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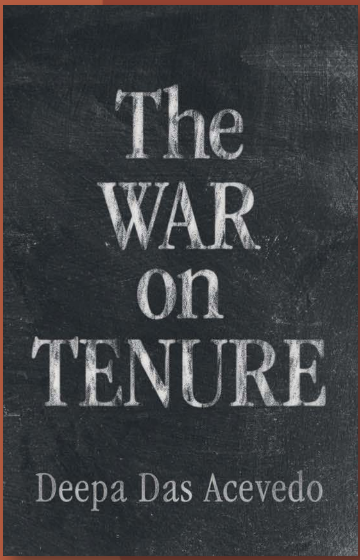

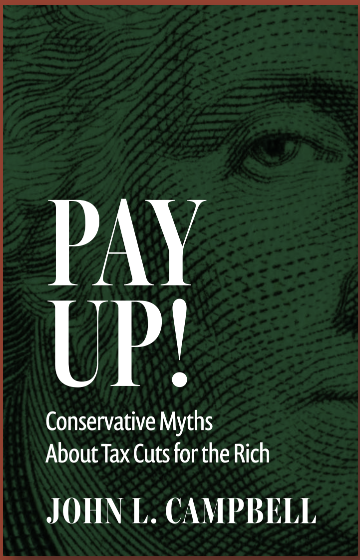

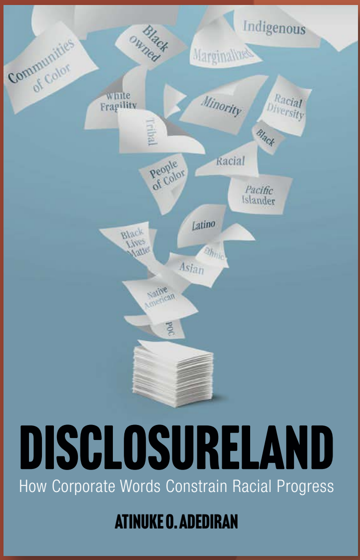

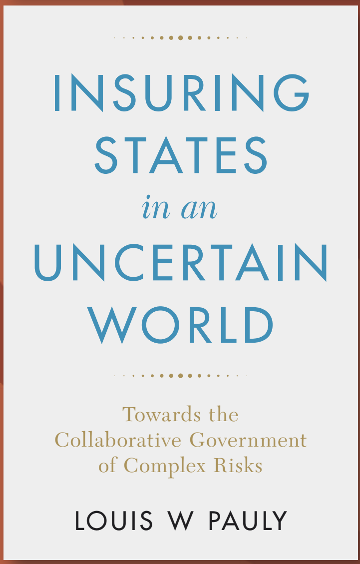

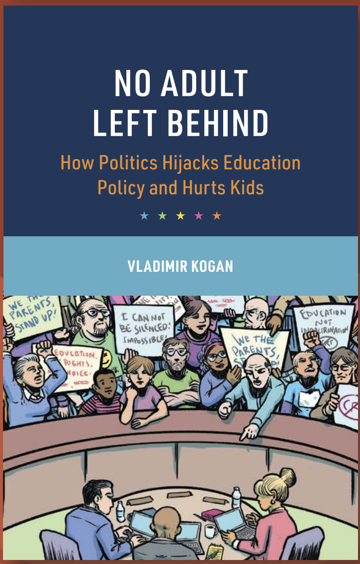

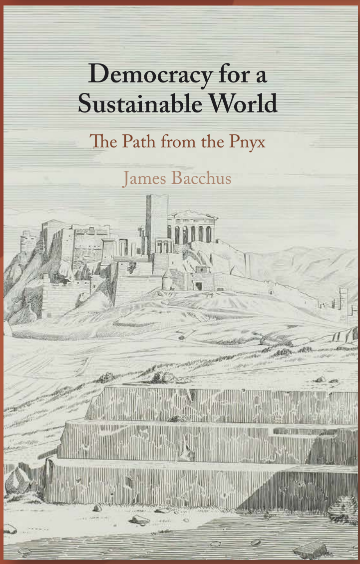

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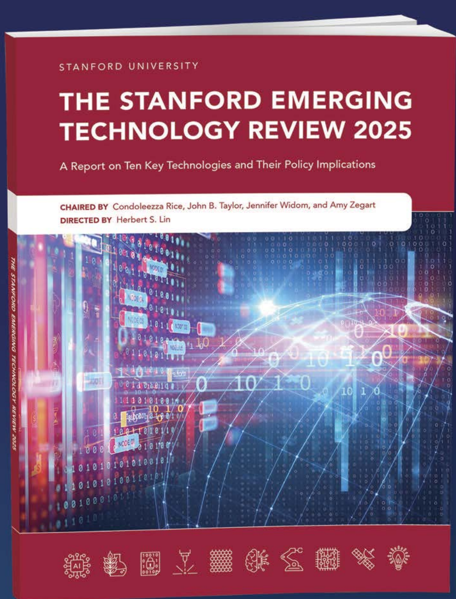

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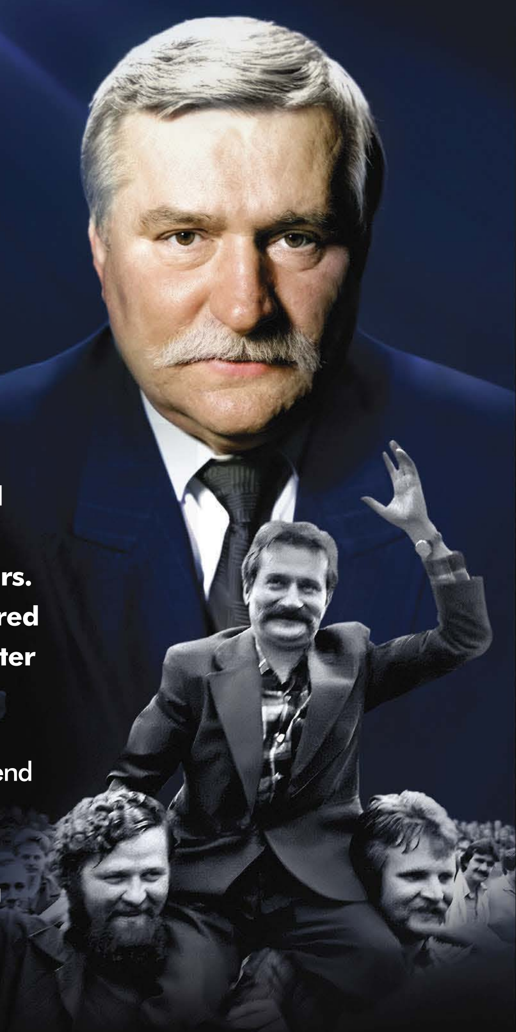

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America in a Post-American World

KORI SCHAKE

President Donald Trump's rise to power and enduring political appeal have been fueled in part by his depiction of the United States as a failure: exhausted, weak, and ruined. In a characteristic act of self-contradiction, however, his foreign policy is based on a significant overestimation of American power. Trump and his advisers seem to believe that, despite the country's allegedly parlous condition, unilateral action on Washington's part can still force others to capitulate and submit to American terms.

But since the end of World War II, American power has been rooted mostly in cooperation, not coercion. The Trump team ignores that history, takes for granted all the benefits that a cooperative approach has yielded, and cannot envision a future in which other countries

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Illustration by Rob Dobi

opt out of the existing U.S.-led international order or construct a new one that would be antagonistic to American interests. Yet those are precisely the outcomes the Trump administration is hastening.

The political scientist Michael Beckley has argued in *Foreign Affairs* that the United States is becoming "a rogue superpower, neither internationalist nor isolationist but aggressive, powerful, and increasingly out for itself." That portrait is accurate but incomplete, since it does not fully capture the extent to which American dominance can be undercut or constricted by others. In the Trump era, many have speculated about whether or to what degree the United States will withdraw from its leading role in the world. But a more pressing question might be, what if the rest of the world beats Washington to the punch, withdrawing from the cooperative U.S.-led order that has been the bedrock of American power?

Trump's approach is solipsism masquerading as strategy.

Some may counter that even if U.S. allies and neutral countries don't like the way Trump exercises American power, they have little choice but to go along with it now and will accommodate themselves to it in the longer term, placating the United States as much as possible and hedging only when absolutely necessary. After all, they might come to loathe and distrust the United States, but not as much as they already loathe and distrust China, Russia, and other American rivals. In this view, the United States that Trump wants to create would be the worst possible hegemon—except for all the other possible candidates. Besides, even if other countries wanted to opt out of the U.S.-led order or work around Washington, they don't have the ability to do so, individually or collectively. They might yearn for the days when a more internationalist, open, cooperative United States shaped the world order. But they'll learn to live with a more nationalist, closed, and demanding United States.

That view results from a failure of imagination—a common source of strategic failure, since statecraft requires one to anticipate how other actors in the international system will react and what forces they might set in motion. Lacking the ability to do that, the Trump team has instead taken an approach predicated on a pair of faulty assumptions: that other countries, international organizations, businesses, and civil society organizations have no alternative to capitulation in the face of U.S. demands and that even if alternatives emerged, the United States could remain predominant without its allies. This is solipsism masquerading as strategy. Instead of producing a less constraining order in which American power will flourish, it will instead yield a more hostile order in which American power will fade.

DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'VE GOT TILL IT'S GONE

Despite Trump's disparagement, the United States is incredibly strong and dynamic. No other advanced country relies so much on its domestic market and so little on trade. Around half of global trade and almost 90 percent of global foreign exchange transactions are conducted in U.S. dollars, an extraordinary repository of value that affords Washington the luxury of deficit spending that would be outrageous anywhere else. Unlike almost every other developed country, the United States has a growing prime-age workforce. The country boasts abundant natural resources, has friendly neighbors, draws the world's most talented people to its universities and companies, fosters social and economic mobility that reduce ethnic and religious animosities, and is governed by a political system that is well adapted to a diverse society.

But Trump and his team are burning through those advantages at an alarming rate. Since he took office in January, elements of the country's constitutional democracy have been undercut—or, worse yet, weaponized to serve partisan ends or indulge Trump's personal vendettas. The White House has aggressively expanded the executive branch's power by trampling on Congress's authority, refusing to comply with court orders, and calling into question the independence of vital institutions such as the Federal Reserve. Trump has targeted elite American universities, starving them of the federal funding they use to create innovative technologies and medical advances. He has allowed Elon Musk, a billionaire tech titan who donated massive sums to his campaign, to run roughshod over the federal bureaucracy, forcing out many of the talented career civil servants who make the federal government work and carry out U.S. foreign policy.

Meanwhile, Trump's erratic trade war, which targets rivals and allies alike, has whipsawed markets, spooked investors, and convinced Washington's partners that they can no longer trust the United States. Trump has threatened the sovereignty of allies and publicly berated their leaders, all while lavishing praise on the dictators and thugs who threaten them. The administration's radical and peremptory elimination of U.S. foreign assistance removed a lever of American influence and telegraphed a level of indifference that will not go unnoticed. As the country's friends have looked on in horror and its rivals have watched with glee, the United States has gone from indispensable to insufferable.

The American experience of dominance in the international order is historically anomalous because it has occasioned so little hedging on the part of others. Typically, a rising power creates incentives for other countries to counterbalance its influence: in the fifth century BC, the rise of Athens caused neighboring states to seek protection from Sparta; in the Great Northern War of the early eighteenth century, the ambitions of King Charles XII of Sweden provoked an anti-Swedish coalition; a century or so later, France's growing power fostered the coalition that eventually defeated Napoleon. But the international order that the United States and its allies created out of the ashes of World War II prevented that seeming inevitability. Its agreed-on rules and consensual participation maximized the influence of small countries and midsize powers that enjoyed the safety provided by American power. The United States voluntarily restrained itself to encourage cooperation. As a result, the American order was remarkably cost-effective, because the rules so seldom had to be enforced. No dominant power has ever had so much assistance from others in maintaining its dominance.

That order is now collapsing. Trump has a deep-seated ideological conviction that allies are a burden. His tactic in negotiations is to use U.S. leverage to wring concessions from all counterparties at all times. But this approach fails to account for how cooperation can act as a force multiplier. Take the case of Iran. The United States has maintained draconian sanctions on the Islamic Republic since 1979. American pressure alone, however, was not enough to get Tehran to come to the negotiating table over its nuclear program. Doing so required China, Russia, and Washington's European allies to sign on to a sanctions regime.

The war in Ukraine offers another example. To bring an end to the war, the Trump administration may want to relax sanctions on Russia or force Ukraine to capitulate to Moscow's aggression. But it would take European acquiescence for the Russian economy to recover, and European countries could continue to support Ukraine even

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without American assistance. Instead of securing the cooperation of European allies in the negotiations, however, Trump has frozen them out. Similarly, the United States wants to restrict China from acquiring certain kinds of advanced technology, such as tools and components critical to manufacturing semiconductors. But without the compliance of countries that manufacture such things, including Japan and the Netherlands, U.S. restrictions won't work. Threats to exclude countries from the U.S. market or to strip their ability to use the U.S. dollar for transactions won't be effective if Washington is going to restrict market access no matter what, or if the dollar loses its centrality to the global economy.

The Trump administration has hardly been alone in abetting the corrosion of an international order advantageous to the United States. Washington has been weaponizing economic interdependence for decades, and in response to a widespread belief among American voters that free trade harmed U.S. manufacturing and hollowed out the American economy, the last three presidential administrations have all been hostile to providing market access, even to preferred trading partners whose inputs are essential to U.S. production.

For many years, U.S. allies—particularly those in Asia, which fear China's growing power—have pleaded with Washington to pursue an economic strategy that would allow them to reduce their reliance on China. During President Barack Obama's second term, his administration negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which offered a collaborative way forward. The deal would have linked 12 economies, taken advantage of Asia's economic dynamism, and used the promise of access to American markets to compel higher environmental and labor standards that would, in turn, make U.S. production more competitive. But the Obama administration let the deal languish instead of pushing for congressional ratification. Both major-party presidential candidates disavowed it in 2016, Trump withdrew from the negotiations in 2017, and Joe Biden chose not to join the pact after he became president in 2021.

When it comes to burning bridges, however, nothing matches the speed and destructiveness of Trump's policies in the past few months. According to a recent survey conducted by the opinion-research firm Cluster 17 and the journal *Le Grand Continent*, 51 percent of Europeans "consider Trump to be an enemy of Europe." And this sentiment is strongest in countries that had previously been most supportive of the United States, such as Denmark and Germany. "Americans—at least this part of the Americans, this administration—are largely indifferent to the fate of Europe," said Friedrich Merz, now Germany's chancellor, after his center-right party prevailed in elections in February. As a result, he said, "my absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the United States." His words captured what would have been a fringe belief a decade ago but has become conventional wisdom in Europe today.

AMERICA ALONE

In recent years, U.S. adversaries including China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia have stepped up their cooperation in the face of Washington's efforts to isolate them, helping one another skirt sanctions, arm their militaries, and carry out various acts of aggression. This hardly comes as a surprise, and American policymakers have plenty of experience in dealing with such machinations. What they lack, however, is any experience of a world in which traditional American allies and more neutral countries also start working together—but against the United States.

The first signs of this process might look like little more than symbolic protests, as countries and institutions seek ways to strip Washington of its traditional convening power. Heads of state might avoid Oval Office meetings, foreign officials might be unavailable for phone calls to coordinate policy with their American counterparts, and the heads of international organizations might not schedule the kinds of summits that grant U.S. officials stature and allow them to set the agenda and meet with many world leaders at once. Fearing that Washington plans to withdraw U.S. troops stationed in Europe, the NATO secretary-general might cancel the alliance's annual summit to avoid giving the American president a platform to announce the move; the UN secretary-general could choose not to accommodate U.S. scheduling requests for Security Council meetings or decline to give U.S. representatives the floor for arguments. Although such acts might seem trivial, they would erode Washington's ability to make sure that its policy proposals form the basis of international debate and action.

A global retreat from Washington would quickly begin to have far more palpable effects by taking a toll on the American economy.

Countries might choose not to invest in U.S. Treasuries or might buy them only at higher interest rates, imposing higher costs on Washington for servicing the national debt. The United States can sustain the eye-popping profligacy of its national debt only because investors consider the U.S. dollar to be a safe haven. But Trump and his Republican allies in Congress are destroying that hard-earned privilege with tariffs and a budget that will push debt levels to unprecedented heights. (It should have come as no surprise when, in May, Moody's downgraded the United States' credit rating.) Over time, the United States might suffer an exodus of investors, who cherish not only the growth they have come to expect from U.S. markets but also the stability, rule of law, and regulatory independence that undergird the American economy. Meanwhile, foreign governments might begin to use subsidies and regulations to create supply chains that avoid American-made components.

If Washington continues to erect significant barriers to foreign goods, its trading partners will seek out other markets, increasing their integration with one another at the expense of American companies. In March, Japan and South Korea, the two Asian U.S. allies most dependent on the United States, held a trade summit with China, after which the three countries jointly announced a plan to pursue a new trilateral free trade agreement and pledged to work together to develop "a predictable trade and investment environment" in the region. Washington needs Tokyo and Seoul on its side to create economies of scale and circumvent Chinese supply chains. Japan and South Korea are the two anchors of Asian economic dynamism; without them, American efforts to marginalize China cannot succeed.

Trump's disdain for multilateralism is also imperiling the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. For decades, they have helped shape the global economy to Washington's advantage. But the Trump administration has accused them of "falling short" and has demanded they align their agendas with the president's, creating concern that Washington might withdraw from them—or starve them, as it has the World Trade Organization.

WATCH YOUR BACK

U.S. national security would also suffer if countries started to decouple from Washington. Consider intelligence sharing, another area in which Washington can expect less cooperation. That practice requires

U.S. partners to trust that any information they share with Washington won't be used to disadvantage them and that the sources and methods for acquiring that intelligence will remain secret. In Trump's first term, U.S. allies quickly learned that the president was cavalier about classified information. In May 2017, *The New York Times* reported, Trump casually discussed classified information about a terrorist plot, which Israel had provided to the United States, with Russian officials visiting the White House. The cause for concern has only grown in his second term. In March, a number of Trump's cabinet officials used Signal, an unclassified commercial mobile app, to share and discuss classified details about an imminent U.S. strike on Houthi militants in Yemen. Such laxity might cause other countries to become more cautious about what they share with Washington, as well as how and when they share it.

Trump has hardly been alone in abetting the corrosion of the U.S.-led order.

