-backed militias set up checkpoints around Kandahar and smacked around ordinary Afghans who refused to pay bribes. Truck drivers, families on their way to weddings, and even kids on bikes got a taste of those batons.

In time, U.S. military intelligence officers figured out how to map the social networks of small-time Taliban commanders. But they never explored the links between local officials and the heads of construction or logistics companies that got to bid on U.S.-funded contracts. No one was comparing the actual quality of raw materials used with what was marked down in the budget. We Americans had no idea who we were dealing with.

Ordinary Afghans, on the other hand, could see who was getting rich. They noticed whose villages received the most lavish development projects. And Western civilian and military officials bolstered the standing of corrupt Afghan officials by partnering with them ostentatiously and unconditionally. They stood by their sides at ribbon cuttings and consulted them on military tactics. Those Afghan offi-

cials could then credibly threaten to call down a U.S. raid or an airstrike on anyone who got out of line.

SOMETHING ROTTEN

By 2007, many people, myself included, were urgently warning senior U.S. and European officials that this approach was undermining the effort to rebuild Afghanistan. In 2009, in my capacity as special adviser to the commander of international troops in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, I helped establish an anticorruption task force at the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). (McChrystal's successor, David Petraeus, expanded the group and rebranded it as Task Force Shafafiyat.) The original team put together detailed plans for addressing corruption at a regional level throughout the country.

Later, I helped develop a more systematic approach, which would have made the fight against corruption a central element of the overall NATO campaign. Intelligence units would have mapped the social networks of ministers and governors and their connections. International military and civilian officials in Kabul would have applied a graduated range of sanctions to Afghan officials whose corruption was most seriously undermining NATO operations and Afghans' faith in their government. And Afghan military commanders caught stealing materiel or their troops' monthly pay would have been deprived of U.S. support. Later, while serving as special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, I proposed a series of steps that would have taken particular aim at Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who had intervened to protect corrupt officials who had come under scrutiny, and whose brothers were salting away millions of stolen dollars in Dubai—some of it, we suspected, in trust for Karzai himself.

None of those plans was ever implemented. I responded to request after request from Petraeus until I realized that he had no intention of acting on my recommendations; it was just make-work. The principals' committee of the National Security Council—a group that includes every cabinet-level foreign policy and security official—agreed to consider an alternative approach, but the plan we sent over died in the offices of President Barack Obama's national security advisers James Jones and Tom Donilon. Task Force Shafafiyat continued operating, but it served essentially as window-dressing to be displayed

when members of Congress visited as proof that the United States was really trying to do something about Afghan corruption.

ISAF and the U.S. embassy in Kabul had also formed a more specialized task force, the Afghan Threat Finance Cell, to carry out financial investigations. In 2010, it launched its first significant anticorruption probe. The trail led to Karzai's inner circle, and police detained Muhammad Zia Salehi, a senior aide. With a single phone call to corrections officials, however, Karzai got the suspect released. Karzai then demoted all of the Afghan government's anticorruption prosecutors, some of whom had assisted in the ATFC's investigation, cutting their salaries by about 80 percent and barring U.S. Department of Justice officials from mentoring them. No protest came from Washington. "The cockroaches went scuttling for the corners," as a member of the ATFC's leadership described it.

Civilian officials at the Pentagon and their counterparts at the U.S. Department of State and in the intelligence agencies had long dismissed corruption as a significant factor in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Many subscribed to the belief that corruption was just part of Afghan culture—as if anyone willingly accepts being humiliated and robbed by government officials. In more than a decade of working to expose and fight corruption in Afghanistan, I was never told by a single Afghan, "We don't really mind corruption; it's part of our culture." Such comments about Afghanistan invariably came only from Westerners. Other U.S. officials contended that petty corruption was so common that Afghans simply took it for granted and that high-level corruption was too politically charged to confront. To Afghans, the explanation was simpler. "America must want the corruption," I remember my cooperative's chief financial officer remarking.

The precedent for Karzai's impunity had been established in the wake of the Afghan presidential election of 2009. Karzai had brazenly stolen it by declaring some Taliban-infested districts safe for voting and then negotiating with the Taliban to allow for the entry and exit of ballot boxes—but not to allow voters free access to polling stations. The result was empty ballot boxes that could then be stuffed. Afghan friends regaled me with descriptions of poll workers they had observed in rural villages firing their guns in the air while on the phone to officials in Kabul. "We're having a tough time here," the election officials would shout into the phone. "Can you give us a few more days to get the boxes to you?" Then they would go back to filling out fraudulent ballots.

In some cases, UN investigators who opened sealed boxes found intact pads of ballots inside, all filled out in the same ink. But Washington declined to call for a new election. Instead, the Obama administration dispatched John Kerry, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts who was then chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, to try to reason with Karzai. In the end, the official results emerged from a negotiation: Karzai would still win but by fewer votes. That, ultimately, was the type of democracy that Americans cultivated in Afghanistan: one where the rules are rewritten on the fly by those who amass the most money and power and where elections are settled not at the ballot box but by those who already hold office.

THERE WAS ANOTHER WAY

How did U.S. officials across four administrations get Afghanistan so wrong? As in any complex phenomenon, many factors played a role.