Trump's approach to managing the U.S. military could also contribute to a flight from American leadership. Some of the military's most highly trained units are now being diverted from high-intensity combat preparations at the army's National Training Center in order to assist with immigration enforcement at the border with Mexico. In pursuit of such presidential priorities, the country's armed forces will lose operational proficiency, making them a less valuable partner and a less available one, as well. Allies may choose to avoid acquiring U.S.-made weaponry for fear that Washington or an American company might deny them permission to use it in a crisis—just as Musk denied Ukraine the ability to use his Starlink communications network to carry out an attack on Russian forces in Crimea in 2022. That avoidance, in turn, may pose problems for interoperability. Getting militaries to work intimately together is difficult enough when they're using compatible equipment; increasing the degree of difficulty will chip away at one of the central advantages Washington and its allies enjoy over potential adversaries.

The U.S. military's ability to project power across the globe relies on partners and allies. The Pentagon cannot provide a surge of forces to the Middle East without using ports in Belgium and Germany, or dispatch forces across the Pacific (much less sustain combat operations against China) without using bases in Japan and the Philippines. The United States cannot carry out airstrikes on terrorists in Afghanistan without permission to transit Pakistani airspace, and many more American service members would have died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had the U.S. military not maintained access to its Ramstein Air Base and Landstuhl hospital in Germany. Washington would not be able to carry out war plans with the requisite speed without preferential passage through the Panama and Suez Canals. American military power isn't autarkic; it's dependent on others. But growing antipathy to U.S. policies will alienate publics in other countries and make it more difficult for their governments to provide support to American military operations, much less participate in them. Imagine if terrorists carried out a massive attack on the United States and allies didn't rush to help, as they did after the 9/11 attacks, in part by supporting U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

The United States' dense web of alliances and partnerships also enables the "extended deterrence" that protects Washington's friends from their enemies. But Trump has already weakened that pillar of the post–Cold War order. In 2019, for example, after Iranian proxies attacked major oil processing facilities in Saudi Arabia, American allies took note that Trump chose not to retaliate.

The Trump administration seems to believe that if Washington forces its allies to stand on their own, they will make choices that would benefit the United States. That is unlikely to be true. Although most American allies have militaries superior to those of their potential adversaries, they generally lack the confidence to use them. Washington's European allies could unquestionably defeat the Russian military in a conventional, nonnuclear war. Finland alone could probably defeat Russia in such a fight if backed by security guarantees from at least one of its nuclear-armed allies, France or the United Kingdom.

But U.S. allies in Europe have too little confidence in their own strength. And if the United States walks away from them, they are likely to make compromises with aggressors that would harm their interests and Washington's, as well. That is what France and Germany did after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, and the Obama administration barely reacted. The European powers pressured Ukraine into accepting the so-called Minsk agreements, which formalized a buffer zone of Russian occupation on Ukrainian territory.

But that didn't stop the fighting: Russia reinforced its positions, violated the accords, and invaded again in 2022.

In the years to come, a Russian encroachment onto the territory of a Baltic member of NATO, coupled with threats to use nuclear weapons if NATO resisted, could fracture the West. The Trump administration might be unwilling to trade New York for Tallinn—and France, Germany, and the United Kingdom might fold, too. A Europe consumed with such insecurity wouldn't be particularly keen to help Washington deal with Chinese military and commercial aggression or to help constrain the Iranian nuclear program.

Trump routinely calls into question the reliability of U.S. security guarantees by demonstrating his indifference to the security of treaty allies that do not spend what he considers to be the proper amount on defense. And the shameful way that he equates Russia's aggression against Ukraine with that country's heroic defense of its sovereignty has eroded the sense of basic American morality—imperfect and inconsistent though it might be—that attracts cooperation from like-minded countries. If U.S. policies are overtly amoral and thus indistinguishable from those of China and Russia, other countries might opt to side with those powers, betting that at least their behavior will be more predictable.

A BAD BET

The Trump administration may be relying on the antipathy that U.S. allies feel toward the ideologies that guide American rivals such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. In this view, even if U.S. partners don't like certain things Washington does, they're ultimately going to stick with the United States out of a sense of democratic solidarity. But U.S. allies easily overcame whatever ideological objections they may have had and continued trading with Russia after the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, and with China despite its repression of Uyghurs and its crackdown in Hong Kong in recent years. Besides, the Trump administration itself hardly considers ideological differences to be an obstacle to cooperation. A mismatch between American and Russian values has not prevented Trump from taking Moscow's side in the Ukraine war. Under his administration, Washington won't be "giving you lectures on how to live or how to govern your own affairs," Trump assured a gathering of investors and Saudi leaders in May. If Washington doesn't act as if ideology matters, it shouldn't expect that others will.

Trump and his team may also believe that the convergence of Chinese, Iranian, North Korean, and Russian power is of such magnitude that European resistance would prove futile without American heft. Better, in this view, to revive the nineteenth-century practice of the great powers dividing up the world. Doing so, however, would concede Europe to Russia and Asia to China, which would constitute a colossal loss. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that such concessions would slake Chinese and Russian ambitions: consider, for example, what Beijing's massive investments in Latin America and attempts to corrupt the Canadian political system suggest about Chinese intentions.

America risks becoming too brutal to love but too irrelevant to fear.

Another potential explanation for the Trump administration's approach is that it sees most forms of alliance management as at best a distraction from and generally an impediment to winning the contest with China. Trump administration officials would hate the comparison, but that position is a continuation of the Biden administration's argument that the most important thing for the United States is to strengthen itself at home: to have the best economy, the most innovative technology, and the strongest military.

According to this logic, winning in those dimensions will draw global support because people like to be on the side of a winner. But that won't be the case if others don't have access to the American market or if they consider American technology dangerous to them or believe the U.S. military offers them no genuine protection. The United States should, of course, strengthen itself. But when it does so without benefiting others, they will try to shield themselves and limit their exposure to American power.

And if Trump is truly aiming to make the country stronger abroad by making it stronger at home, he is doing so in a curious way. The administration's ill-conceived tariffs are increasing market volatility and making business planning practically impossible. Republican legislation advocated by Trump is likely to explode the deficit and increase inflation. The association of U.S. technology titans with the administration's assault on government agencies and the rule of law is damaging their brands and imperiling their market values and adoption rates. And according to the defense analyst Todd Harrison, the budget proposal Trump has championed would result in a $31.5 billion reduction in defense spending in 2026 compared with what the Biden administration had projected for that year, which was itself inadequate to the security challenges the country faces. This is an agenda for weakness, not strength.

NEITHER FEARED NOR LOVED

Trump and his team are destroying everything that makes the United States an attractive partner because they fail to imagine just how bad an order antagonistic to American interests would be. The United States' indispensability was not inevitable. In the post–Cold War world, the country became indispensable by taking responsibility for the security and prosperity of countries that agreed to play by rules that Washington established and enforced. If the United States itself abandons those rules and the system they created, it will become wholly expendable.

The self-destruction of American power in the Trump years is likely to puzzle future historians. During the post–Cold War era, the United States achieved unprecedented dominance, and maintaining it was relatively easy and inexpensive. All of Trump's predecessors in that period made errors, some of which significantly reduced U.S. influence, aided the country's adversaries, and limited Washington's ability to induce cooperation or compliance on the part of other countries. But none of those predecessors intended such outcomes. Trump, on the other hand, wants a world in which the United States, although still rich and powerful, no longer actively shapes the global order to its advantage. He would prefer to lead a country that is feared rather than loved. But his approach is unlikely to foster either emotion. If it stays on the path Trump has started down, the United States risks becoming too brutal to love but too irrelevant to fear.

In the years to come, the alliances it took decades to foster will begin to wither, and U.S. rivals will waste no time in leaping to exploit the resulting vacuum. Some of Washington's partners may wait for a while, hoping that their American friends will come to their senses and try to reestablish something akin to the traditional U.S. leadership role. But there is no going all the way back; their faith and trust have been irreparably damaged. And they won't wait long, even for an American return to form that would amount to less than a full restoration. Soon, they will move on—and so will the rest of the world.

Beware the Europe You Wish For

The Downsides and Dangers of Allied Independence

CELESTE A. WALLANDER

For decades, the United States had asked its NATO allies in Europe to do more for their own defense. And by the alliance's 2024 summit in Washington, they had gotten the message. Twenty-three of NATO's 32 members were spending two percent of their GDP on defense, the alliance target—up from six members in 2021.

In explaining this increase, many commentators cited a single factor: Donald Trump. It is true that the U.S. president's rhetoric, broadly critical of European defense spending during his first presidential term and now his second, has played a role in the uptick. But the increase was underway before Trump entered politics. For over a decade, NATO allies have been focused on the elevated threat

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Illustration by Emmanuel Polanco

that Russia poses to European security, with Russian President Vladimir Putin's naked aggression against Ukraine as a harbinger. They have also warily watched as Washington paid less attention to their region and more to Asia. Together, these factors prompted the steady increase in defense spending, procurement, and production that helped Europe build more capable militaries before Trump's return to the presidency in 2025—and that will continue after he leaves office. Trump's reelection has only helped underscore the continent's burgeoning independence: Europeans now see a fundamentally changed United States, and they are no longer confident that investing in U.S. leadership will secure their interests.

U.S. officials must realize the downside of their success.

The fact that Europe is spending more on its own defense is in many ways good news for Americans. Thanks to the continent's increased strength, Washington can now focus on China first and Russia second. There is a reason why generations of U.S. presidents from both parties have pushed for Europe to spend more on defense.

But before American officials pat themselves on the back or take a victory lap, they must understand the downsides of their success. Growing European power means the era of comfortable U.S. leadership is over. Now that it provides more for itself, Europe will feel less pressure to defer to Washington's interests. It is less likely to buy American-made weapons. It might deny the United States the right to use American military bases in Europe for operations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. And the continent is already holding up Washington's efforts to end the war in Ukraine, restraining American officials in ways it previously wouldn't.

None of this means the transatlantic alliance is doomed, let alone already finished. Washington and Europe still have many shared interests, which will encourage them to keep working together. But the changing balance of power means that the United States now has to earn Europe's partnership—just when that partnership is becoming more significant. The United States is facing challenges on multiple fronts across the globe in ways it hasn't since the end of the Cold War. It will need its European friends, with their newfound strength, to help it handle aggressors in multiple regions. Washington, then, has to make a decision. It can forge a new transatlantic relationship that respects Europe's interests. Or it can lose the world order to a triumvirate of autocracies: Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran.

NOT-SO-FREE RIDERS

Ever since its 1949 founding, NATO has relied heavily on the United States. During the Cold War, in the 1970s, Europe's NATO members spent an average of two to three percent of their GDP on defense. The United States, meanwhile, averaged seven percent. As a result, the most capable military force defending Europe was made up of American troops. With some exceptions, European NATO militaries were underfunded. Credible defense and deterrence against any Soviet attack depended on Washington.

This might seem odd, given that Europe—not North America—would suffer most immediately from Soviet conquest. But preventing Moscow from controlling western Europe when it already occupied eastern Europe was the necessary condition for American global security and prosperity. The Soviet Union's ultimate goal was to defeat the United States, and control of western European economic and industrial power would fuel Moscow's ability to strike against its real enemy: an America built on democracy, a market economy, and global trade. Washington, locked in competition with the only other power that came close to matching it, could thus not risk a third world war on the continent. European and American security were, in other words, indivisible. They constituted a collective good.

Because a collective good benefits all members of a group regardless of who steps up to provide it, there is little incentive for most members to pay. But for the most powerful player, one with a huge stake in ensuring that the collective good is secure, contributing the lion's share is perfectly rational. After the disasters of two world wars and a global depression, the United States was the only country with the resources to really ensure that Europe was defended from Soviet occupation, and so it did. The imbalance of defense spending was still a source of friction in the alliance, but U.S. leadership was ultimately in Washington's own interest.

The United States got more than just a stable world order in exchange for being Europe's protector. It received a stockpile of military, political, economic, and diplomatic advantages. Some of these were explicit and negotiated. Others developed naturally from the structures and processes of the alliance, and still others arose from the determination of individual allies to support Washington one on one. (Each state gained unique benefits from its bilateral relationship with the superpower.) All of these advantages helped Americans.

Consider the most concrete benefit: the more than 30 military bases the United States has set up across Europe. The legal status of these bases is established in bilateral agreements that dictate how, when, and whether the U.S. military can operate from both the bases themselves and the airspace and waterways that allow access to them. These are called "access, basing, and overflight," or ABO, agreements. Typically, the terms are quite generous, allowing the United States to use the bases not only to defend Europe but also to support American interests across the globe.

Washington has repeatedly availed itself of this ability. In 1973, for example, Portugal let the United States use an air base in the Azores to supply Israel during the Yom Kippur War despite the risk of economic retribution by Arab states. In 2001, multiple European allies granted Washington permission to use its bases for operations in Afghanistan, as well as the right to fly military planes through European airspace. Several NATO allies that opposed the 2003 U.S. war against Iraq nonetheless allowed Washington to use bases in Europe for the invasion—or at least permitted U.S. military aircraft to transit their territory. When France did not, it was criticized by some members for causing NATO disunity. This is the essence of the United States' hegemonic advantage, built over the course of 75 years of leadership: NATO allies often support American priorities, even when they disagree with them, to preserve U.S. leadership.

The benefits of the United States' NATO hegemony continue to this day. Washington's 2024 defense of Israel against Iranian air attacks depended on American military aircraft and ships based in Greece, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. European basing and overflight enabled the United States to destroy strike and command facilities operated by the Houthi rebels in Yemen. And European bases support U.S. counterterrorism operations in the Horn of Africa.

These bases even help the United States protect itself. To reach the northern Atlantic Ocean, for example, Russian submarines must first travel from a naval and air base on the Arctic Ocean through a chokepoint known as the GIUK Gap (for Greenland, Iceland, and the

United Kingdom). If they succeed in evading detection there, they can move along the U.S. coastline unnoticed, ready to launch nuclear weapons against hundreds of American targets without warning. Such an attack would be extremely difficult to defend against. The Pentagon is typically able to track these submarines through the gap, but only because of the many U.S. naval and air assets it has stationed in Europe. Washington is helped in this task by patrols from Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

ONE-STOP SHOP

The United States benefits from NATO leadership in ways that go beyond basing. For the alliance to function properly, its members need to be able to jointly plan, patrol, and carry out operations. That means they must use similar sets of weapons. And although NATO states are free to purchase any systems that meet alliance interoperability and capability requirements, in practice, they very often buy U.S.-made ones.

The advantage of buying American is simple: European forces are more effective at operating alongside U.S. forces when they use American systems. Norwegian and U.S. NATO patrols in the GIUK Gap, for instance, train on the same systems, especially the Boeing P-8 Poseidon aircraft, so that they can seamlessly coordinate complex joint military operations. Poland and the Baltic states have prioritized the purchase of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, known as HIMARS, because when their units and U.S. units need to hand off patrol duties to each other to ensure round-the-clock coverage of NATO's eastern frontline, operating with the same equipment makes the process relatively frictionless. The Polish government is more likely to get American soldiers patrolling and training with Polish soldiers every day if they are all working from the same weapons systems. American leaders, after all, will then have greater confidence that their soldiers will be effective and safe if the troops fighting alongside them are using the same technology. By equipping European forces with American weapons, eastern allies can encourage Washington to keep its military in the region.

The reliability of the U.S. defense industrial base and the scale of the Pentagon's long-term contracts offer additional incentives to use American weapons. The American Foreign Military Sales system is notoriously inefficient, with years-long processes to finalize contracts and last-minute price increases. But European countries still choose U.S. military equipment over their own partly because American defense contractors, accustomed to servicing the enormous U.S. armed forces, are typically capable of providing decades' worth of maintenance, parts, and upgrades. This reliability is one reason why European countries have inked contracts for fifth-generation F-35 aircraft despite the high prices and torturous timelines.

Europe's purchases help the United States maintain a strong defense industrial base. From 2022 to 2024, European countries purchased $61 billion worth of U.S. defense systems, accounting for 34 percent of all their defense contract procurement, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The F-35 alone is worth billions of dollars to U.S. defense companies. And these deals are growing in size and scale: since 2020, European NATO allies have more than doubled the number of weapons they import and increased the proportion they buy from the United States from 54 percent to 64 percent. U.S. military contractors are not just exporting more to European allies but also getting a larger share of the continent's defense spending pie. Yes, Washington pays more for defense than Europe does. But the United States has long enjoyed its own benefits from this predominance.

MIND THE GAP

As European defense spending grows, however, the two sides are becoming more equal. In 2014, European NATO members spent an average of 1.5 percent of their GDP on defense, procurement included, compared with 3.7 for the United States. In 2024, however, European members spent an average of 2.2 percent of GDP on defense, whereas the United States spent just under 3.4 percent. Two EU countries, Estonia and Poland, spent a greater percentage than Washington: 3.43 percent and 4.12 percent, respectively. If the United States' share of global GDP were significantly larger than Europe's, Washington might still be spending far more on NATO than its transatlantic counterparts do, even as Europe begins to spend a similar share of GDP on defense. But by 2025, the United States made up 14.8 percent of global GDP, whereas European countries (the EU, along with Norway and the United Kingdom) made up 17.5 percent. European NATO allies allocated the vast majority of their defense spending to the continent. The United States, by contrast, has military forces spanning the globe.

The move toward parity in relative expenditures has been years in the making. Europe's increase in defense spending began after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Rattled by Moscow's assault and under mounting American pressure, nearly all NATO countries began to allocate larger shares of their spending to defense, even as U.S. outlays slipped. Europe also began spending more on buying and maintaining military equipment. In 2024 alone, for instance, NATO's non-U.S. members increased their expenditures on equipment by 37 percent, while U.S. spending for equipment grew 15 percent.

Washington will have to earn Europe's partnership.

Europe seems poised to go even further in the years ahead. The EU, for example, is making changes in procurement and in overall military spending to expand defense industrial production. The union recently changed its stringent deficit spending restrictions so that members can budget up to 1.5 percent more of individual GDP on defense. If EU countries take advantage of this provision, they could spend more than $700 billion more on defense through 2030 than is currently earmarked. The EU has also proposed setting aside a $163.5 billion pool of money for long-term low-interest loans for procuring military goods.

EU member governments seem similarly committed to increasing spending. Belgium, Italy, and Spain have all announced that they will reach NATO's two percent goal in 2025. Other European countries have announced defense budget increases, as well. Most strikingly, Germany—long highly averse to both defense and deficit spending—changed its constitution so it could borrow money for military purposes. The country's new government, led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz, has signaled plans to expand defense procurement through at least 2030. Should all these trends continue, Europe will not only match U.S. regional defense spending but also exceed it.