First, despite the high costs, the U.S. war was always a halfhearted effort. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. President George W. Bush's top advisers were obsessed with Iraq; they grudgingly set their sights on Afghanistan only when irrefutable intelligence made clear that the attacks had been carried out by al Qaeda. The organization was then based in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden had long-standing partnerships with local jihadis. And yet within a few months of the collapse of the Taliban regime, U.S. diplomats and the military brass had orders to swivel to Iraq. The United States put itself in the impossible position of trying to prosecute two complex wars at once.

For his part, Obama always exuded ambivalence about the mission in Afghanistan. As vice president, Joe Biden was outspoken about his opposition to the intervention. President Donald Trump oversaw the negotiations that forced the Afghan government to make concession after concession to the Taliban so that U.S. forces could leave—and set up the Taliban for their lightning victory. And Biden, back in the White House as president, was at last able to bring about the withdrawal that he wanted 12 years ago. But today is not 12 years ago.

Throughout all four administrations, U.S. officials never met ordinary people in settings that would have made those people feel safe to speak freely. So the Americans never absorbed critical information that was obvious to Afghans, such as the prevalence of corruption and the disgust it was generating. Meanwhile, Karzai knew how to get

Afghanistan into the headlines—something that none of the four presidents who oversaw the war wanted. Even out of office, Karzai seems able to outfox the White House: witness his reported role in paving the way for the humiliating denouement of the U.S. war effort by negotiating with regional strongmen and Pakistani officials (or their proxies) to smooth the Taliban takeover.

The United States could have and should have taken a different approach. It should have stood firm in the face of Karzai's temper tantrums, leveraging the fact that Afghan leaders needed Washington far more than Washington needed them. It should have made U.S. assistance, civilian as well as military, conditional on the integrity of the officials receiving the support. The United States should have supplied as many mentors for Afghan mayors and health department heads as it did for colonels and captains in the Afghan National Army. And it should have ensured that entry-level salaries for Afghan civil servants and security forces were sufficient to keep their families clothed and fed, so that clerks and police officers couldn't use the excuse of low pay to legitimize their pilfering. The ISAF and Western embassies could have set up tip lines and ombudsman committees, such as the one the Taliban set up in Kandahar Province, so that citizens could lodge complaints and those complaints could be investigated. U.S. military and civilian institutions should have trained more of their own emissaries in Pashto and Dari to reduce their dependence on interpreters, who were always woven into Afghan networks and often had their own interests to further.

I have no way to certify that such an approach would have succeeded. But the United States didn't even try. None of the four administrations that carried out this war ever came close to adopting such an agenda.

Of course, Afghan leaders were hardly blameless—not only Karzai but also Ashraf Ghani, who served as president after Karzai and fled the country as the Taliban closed in on the presidential palace. When the former chief financial officer of my cooperative took up his post in the Ghani administration earlier this year, we spoke frequently. "You have no idea," he told me one day, his voice pale. "No one in this ministry is concerned with anything but his own personal gain." Even after all he had been through, he was shocked. "I came into my office and I found nothing. There is no strategic plan; no one even knows what this agency's mission is. And there is no one on staff even capable of writing a strategic plan." Within weeks of taking up his job, he

had to cancel a major contract that his ministry had awarded via a rigged bidding process and head off his predecessor's plan to create a parallel ministry that would have controlled the bulk of his budget.

A DISTANT MIRROR

It is likely Afghanistan will soon recede from U.S. headlines, even as the situation there goes from bad to worse. Politicians and pundits will point fingers; scholars and analysts will look for lessons. Many will focus on the fact that Americans failed to understand Afghanistan. That is surely true—but perhaps less important than how badly we Americans have failed to understand our own country.

On the surface, Afghanistan and the United States are vastly different places, home to different societies and cultures. And yet when it comes to allowing profiteers to influence policy and allowing corrupt and self-serving leaders to cripple the state and anger its citizens, the two countries have much in common.

For all the mismanagement and corruption that hollowed out the Afghan state, consider this: How well have American leaders been governing in recent decades? They have started and lost two wars, turned free markets over to an unfettered financial services industry that proceeded to nearly bring down the global economy, colluded in a burgeoning opioid crisis, and bungled their response to a global pandemic. And they have promulgated policies that have hastened environmental catastrophes, raising the question of how much longer the earth will sustain human habitation.

And how have the architects of these disasters and their cronies been doing? Never better. Consider the skyrocketing incomes and assets of executives in the fossil fuel and pharmaceutical industries, investment bankers, and defense contractors, as well as the lawyers and other professionals who provide them with high-end services. Their staggering wealth and comfortable protection from the calamities they have unleashed attest to their success. Not success at leadership, of course. But maybe leadership isn't their objective. Maybe, like their Afghan counterparts, their primary objective is just making money.

Don't Sink the Nuclear Submarine Deal

The Benefits of AUKUS Outweigh the Proliferation Risks

Caitlin Talmadge

SEPTEMBER 27, 2021

The United States' decision to sell nuclear-powered submarines to Australia is coming under fire from some experts on nuclear nonproliferation. These critics fear that sharing the sensitive nuclear reactor technology needed to propel such vessels will set a dangerous precedent and open a new pathway for states to acquire nuclear weapons.