The continent has also taken steps to make sure this new money is not wasted. Right now, Europe is plagued by redundancy and poor interoperability, largely because each state is responsible for its own procurement. But the EU is adopting new rules to standardize planning and purchasing, including a 2023 provision that incentivizes and facilitates joint defense procurement and production. This change resulted in the signing last year of a $5.6 billion contract by Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, and Sweden to procure Patriot missiles.

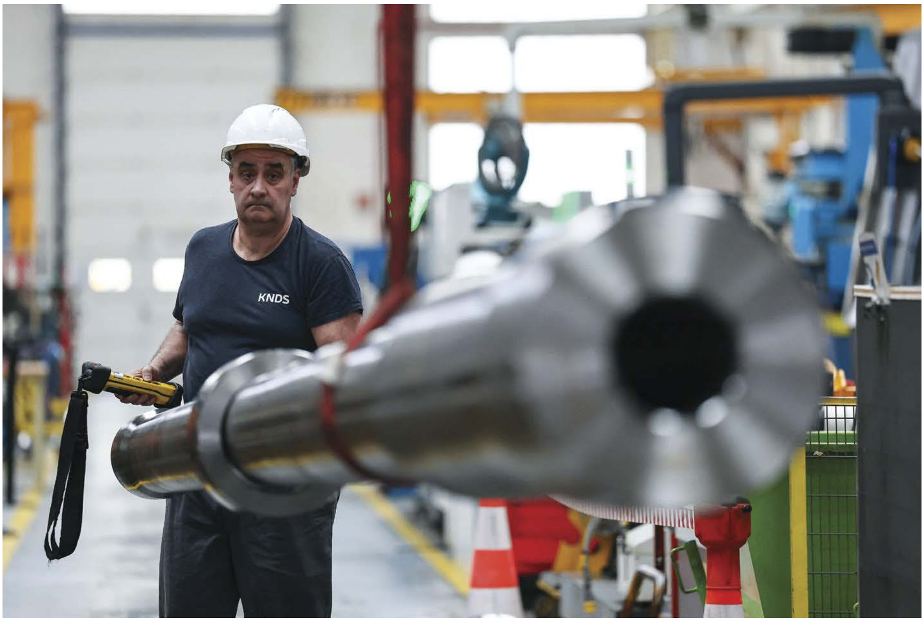
European states are not just stepping up monetarily. They are also stepping up in terms of leadership. Since 2017, for example, NATO has established nine battle groups, one for each of its nine frontline countries. Rather than expecting Washington to carry the burden, the alliance has adopted a distributed leadership approach for these groups; only in Poland does the United States lead. In Finland, Sweden is the leader. In Estonia, it is the United Kingdom. Germany leads in Lithuania, Spain in Slovakia, France in Romania, and Italy in Bulgaria. Hungary has taken leadership of its own battle group. Canada is leading in Latvia.

Washington, of course, still has a vital role to play in the defense of all these countries. No one expects that European forces can match the scale and global reach of the U.S. military. But they are now much closer in strength to the United States within the NATO alliance, even in comparison with five years ago. With Finland and Sweden as NATO members, the continent has forces that can better manage challenges from China and Russia in the Arctic. To counter Russia's use of the Black Sea as a platform for striking Ukraine, NATO's European members are developing new coastal defense forces and autonomous vehicles that can enhance U.S. operations in the Mediterranean. European defense companies are at the forefront of developing uncrewed vehicles, and the continent is no longer dependent on the United States' surveillance aircraft. The heavy burden that Washington bore for collective defense is being lightened by Europe's response to Russia.

BUYER'S REMORSE

For the United States, the upside of Europe's rise is easy to grasp. Beijing is the primary challenge to American security, so U.S. officials want to prioritize it over Moscow. Now, they can.

But Americans may find that they overcorrected in their quest to get Europe to do more. Consider, for example, the manufacturing implications. With Washington retrenching from the continent, Europe has seemingly decided to buy fewer goods from American



Western canon: at an armament factory, Bourges, France, March 2025

SARAH MEYSSONNIER / REUTERS

defense manufacturers. Countries drawing from the EU's new $163.5 billion defense procurement loan pool must spend the funds only for purchases from European defense companies. A senior EU official told me that purchases from U.S. defense companies might qualify if their products are manufactured in Europe. Yet the contracts will require employing European workers and paying European taxes. Such agreements could help American production by creating more resilient supply chains, but not if tariffs and trade barriers create obstacles for U.S. companies in Europe. For example, American companies have been scouring the globe for sources of ammunition fuses and explosives, many of which European companies have been able to source. But ironically, that potential benefit could be undermined if new tariff rules label these products as European imports, even if they are ultimately produced by American companies on the continent.

Europe's newfound autonomy is also causing strategic difficulties. For instance, the United States wants to put a quick stop to the war in Ukraine, and it has therefore argued for lifting sanctions on Russia in step-by-step peace negotiations. Europe, however, does not want to pressure Kyiv into an unwanted settlement. In the past, Europe might have gone along with Washington's plans anyway, lest the bloc lose American support. But this time around, the continent has declared that it will not lift sanctions until Ukraine is ready to settle.

This has severely restricted the amount of relief American officials can provide to Russia. Europe holds two-thirds of the $330 billion of the Russian assets that U.S. allies agreed to freeze in 2022 to deny Moscow access to financing for its war in Ukraine. This means that the White House cannot dangle this carrot before Putin without European permission. Europe is also home to SWIFT, the payments mechanism that is keeping Russian banks from gaining access to the global financial system. The United States could loosen sanctions on the Russian energy sector, but since it is Europe that buys Russian natural gas through the now shuttered Nord Stream pipelines, a change in U.S. energy policy alone has little impact on the Kremlin's purse strings. And Europe has significant sanctions on Russian shipping and Russian access to dual-use technology goods, which the United States can do nothing about.

> The United States' Russia policy depends on European acquiescence.

Other parts of the United States' Russia policy also depend on European acquiescence. Washington, for example, wants European countries to pledge to put troops on the ground in Ukraine to enforce an eventual peace settlement. But Europeans have demonstrated little interest in doing so as long as Washington entertains Russia's demands. Unlike the United States, for example, the vast majority of European countries will not concede that Russia should be able to dictate whether Ukraine can be a member of NATO—not least because Putin has stated that a peace settlement with Kyiv should also revisit previous rounds of NATO's enlargement.

If a sense of a common transatlantic purpose continues to fray, Europe might wind up undermining Washington's objectives elsewhere in the world. Should the United States decide to conduct a major military campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities, for example, it will want to use its military bases in Europe. This would require seeking permission from European countries. Those governments will know that their granting Washington's request will guarantee massive protests all over the continent. But in contrast to their actions in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, many European countries might refuse. Washington would then either have to start its offensive from far-off bases in the United States—or from partner bases in the Middle East, which are easier for Iran to hit than bases in Europe.

As long as NATO remains strong, the United States will probably be able to keep using its bases in Europe for self-defense. Protecting North America is written into the alliance's charter. But European countries may no longer trust that Washington will defend them should the need arise. As a result, European leaders are seriously discussing whether the continent should acquire its own credible nuclear deterrent. France and the United Kingdom both have nuclear weapons, but neither currently has the number of warheads and the variety in delivery vehicles that the U.S. arsenal does, or the strategic depth. (Washington, for example, is separated from its competitors by vast oceans.) The United States claims it has no intention of pulling its nuclear umbrella from Europe or ignoring Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which states that an attack on one member of the alliance is an attack on all. But Washington's NATO policy seems to change every day, and Europe does not have the time to wait and see if the Americans will actually uphold their commitments.

RUSSIAN RESET

There is, of course, another force splitting Washington and Europe: Trump. In 2017, Europe could comfort itself with the thought that American voters didn't really know what they were getting when they elected him. But in 2024, Americans had already watched Trump bully U.S. allies, toy with leaving NATO, and cozy up to Russia. They voted for him anyway. As one European diplomat told me in January, the continent must consider the idea that Joe Biden's presidency, not Trump's, was the blip.

Unfortunately, in the months since that diplomat and I spoke, relations have deteriorated further. During his first term, Trump had advisers and cabinet members who supported the transatlantic relationship and restrained some of his worst impulses. This time around, those in his administration are far more in sync with Trump's deep-seated antagonism toward Europe. In February, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told European officials in Brussels that "the United States will no longer tolerate an imbalanced relationship which encourages dependency." In a speech in Munich the same month, Vice President JD Vance said that when he looked "at Europe today, it's sometimes not so clear what happened to some of the Cold War's winners." Secretary of State Marco Rubio, meanwhile, told reporters that Washington had "incredible opportunities" to partner with Russia.

Europeans have listened. In a poll of 18,000 Europeans conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations just after Trump's victory in November, more than half of respondents considered the United States merely a "necessary partner" rather than an "ally," a term that just 22 percent were willing to apply. Just 18 months earlier, more than half of Europeans polled by ECFR considered the United States an ally.

European officials, for their part, now speak of relations with the United States using a term that they once reserved for China: "de-risking." Over the past decade, European countries have erected barriers to Chinese investment in critical national infrastructure on the assumption, pushed by Washington, that doing so was necessary to reduce the risk that Beijing could acquire leverage over their political systems and economies. Now, the script has flipped: European countries are considering enhanced trade with China to mitigate their vulnerability to the United States. They became particularly interested in doing so after Trump slapped sudden, massive tariffs on almost all the continent's exports.

In 2028, Americans might be able to slow Europe's flight from Washington by replacing Trump with a more traditional leader. But it will take more than one election to persuade Europeans that the United States can be trusted again. Even if Trump is followed by a string of committed transatlanticist presidents, U.S.-European relations will probably never return to what they were. Europe is moving away from Washington not just because of Trump but also because its priorities are different from the United States', its capabilities have improved, and Europeans are no longer certain that America is an unshakable ally.

But that doesn't mean the United States and Europe are headed for divorce. The two parties may give different weight to their respective concerns, but those concerns are still mutual. China remains a threat to Europe. Russia is still a threat to the United States. The world is changing, and not for the better, and the two sides need each other to cope with a challenging Beijing, a destructive Moscow, a dangerous Tehran, and a wildcard Pyongyang.

To repair relations, however, Washington will have to recalibrate its approach to Europe. This means accepting, first and foremost, that the world now has multiple poles and that the continent is one of them. The key will be returning to the fundamentals of defense diplomacy: accommodating power, recognizing interests, and allowing for a give and take that unlocks mutually beneficial agreements. Over eight decades of leadership born of gratitude from a destroyed Europe, generations of American officials have gotten used to European concessions to U.S. priorities. Now, they will have to get better at dealmaking and compromise. As Washington considers reducing its military posture in Europe, it will need to spend more to compete for the continent's defense contracts. The United States will likely have to listen to European arguments about balancing the continent's wariness of Chinese influence with the need for Chinese trade, investment, and technology—just as the United States heeds the needs of its partners in the Middle East, who are developing strong ties with China out of economic necessity. The United States will also have to accept that NATO allies hosting U.S. military bases might have strong views on how Washington can prevent Iranian nuclear proliferation. It certainly will have to acknowledge that the European Union is a powerful economic force essential to NATO's success.

If the United States can maintain its partnership with Europe, it will have an advantage not available to China or Russia in a multipolar world. Neither Beijing nor Moscow has an alliance of such economic heft, diplomatic might, and global reach. They cannot muster the kind of power wielded by NATO. Europe may give Americans headaches, but it always has; there is a reason why Washington has long wanted the continent to give the United States freedom to focus on other issues.

But having achieved what they wanted, U.S. officials now have to make a choice. They can spurn Europe and face a more dangerous world alone and depleted. Or they can forge a new, more accommodating transatlantic relationship. They will face obstacles in attempting the latter, given all that has changed. But the two parties have nearly a century of shared experience. Their friendship can prevail.

The Case for a Pacific Defense Pact

America Needs a New Asian Alliance to Counter China

ELY RATNER

The time has come for the United States to build a collective defense pact in Asia. For decades, such a pact was neither possible nor necessary. Today, in the face of a growing threat from China, it is both viable and essential. American allies in the region are already investing in their own defenses and forging deeper military bonds. But without a robust commitment to collective defense, the Indo-Pacific is on a path to instability and conflict.

Tactical shifts aside, Beijing's geopolitical aspirations for "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" remain unchanged. China seeks to seize Taiwan, control the South China Sea, weaken U.S. alliances, and ultimately dominate the region. If it succeeds, the result would be a China-led order that relegates the United States to the rank of a diminished continental power: less prosperous, less secure, and unable to fully access or lead the world's most important markets and technologies.

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Illustration by Matt Murphy

After decades of pouring resources into its armed forces, China could soon have the military strength to make that vision a reality. As CIA Director William Burns revealed in 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping has instructed his military "to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan." But as Burns went on to note, China's leaders "have doubts about whether they could accomplish that invasion." To sustain those doubts—concerning Taiwan but also other potential targets in the region—should be a top priority of U.S. foreign policy. That requires convincing Beijing that any attack would ultimately come at an unacceptable cost.

With that objective in mind, the United States has invested in advanced military capabilities and developed new operational concepts. It has moved more mobile and lethal military forces to strategic locations across Asia. Crucially, it has overhauled its security partnerships in the region. In past decades, Washington's principal focus was to forge close bilateral ties. In recent years, by contrast, the United States has pursued a more networked approach that gives U.S. allies greater responsibilities and encourages closer ties not just with Washington but among the allies themselves. These changes are creating novel military and geopolitical challenges for Beijing, thereby reinforcing China's doubts about the potential success of aggression.

The new, more multilateral approach marks a critical step toward stronger deterrence. But the defense initiatives it has produced remain too informal and rudimentary. In the face of continued Chinese military modernization, true deterrence requires the will and capability that only a collective defense arrangement can deliver. Such an alliance—call it the "Pacific Defense Pact"—would bind those countries that are currently most aligned and prepared to take on the China challenge together: Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States. Additional members could join as conditions warrant.

Skeptics may argue that such an arrangement is infeasible with a Trump administration that appears to disavow the importance of the United States' alliances. But the reality is that leaders in Washington and allied capitals are still working to deepen military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific despite economic and diplomatic tensions. As far as defense matters are concerned, there has been far more continuity than disruption to date. Provided the administration avoids debilitating economic measures targeting U.S. allies, the trends pointing the way toward collective defense in the region are likely to endure. And if the Trump administration ultimately lacks the vision and ambition to grasp this opportunity, defense establishments can and should still lay the foundations for future leaders.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED

This is not the first time Washington has confronted the question of how to design its security partnerships in Asia. After World War II, the United States crafted a network of alliances in the region, hoping to keep Soviet expansion at bay, entrench its own military presence—particularly in East Asia—and curb internecine tensions among its partners. This network, made up of separate security arrangements with Australia and New Zealand, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, served its constituents well. It insulated large stretches of the Indo-Pacific from great-power conflict, setting the conditions for decades of remarkable economic growth. It also proved resilient, weathering the wars in Korea and Vietnam, successive waves of decolonization and democratization, and even the end of the Cold War itself.

Notably, the network never evolved beyond a set of disparate and almost exclusively bilateral alliances. In Europe, U.S. officials embraced collective defense: an attack on one ally would be treated as an attack on all. (Such was the logic behind the founding, in 1949, of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.) In Asia, however, similar aspirations foundered. As John Foster Dulles, one of the architects of the U.S. postwar security order, wrote in these pages in 1952, shortly before becoming secretary of state: "It is not at this time practicable to draw a line which would bring all the free peoples of the Pacific and East Asia into a formal mutual security area."

For their part, many Asian leaders preferred strong bilateral relationships with the United States over closer links with former adversaries or historical rivals. Some worried that a collective defense arrangement would draw them into a great-power clash between Washington and Moscow. Others doubted that any such institution could overcome the legacies of conflict and mutual distrust among their neighbors and bring together members that were far apart both geographically and in terms of security concerns. The only seeming exception, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, proved the point. Founded in 1954, SEATO was a motley alliance among Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the

United Kingdom, and the United States. It suffered from a lack of unity and quietly dissolved in 1977.

But times have changed. The conditions once preventing multilateral alignment in Asia are giving way to fresh calls for collective defense. Just before taking office last year, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba warned that "the absence of a collective self-defense system like NATO in Asia means that wars are likely to break out." In fact, such a collective defense pact is now within reach. Three trends buttress this conclusion: a new strategic alignment centered on an advancing threat from China, a new convergence of security cooperation among U.S. allies, and the demand for a new reciprocity that gives the United States' partners a larger role in keeping the peace.

COMMON CAUSE

China's assertiveness throughout the Indo-Pacific is spreading a sense of insecurity, particularly as leaders in Beijing lean on the military as a central instrument in their revisionist aims. The dangerous and threatening activities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), combined with its rapidly growing capabilities, have prompted leaders across the region to adopt new defense strategies arrayed against what they perceive as a growing threat from China. New military investments and activities have followed suit.

Nowhere is this strategic reorientation more apparent than in Tokyo. Despite deep economic interdependence between China and Japan, ties between the two countries have been frail for decades, strained by historical animus, trade tensions, and territorial disputes. Relations have only worsened in recent years, as Beijing has leveraged its budding economic and military power to ramp up pressure on its neighbor. A new law, passed in 2021, allows China's coast guard to use weapons against foreign ships sailing in what Beijing considers its sovereign waters. In the years since, Chinese incursions into the areas surrounding what Japan refers to as the Senkaku Islands—administered by Japan but also claimed by China, which refers to them as the Diaoyu Islands—have become more frequent, with greater numbers of larger and more heavily armed vessels. In March, Chinese coast guard ships entered the territorial waters around the islands and lingered for nearly 100 hours—the longest episode to date in a string of incidents that Japan's top diplomat described as "clearly escalating."

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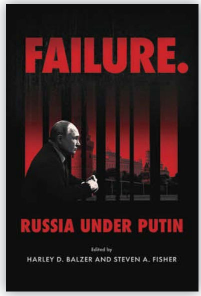

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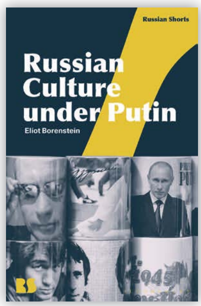

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Tokyo is responding by loosening long-standing political and legal constraints on its armed forces. As early as 2013, the country's first-ever publicly released national security strategy warned of China's "rapidly expanded and intensified" activities around Japanese territories. Not long after, the Japanese government reinterpreted the country's pacifist constitution, allowing its armed forces to work more closely with partner militaries. In recent years, it has embarked on a historic military buildup, pledging to double its military spending to roughly two percent of its gross domestic product. Tokyo has also moved beyond its erstwhile focus on defensive capabilities and now aims to acquire and deploy "counterstrike capabilities," including hundreds of long-range Tomahawk missiles. These changes, as the political scientist and Japan expert Michael Green wrote in these pages in 2022, are establishing Tokyo as "the most important net exporter of security in the Indo-Pacific."