These concerns are overblown. Furthermore, they are outweighed by the clear security benefits of the deal—in particular, the fact that the sale will enhance Washington's ability to counter Beijing both militarily and politically. There are significant military advantages to deploying nuclear-powered submarines, as opposed to the conventionally powered submarines Canberra had originally agreed to buy from France. The United States also has a number of ways to manage any proliferation risks, and it likely will do so in the coming months and years as the sale is finalized. If anything, partnering closely with Australia should help reduce one of the potential causes of future nuclear proliferation in Asia: the perception that the United States cannot or will not defend its allies from China.

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SALE AWAY

In military terms, selling nuclear-powered submarines to Australia is a no-brainer. Because they have essentially unlimited power from their reactors, U.S. nuclear submarines are capable of greater speed, endurance, and range than their conventional counterparts—important characteristics when operating in the vast Indo-Pacific theater. Nuclear-powered submarines can also be designed to remain stealthy at high speeds and to operate at great ocean depths. This means that nuclear-powered submarines have a better chance at surviving Chinese attempts to find them.

As a result, nuclear-powered submarines are more likely to be able to sustain their missions during a crisis or a war. These include surveillance as well as protecting or attacking ships. Such undersea tasks will be especially vital in the future, as the surface of the ocean and the airspace above it grow increasingly contested due to technological trends in weaponry and the prodigious growth of China's capabilities.

Beijing's military expansion includes an ever-larger force of attack submarines, but the undersea domain is one in which the United States retains important qualitative advantages. Australia's recognition of these advantages is an obvious motive for its sudden embrace of naval reactor technology as part of its new security partnership with the United Kingdom and the United States, known as AUKUS. This move would have been inconceivable only a few years ago, prior to Beijing's blistering rhetoric toward Canberra, tariffs on major Australian exports, and suspension of key bilateral communication channels.

Critics of the submarine deal fear that allowing Australia to use naval nuclear propulsion technology will open a new pathway to nuclear proliferation. The main concern is that potential nuclear aspirants—not Australia, but states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea—might argue that they too should be able to build naval nuclear reactors. This would be technically allowed thanks to a loophole in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which permits these states to remove nuclear materials from the safeguards regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for this purpose. The fear is that those countries, having obtained reactor fuel on the pretext that they would use it solely to power submarines, might then turn around and use the fuel to make a nuclear bomb. Submarines fueled with highly enriched uranium (HEU) are particularly concerning because this material could be used to make nuclear weapons without further modifications.

Yet history does not support these doomsday scenarios. As the political scientist Nicholas Miller has pointed out, past exceptions to U.S. nonproliferation policy do not seem to have undermined the overall regime. He notes, for example, that the United States' decision to waive sanctions on Pakistan as it pursued nuclear weapons in the 1980s did not lead any other countries to conclude that they suddenly had a free pass to go nuclear without consequences. Similarly, the 2008 U.S.-India nuclear deal, although criticized for seeming to bless India's nuclear status despite its refusal to sign the NPT, did not result in subsequent proliferation by other states. These rare exceptions to nonproliferation policy seem to be understood as just that—exceptions. There is little reason to think the sale to Australia will be viewed otherwise.

Regardless, today's nonproliferation regime has much bigger problems than the sale of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. The collapsed Iran nuclear deal, the fraying U.S.-Russian strategic arms control framework, and China's rapid buildup of new nuclear forces all pose profound challenges to efforts to reduce the spread of nuclear weapons, with or without a perceived weakening of the rules surrounding naval nuclear reactors. Overall, it makes little sense to undermine a new agreement with clear security benefits for Washington in order to prevent unspecified future damage to a set of reactor rules.

BELOW THE SURFACE OF AUKUS

The United States has a substantial ability to manage proliferation risks from the sale. When announcing the agreement, President Joe Biden highlighted proliferation safeguards as a major area of focus as the two countries hammer out the details over the next 18 months. Choices about reactor design, the process for shipbuilding, and other features of the submarines all provide opportunities to minimize any dangers.

In particular, it seems likely that the United States will draw from its own stock of HEU to produce the entire reactor core domestically. Then the United States will ship the sealed core to Australia, where it will be put into submarines. Opening the reactor to access the fuel would be extremely difficult physically and time consuming, not to mention suicidal, since anyone doing so would be exposed to unshielded, highly radioactive nuclear material.

In practical terms, what this means is that the deal will not give Australia the ability to produce HEU or provide it with an opportunity to somehow divert the fuel it gets from the United States. It also

means that no HEU will be removed from international safeguards: the stockpile of the United States, as one of the NPT's five nuclear weapons states, is under no such regime. It is true that Australia would be the first nonnuclear weapons state to acquire naval nuclear reactors fueled by HEU, but rather than giving a free pass to future nuclear aspirants, the circumstances seem to set a very narrow precedent.

Moreover, as the nuclear policy expert James Acton has pointed out, the United States could deliberately seek to constrain this precedent by publicly outlining the conditions under which it would view as acceptable any future efforts by nonnuclear weapons states to remove nuclear material from international safeguards for use in a naval nuclear reactor. Iran, for example, would not meet these criteria due to its previous violations of IAEA safeguards. Its record looks very different from that of Australia, a staunch supporter of the NPT.