The Philippines is undergoing a similar transformation. For decades, the Philippine armed forces battled insurgents in the southern reaches of the archipelago. Military investments and operations reflected that domestic focus. Today, the insurgency has weakened, but an external threat looms larger and larger: steady Chinese encroachment on Philippine maritime rights and sovereignty, primarily in the South China Sea. In the 2010s, Beijing pursued an unprecedented campaign of land reclamation and built military bases atop reefs and islets that are also claimed by the Philippines and other Southeast Asian states. China has cordoned off one of these atolls, Scarborough Shoal, denying access to Philippine fishing vessels. At another reef, Second Thomas Shoal, violent attacks by Chinese vessels have disrupted efforts to resupply Philippine military personnel. Chinese coast guard ships have even harassed vessels conducting energy exploration inside the Philippines' exclusive economic zone.

The view from Manila has sharpened accordingly. Beginning under President Rodrigo Duterte in the late 2010s and accelerating under his successor, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., the Philippine military has been undertaking an ambitious modernization effort. The government adopted a watershed defense strategy in 2024 to secure the country's periphery with investments in additional combat aircraft, tougher cyberdefenses, and more unmanned assets for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. There is little doubt about what is driving the overhaul: the need to better monitor and confront China's coercive activities.

In Canberra, a few thousand miles to the south, the rise of China was once considered benign and beneficial to Australian interests. A series of diplomatic and military incidents in the past decade, however, have convinced many that the opposite is true. Revelations of malign Chinese Communist Party influence in Australian elections and policymaking ignited a political firestorm. And after Australia's government called for an independent investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, China unleashed a barrage of tariffs and other restrictions on Australian exports.

In the South China Sea, Australian armed forces have suffered the same malign pattern of harassment by Chinese jets and warships. The PLA is also operating closer than ever to Australia's shores. Earlier this year, Chinese naval vessels circumnavigated Australia and disrupted commercial air traffic with live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea. And amid intense efforts by China to make security inroads with Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and other Pacific Island countries, Australia's foreign minister said in 2024 that her country is now "in a state of permanent contest in the Pacific."

In Europe, America embraced collective defense; in Asia, similar aspirations foundered.

Against this backdrop, Canberra, too, is revising its defense priorities from top to bottom. As recently as 2016, the government's official view was that a foreign military attack on its territory was "no more than a remote prospect." By 2024, its updated national defense strategy warned that, owing to the present realities in the Indo-Pacific, "there is no longer a ten-year window of strategic warning time for conflict." Instead of preparing for a wide variety of contingencies around the world, including counterterrorism in the Middle East, the Australian Defence Force is gearing up to fend off major threats closer to home. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has unveiled plans for record military spending, including major investments in stockpiles of critical munitions such as long-range fires, antiship missiles, and missiles for air defense. The reforms highlight a growing conviction that the country's advantageous geography no longer offers sufficient protection against the PLA. The public shares that apprehension: according to the Lowy Institute, a leading Australian think tank, the share of Australians who believed China would become a military threat to their country nearly doubled from 2012 to 2022. It now stands above 70 percent.

QUAD GOALS

Japan, the Philippines, and Australia have not only come to recognize China as their primary and common threat; they also increasingly acknowledge that their fates are intertwined with the broader region. This is true even on issues as sensitive as Taiwan, once a taboo subject in the region: "A Taiwan emergency is a Japanese emergency," former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared in 2021. "If something happens to Taiwan, inevitably we will be involved," the Philippine military chief warned earlier this year.

The view that Chinese aggression would have massive consequences for countries throughout the Indo-Pacific has resulted in an unprecedented deepening of security partnerships among Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and other regional powers. Analysts have described defense cooperation between Australia and Japan in particular as taking on "alliance-like characteristics." A new reciprocal access agreement allows the Australian and Japanese militaries to operate in each other's countries. August 2023 marked the first-ever visit by Japanese F-35 fighter jets to northern Australia, followed only days later by the inaugural deployment of Australian F-35s for military exercises in Japan.

Japan is finalizing a similar access agreement with the Philippines, which has emerged in recent years as the largest recipient of Japanese security assistance. In February, defense leaders from the two countries announced a spate of measures for closer security cooperation. In what could be read only as a thinly veiled reference to China, the Philippine secretary of defense explained that Manila and Tokyo's "common cause" was to resist "any unilateral attempt to reshape the global order."

That newfound common cause has animated a series of overlapping, complementary initiatives—what, in 2024, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin called "the new convergence in the Indo-Pacific"—that build on the United States' traditional focus on bilateral ties in the region. The Biden administration in particular worked to supplement the older "hub-and-spokes" model with what it envisioned as a "latticework" of relationships in Asia. The AUKUS partnership brought together Canberra, London, and Washington to help Australia build conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines. As members of the Indo-Pacific Quad, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States joined efforts to provide maritime domain awareness throughout the region. American officials also stepped up trilateral security cooperation with Japan and South Korea.

Among the many partners involved in these efforts, Canberra, Manila, and Tokyo frequently stand out as common denominators. At a meeting of their leaders in 2024, the Japanese, Philippine, and U.S. governments expressed “serious concerns” about China’s “dangerous and aggressive behavior” and announced initiatives on infrastructure investment and technology cooperation, among other measures. Later that year, Australian, Japanese, and U.S. defense leaders unveiled another set of cooperative activities, including three-way military exercises and advanced defense industrial cooperation. Perhaps most promising of all is a new grouping that brings together all four of these parties—Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the United States. Known informally as “the Squad” (to distinguish it from the Quad), the group conducts regular naval, maritime, and air force exercises in the South China Sea. It also plans to strengthen information sharing and work together to modernize the Philippine military.

A GOOD START

The new convergence in the Indo-Pacific represents a profound development in the security architecture of the region. But it is best viewed as an incomplete evolution—an important period of transition rather than an optimal end state. The shortcomings are significant. There are no mutual defense obligations between U.S. allies, only with the United States. There is no central headquarters to plan and conduct multilateral operations. And the unofficial nature of these groupings means that there is no regular drumbeat of planning among political and military staffs. Coordination is occurring, but only intermittently. As a result, it rarely receives the necessary urgency, attention, and resources.

A collective defense pact would deliver where the current mechanisms fall short. Getting there would not require a panregional security organization such as NATO, which grew from 12 original members to over 30. Instead, the logical starting point for Washington is to form a pact with the three partners that are most strategically aligned and have the fastest-growing and most robust combined military cooperation: Australia, Japan, and the Philippines.

Additional members could join later, circumstances allowing. As an advanced and stalwart ally in East Asia, South Korea would be an obvious candidate, and its contributions could be quite significant. But Seoul would have to decide whether it was willing to focus its defense forces more on China, partner more closely with Japan, and support a broader regional orientation for its own military and the tens of thousands of U.S. troops stationed on the peninsula. New Zealand would be another prospective partner, especially since it is already part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing group alongside Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. But although New Zealand has recently shown greater willingness to challenge China and align more closely with the United States, it might not yet be prepared to enter a formal collective defense pact.

A collective defense pact would deliver where current cooperation falls short.

Critical U.S. partners such as India and Singapore would not be expected to join at the outset but could still participate in certain activities as observers or in some other nonmember capacity, as is common in regional groupings. The inclusion of Taiwan would not be possible or advisable under current U.S. policy, nor would it be acceptable to the other members of the pact. As for the United States' European allies, they are neither politically nor militarily ready to join as full members right now, but that option could be considered in the future, under different circumstances. Larger defense budgets in Europe could produce militaries with more global reach, provided the continent itself is secure and at peace.

Given the urgency of the China challenge, the United States cannot afford to wait for a perfect alignment among all its partners. There is already a core group in place and room to consider additional members in the future. Preparations should begin now. Given that alliances with the United States already exist, a first-order task is to establish mutual obligations among Australia, Japan, and the Philippines themselves. This will demand skillful leadership and intense negotiations, but the benefits of stronger deterrence and greater security should outweigh the risks of closer alignment. Besides, for

Australia and Japan in particular, the practical differences between today's defense partnership and one of mutual defense are relatively small and shrinking by the day.

From an operational perspective, collective defense could build on existing cooperative projects, including in the areas of intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness, combined training and exercises, and command and control. One such project is the Bilateral Intelligence Analysis Cell, a new U.S.-Japanese effort at Yokota Air Base that monitors Chinese activity in the East China Sea. Japan and the United States could share the cell's intelligence with Australia and the Philippines, which could in turn contribute personnel at the air base and provide data from their own unmanned surface and aerial platforms. Likewise, the recently inaugurated U.S.-Philippine Combined Coordination Center near Manila could include Australia and Japan, providing similar functions in the South China Sea.

The U.S. military has major operating bases in Japan, access to locations in the Philippines, and regular rotations of U.S. troops throughout Australia. With sufficient legal underpinning—including reciprocal access agreements among the three Asian allies—each of these arrangements could be expanded to include forces from the other members. In fact, there are already plans to integrate Japanese forces into U.S. initiatives in Australia.

The four members could also invest in shared military facilities. Major bilateral and trilateral military exercises involving different combinations of the partners could include all four. Together, they could more readily pre-position weapons to ensure sufficient stockpiles in the event of conflict, further strengthening deterrence.

Establishing a headquarters for the Pacific Defense Pact and mechanisms for command and control will be essential. Japan could serve as one potential location. In July 2024, the United States announced its intent to upgrade the U.S. military command in Japan to plan and direct more missions in the region with its Japanese counterpart. As new facilities and communications links are established to support this effort, U.S. and Japanese officials should ensure that it will be possible to include military commanders and personnel from Australia and the Philippines. Alternative locations for the headquarters could be considered in Australia or at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii.

The four countries should establish a series of working groups to negotiate the full range of policy and legal issues associated with more integrated planning and operations. Military and civilian staff from defense and foreign ministries could work together to develop proposals for governance and decision-making processes, including personnel structures and consultation mechanisms that form the engine rooms of day-to-day alliance management. This breadth of tasks only underscores the need to start consultations as soon as possible.

ALL FOR ONE

In addition to deepening their collective cooperation with one another, U.S. allies will also need to rebalance their bilateral security partnerships with Washington. In their current form, those partnerships reflect the asymmetries of a different era, when American military primacy appeared uncontested and immutable. Bilateral treaties in the region were restricted in scope to specific local geographies, and the contributions of allied militaries were limited by design. In essence, the United States promised protection in exchange for military access and political-economic comity in Asia but without demanding fully reciprocal protection for itself.

This framework was sustainable—both strategically and politically—as long as the U.S. military retained its dominance in the region, the threat from China was confined, and the potential contributions of U.S. allies were limited to their own self-defense. None of these conditions holds true today. The PLA now poses serious challenges to the U.S. military and the American homeland. And U.S. allies in Asia are now among the wealthiest and most advanced countries in the world, capable of playing a significant role in both deterrence and warfighting. To adapt to this new reality, U.S. alliances need to build on a foundation not of asymmetry but of reciprocity.

Domestic politics in the United States also makes greater reciprocity necessary. Although most Americans support military ties in principle, increasing numbers would like to see U.S. allies contribute more in practice. U.S. President Donald Trump has focused in particular on the notion that allies need to pay their "fair share," casting doubts on whether the United States would defend NATO members that failed to meet certain levels of military spending. U.S. allies do need to spend more on defense—but reciprocity should extend far beyond bigger military budgets.

U.S. allies will also need to commit to greater degrees of mutual obligation with the United States. Washington's security treaty with Tokyo, for instance, is bound only to "the territories under the administration of Japan." The resulting imbalance is on display at every major bilateral summit, where U.S. leaders reaffirm their commitment to defend Japan and Japanese leaders stay silent on whether their forces would assist the U.S. military elsewhere. Instead, U.S. allies should commit to supporting the United States both in crises throughout the region and in defending the U.S. homeland.

This new reciprocity would further enable collective defense. The upshot of more mutual obligation would be that U.S. allies could take on new roles and missions in crises and conflicts, especially when combined with recent investments in their own militaries. This would, in turn, open new pathways for cooperation that do not exist today in sufficient form: members of the pact could draft combined military plans, more effectively target their defense spending toward specialized and complementary capabilities, and rehearse and improve together through tailored military exercises and operations. These measures would fortify the collective power and deterrence of the United States' alliances far beyond what is possible under today's informal mechanisms.

Greater reciprocity should also entail greater clarity on what military strategists refer to as "access, basing, and overflight"—that is, the ability of the U.S. military to operate in and around allied territory. Given the vast distances involved, forward-deployed U.S. forces are essential to ensuring rapid response times and sustaining the military during a contingency. More certainty surrounding U.S. military access would strengthen deterrence in the western Pacific by ensuring that the United States would have the right forces and capabilities ready to fight in the right places. More assured access would also lead to greater infrastructure investments and the deployment of more advanced capabilities, which further enhance the potential utility of various locations. While U.S. allies should not be expected to give the U.S. military a blank check, a robust Pacific Defense Pact will require more flexible and assured access for U.S. forces.

THE CORE FOUR

Collective defense touches on matters of sovereignty and treaty obligations, deeply political issues that require intense negotiations and deft diplomacy. This will be all the more challenging if the Trump administration moves forward with punishing tariffs or other measures that strain Washington's alliances in the region. But even amid tense diplomatic relations, defense and military establishments can continue laying the foundations for collective defense. Short of a severe break in ties, the four partners should work as best they can to silo security cooperation from economic and diplomatic disagreements. The stakes are simply too high to do otherwise. It is also worth underscoring that the demand for more reciprocal relationships has become a political and strategic imperative that spans the partisan divide in Washington.

The evidence to date is that the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies are managing to deepen defense cooperation despite political and economic headwinds. This is largely owing to the mounting threat from China, the continued demand for a U.S. military presence in the region, and the growing trend of intra-Asian security cooperation. To be sure, the Trump administration may be too divided, distracted, or confrontational to play the winning hand it has been dealt. In that case, many of the building blocks can still be put in place for a future administration. Given the number of tasks ahead, a pact might not be finalized until the next U.S. administration anyway.

For their part, leaders in Canberra, Manila, and Tokyo will need to win the support of their respective domestic publics. Beyond strategic arguments about deterrence and national security, the United States can support these conversations by highlighting the potential benefits to its allies' domestic constituencies. These could include technology sharing, infrastructure investments, and improved disaster response. In the United States, skeptics can be assured that a defense pact in the Pacific would entail no obligations for the U.S. military beyond what is already in place—but that it would reduce threats to the U.S. homeland and to U.S. troops.

Given the historic significance of such an arrangement, Washington should also be prepared to manage reactions and concerns from others in the Indo-Pacific. U.S. officials can underscore that a Pacific Defense Pact would be but one of several components of its approach to the region. In both rhetoric and practice, Washington should remain committed to a network of overlapping and complementary institutions, including the Indo-Pacific Quad, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea. The publicly stated objective of the pact should be the pursuit of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," a goal shared by nearly every country in the region.

Moreover, the pact should remain focused on defense rather than subsuming or taking on the economic and diplomatic roles of other important institutions. Indeed, the pact will be most successful if complemented by a robust regional trade agenda, active diplomatic efforts, and effective foreign assistance programs.

Beijing will draw from its playbook of disinformation and economic coercion.

Protests from Beijing will no doubt be as loud as they are predictable. China has long accused the United States of "Cold War thinking" and "bloc politics." PLA officials have already warned that current U.S. efforts to bring American security partners closer together are "tying the region's countries to the U.S. war chariot." These refrains will feature prominently in China's reaction precisely because a stronger coalition could stymie Beijing's revisionist ambitions. To push back and make potential members think twice about a new pact, Beijing will likely draw from its traditional playbook of disinformation and economic coercion. With that in mind, the United States should help its allies prepare for China's efforts to scuttle a collective defense arrangement in Asia.

None of this will be easy. But neither was the great progress that Washington's allies have already made, not only in acknowledging the threat from China but also in taking unprecedented steps to invest in their own militaries, build ties with their neighbors, and double down on their alliances with the United States. In fact, in recent years, Australia, Japan, and the Philippines have already made moves on defense and security matters that were previously deemed implausible. The conditions are now set for strong leadership to transform a collective defense pact in Asia from something once unimaginable into a defining feature of the region's future peace and prosperity.

India's Great-Power Delusions

How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions

ASHLEY J. TELLIS

Since the turn of the century, the United States has sought to help India rise as a great power. During George W. Bush's presidency, Washington agreed to a major deal with New Delhi that offered support for India's civilian nuclear program despite the country's controversial development of nuclear weapons. Under the Obama administration, the United States and India began defense industrial cooperation that aimed to boost the latter's military capabilities and help it project power. During President Donald Trump's first term, the United States started sharing sensitive intelligence with India and made it eligible to receive advanced technologies previously reserved only for American allies; under President Joe Biden, Washington gave New Delhi sophisticated fighter jet engine

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Illustration by Matt Rota

technology. Each of these recent administrations deepened diplomatic, technological, and military cooperation with India, making good on Bush's promise "to help India become a major world power in the twenty-first century."

The rationale for this pledge was simple. Washington wanted to transcend the rancor of the Cold War era that had divided the two great democracies. With the demise of the Soviet Union, India and the United States no longer had reason to be on opposite sides. Furthermore, they were increasingly tied by deep people-to-people connections, as Indian immigrants played a larger role in shaping the American economy and New Delhi's own post–Cold War economic reforms invited American firms and capital to Indian markets. Beneath these shifts lay a deeper geopolitical opportunity: Indian and U.S. officials recognized that they had many shared interests, including combating Islamist terrorism and, more important, addressing the dangers of a rising China while protecting the liberal international order. Washington correctly concluded that a stronger India would make for a stronger United States.

A stronger India would make for a stronger United States.

But India and the United States are not aligned on all issues. New Delhi does not want a world in which Washington is perpetually the sole superpower. Instead, it seeks a multipolar international system, in which India would rank as a genuine great power. It aims to restrain not just China—the near-term challenge—but also any country that would aspire to singular, hegemonic dominance, including the United States.

India believes that multipolarity is the key to both global peace and its own rise. It obsessively guards its strategic autonomy, eschewing formal alliances and maintaining ties with Western adversaries such as Iran and Russia, even as it has grown closer to the United States. This behavior is intended to help advance a multipolar international order. But it may not be effective or even realistic. Although India has grown in economic strength over the last two decades, it is not growing fast enough to balance China, let alone the United States, even in the long term. It will become a great power, in terms of relative GDP, by midcentury, but not a superpower. In military terms, it is the most significant conventional power in South Asia, but here, too, its advantages over its local rival are not enormous:

in fighting in May, Pakistan used Chinese-supplied defense systems to shoot down Indian aircraft. With China on one side and an adversarial Pakistan on the other, India must always fear the prospect of an unpalatable two-front war. Meanwhile, at home, the country is shedding one of its main sources of strength—its liberal democracy—by embracing Hindu nationalism. This evolution could undermine India's rise by intensifying communal tensions and exacerbating problems with its neighbors, forcing it to redirect security resources inward to the detriment of outward power projection. The country's illiberal pivot further undermines the rules-based international order that has served it so well.

India's relative weakness, its yearning for multipolarity, and its illiberal trajectory mean that it will have less global influence than it desires even when it can justifiably consider itself a great power. Becoming the fourth (or possibly the third) largest economy in the world should herald a dramatic expansion of a country's clout, but that will not be the case for India. Even by 2047—the centenary of its independence—it may still have to rely on foreign partners to ward off Chinese power. And because of its perennial discomfort with alliances, or even with close partnerships, securing external support could be challenging, especially as the United States grows more transactional in its foreign policy—and also if Washington comes to fear New Delhi as a competitor. In the coming decades, India will grow undeniably stronger but less able to wield that strength in meaningful ways, with less global sway.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

For most of the Cold War, India's economic performance fell short of its inherent potential. Although the country overcame the stagnation that marked the century before its independence, it grew at just around 3.5 percent per year from 1950 to 1980—far less than many other developing countries. India's average growth rates improved to about 5.5 percent during the 1980s, after the government began modest economic reforms. But the pace of growth remained lackluster compared with other Asian states.

In 1991, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and his finance minister, Manmohan Singh, took an axe to the country's controlled economy, dismantling the so-called License Raj, which had stifled India's economic growth through excessive regulations, production controls, and closed domestic markets. As a result, the economy finally began to pick up in the mid-1990s. Since then, India's GDP has grown at about 6.5 percent annually—a remarkably long and unprecedented period of sustained growth. India has consequently been able to lift millions of people out of poverty and rejoin the international economy as an important engine of global growth. It is one of the main reasons why the United States sees India as an important partner and a potential counterweight to China.

But no matter how impressive India's more recent performance has been, the country has fallen short of China's reform-era achievements. Since Beijing opened up its economy in the late 1970s, Chinese GDP has grown at close to nine percent annually, reaching double digits 15 times between 1979 and 2023, according to World Bank data. The same figures show that, by contrast, India has never chalked up double-digit GDP growth. As a result, China's economy went from being roughly the same size as India's in 1980 to almost five times its size today.

Beijing has also used its wealth to become far more influential than New Delhi. It has built a larger, more sophisticated military. It has more deeply integrated itself into the Indo-Pacific region in ways that enhance its economic heft and provide it with enormous—sometimes choking—political influence. This helps explain why New Delhi, despite its often confident rhetoric, is skittish about confronting Beijing unless pressed, even when it is backed by Washington.

Indians, of course, are not happy about this disadvantage. Many of the country's officials hope that, in the years ahead, they will match their northern neighbor. The Chinese economy, after all, has slowed considerably over the last decade: China is now growing at between four and five percent annually on average—behind India's pace. The Chinese economy is buffeted by multiple challenges that could keep growth rates down, such as a real estate crisis, high local debt, and increasing constraints on its market access to the West. Most important, it faces significant demographic headwinds. After years of slowing growth, China's population declined for the first time in 2022, and it continues to age rapidly. The country's diminishing workforce further imperils its longer-term economic prospects and, by extension, its power. India, meanwhile, still has a growing population, despite declining fertility rates. It will possess a large cohort of working-age adults for some time to come.

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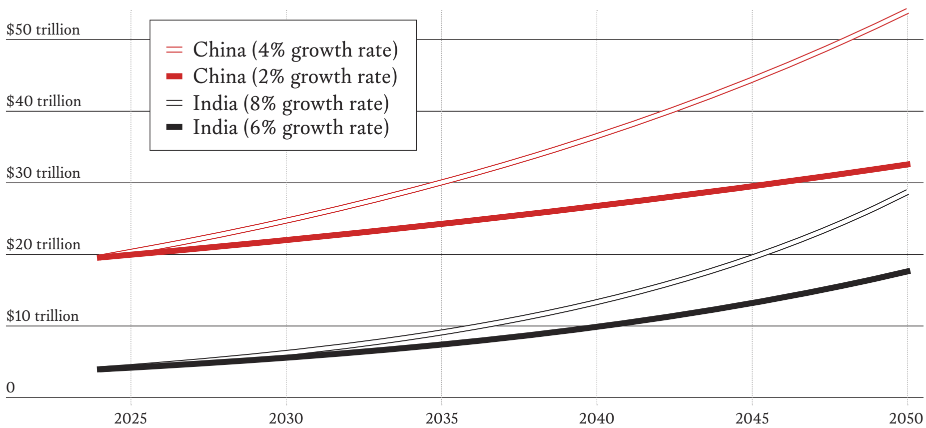
BIG DREAMS, SMALL CHANCE

GDP growth projections for China and India through 2050



Sources: Author's calculations; International Monetary Fund.

But China's slowdown does not guarantee that India will catch up. In fact, based on current trends, the Indian economy is unlikely to match its Chinese counterpart before the middle of the century, if at all. To become a genuine peer of China, India would need to grow consistently at eight percent per year over the next 25 years while China grows at a glacial two percent. This is unlikely to happen. India has not developed a significant manufacturing sector (and probably will not because it lacks the requisite comparative advantage), clings to excessive protectionism that impedes exports, and invests too little in research and development. It lags in overall technological proficiency, despite having many excellent technology companies. It has not yet invested sufficiently in improving its large human capital.

India will therefore likely grow at an annual rate of six percent over the next two decades, its average annual rate during the last decade, based on World Bank data through 2023. If that happens, and China grows at just two percent per year, on average, New Delhi's standing vis-à-vis Beijing would certainly improve: by midcentury, India's GDP would be a little more than half that of China. But China could still achieve average annual GDP growth higher than two percent in the coming decades. For all its challenges, China still has enormous economic advantages relative to India, including a literate, skilled, and comparatively healthy population; greater technological proficiency; and larger capital stocks. It has made substantial investments in critical technologies—such as artificial intelligence, robotics, energy storage, and information and communications—which could improve growth despite its demographic constraints. If China grows even a little faster, say at three percent annually, it could end up with an economy that is closer to three times as large as India's, even if India grows at six percent.

Long-range projections of economic growth are admittedly difficult to make. Yet if past is prelude, India will become a great power by the middle of this century, but it will be the weakest of a quartet that includes China, the United States, and the European Union. It will not be on par with China. And it will certainly not be on par with the United States.

THE INDIAN WAY

If New Delhi wants to constrain Beijing, it will therefore need Washington. None of the other Indo-Pacific powers, not even Australia or Japan, will be strong enough by 2050 to compensate for the United States. The EU might have the collective economic and military capacity to do so, but its members are not threatened by China in the same way that the Indo-Pacific states are. New Delhi and Washington then will—indeed, must—continue cooperating in the years ahead.

But those hoping for a boundless friendship will be disappointed. Despite its weaknesses, India will not settle for any alliance with the United States, and there will be limits on their partnership. That is because India does not want to be part of any collective defense arrangements. Instead, it will zealously guard its nonallied status.

India's desire to avoid formal coalitions is partly the product of its colonial past. The country's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, pledged that India would never become a "camp follower" of any great power, given that it had spent centuries suffering under British rule. But the country's attitude is equally motivated by the conviction that a rising power must never do anything in the interim to compromise the freedom of action it will enjoy once it has ascended. Indian policymakers fear that accepting the constraints that come with alliances, particularly in coalitions that include more powerful states, would not only lead to the country's subordination but also limit its ability to maneuver between the various geopolitical divisions in the international system.

At heart, New Delhi has realist inclinations: it does not trust other states to act out of anything other than self-interest. It assumes that it will receive external support only if the donor benefits appropriately. To the degree that the United States and others have an interest in balancing Chinese power, India expects their support without having to make any onerous compromises to secure such assistance.

With this assessment of the world in mind, New Delhi will keep trying to push the international order toward multipolarity even if that is not what Washington wants. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee articulated this ambition in 2004, when he declared, "India does not believe that unipolarity is a state of equilibrium in today's world." India, he insisted, would work to build a "cooperative, multipolar world which accommodates the legitimate aspirations and interests of all its component poles." Indian leaders across the political spectrum share this vision, believing that multipolarity is the natural state of the world, that the international system is entering a state of multipolarity, or that multipolarity is needed for global peace because it ensures that no single country can impose its will on others.

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar argues in his 2020 book, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, that New Delhi should advance its "national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions" to reap the most benefits "from as many ties as possible." A unipolar order undermines this strategy because it denies New Delhi the opportunity to play one pole against another. A bipolar order is more favorable; throughout the Cold War, for example, India played the Soviet Union against the United States to benefit itself. But multipolarity is best. After all, a multipolar world would have many more cleavages and affinities that India could use to its advantage.

In practice, this means that India pursues eclectic partnerships with individual countries and groupings of countries, even if some of those partners have strikingly anti-American agendas. New Delhi often serves as a moderating force in these forums, to the benefit of the United States. But sometimes, even as India has deepened its ties with the United States bilaterally, it acts to constrain U.S. power in the larger global arena. India has, for instance, pushed back against the United States on issues such as climate policy, trade preferences, data sovereignty, e-commerce rules, and global governance. Even in the realm of high politics, India has opposed U.S. sanctions on friendly third countries, championed the so-called global South in its campaign against Western domination, and preserved its traditional ties with countries such as Iran and Russia, despite the latter's appalling war in Ukraine. India has even sought to maintain stable relations with China, cooperating whenever possible, to preserve a modicum of peace across their shared border. Unlike Washington, New Delhi cannot tolerate violent oscillations in its bilateral relationship with Beijing and, depending on the future trajectory of U.S. policy, may edge closer to China as circumstances demand.

An illiberal India will be a less powerful one.

So far, however, these Indian efforts have done little to make the world any more multipolar than it was. In fact, if economic trends continue, genuine multipolarity will remain elusive as China and the United States will be in a class by themselves by the middle of the century. The world, then, will be bipolar. And should that happen, India may find itself in an uncomfortable position. It will frustrate Washington by remaining ensconced in non-Western forums, such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, only to find that Beijing has more influence in those groups and among many non-Western countries than does New Delhi. Thus far, India has escaped this dilemma because successive U.S. presidential administrations have deliberately overlooked these dalliances. But a more jaundiced government, like the one currently led by Trump, might be tempted to penalize India for this behavior. For example, New Delhi's effort to conduct some of its bilateral trades in local currencies rather than the U.S. dollar, although intended to immunize India against U.S. sanctions on third countries, could provoke a nationalist U.S. administration to limit cooperation with India.

Even if India avoids such retaliation, the country should be wary of multipolarity for other reasons. In a genuinely multipolar system, New Delhi would benefit less from the collective goods the United States supplies, such as protecting the sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean. To compensate, India would have to bear larger financial and security burdens than it has been willing to thus far. It might also fail to balance against Beijing, should the other two great powers (the United States and the EU) decide to leave India—the weakest in the mix—to fend for itself. Under multipolarity, India could end up worse off than it is under American unipolarity or than it might be under

U.S.-Chinese bipolarity. As a result, India's current approach—seeking continued American support for itself while promoting a multipolar system that would limit Washington's power—is both counterproductive and unwise.

TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY

India's qualities as a great power will not just be characterized by its approach to other states. They will also be defined by its internal politics. And here, the country is experiencing a profound—and dangerous—shift.

For decades, India has been a spectacular democratic success. Since winning independence in 1947, the country has had 18 national elections. The average voter turnout across these contests has been 60 percent, and turnout has increased with time. More pertinently, Indian citizens have enjoyed universal adult franchise from the very beginning, irrespective of their gender, caste, or economic status. They have also enjoyed vital fundamental rights to freedom, equality, and religion, enforceable via judicial action. The government did suspend these rights from 1975 to 1977, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi infamously declared an "emergency" that let her rule as a dictator and imprison her opponents. But the Indian people resisted her authoritarianism and threw her out of office when she called an election in the hope of ratifying her dictatorship.

What made Indian democracy especially remarkable, however, is that it thrived in conditions in which democracy typically fails. Political science research has shown that democratic success is strongly correlated with a country's level of per capita income. Most Third World states, for example, that were born as democracies lapsed into dictatorships or became autocratic shortly after independence. But not India. Despite being poor, India's democracy thrived as its leaders managed the country's political fortunes through open competition.

The country's success at staying democratic is attributable, in part, to its constitution. This document has multiple provisions guaranteeing respect for all people. To guard against the tyranny of the majority, for example, India defined citizenship entirely by the principle of *jus soli*—place of birth—rather than by ascriptive markers such as religion, wealth, or race. It also offered minorities meaningful legal protections, including the right to manage their religious and charitable institutions, beyond the broader freedom offered to all citizens to freely profess, practice, and propagate their religion. The country also created a federal system in which multiple linguistic groups, for instance, were afforded their own states in order to protect the country's cultural diversity. India's constitution set deliberate limits on executive power both by empowering the legislature and the judiciary at the federal and provincial levels to serve as checks and balances and by creating space for civil society wherein citizens could tangibly express their freedoms of speech, assembly, and association, among others.

This is what made India's political system not merely democratic but also fundamentally liberal. As Nehru put it, the country's founders sought "to create a just society by employing just means." They believed, and proved, that a poor country could zealously protect individual rights and reject authoritarianism's promise of faster economic growth.

But now, India is distancing itself from these origins. Unlike the India of the Cold War, which remained robustly liberal even when underperforming economically, India today, despite being more economically successful, has been markedly tainted by illiberalism and authoritarianism. Its long tradition of secular politics is now eclipsed by Hindu nationalism, whose proponents believe India to be the land of Hindus and that its religious minorities are, at best, second-class citizens. This ideology, called Hindutva, was repudiated and marginalized by the country's founders. But it never disappeared, and since the 1990s it has been resurrected in Indian politics, winning power for the first time late in that decade through its incarnation in the Bharatiya Janata Party and then more decisively from 2014 onward, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi swept into office. This ascendance has precipitated policies that have alienated India's almost 200 million Muslims and nearly 30 million Christians. Along the way, the BJP has attempted to reabsorb previously alienated lower-caste Hindus in order to create a unified Hindu voting bloc that, collectively, numbers almost one billion people even as Hindu nationalists have sought to promote the idea that many of India's other minority faiths—notably Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—are really Hinduism in disguise. All this is part of the larger belief that only adherents belonging to religious traditions that arose in the Indian subcontinent are authentically Indian.

This attack on the secular ideals of the Indian constitution has also been accompanied by rising authoritarianism. This drift has not manifested through rewriting the constitution itself, although some have voiced the idea of replacing it entirely. Instead, the change has occurred through the deliberate erosion of fundamental norms related to belonging and through the weaponization of once neutral institutions. Harking back to the emergency, Modi's government has deputized the tax authorities and other instruments of law to intimidate India's opposition parties, civil society, regulatory institutions, and some opposition-ruled states.

India will never be able to contain China on its own.

Yet Indian democracy is not dead. The country still has competitive elections, and there are faint signs that it could liberalize again. The BJP lost its outright majority in parliament during the last national elections, and it now has to govern in a coalition. It has, in fact, never won a popular vote majority; it secured parliamentary majorities thanks to the country's first-past-the-post electoral system. Despite the party's best efforts, Hindutva does not appear to enjoy the allegiance of most Indian voters. The opposition still governs a third of India's states. Indian liberals are beleaguered, but they continue to resist the Hindutva tide. And occasionally, the judiciary and other adjudicating bodies still push back on the executive's overreach. The question of whether India will be an illiberal great power thus remains open.

But if the country's politics do not revert, it will have serious consequences for the world. India would cease to be an exemplar of liberal democracy at a time when the world desperately needs one. It would not enhance the liberal international order, which promises both peaceful politics and economic prosperity and which has come under growing assault. In fact, if both India and the United States end up being persistently illiberal democracies, the postwar order—which has served both countries well, despite their current complaints to the contrary—would be severely damaged. Persistent illiberalism in both erstwhile liberal democracies would strengthen similar political forces in other countries. In a speech in New Delhi in 2015, President Barack Obama presciently declared, "If America shows itself as an example of its diversity and yet the capacity to live together and work together in common effort, in common purpose; if India, as massive as it is, with so much diversity, so many differences is able to continually affirm its democracy, that is an example for every other country on Earth." Today, both the United States and India seem intent on failing this test.

An illiberal India is also likely to be less powerful. The BJP's policies have polarized India along ideological and religious lines, and the unresolved issues about how India's changing demography is to be represented in parliament threaten to exacerbate regional and linguistic divisions. This makes India look increasingly like the highly divided United States. Polarization has been bad enough for Americans, hobbling their institutions and fueling democratic decay. But it will be even worse for India, where the state and society are much weaker. Polarization, for example, could intensify the armed rebellions against New Delhi that have long been underway, creating opportunities for outside powers to sow chaos within India's borders. Those conflicts could also spill over into India's neighborhood, as the ideological animus against Muslims exacerbates tensions with both Bangladesh and Pakistan. Polarization would also increase India's internal security burdens, consuming resources that New Delhi needs to project influence abroad. And even if polarization does not create more internal troubles, it will undermine New Delhi's efforts to mobilize its population in accumulating national power.

POWER FAILURE

The combination of moderate economic growth, the persistent quest for partnerships with all states but privileged relationships with none, and growing illiberalism within the country make for an India whose global influence will fall short of its increasing material strength. Although India will become the third or fourth largest economy globally, its lagging development indicators imply that its relatively large population will neither enjoy the standard of living nor contribute proportionately to the production of national power that its counterparts do in China, the United States, and Europe. Even as its economy grows inarguably larger, India will still face tremendous challenges of deprivation and grievance that could threaten the country's social stability and national power.