Acton and other critics of AUKUS, including former NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller, have also suggested that the United States should encourage Australia to buy French nuclear-powered submarines that run on low-enriched uranium (LEU) instead of American HEU-fueled submarines. LEU poses a lower proliferation risk because it is unsuitable for direct use in nuclear weapons. Numerous nonnuclear weapons states also already possess LEU stockpiles, meaning there would be nothing new about Australia's use of this technology. And by bringing France into AUKUS, these critics argue that the United States could also heal the rift that the deal has caused within NATO.

The transatlantic rift is real, so this idea is worth studying. Yet there are two problems with it. First, from a proliferation perspective, it is not actually clear that giving a greenlight to LEU-fueled naval propulsion is really that much better in the hands of a determined proliferator. LEU reactors have to be regularly refueled, which provides a pretext for states to develop indigenous enrichment capabilities to generate the needed fuel. Once a state can produce LEU, it is relatively straightforward to further enrich it into the HEU needed for a bomb. At least with HEU naval propulsion, the reactor core is inserted and sealed for the decades-long life of the ship, providing no rationale for ongoing enrichment.

Second, U.S.-designed nuclear submarines are superior in performance to their French counterparts. They are significantly larger and carry more weapons. And just as important, U.S. nuclear submarines have a sensor suite of advanced hull-mounted and towed arrays that

dramatically improve their capabilities. Access to these sensors—and to continuous software upgrades for them over time by U.S. labs and industry—is part of what Australia is acquiring through the deal. France simply cannot provide this capability. No doubt this is part of what motivated Australia to form the deal with the Americans in the first place.

On balance, the AUKUS submarine deal is probably more likely to reduce proliferation risks in the Indo-Pacific than increase them. The most likely cause of future nuclear proliferation in the region stems from growing anxiety among U.S. allies that they have to counter China on their own and that their conventional defenses won't suffice, thus leading them to provide for their own security with nuclear weapons. The submarine deal with Australia helps assuage these fears by signaling the United States' political commitment to the region and bolstering a critical conventional military capability. It is important not to overstate the benefits of the agreement, but they seem more certain than its potential drawbacks.

Can Ethiopia Survive?

What Might Happen If Abiy Ahmed Falls

Nic Cheeseman and Yohannes Woldemariam

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In October, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered an offensive against the Tigrayan rebel forces that control much of the country's northern Tigray region and part of the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions. His aim was to force the insurgents into a final stand on their home turf, ultimately concluding a yearlong war that has claimed thousands of lives and uprooted more than 1.7 million people. Instead, the gambit appears to have backfired. Not only have Ethiopian troops failed to advance but they have suffered a series of defeats that have left the capital, Addis Ababa, open to attack—forcing Abiy to declare a state of emergency this week and to call on residents to take up arms to defend the city.

Even if Abiy's military offensive had succeeded, he would have faced a major challenge in reintegrating Tigray and restoring a sense of national identity. Now that he appears on the brink of failure, however, the prime minister has called into question his own capacity to govern and, potentially, the very existence of the Ethiopian state in its current form.

The political geographer Richard Hartshorne famously argued that the viability of any state depends on whether its centripetal (unifying) forces outweigh its centrifugal (dividing) ones. The former includes government efforts to build infrastructure, provide services, and

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strengthen borders, as well as efforts to persuade citizens to buy into the idea of the state—whether by promoting a shared national culture, language, economy, or other unifying visions. The latter includes large or unwieldy territory, weak infrastructure, lack of resources, and entrenched ethnic or social divisions.

Abiy's fundamental challenge is that the centrifugal forces in Ethiopia have grown stronger than the centripetal ones. In addition to Tigray, a number of other long-running insurgencies and cycles of interethnic violence have persisted and, in some cases, intensified. Ethnic and regional tensions have been further inflamed by the deployment of propaganda by all sides and by social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that have facilitated the spread of hate speech and helped fuel atrocities.

Of Ethiopia's festering conflicts, the one in Tigray has been the most destabilizing because it has torn apart the governing alliance that has ruled Ethiopia since 1991. The war pits Abiy's government against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which once dominated Ethiopia's government but has raised a formidable rebel army and now seeks to conduct a referendum to determine the future of Tigray and to secure greater autonomy. Both sides have at times framed the conflict in ethnic terms, raising the risk of widespread ethnic violence, and each regards the other's vision for how to govern Ethiopia as fundamentally incompatible with its own. The conflict has also sucked in a range of foreign powers—including China, Egypt, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States—which in turn has prompted each side to accuse the other of selling out Ethiopia's sovereignty and has raised the risk that Ethiopia will fall victim to proxy wars between rival regional and world powers.

As East Africa's largest nation and arguably its most powerful one, Ethiopia has long been held up by its allies as a force for stability in an otherwise volatile region. It has been a close counterterrorism partner of the United States, and its military has played a leading role in the fight against al Shabab extremists in neighboring Somalia. Yet even before the recent crisis, critics pointed out that Ethiopian intervention in Somalia often did more harm than good. And as the conflict in Tigray has intensified, it has become increasingly clear that the country has become a source of instability rather than a bulwark against it.