If India's continuing growth also remains tied largely to domestic market expansion but not international integration—as China's has been, in striking contrast—its ability to grow faster will inevitably be constrained. Equally, India will lose the opportunity to influence the choices of countries in its wider neighborhood. Scholars have often argued that the minimum characteristic of a great power is the ability to decisively shape outcomes in the region beyond its immediate frontiers. India today, unfortunately, fails this test in both East Asia and the Middle East, and the situation will probably not change dramatically in the decades ahead, given the likely activities of China and the United States in these regions. The imperatives of tying India's economic fortunes more closely to the transformations occurring in these regions are therefore incontestable, especially because India already faces strong impediments to translating its natural dominance within South Asia into lasting local hegemony.

Because even if India grows at a rate of six percent over the next two decades or so, it will be eclipsed by China in Asia. India will need to rely on external balancing, that is, cooperating comprehensively with foreign powers to keep China at bay. The best candidate here remains the United States because it will probably still be the most powerful country in the international system in the coming decades, no matter its domestic dysfunction.

New Delhi and Washington have made important strides together toward balancing Chinese power in recent years, but India's diffidence about a tight partnership with the United States frustrates this outcome. The economic ties between the two are not as strong as they could be given the countries' natural complementarities. But the biggest constraint is India's preoccupation with promoting multipolarity through multialignment, which presumes that India will become a meaningful peer of China, the United States, and Europe sometime soon and, consequently, will be able to balance China on its own.

Not only is this prospect nowhere in sight, but it also prevents the crafting of a genuine cooperative defense against China. This deficiency would be tolerable if India could expand its military capabilities sufficiently to neutralize the Chinese threat independently and to assist other Indo-Pacific states threatened by China. For the foreseeable future, India will find it hard to achieve either objective. Given the current, and likely future, gap in GDP with China, India will struggle to compete with its northern neighbor when it comes to defense modernization. Beijing's military capabilities already surpass India's, and given its lower defense burden—the ratio of military expenditures to GDP—China could expand its defense spending with fewer penalties to its economic growth compared with India while further widening its military superiority.

India's reluctance to partner more closely with the United States in building cooperative defense, however understandable, thus makes balancing against China difficult. Even worse, the Indian ambition of promoting multipolarity puts it at odds with the United States on many issues of international order at a time when working with Washington should be the more pressing priority. India should not delude itself that it can contain China on its own, which it cannot, while calling for a multipolar world in which the United States has a reduced role.

The United States has tolerated these Indian behaviors in the past in part because both countries were largely liberal democracies. As both proceed down the path of illiberalism, however, they will no longer be tied by shared values. Transactional habits may come to dominate the relationship, and Washington could demand more of New Delhi as the price of partnership. Trump's approach to India in his second term has already signaled such an evolution. Indeed, India's inability to match China in the future, as well as its commitment to multipolarity, which is fundamentally at odds with American interests, will be deeply inconvenient for the United States. India, it seems, will partner with the United States on some things involving China, but it is unlikely to partner with Washington in every significant arena—even when it comes to Beijing.

If New Delhi cannot effectively balance Beijing in Asia, Washington will invariably wonder how many resources and how much faith it should invest in India. A liberal United States might continue to support a liberal India because helping it would be inherently worthwhile (provided that the costs were not prohibitive and New Delhi's success still served some American interests). But if either India or the United States remains illiberal, there will be no ideological reason for the latter to help the former.

To be sure, a narrower U.S.-Indian relationship centered on interests, not values, will not be a disaster for either country. But it would represent shrunken ambitions. The transformation of the bilateral ties between the two countries after the Cold War was once conceived as a way to help improve and uphold the liberal international order. Now, that relationship could be largely limited to trying to constrain a common competitor, China. And if so, neither India nor the United States nor the world at large will be the better for it.

The End of the Long American Century

Trump and the Sources of U.S. Power

ROBERT O. KEOHANE
AND JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.

President Donald Trump has tried both to impose the United States on the world and to distance the country from it. He began his second term by brandishing American hard power, threatening Denmark over the control of Greenland, and suggesting he would take back the Panama Canal. He successfully wielded threats of punitive tariffs to coerce Canada, Colombia, and Mexico on immigration issues. He withdrew from the Paris climate accords and the World Health Organization. In April, he sent global markets into chaos by

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They are the authors of *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition.* This essay draws on some of Nye's previous writings. Nye passed away in May, as this essay was being finalized. We mourn his passing and are grateful to his family for granting permission to proceed.

Illustration by Dave Murray

announcing sweeping tariffs on countries all over the world. He changed tack not long after, withdrawing most of the additional tariffs, although continuing to press a trade war with China—the central front in his current offensive against Washington's main rival.

In doing all this, Trump can act from a position of strength. His attempts to use tariffs to pressure U.S. trade partners suggest that he believes that contemporary patterns of interdependence enhance U.S. power. Other countries rely on the buying power of the enormous American market and on the certainties of American military might. These advantages give Washington the leeway to strong-arm its partners. His positions are consistent with an argument we made almost 50 years ago: that asymmetric interdependence confers an advantage on the less dependent actor in a relationship. Trump laments the United States' significant trade deficit with China, but he also seems to understand that this imbalance gives Washington tremendous leverage over Beijing.

Even as Trump has correctly identified the way in which the United States is strong, he is using that strength in fundamentally counterproductive ways. By assailing interdependence, he undercuts the very foundation of American power. The power associated with trade is hard power, based on material capabilities. But over the past 80 years, the United States has accumulated soft power, based on attraction rather than coercion or the imposition of costs. Wise American policy would maintain, rather than disrupt, patterns of interdependence that strengthen American power, both the hard power derived from trade relationships and the soft power of attraction. The continuation of Trump's current foreign policy would weaken the United States and accelerate the erosion of the international order that since World War II has served so many countries well—most of all, the United States.

Order rests on a stable distribution of power among states, norms that influence and legitimize the conduct of states and other actors, and institutions that help underpin it. The Trump administration has rocked all these pillars. The world may be entering a period of disorder, one that settles only after the White House changes course or once a new dispensation takes hold in Washington. But the decline underway may not be a mere temporary dip; it may be a plunge into murky waters. In his erratic and misguided effort to make the United States even more powerful, Trump may bring its period of dominance—what the American publisher Henry Luce first called "the American century"—to an unceremonious end.

THE DEFICIT ADVANTAGE

When we wrote *Power and Interdependence* in 1977, we tried to broaden conventional understandings of power. Foreign policy experts typically saw power through the lens of the Cold War military competition. Our research, by contrast, explored how trade affected power, and we argued that asymmetry in an interdependent economic relationship empowers the less dependent actor. The paradox of trade power is that success in a trading relationship—as indicated by one state having a trade surplus with another—is a source of vulnerability. Conversely, and perhaps counterintuitively, running a trade deficit can strengthen a country's bargaining position. The deficit country, after all, can impose tariffs or other trade barriers on the surplus country. That targeted surplus country will have difficulty retaliating because of its relative lack of imports to sanction.

Threatening to bar or limit imports can successfully exert pressure on trading partners. In terms of asymmetric interdependence and power, the United States is in a favorable bargaining position with all seven of its most important trading partners. Its trade is extremely asymmetric with China, Mexico, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, all of which have an export-import ratio of more than two to one with the United States. For Japan (roughly 1.8 to 1), South Korea (1.4 to 1), and the European Union (1.6 to 1), those ratios are also asymmetric. Canada enjoys a more balanced ratio of around 1.2 to 1.

These ratios, of course, cannot capture the full dimensions of the economic relationships between countries. Countervailing factors, such as domestic interest groups with transnational ties to foreign actors in other markets or personal and group relationships across borders, can complicate matters, sometimes leading to exceptions or limiting the impact of asymmetric interdependence. In *Power and Interdependence*, we characterized these multiple channels of connections as "complex interdependence," and in a detailed analysis of U.S.-Canadian relations between 1920 and 1970, we showed that they often strengthened Canada's hand. For example, the U.S.-Canadian automotive pact of the 1960s resulted from a process of negotiation that began with Canada's unilateral introduction of an export subsidy for auto parts. In every analysis of asymmetric interdependence and power, it is necessary to look carefully at countervailing factors that might diminish the advantages that would normally accrue to the deficit country.

China appears weakest of all in the trade sector alone, with its three-to-one ratio of exports to imports. It also cannot call on alliance ties or other forms of soft power. But it is able to retaliate by exploiting countervailing factors, punishing important American corporations that operate in China, such as Apple or Boeing, or important American domestic political actors, such as soybean farmers or Hollywood studios. China can also use hard power such as cutting off supplies of rare minerals. As the two sides discover more precisely their mutual vulnerabilities, the focus of trade warfare will shift to reflect this learning process.

Mexico has fewer sources of counterinfluence, and it remains highly vulnerable to the whims of the United States. Europe can exercise some counterinfluence in the trade sector because it has more balanced trade with the United States than do China and Mexico, but it still depends on NATO, so Trump's threats not to support the alliance could be an effective bargaining tool. Canada has more balanced trade with the United States and a web of transnational ties with American interest groups that make it less vulnerable, but it is probably playing a losing hand on trade alone because its economy is more reliant on the U.S. economy than the other way around. In Asia, the asymmetry in U.S. trade relations with Japan, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is somewhat compensated for by the U.S. policy of rivalry with China. As long as this rivalry continues, the United States needs its East Asian and Southeast Asian allies and partners, and it cannot take full advantage of its trade-derived leverage. The relative influence of U.S. trade policy therefore varies depending on the geopolitical context and on patterns of asymmetric interdependence.

REAL POWER

The Trump administration misses a major dimension of power. Power is the ability to get others to do what you want. This goal can be accomplished by coercion, payment, or attraction. The first two are hard power; the third is soft power. In the short term, hard power usually trumps soft power, but over the long term, soft power often prevails. Joseph Stalin is thought to have once mockingly asked, "How many divisions does the Pope have?" But the Soviet Union is long gone, and the papacy lives on.

The president seems inordinately committed to coercion and the exercise of American hard power, but he does not seem to understand soft power or its role in foreign policy. Coercing democratic allies such as Canada or Denmark more broadly weakens trust in U.S. alliances; threatening Panama reawakens fears of imperialism throughout Latin America; crippling the U.S. Agency for International Development undercuts the United States' reputation for benevolence. Silencing the Voice of America mutes the country's message.

Skeptics say, So what? International politics is hardball, not softball. And Trump's coercive and transactional approach is already producing concessions with the promise of more to come. As Machiavelli once wrote about power, it is better for a prince to be feared than loved. But it is better yet to be both feared and loved. Power has three dimensions, and by ignoring attraction, Trump is neglecting a key source of American strength. In the long run, it is a losing strategy.

And soft power matters even in the short run. If a country is attractive, it won't need to rely as much on incentives and penalties to shape the behavior of others. If allies see it as benign and trustworthy, they are more persuadable and likely to follow that country's lead, although admittedly they may maneuver to take advantage of a benign stance by the more powerful state. Faced with bullying, they may comply, but if they see their trading partner as an unreliable bully, they are more likely to drag their feet and reduce their long-term interdependence when they can. Cold War Europe offers a good example of this dynamic. In 1986, the Norwegian analyst Geir Lundestad described the world as divided into a Soviet and an American empire. Whereas the Soviets had used force to build their European satrapies, the American side was "an empire by invitation." The Soviets had to send troops into Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968 to keep the governments there subordinate to Moscow. By contrast, NATO remained strong throughout the Cold War.

> America's decline may not be a mere dip but a plunge.

In Asia, China has been increasing its hard military and economic investments, but it has also been cultivating its powers of attraction. In 2007, President Hu Jintao told the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party that China needed to increase its soft power. The Chinese government has spent tens of billions of dollars to that end. Admittedly, it has achieved mixed results at best, owing to two major obstacles: it has stoked rancorous territorial disputes with a number of its neighbors, and the CCP maintains tight control over all organizations and opinions in civil society. China generates resentments when it ignores internationally recognized borders. And it comes across poorly to people in many countries when it jails human rights lawyers and compels nonconformists, such as the brilliant artist Ai Weiwei, into exile.

At least before Trump's second term began, China lagged far behind the United States in the court of global public opinion. Pew surveyed 24 countries in 2023 and reported that a majority of respondents in most of them found the United States more attractive than China, with Africa the only continent where the results were even close. More recently, in May 2024, Gallup found that in 133 countries it surveyed, the United States had the advantage in 81 and China in 52. If Trump keeps undercutting American soft power, however, these numbers may change markedly.

To be sure, American soft power has had its ups and downs over the years. The United States was unpopular in many countries during the Vietnam War and the Iraq war. But soft power derives from a country's society and culture, not just the actions of its government. Even during the Vietnam War, when crowds marched through streets around the world to protest American policies, they did not sing the communist "Internationale" but the American civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome." An open civil society that allows protest and accommodates dissent can be an asset. But the soft power derived from American culture will not survive the excesses of the U.S. government during the next four years if American democracy continues to erode and the country acts as a bully abroad.

For its part, China is striving to fill any gaps that Trump creates. It sees itself as the leader of the so-called global South. It aims to displace the American order of international alliances and institutions. Its Belt and Road infrastructure investment program is designed not only to attract other countries but also to provide hard economic power. More countries have China as their largest trading partner than have the United States as such. If Trump thinks he can compete with China while weakening trust among American allies, asserting imperial aspirations, destroying the U.S. Agency for International Development, challenging the rule of law at home, and withdrawing from UN agencies, he is likely to be disappointed.

THE SPECTER OF GLOBALISM

Looming over the rise of Western populists such as Trump is the specter of globalization, which they invoke as a demonic force. In reality, the term simply refers to increasing interdependence at intercontinental distances. When Trump threatens tariffs on China, he is trying to reduce the economic aspect of the United States' global interdependence, which he blames for the loss of industries and jobs. Globalization can certainly have negative and positive effects. But Trump's measures are misplaced, since they attack those forms of globalization that are largely good for the United States and the world while failing to counter those that are bad. On balance, globalization has enhanced American power, and Trump's assault on it only enfeebles the United States.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British economist and statesman David Ricardo established the widely accepted fact that global trade can create value through comparative advantage. When they are open to trade, countries can specialize in what they do best. Trade generates what the German economist Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction": jobs are lost in the process, and national economies are subject to shocks from abroad, sometimes as a result of deliberate policy by foreign governments. But that disruption can help economies become more productive and efficient. On balance, during the last 75 years, creative destruction has augmented American power. As the largest economic player, the United States has benefited most from the innovation that generates growth and the spillover effects that growth has had around the world.

At the same time, growth can be painful. Studies have shown that the United States has lost (and gained) millions of jobs in the twenty-first century, forcing the costs of adjustment onto workers, who have generally not received adequate compensation from the government. Technological change has also eliminated millions of jobs as machines have replaced people, and it is difficult to untangle the interconnected effects of automation and foreign trade. The usual strains of interdependence have been made much worse by China's export juggernaut, which is not letting up.

Even as economic globalization enhances the productivity of the world economy, these changes may be unwelcome for many individuals and families. People in many communities are reluctant to move to places where they might more easily find work. Others, of course, are willing to move halfway around the world to find more opportunities. The last several decades of globalization have been characterized by massive movements of people across national borders, another major type of interdependence. Migration is culturally enriching and offers major economic benefits for countries that receive migrants by bringing people with skills to places where they can use those skills more productively. Countries from which people migrate may benefit from the relief of population pressure and from emigrants sending remittances. In any event, migration tends to engender further movement. In the absence of high barriers constructed by states, migration in the contemporary world is often a self-perpetuating process.

Trump blames immigrants for causing disruptive change. Although at least some forms of immigration are clearly good for the economy in the long term, critics can easily characterize them as harmful in the near term, and they may stir strong political opposition among some people. Sudden spikes in immigration provoke strong political reactions, with migrants often cast as responsible for various economic and social changes, even when they are demonstrably not to blame. Immigration has become the dominant populist political issue used against incumbent governments in nearly all democracies in recent years. It fueled Trump's election in 2016—and again in 2024.

Trump's assault on globalization enfeebles the United States.

It is much easier for populist leaders to blame foreigners for economic upheaval than to accept the far more determinative roles of technological change and capital. Globalization has presented challenges to incumbents in many recent elections in many countries. The politician's temptation in the face of these stresses is to seek to reverse globalization by imposing tariffs and other barriers to international exchange, as Trump is doing.

Economic globalization has been reversed in the past. The nineteenth century was marked by a rapid increase in both trade and migration, but it slowed precipitously with the beginning of World War I, in 1914. Trade as a percent of global economic activity did not recover to its 1914 levels until nearly 1970. This could happen again, although it would take some doing. World trade grew extremely rapidly between 1950 and 2008, then more slowly since the 2008–9 financial crisis. Overall, trade grew by 4,400 percent from 1950 to 2023. Global trade could again lurch into decline. If the U.S. trade measures against China lead to a more committed trade war, it is likely to do a great deal of damage. Trade wars in general can easily morph into enduring and escalating conflict, with the possibility of catastrophic change.

On the other side of the ledger, the costs of undoing more than half a trillion dollars of trade are likely to limit the willingness of countries to engage in trade wars and may generate some incentives for compromise. And although other countries may act reciprocally toward the United States, they will not necessarily limit trade with one another. Geopolitical factors could also speed the unwinding of trade flows. A war over Taiwan, for example, could bring trade between the United States and China to a screeching halt.

Some analysts blame the wave of nationalist populist reactions in nearly all democracies on the increased spread and speed of globalization. Trade and migration accelerated in tandem after the end of the Cold War, as political change and improved communications technology reduced the costs of crossing borders and long distances. Now, tariffs and border controls may slow down those flows. That would be bad news for American power, which has been enhanced by the energy and productivity of immigrants throughout its history, including during the last several decades.

PROBLEMS WITHOUT PASSPORTS

No crisis highlights the inescapability of interdependence better than climate change. Scientists predict that climate change will have huge costs as global icecaps melt, coastal cities flood, heat waves intensify, and weather patterns shift chaotically later in the century. Even in the near term, the intensity of hurricanes and wildfires is exacerbated by climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been an important voice articulating the dangers of climate change, sharing scientific information, and encouraging joint transnational work. Yet Trump has eliminated support for international and national action to counter climate change. Ironically, while his administration is seeking to limit types of globalization that have benefits, it is also deliberately undermining Washington's ability to address types of ecological globalization, such as climate change and pandemics, whose costs are potentially gargantuan. The COVID-19 pandemic in the United States killed over 1.2 million people; *The Lancet* has placed the worldwide death toll at about 18 million. Covid-19 circulated the world rapidly and was certainly a global phenomenon, fostered by travel that is an integral part of globalization.

In other areas, interdependence remains a key source of American strength. Networks of professional interaction among scientists, for instance, have had tremendous positive effects in speeding discoveries and innovation. Until the Trump administration came into power, the expansion of scientific activity and networks had engendered little negative political reaction. Any catalog of the pluses and minuses of globalization for human welfare must include it on the positive side of the scale. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan in 2020, Chinese scientists shared their genetic decoding of the novel coronavirus with international counterparts before they were stopped from doing so by Beijing.

That is why one of the strangest aspects of Trump's new term has been his administration's gutting of federal support for scientific research, including in fields that have yielded great returns on investment, are largely responsible for the pace of innovation in the modern world, and have enhanced the prestige and power of the United States. Although American research universities lead the world, the administration has sought to stifle them by canceling funding, seeking to curtail their independence, and making it harder to attract the brightest students from around the world. This attack is hard to understand except as a salvo in a culture war against putative elites who do not share the ideology of right-wing populism. It amounts to a massive, self-inflicted wound.

The Trump administration is also unwinding another key tool of American soft power: the country's espousal of liberal democratic values. Especially during the last half century, the idea of human rights as a value has diffused around the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991, democratic institutions and norms spread to much of eastern Europe (including, briefly, to Russia), as well as to other parts of the world, notably Latin America, and gained some foothold in Africa. The proportion of countries in the world that were either liberal or electoral democracies reached slightly over 50 percent at its high point around 2000, and has fallen a little bit since, remaining near 50 percent. Even though the post–Cold War "democratic wave" has subsided, it has still left an abiding mark.

The wide appeal of democratic norms, and of human rights, has certainly contributed to the soft power of the United States. Autocratic governments resist what they see as interference in their sovereign autonomy by groups supporting human rights—groups that are often based in the United States and backed by nongovernmental and governmental resources in the United States. For a while, autocracies were fighting a defensive, rearguard battle. Not surprisingly, some authoritarian governments that have chafed under U.S. criticism or sanctions have applauded the Trump administration's renunciation of support for human rights abroad, such as closing the State Department's Office of Global Criminal Justice, its Office of Global Women's

Issues, and its Bureau of Conflict and Stability Operations. Trump administration policy will inhibit the further spread of democracy and deplete American soft power.

A BET ON WEAKNESS

There is no undoing global interdependence. It will continue as long as humans are mobile and invent new technologies of communication and transportation. After all, globalization spans centuries, with roots extending back to the Silk Road and beyond. In the fifteenth century, innovations in oceangoing transport spurred the age of exploration, which was followed by European colonization that shaped today's national boundaries. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, steamships and telegraphs accelerated the process as the Industrial Revolution transformed agrarian economies. Now, the information revolution is transforming service-oriented economies. Billions of people carry a computer in their pocket packed with an amount of information that would have filled a skyscraper 50 years ago.

World wars temporarily reversed economic globalization and disrupted migration, but in the absence of global warfare, and as long as technology continues its rapid advance, economic globalization will continue, as well. Ecological globalization and global scientific activity are also likely to persist, and norms and information will continue to travel across borders. The effects of some forms of globalization may be malign: climate change is a prominent example of a crisis that knows no borders. To rechannel and reshape globalization for the common good, states will have to coordinate. For such coordination to be effective, leaders will have to construct and maintain networks of connection, norms, and institutions. Those networks will in turn benefit their central node, the United States—still the economically, militarily, technologically, and culturally most powerful country in the world—providing Washington with soft power. Unfortunately, the myopic focus of the second Trump administration, which is obsessed with coercive hard power linked to trade asymmetries and sanctions, is likely to erode rather than strengthen the U.S.-led international order. Trump has focused so much on the costs of free-riding by allies that he neglects the fact that the United States gets to drive the bus—and thus pick the destination and the route. Trump does not seem to grasp how American strength lies in interdependence. Instead of making America great again, he is making a tragic bet on weakness.

Might Unmakes Right

The Catastrophic Collapse of Norms Against the Use of Force

OONA A. HATHAWAY AND SCOTT J. SHAPIRO

In his first months back in office, U.S. President Donald Trump has threatened to use military force to seize Greenland and the Panama Canal, suggested that the United States could take ownership of Gaza after the expulsion of two million Palestinians, and demanded that Ukraine give up territory to Russia in exchange for a cease-fire. These acts and statements might appear to be just a handful of examples of Trump's typical wide-ranging and hyperbolic bluster. But in fact, they all form part of a cohesive assault on a long-standing principle of international law: that states are

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prohibited from threatening or using military force against other states to resolve disputes.

Before the twentieth century, legal theorists believed not only that countries could wage war to seize others' land and resources but also that in some circumstances, they should. War was considered legal, the primary way to enforce national rights and resolve disputes between states. That all changed in 1928, when nearly every country in the world at the time joined the Kellogg-Briand Pact, agreeing that wars of aggression should be illegal and territorial conquest prohibited. The 1945 UN Charter reaffirmed and expanded that commitment, putting at its core a prohibition on the "threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state." Having discovered that merely agreeing to prohibit war was not by itself enough, states then went to extraordinary lengths to design frameworks and institutions to cement this essential rule, leading to the establishment of a new legal order that elevated economic tools over military might to ensure peace.

As a result, wars between states became far less common. In the 65 years after the last settlements of World War II, the amount of territory conquered by foreign states each year plummeted to less than six percent of what it had been for just over a century before the world first outlawed war. The number of countries tripled from 1945 to today, as states no longer feared that they would be gobbled up by more powerful neighbors. And countries traded more freely with one another, knowing that the wealth they accumulated was less likely to be plundered by other states. The world became more peaceful and prosperous.

The influence of the prohibition on the use of force had already eroded somewhat before Trump returned to office. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, justifying the war by claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that it did not possess; China has spent the last decade building military bases in contested areas of the South China Sea; and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 set off the largest land war in Europe since World War II. But Trump is shredding what is left of the norm against using force. Until now, the United States had played a critical, if imperfect, role in maintaining and defending the postwar legal order. The resilience of that order depended less on total compliance with international law than on a shared set of expectations about how other countries would behave: even if a country was not itself committed to the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force, it knew that violating the norm would likely trigger condemnation, sanctions, and perhaps even lawful intervention from the United States and its allies.

Now, that expectation is gone. Trump is not merely abandoning the United States' traditional role in defending the prohibition on war and, with it, conquest. He seems to want something more: to restore war or the threat of it as the main way that states resolve their disagreements and seek economic gain. Other countries are already signaling an acceptance that the norms have changed. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to endorse Trump's musings about Gaza, and Panama chose to placate the American president by accepting deportation flights of non-Panamanians and signing an agreement allowing the United States to deploy military personnel along the Panama Canal. Amid Trump's threats to permit Russian President Vladimir Putin to annex parts of Ukraine, Kyiv inked a deal with Washington giving the United States access to its rich mineral resources. If left unchecked, the erosion of the prohibition on the use of force will return geopolitics to a raw contest of military power. The consequences will be grave: a global arms race, renewed wars of conquest, shrinking trade, and the collapse of the cooperation needed to confront shared global threats.

ENTRENCHED WARFARE

For centuries before World War I, war was a legally recognized means by which states resolved disputes. The outbreak of war did not constitute a breakdown of the international order—it was the order. In the absence of a global court to adjudicate international conflicts, sovereign states had the authority to enforce their rights as they saw fit—namely, by going to war. States set out their legal reasoning for attacking other states in "war manifestos." Any legal grievance could serve as a just cause for using military force: property damage, such as harm to ships; unpaid debts; treaty violations; and, of course, self-defense. As the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher and jurist Hugo Grotius—often called "the father of international law"—wrote in *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty*, a "war is said to be 'just' if it consists in the execution of a right."

Because war was conceived as a means of enforcing rights, international law recognized the right of conquest. Land and property could be seized to remedy the wrongs that had triggered the conflict. “In seizing prize or booty,” Grotius explained, states attain “through war that which is rightfully [theirs].” To be sure, powers often claimed what was not rightfully theirs. But because no supreme authority existed to judge the legality of wars, the international system effectively presumed that every conquest was just. Might made right. When the United States launched a war against Mexico in 1846, for example, a main legal justification was Mexico’s unpaid debts. In return for stopping the military campaign, the United States forced Mexico to sign a treaty ceding 525,000 square miles of territory that became the American Southwest in exchange for $15 million and forgiving the debts.

For centuries, international law recognized the right of conquest.

This outcome was far from unique. States often practiced what became known as “gunboat diplomacy”—the use of military threats to advance political or economic demands—to pressure weaker countries into signing unequal treaties. If it was justified for a state to wage war in defense of its rights, then it was justified to threaten war in defense of those rights. In early 1854, U.S. Commodore Matthew Perry exemplified this logic when he sailed into Edo (now Tokyo) Bay with a fleet of American warships. He claimed that the United States had a legal right to trade with Japan, and he made it clear that if Japan did not agree to open its ports, he would do so using military power. The pressure worked: on March 31, 1854, the two countries signed the Treaty of Kanagawa, which opened two Japanese ports to U.S. ships.

Because war was the way in which states pursued their legal rights, waging war was a means of law enforcement, not a crime. When Napoleon lost the War of the Sixth Coalition, in 1814, the European powers that defeated him did not imprison him as a war criminal. Rather, he was sent to the island of Elba, where he was allowed to retain the title of emperor and rule the island as a sovereign. Even after he returned to mainland Europe and was again defeated at the Battle of Waterloo, his subsequent exile to St. Helena in the South Atlantic was not a criminal punishment. It was a preventive measure—a kind of quarantine—meant to keep him from once again unleashing war on Europe.

Not only did states possess the right to conquer other countries' territory, practice gunboat diplomacy, and enjoy immunity from criminal prosecution for waging war; they were also bound by strict duties of impartiality toward belligerents. Neutral states could not put sanctions on warring parties. If they did, they would be interfering with the belligerents' efforts to assert their legal rights; if a state violated that duty of neutrality, it created a just cause for war against it. Conquest was lawful, but imposing economic sanctions against belligerents was not.

Under this legal order, which lasted until the early twentieth century, powerful states freely resorted to war to enforce their claims, and weaker states were forced to submit or risk annihilation, yielding a near-constant churn of conflict. With no prohibition on conquest, national borders shifted regularly through violence, and empires expanded by force, entrenching global inequalities. Trade routes were opened and then controlled with cannons, and colonial possessions were won and lost like damages in a lawsuit. The world's economy remained stunted by the incessant threat of war.

FROM WAR TO PEACE

World War I, however, brought destructive new technologies to the battlefield, and its devastation far outstripped that of previous wars. More than 20 countries eventually entered the fight, and an estimated 20 million people died, around half of them civilians. Once the killing subsided, a desperate search began to find a way to prevent such a catastrophe from happening again. The League of Nations, founded in 1920 to preserve peace through collective security, offered one answer. But the U.S. Senate, wary of being drawn back into European wars, blocked the United States from joining, which hobbled the international organization's enforcement power.

Around the same time, a new and more audacious idea emerged: to outlaw war altogether. In late 1927, U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg proposed a global treaty formalizing the concept to French Prime Minister Aristide Briand. In less than a year, the so-called Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928—formally titled the General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy—acquired 58 signatories, the vast majority of states in the world at the time. Establishing the principle that aggressive war was illegal, the parties agreed to "condemn recourse to war for the solution of

international controversies, and renounce it, as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another" and pledged to settle any disputes between them "by pacific means."

Because the pact failed to prevent World War II, it has been widely mocked as naive and ineffective. But in truth, it set in motion a process that gave rise to the modern international legal order. The authors of the pact, for all their ambition, failed to appreciate the scale of what they had done. Once war was outlawed, nearly every aspect of international law had to be reimagined. When Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, it took U.S. Secretary of State Henry Stimson a year to craft a response consistent with the pact's principles. Stimson decided that the United States would refuse to recognize Japan's right to the land it had illegally seized, and the members of the League of Nations soon followed suit. This new principle of nonrecognition, now known as the Stimson Doctrine, became a turning point. Conquest, once lawful, would no longer be recognized. And even if Japan could force China to sign a treaty to give the Japanese the illegally seized land, the agreement would not be recognized as lawful. Gunboat diplomacy would no longer give rise to valid treaty obligations.

Although Germany and Japan—both parties to the Kellogg-Briand Pact—flouted it by launching World War II, they ultimately

ANNA SOROKINA

faced its consequences: they lost all the territory they had conquered by force, and their leaders stood trial at war crimes tribunals. The first count in the indictment at the Nuremberg trials charged that "the aggressive war prepared by the Nazi conspirators . . . had been specifically planned in advance, in violation of the terms of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928."

The pact's principles also redefined other aspects of international law. U.S. Attorney General Robert Jackson defended the 1941 Lend-Lease Act—which enabled the United States to provide weapons to countries fighting Nazi Germany without a formal declaration of war—by noting that the Kellogg-Briand Pact had altered the laws regulating neutrality. Because the pact's signatories had agreed "to renounce war as an instrument of policy," Jackson explained, it followed that "the state which has gone to war in violation of its obligations acquires no right to equality of treatment from other states." Neutrality no longer demanded that states remain completely impartial in the face of aggression.

> After World War I, an audacious idea emerged: to outlaw war altogether.

Norms, in other words, began shifting in 1928. But the world's leaders came to realize that ideals were not enough. They needed new legal rules and institutions to give those ideals force. After World War II, the victorious states founded the United Nations to codify the revolution that the Kellogg-Briand Pact had set in motion. In the UN Charter, states are prohibited "from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state." Treaties signed under coercion became formally void, neutrality no longer required impartiality, and leaders who committed aggressive acts of war could be held criminally responsible.

This shift, led by the United States, marked one of the most profound legal transformations in world history. During the nearly eight decades after the UN Charter entered into force, the kinds of interstate wars and territorial conquests that had shaped and reshaped national borders for centuries became rare. Great powers have not openly fought a war against one another since 1945, and no UN member state has permanently ceased to exist as a result of conquest. Conflict, of course, has not disappeared, but it has become far less prevalent. The century that preceded World War II saw over 150 successful territorial conquests; in the decades afterward, there have been fewer than ten.

Some analysts credit the postwar peace to nuclear deterrence, others to the spread of democracy, and others to the rise of global trade. But these interpretations fail to account for the importance of the decision to outlaw war. When the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, violating the UN Charter, for instance, the UN Security Council demanded that Iraqi forces withdraw immediately. When they failed to do so, the Security Council authorized other countries to "use all necessary means" to "restore international peace and security." The United States then led an international military coalition that expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait. States watching learned that violating the prohibition on the use of force would have consequences. The law shaped states' behavior not necessarily because they decided that they ought to follow it. It shaped their behavior because it changed how they expected other states—especially the United States—to respond.

The prohibition on territorial conquest also altered how countries could acquire wealth. Before this rule was established, states' ability to accumulate wealth often depended on how much territory, resources, and concessions they could capture from other countries. War and conquest were recognized paths to prosperity. By eliminating the right to conquest, the postwar legal order forced states to seek economic growth through peaceful means, primarily trade. The expansion of trade and the prohibition of war went hand in hand, as states could no longer enrich themselves through conquest. Instead, they had to rely on economic cooperation, market competition, and the free flow of goods and capital.

Great powers that had relied on gunboat diplomacy to impose their will, meanwhile, had to substitute checkbook diplomacy. Economic and diplomatic sanctions replaced war as the primary means of enforcing international law. As states became more economically interdependent, they designed increasingly nuanced ways of "outcasting," or excluding states from the benefits of international cooperation. One such tool, trade sanctions, became a key way that states responded to a wide variety of unlawful actions, such as human rights violations, supporting terrorism, or waging wars of aggression. In 1945, imports and exports accounted for only around ten percent of the world's GDP; by 2023, they made up 58 percent. Tens of thousands of international organizations emerged, and more than 250,000 treaties were created to help manage this unprecedented level of interdependence. The threat of being excluded from international cooperation became harder and harder to bear.

Thanks to its large share of global GDP and the U.S. dollar's status as the world's reserve currency, the United States gained extraordinary power to enforce the rules. For most states, staying on good terms with the United States was a financial imperative. Washington's role in maintaining the postwar legal order was far from perfect: the United States' war in Vietnam, its 2003 invasion of Iraq, and its multidecade counterterrorism campaign in the Middle East all relied on overly broad claims of self-defense. But the United States did not violate the essential prohibition on territorial conquest, and it played a critical role in upholding the system, pledging to defend the European states that joined NATO and the American countries in the Rio Treaty, as well as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, if any of them faced an illegal attack. Washington's decision to lead the charge against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait made it clear that if a state attempted to conquer another, it could well face American-led resistance—even when the United States did not have a treaty obligation to respond. This imperfect but functional system kept major conflicts at bay and ensured that an interconnected world, for all its tensions, did not descend into unchecked violence. States were able to build more prosperous economies without fearing that a greater military power would conquer them or force them into unequal treaties to fork over the spoils.

LEGAL JEOPARDY

That may all be about to change. Prior U.S. administrations can be condemned for their hypocrisy. But the Trump administration's willingness to give up altogether on the prohibition on war is far more dangerous. The very premise that the United States could acquire Canada, Greenland, or the Panama Canal by force—or that it might claim ownership of Gaza—is not mere realism or a new form of transactional politics based on dealmaking. It is a throwback to an earlier era when might made right. Trump's rhetoric and actions resuscitate the pre-Kellogg-Briand idea that threatening war or embarking on territorial conquest is a legitimate way to solve disputes and force other states to make concessions.

In addition to threatening conquests of its own, the Trump administration appears poised to give up on defending other states' right not to be conquered. In April, after threatening to pull U.S. military assistance from Ukraine, Trump warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that if he would not consider a U.S.-brokered peace plan that, according to the *Financial Times*, could cede 20 percent of Ukraine's territory to Russia, he would face "losing [his] whole country." Trump has already brought back gunboat diplomacy by using the threat of force to coerce other countries into signing treaties on his terms; military threats helped obtain concessions from Canada and Mexico. Trump's tariff policy also undermines the prohibition on conquest by diminishing the power of economic sanctions as a law enforcement tool. Sanctions are most effective if used rarely and in response to clear violations of international law. Slapping tariffs of 25 percent on other countries on a whim, as Trump did to Canada and Mexico, corrodes the impact economic penalties have to punish real unlawful behavior.