Even if the fighting can be halted, fierce disagreements about who should govern Ethiopia and how will persist. Without a compelling

and widely shared vision for the Ethiopian state, neither Abiy nor any potential successor will be able to prevent the centrifugal forces from overwhelming the centripetal ones. "The state must have a reason for existing," Hartshorne wrote. If Ethiopia is to survive in its current form, it will need to come up with one.

UPHILL BATTLE

The war in Tigray erupted in November 2020, after months of simmering tensions between Abiy's government and the TPLF, which refused to join his new Prosperity Party. Initially, Abiy portrayed the conflict as a quick "policing operation" necessary to root out what he claimed were corrupt and recalcitrant members of the TPLF elite. Ethiopian government forces, backed by troops from neighboring Eritrea, rapidly took control of key Tigrayan towns and the city of Mekelle. But Abiy underestimated how hard it would be to hold this territory. Having fought a successful guerrilla war against the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime from 1974 to 1991, the TPLF fell back, fanned out, and launched an insurgency to retake control. The conflict soon became a thorn in Abiy's side, with military setbacks going hand in hand with evidence of widespread human rights abuses that tarnished his carefully cultivated image as a reformer.

Abiy should have anticipated how hard it would be to surgically eliminate the leadership of the TPLF. After all, he was an intelligence chief in the previous government, known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which ruled Ethiopia for almost three decades before he became prime minister in 2018. The TPLF dominated this government, and its leaders enjoyed plum military postings and controlled much of the economy. They were never going to simply step aside. Yet Abiy failed to appreciate how ferociously the TPLF would resist any attempt to invade Tigray or to hold its territory by force. He sought to establish an interim administration, even handpicking new officials who were ethnic Tigrayans. But these administrators were either incapable of winning back hearts and minds or actively working with the TPLF.

Despite the government's repeated claims that it was winning the war, the Tigrayan forces fought an effective rear-guard action and were ultimately able to wrestle back control of most of the region in June, forcing Ethiopian troops to make an embarrassing withdrawal from Tigray. Worse still for Abiy, the Tigrayan forces went further,

invading parts of the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions in an attempt to force the regional government there to relinquish control of a disputed area now commonly referred to as Western Tigray.

Abiy's latest offensive was designed to push the Tigrayan forces out of the Amhara and Afar regions and cut off their supply lines so that they could no longer provide for the Tigrayan people. Instead, Ethiopian troops not only failed to win back territory but lost control of the cities of Dessie and Kombolcha in Amhara, likely giving the rebels access to an airport and thwarting Abiy's efforts to block access to the region. Even more troubling for Abiy's government, Tigrayan forces have begun coordinating with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which has intensified a long-running insurgency and is closing in on the capital from the southwest. Recent press reports suggest that both rebel movements may join together with other opposition groups to forge an anti-Abiy alliance under the banner of the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist Forces.

At this point, it is possible to envision four outcomes to the conflict, all of which could ultimately threaten the survival of the Ethiopian state. The first is a joint Tigrayan and Oromo rebel victory over the Ethiopian army, which is rumored to be collapsing. Such an outcome would resolve the conflict with Abiy's government but require the TPLF and the OLA to find a way to jointly govern the country, large parts of which are hostile to them. Having to share power would also likely bring long-standing tensions between the two groups to the fore, increasing the risk of further political instability.

The second possible outcome would involve some kind of negotiated settlement. Recognizing that a military victory could land them in the same impossible position as Abiy—trying to hold a large territory against an inevitable insurgency—the TPLF could decide not to march on Addis Ababa but instead to sue for peace on favorable terms. Among other things, Tigrayan leaders could demand a referendum on greater autonomy and protections for Tigray. But such an arrangement would likely heighten tensions with the OLA, which claims the capital as the heart of Oromia. It would also leave the underlying drivers of the conflict unresolved, raising questions about the durability of such a solution.

A third possible scenario would see Abiy removed from his position, likely by his own military officers. Once feted as a peacemaker and a reformer, the prime minister increasingly looks like a liability, and it is not impossible to imagine that he will join the growing list of recently

deposed African leaders that includes Guinea's Alpha Condé and Mali's Bah Ndaw. But a coup would not necessarily bring the conflict any closer to resolution, since Ethiopia's military appears internally divided and unable to defeat the TPLF and the OLA through force alone.

A final possible outcome would be a prolonged stalemate. Ethiopian troops could hold on to the capital and to the train line that connects Addis Ababa to Djibouti but fail to win back any of the territory now controlled by Tigrayan and Oromo forces. Should this happen, Abiy would come under even greater pressure to pursue a negotiated settlement. But although there have been backroom discussions between representatives of both sides in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, there has been little progress, in part because both teams include hard-liners who see compromise as betrayal. In other words, whichever way the current conflict plays out, the stability and, ultimately, the survival of the Ethiopian state will require the country's leaders to devise a new vision for the country—one they currently seem incapable of delivering.

THE FORCES OF DIVISION

The crisis in Tigray has underscored the severity of the risk of national fragmentation, but the seeds of Ethiopian instability were not sown in 2020 or even 2012, when longtime EPRDF leader Meles Zenawi passed away. Rather, they have been lying just beneath the surface all along. At no point in history have Ethiopians agreed on who their legitimate leaders are or how they should share power between different ethnic groups. Take the founder of modern Ethiopia, Emperor Menelik II. The Amhara generally revere him as a national hero, but many Oromo, Somalis, and Tigrayans see him as an imperialist slave owner and land grabber.

The same is true of Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, who spent much of his tenure attempting to put down insurgencies. In fact, Abiy, who recently ordered controversial airstrikes on Mekelle, is not the first Ethiopian leader to attempt to bomb Tigray into submission. Haile Selassie did the same after returning from exile during World War II, calling in the British Royal Air Force to try to snuff out a Tigrayan campaign for autonomy.

Indeed, Ethiopia has rarely known internal peace. The era of the Derg, which lasted from 1974 to 1991, was also characterized by intense war, instability, and famine. After ousting Haile Selassie in a military coup, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam sought to impose his vision of

socialism on the country. But disagreements about how to govern Ethiopia and to accommodate its different ethnic communities persisted. Between 1977 and 1979, Mengistu attempted to strengthen his hold on power through a series of purges known as the Red Terror that killed thousands of people. In 1977, Somalia invaded the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, causing internal conflicts to blend with external ones. So great was the political fragmentation during this period that it set in motion Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia and the ascendance of TPLF and EPRDF insurgencies, which went on to take power by force in 1991.

By comparison, the period of EPRDF rule was relatively stable. But many of the tensions and disagreements that had animated the Haile Selassie and Mengistu eras were papered over rather than resolved. Meanwhile, the EPRDF's mode of governance gave rise to fresh quarrels. Many Tigrayans regard this as a golden era, marked by rapid development, poverty reduction, and strong international support. Yet many more non-Tigrayans remember the rampant repression of these years and the rigged elections that maintained EPRDF dominance over the country and Tigrayan dominance of the EPRDF. This viewpoint has hardened since Abiy came to power, and especially since the war began in Tigray, with the prime minister's supporters using it to deflect criticism of the government's human rights record. Foreigners have no right to criticize Abiy, they argue, because they were silent when the EPRDF intimidated, tortured, and imprisoned its rivals.

It is easy to see these divisions as an inevitable outgrowth of the country's immense size and diversity: Ethiopia is the 27th-largest country in the world by landmass and home to more than 80 different ethnic groups. But neither geography nor demography is destiny. Successive Ethiopian leaders have fueled ethnic and regional tensions, each one ruling in a way that has given at least one community a reason to feel aggrieved.

The current Tigray crisis is a case in point. Abiy's government has been careful to claim that it is fighting a battle against the TPLF, not the people of Tigray. But its actions, including removing many Tigrayans from government positions, have undermined this contention. Ethiopian and Eritrean forces have committed atrocities, including against civilians, and Abiy's government has blocked humanitarian aid, creating near famine conditions in Tigray. Deacon Daniel Kibret, a close ally of Abiy's, has called for the total elimination of the TPLF, and the prime minister himself previously celebrated

the idea that "the weed is being removed from our country." Coupled with reports of ordinary Tigrayans being detained and beaten in non-Tigrayan regions, this kind of rhetoric has fanned fears of genocide and strengthened the bond between the TPLF and the people of Tigray, who feel that their community is under attack and that they would not be safe or well treated under a regional government loyal to Abiy. At the same time, the Tigrayan forces have been accused of committing human rights abuses of their own, including during the recent fighting in Amhara. These reports, in turn, have stoked fears among other communities about what a Tigrayan and Oromo rebel invasion of Addis Ababa could bring.

Over the past two years, Ethiopia's divisions have been hardened by the spread of hate speech on social media. The Ethiopian government has built a powerful propaganda machine that disseminates pro-Abiy material on satellite networks and on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, while censoring dissent. At the same time, rebel groups and their supporters are pushing their own narratives on social media and through outlets such as the Tigray Media House—often with the help of incendiary falsehoods. Last March, the Ethiopian parliament introduced a measure requiring social media companies to remove hate speech within 24 hours but failed to explain exactly how this should happen or what consequences would befall companies that failed to comply. Similar ambiguities undercut other laws governing hate speech on social media.

Even if Ethiopia had a clear regulatory framework, it would be difficult to stop the spread of dangerous misinformation online. Identifying and removing such content requires understanding both the language and the context. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Facebook sent many of its human content moderators home, relying instead on algorithms that are not as good at detecting hate speech that involves local idioms or is written in languages not spoken globally. In Ethiopia, Facebook has not even made its community standards available in Amharic, one of the country's most widely spoken languages. The result has been a proliferation of hate speech, some of which has turned deadly. As the Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen told U.S. senators in a hearing in October, "Dangerous online talk has led to actual violence that harms and even kills people." She cited the case of Ethiopia specifically, acknowledging that the social media giant has contributed to the fragmentation of the state.

Ethnic and regional grievances, supercharged by social media, have been further aggravated by deep inequalities. As the development economist Frances Stewart has argued, when economic inequalities break down along ethnic or religious lines and thereby reinforce subnational identities, the risks of intercommunal conflict increase significantly. Overall income inequality is relatively low in Ethiopia, but unemployment stands at 27 percent and the benefits of economic growth have mainly been enjoyed by the urban elite. Inequalities, or perceived inequalities, between regions and ethnicities have added to the problem. During the years it was in power, the TPLF was accused of funneling a disproportionate share of government resources to Tigray. Now, Abiy, who hails from the region of Oromia, is seen by some as favoring his own group and by others as not doing enough to aid the impoverished Oromo youth who enabled his political rise. Competition between these groups, often over land or resources, tears at the fabric of the Ethiopian state and claims hundreds of lives each year in Afar, Amhara, Oromia, the Somali region, and elsewhere.

Economic inequalities can sometimes be managed during times of prosperity, when most citizens feel optimistic and that their lot is improving. But Ethiopia is in the midst of a painful economic downturn. Disruptions caused by the war in Tigray have pushed up food prices dramatically, and the government has been forced to devalue the Ethiopian currency, the birr. At the same time, large government deficits and weak fiscal and monetary policies have accelerated the downward economic spiral. Graft within state enterprises, the expansion of the black market, and considerable spending on the 2021 general elections have all aggravated the situation. Against this backdrop, the name Abiy selected for his new political vehicle, the Prosperity Party, is a constant reminder of his failure to meet the expectations of the Ethiopian people.

At least 13 different ethnic groups are currently demanding either greater autonomy or regional status. Resolving these tensions has proved to be particularly challenging not only because the central government has in practice refused to allow communities to exercise their right to secession, which the constitution gives them in theory, but also because some of their claims are contradictory. For example, regions such as Tigray and Amhara claim parts of each other's territory and have been locked in long-running border disputes. Other disputes are even more complicated: the Sidama and Wolayita ethnic groups wish to break away from the country's Southern region, which

lumps together 56 different ethnic groups, some of which oppose letting the Sidama and Wolayita go—in part because the region's capital, Hawassa, is also the capital of the Sidama region and therefore has economic and symbolic importance. Partly as a result, this area has become a hotbed of protests and clashes that often occur along ethnic lines. Such examples underscore the immense difficulty of managing Ethiopia's complex ethnic mosaic and the urgent need for a unifying vision if the country is to remain intact.

"A REASON FOR EXISTING"

In Ethiopia as elsewhere, civil war has destroyed much-needed infrastructure, such as roads, factories, and telecommunications equipment, and has also eroded the fabric of national identity. To prevent the disintegration of the state, Ethiopia's leaders must find a way to put the country back together again, both physically and symbolically. Doing so will require three things, none of which will be easy: securing a lasting peace, reconstructing Tigray and the other parts of the country affected by the war, and forging a consensus on the idea of Ethiopia.

None of these issues can be resolved by military conquest alone. When Abiy's forces have captured territory, they have struggled to hold it. The same would be true for Tigrayan and Oromo fighters, should they succeed in toppling Abiy's government. And if the winning side commits more atrocities or human rights abuses on its road to victory, it will only intensify the distrust and animosity on the other side of the conflict.

The problems presented by outright military conquest will be even worse if that victory is enabled by foreign powers. According to Tigrayan leaders and some Western officials, Ethiopian troops have used armed drones supplied by China, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates to conduct controversial airstrikes on Tigrayan towns. It is also clear that despite Abiy's denials, Eritrean forces fought alongside Ethiopian troops in the early days of the conflict. Eritrean troops are reportedly now stationed near the border with Sudan, likely in an effort to prevent Tigrayan forces from accessing a sanctuary in Sudan. This collaboration with Ethiopia's erstwhile enemy has opened Abiy up to accusations of selling out his country and doing the bidding of Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. As long as this apparent alliance endures, Abiy will be handing the TPLF a propaganda victory and

complicating the task of restoring national unity. Yet Ethiopia's military is unlikely to be able to hold out without foreign military support.

The only solution is to pursue a negotiated settlement that secures at least some buy-in from the leaders of the TPLF and the OLA. It is unclear exactly what terms the TPLF would accept, especially now that it has gained the upper hand. At a minimum, its leaders would hope to press their current military advantage and demand reinstatement as the regional government, greater autonomy for the region, funds to rebuild after the war, and a guaranteed safe route in and out of the region. If the TPLF ends up joining forces with the OLA and other rebel and opposition groups, their demands are also likely to include the removal of Abiy himself and the formation of a transitional government. At present, however, Abiy appears unwilling to make even the more modest of these concessions, even though doing so may be the only way to preserve the integrity of the country.

Once the parties reach a settlement, the process of national reconstruction must begin. Whether Abiy or some other leader is in power, the most effective way to approach this would be to rebuild the nation's infrastructure and its national identity at the same time. Research on countries with politicized ethnic cleavages such as Kenya and Sri Lanka has shown that investment in public goods that benefit all citizens equally makes it easier to build an inclusive national identity. Similarly, investment in a common language and national symbols can create a stronger and more resilient sense of national identity. Former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere's decision to promote Swahili as a lingua franca and to emphasize national unity in civic education has often been credited with fostering that country's political stability.

Doing something similar in Ethiopia will not be easy, however. Historically, the country's deep linguistic fragmentation has prevented the emergence of a single national language. And far from building unity, efforts to promote Amharic by successive rulers since Menelik II, who reigned from 1889 to 1913, have been seen as ethnic favoritism, in part because they have gone hand in hand with the neglect and in some cases suppression of other languages. In theory, the powerful Orthodox Church should be a unifying force, given its deep roots in Amhara and Tigray, but in practice, it is riven by deep divisions. Achieving national unity may therefore require new symbols to be found and promoted—ones that all communities will be able to buy into.

But that will be possible only if agreement can be reached on the most difficult task of all: forging a shared vision for the Ethiopian state. The country has tried two very different formulations, but both have been discredited. Under the EPRDF, the main legitimizing principle of the state was ethnic federalism, which promised each community the right to self-determination in theory, if not always in practice. The failure of this arrangement to treat all groups equally spurred protests by groups such as the Oromo and the Amhara—and ultimately led the EPRDF to choose Abiy, a self-proclaimed reformer born to an ethnic Oromo father and Amhara mother, as the country's new prime minister following Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation in 2018. Yet Abiy's attempt to replace ethnic federalism with a more centralized model has also failed. His decision to supplant the EPRDF with his own party strained relations with the TPLF and contributed to the outbreak of the fighting in Tigray, while doing little to ease tensions among other ethnic groups.

Abiy has characterized his approach to government as *medemer*, or synergy, even writing a book with that title and promoting it across the country. *Medemer* can be understood in two ways: first, as synthesizing all previous attempts to build the Ethiopian nation; and second, as better integrating the country's ethnic groups into a common identity. The practical implications of this philosophy are unclear, but some have interpreted it as meaning that Abiy wished to transform a "mosaic into a melting pot," pursuing a strategy similar to Nyerere's attempt to build a coherent core identity out of the country's fragmented regional governments.

This view of *medemer* is no longer credible given events in Tigray. And even if a future government were to follow Abiy's strategy for forging a collective national identity, there are reasons to think it would fail, at least in the short term. The first and most obvious is that the prime minister has not unified Ethiopia but further polarized it. Although the war in Tigray empowered Abiy to unite many Ethiopians against the TPLF, it has exacerbated a dangerous ethnopolitical cleavage and made the disintegration of the country more likely. And although Ethiopian state media spun Abiy's landslide election victory in June as evidence that he has the backing of the vast majority of Ethiopians, critics pointed out that by "winning" 410 out of the 436 available seats in the federal parliament in elections that were neither free nor fair, Abiy was simply using the same strategy—and repeating the same mistakes—as the EPRDF.

The second problem is that while the model of ethnic federalism promoted by the EPRDF has been discredited, few communities are willing to give up the group-based representation and self-determination that it promised. As a result, anyone seeking to build a more coherent state and national identity will be starting from a very different place than Nyerere did: whereas the Tanzanian leader governed a society made up of a large number of small ethnic groups recently united by the struggle against colonial rule, Ethiopian leaders preside over a smaller number of large ethnoregional groups whose identity has long been enshrined in the country's political system. Persuading these groups to give up their aspirations and trust the federal government may prove just as challenging in the rest of the country as it has been in Tigray.

Finally, the kinds of policies the government would need to implement in order to craft a successful melting-pot strategy would also make it harder to achieve a lasting peace in Tigray. Before they agree to lay down their guns, the TPLF will almost certainly want more regional autonomy, not less. And the same is likely to be true for the OLA. The problem Abiy faces, therefore, is that his favored approach to nation building seems destined to exacerbate the country's most pressing political crisis.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

In the absence of a unifying vision for how to rebuild the country, Ethiopia's future is perilously uncertain. Both ethnic federalism and political centralization have been tried and found wanting. This has fueled speculation that Ethiopia's only path to survival runs opposite to the one Abiy has charted: toward a loose confederation of largely self-governing regions. The name of the mooted alliance of opposition and rebel forces, the United Front of Ethiopian Federalist Forces, certainly points in this direction.

Such a path might help end the conflict with the TPLF, but there are good reasons to think that it would further entrench ethnoregional identities and so exacerbate the centrifugal forces pulling the country apart. If a rebel coalition is formed, any autonomy offered to Tigray would have to be extended to the country's other larger communities. In the absence of any agreement on ideology or how to share resources, such a confederation would risk simply creating stronger regions that would be better placed to defy the central government if they feel they are not receiving their due. A move toward a looser federation

may be inevitable, then, but it could also invite more attempts at secession and thereby the end of the country as Ethiopians know it.

Abiy would almost certainly reject such a plan, which would be a personal humiliation and see him go down in history as the man who broke Ethiopia. This may explain why he seems increasingly determined to find a military solution to a political problem. As the resilience of the Tigrayan insurgency has shown, however, force alone will not subdue a country so large and diverse, with so many armed groups that know how to sustain insurgencies. For this reason, it would be foolish to think that a military victory for either side will lead to greater political stability. Abiy is not the first leader to have tried and failed to resolve Ethiopia's internal contradictions. Every government for the last hundred years has sought to build a viable state and a unifying national identity. So far, none have found a formula that has worked for more than a couple of decades.