Trump made a direct attack on the power of sanctions as an enforcement mechanism when he signed an executive order threatening to sanction judges and lawyers associated with the International Criminal Court. That move turned a tool for enforcing international law into a weapon to undermine it. More broadly, by unraveling states' interdependence, the isolationist economic policies that Trump is pursuing diminish other states' ability to punish breaches of international law by outcasting, leaving them with little choice but to resort to military force or to allow violations to go unchecked.

Trump's various rhetorical salvos and policy shifts may seem chaotic. But they all form part of a wider attempt to dismantle the postwar legal order. This assault is especially dangerous because it is being carried out by the country that built and, albeit imperfectly, maintained that system. Trump may not follow through on all his threats: some may be blocked by the courts or by domestic political opposition, and other leaders may not immediately mimic him. But his threats alone dangerously erode the set of assumptions about behavior, restraint, and consequences that uphold the prohibition on conquest.

Those assumptions—the belief that most states, most of the time, will behave as if the rules matter—allow weaker states to make long-term plans, investors to commit capital across borders, and governments to respond collectively to violations of law. If the world's most powerful state can flout long-settled expectations with impunity, others are likely to feel they can do the same. And once states no longer expect one another to play by the rules, the system that depended on that expectation will crumble—not all at once, but piece by piece until it collapses altogether.

THE RIGHT FIGHT

If the prohibition on the use of force collapses, Putin, Trump, and Chinese President Xi Jinping may well agree to simply carve the world into spheres of influence. Their countries would then be free to terrorize states within their spheres, extracting concessions from the less powerful in exchange for protection. Although it is possible that such a world would temporarily be relatively quiescent, it would also be far less free. It is more likely that the kinds of incessant conflicts that the prohibition on war banished would return, yielding a world in which, in the famous words of Thucydides, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

There is another potential path, but it would require courage and quick action. In 2022, 142 countries joined the United States in supporting a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's attempted annexation of Ukrainian territory as unlawful. Those other states could join forces to reaffirm the prohibition on territorial conquest without relying on the United States as its chief enforcer. There are some signs that Europe intends to step into the gap the United States has left. After the disastrous March meeting in the White House in which Trump and Vice President JD Vance belittled Zelensky and appeared to threaten to abandon Ukraine, Europe rallied to back Ukraine's right to sovereignty. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer pledged that European countries would increase their military spending and assemble a "coalition of the willing" to defend Ukraine, and the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, vowed that the European Union would present a plan to support the country.

But Europe cannot take the United States' place as the world's policeman. It cannot muster the necessary military power, economic influence, and political unity. Even if it could, it would be a mistake for the world to overly rely on another actor. Any serious attempt to safeguard the prohibition on the use of force cannot be made without acknowledging the problems with the system that secured it. When the UN was established, five powerful countries—China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States—gave themselves a privileged position as Security Council permanent members with the power to veto any UN enforcement actions. And the United States' overwhelmingly dominant role in the order meant that when Washington broke the rules—for example, when it invaded Iraq in 2003—nobody was able to hold it to account.

Trump is shredding what is left of the norm against using force.

These flaws delegitimized the legal order prohibiting the use of force, particularly in the eyes of states in the global South. This distrust means that some countries may not recognize the value of what they will lose when Trump dismantles that prohibition. Publicly acknowledging the postwar legal order's weaknesses—and its defenders' frequent failure to live up to their own ideals—is a crucial first step toward creating a more robust legal order. Maintaining the prohibition on the use of force will require fresh thinking about international institutions: a renewed system for ensuring international peace and security must empower a wider variety of states to share the responsibility of upholding legal norms, making them more legitimate and resilient to domestic shifts in any one country.

Midsize and small countries need to form broad coalitions to defend the prohibition on the use of force. Many analysts assume that the relative peace that has predominated for 80 years could never have been sustained without a primary, powerful state guarantor. But this view underestimates the real power that states can wield when they work in concert. The European Union is an example: none of its 27 member states has great power on its own, but together they are a force.

The UN General Assembly, in which all 193 member states have an equal vote, should play a leading role. The body does not currently have the Security Council's enforcement powers, but as an organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security, it can assert more power to enforce the charter's prohibition on the use of force. A recent reform known as the "veto initiative" demonstrates how it can do more. Created after Russia invaded Ukraine, this procedure refers any vetoed Security Council resolution to the General Assembly for debate. General Assembly resolutions passed under this provision afforded states legal backing to coordinate sanctions against Russia and provide Ukraine with arms and financial support. They also led to the creation of an international register of damages to pave the way for postwar reparations.

States should also work within regional or issue-specific coalitions to achieve shared goals. Such coalitions have begun to form: the Council of Europe, for instance, has announced that it is establishing a court to gather evidence against Putin and other Russian leaders and eventually try them for the crime of aggression in Ukraine, and members of the so-called Hague Group—Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Malaysia, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa—are working to enforce decisions made by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court regarding the war in Gaza. In May, foreign ministers from the African Union and the European Union vowed to strengthen their partnership on peace, security, and economic matters, offering a potential starting point for a peace coalition that does not rely on the United States.

Officially, the UN Security Council is currently the only body that can authorize states to go to war to enforce the law. But nothing is stopping countries from creating an "outcasting council," an organization to authorize joint sanctions against states that violate the prohibition on the use of force or other critical international laws. Sanctions have not always successfully curtailed unlawful behavior, in part because coordinating them on an ad hoc basis is slow and unpredictable. But if states work together consistently to trigger automatic, coordinated responses to certain unlawful acts, they could make this tool far more effective.

Most of all, securing the prohibition on the use of force depends on states recognizing how much good it has enabled, how hard it was to establish, and how much chaos could ensue if it vanishes. If countries respond to the United States' abandonment of its enforcement role by creating new institutions to take its place, that would send a powerful signal. American leaders may claim that might makes right, but they would be in the minority, and that stance would isolate them. If, for example, Washington were to pursue its threat to seize the Panama Canal, states could coordinate to outcast the United States with economic sanctions and diplomatic penalties or even by withdrawing their permission to allow U.S. bases in their territories. Demonstrating that other countries are willing and able to join together to impose costs on the United States when it breaks the law would help counter the deep damage the Trump administration has done—and would affirm that a wider variety of countries can play a more equal role in shaping and enforcing international law.

Trump's rise does not constitute the only threat to the prohibition on the use of force. China and Russia are seeking to reshape international norms to suit their interests. But if more states took collective responsibility for enforcing the core rules of the international system, these countries, too, would have to take notice. It is far from clear whether countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—which are used to dictating the terms of global engagement—will be prepared to share that power. It is also unclear whether countries long excluded from global decision-making can place their trust going forward in an international legal order grounded in the prohibition on the use of force. But supporting such an order is critically important. Playing China, Russia, and the United States off one another might seem to offer short-term advantages to developing countries, but in the long run, these countries risk becoming the spoils of great-power rivalries, with little capacity to direct or control their own futures.

The system that preserved relative peace and prosperity for nearly eight decades is not self-sustaining. It must be vigorously defended. After World War II broke out, U.S. policymakers realized that the failure to establish a durable postwar order following World War I had sown the seeds of future chaos. History's lesson is that waiting until a moment of crisis has passed to begin planning for what comes next is a recipe for failure. Just as policymakers in the 1940s sought to establish lasting peace out of the disorder of war, today's leaders must design institutions, alliances, and strategies to secure peace rather than sit and watch as Trump rewinds the clock.

Strategies of Prioritization

American Foreign Policy After Primacy

JENNIFER LIND AND DARYL G. PRESS

Less than six months into U.S. President Donald Trump's second term, his administration's foreign policy has generated widespread dismay and confusion at home and abroad. The use of tariffs against allies and adversaries; the threats to annex Canada, Greenland, and Panama; and the unusually blunt criticism of Washington's closest partners appear both arbitrary and destructive, especially to policymakers who have spent their professional lives managing the U.S.-led international order. They believe that creating order in a world full of complex transnational challenges requires alliances, credibility, and soft power—precisely what the Trump administration seems bent on destroying.

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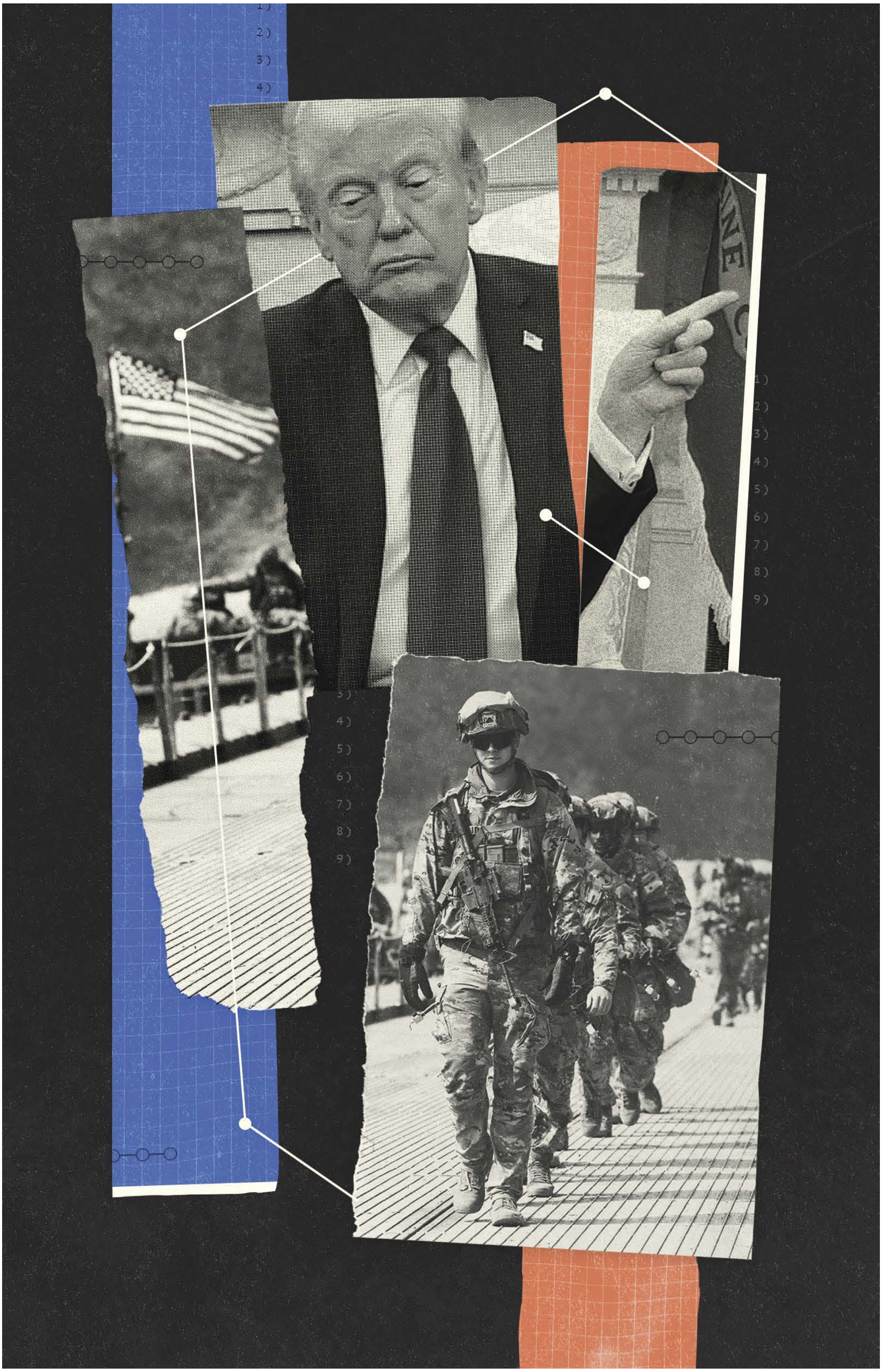

Illustration by Michaela Staton

Aspects of its policies may be difficult to understand, but there is a logic at the core of the administration's national security strategy. The Trump administration sees the previous U.S. strategy—which aimed to build and maintain a global order led by the United States—as a misguided effort that has sapped U.S. power. It views Washington's moves to cultivate soft power as leading to meddling and overstretch, and it perceives highly credible American security guarantees as encouraging most of the United States' allies to reduce their defense efforts and rely on its protection.

There is a logic at the core of Trump's national security strategy.

Instead of trying to create global order, the Trump administration now appears to be pursuing a more focused strategy: prioritization. Its reasoning is simple. The United States has limited resources and China is its greatest geopolitical threat, so Washington must energize recalcitrant allies around the world to manage their own regions, freeing the United States to concentrate on Asia.

At this early stage, prioritization is only one of several approaches the Trump administration may pursue. But for now, signs of prioritization are evident in the administration's words and actions. In the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance, circulated at the Pentagon in March, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth described China as "the Department's sole pacing threat" and the "denial of a Chinese fait accompli seizure of Taiwan—while simultaneously defending the U.S. homeland" as "the Department's sole pacing scenario." This echoed ideas promoted for years by Elbridge Colby, who is now the undersecretary of defense for policy and whose 2021 book, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, contended that the top priority of U.S. foreign policy was to assemble an "anti-hegemonic coalition" in Asia to prepare for the possibility of "a war with China over Taiwan."

In practice, the logic of prioritization clarifies many of the Trump administration's actions with regard to Europe. Tough talk to NATO allies is meant to convince them that they can no longer rely on Washington and must do more for themselves. Ending the war in Ukraine quickly and bringing peace to the continent would enable the United States to reduce its military presence there and focus its resources on Asia. Even the schisms between the United States and Europe over the terms of a settlement between Russia and Ukraine are connected to prioritization. European leaders insist that the U.S. military play a major role in monitoring a peace deal because they desperately want to keep the United States in Europe; the Trump administration wants those responsibilities to rest on European shoulders because it wants out.

The principles of prioritization predate the Trump administration, and they will likely endure beyond it. Every U.S. president since Barack Obama has tried to "pivot" U.S. national security focus from Europe to Asia, because they have all understood that the greater threat to the United States lies in Asia and that U.S. allies in Europe have more capacity to defend themselves. If Trump's team can make this titanic shift happen—if it can draw down U.S. forces in Europe and concentrate U.S. military strength in Asia—future presidents are unlikely to shift back.

When the United States faced another rising great-power rival, the Soviet Union, in the late 1940s, it adopted a strategy that became known as containment to counter the threat. That strategy was initially flawed but refined over time. The first version of prioritization, too, has important weaknesses. Although the strategy is built on the recognition that U.S. resources are limited, the Trump administration has requested higher defense spending. And although prioritization is designed to prevent China's domination of East Asia, some of the Trump administration's policies may be courting unnecessary danger in pursuit of that objective. Policymakers will now have to work through these tensions in the new U.S. strategy. In one form or another, prioritization is here to stay.

THE STRATEGIC EQUATION

For more than three decades, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has pursued a highly ambitious objective: to create, expand, and lead a liberal international order. But for the Trump administration, that order is a fantasy. Efforts to transform global politics have sapped American power and left the United States with near-constant wars, an overextended military, and free-riding allies. Liberal principles such as free trade and the right to asylum, although appealing in theory, robbed the United States of the ability to preserve its domestic industrial power and control its border. Maintaining the international order, prioritizers say, has meant putting the United States second.

Prioritization reframes U.S. national security policy by focusing on the safety, prosperity, and social cohesion of the United States. But prioritizers are not isolationists who want to concentrate only on homeland defense. Instead, this strategy offers a middle position between isolationism and the longtime U.S. strategy of global leadership. It narrows the goals of U.S. foreign policy to focus on the country's most urgent threat—the rise of a rival regional hegemon, China—in order to avoid overstretching the United States' finite resources.

A reckoning with the end of U.S. primacy has driven this shift in strategy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States faced no superpower rivals and could therefore act as what former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called the "indispensable nation," the country that would solve conflicts and lead multilateral efforts around the globe. Those days are gone. Prioritizers condemn that kind of global activism as producing what Colby has described as "overextension" in pursuit of "wildly ambitious goals" predicated on "a gauzy conception of the 'sacredness' of alliances without real strength or prudence to back it up."

Fiscal constraints reinforce the call for greater discipline in U.S. foreign policy. The United States has amassed $29 trillion in public debt, roughly equal to the country's GDP. To make matters worse, the federal budget deficit, at more than six percent of GDP, is higher today than at any time in the past century (except for periods of war or severe economic downturn), pushing the national debt ever higher. And as the U.S. population ages, federal spending on Medicare and Social Security will also increase. As Americans face difficult tradeoffs between spiraling debts, higher taxes, and entitlement reform, it will become harder to pay for the type of military that a strategy of global leadership requires.

China, meanwhile, has become a far more powerful rival than the Soviet Union ever was. It is an economic peer of the United States and a leader in many critical technologies. Beijing is rapidly building up its conventional military capabilities and nuclear arsenal, which were once areas of comparative weakness. Competing with China will therefore require focused U.S. attention, leaving Washington with little time and few resources to manage the world.

Prioritization is a realist strategy, and what keeps realists up at night is the threat of a rival great power controlling an economically vital part of the world. Historically, that fear drew the United States into World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. Were a powerful U.S. adversary to gain regional dominance, the thinking goes, it could use that position to structure world politics in ways that harm the United States, such as by weaponizing trade and isolating the United States diplomatically.

Today, the only vital region with a potential rival hegemon is Asia. In Europe, Russia is aggressive but completely outmatched. It has around one-third the population and one-tenth the GDP of the European Union, and it lags far behind Europe in the emerging technologies that will drive economic growth and warfighting in the future. European countries therefore have plenty of latent power to contain Russia; they merely need to mobilize it. The balance of power is more lopsided in Asia. China has the demographic, economic, and technological might to dominate maritime East Asia and seems intent on doing so. Using "gray zone" tactics, including coercive diplomacy and military pressure, Beijing is increasing its control over disputed territory in the South China and East China Seas. To pressure Taiwan, in particular, China conducts influence operations, cyberattacks, and military incursions. It isolates Taipei diplomatically, denying it membership in international institutions. And all the while, China is modernizing its military and conducting exercises to prepare for a blockade or invasion of Taiwan. In the logic of prioritization, because Beijing has both the will and the ability to achieve regional hegemony, it poses a threat the United States must counter.

To balance China but avoid overstretching U.S. resources, prioritization calls for a U.S. military drawdown in nonprioritized regions. This includes Europe, where the United States currently devotes significant attention and military capacity. Washington must convince all of its allies, but particularly those in Europe, to enhance their own defenses. This step is essential because a weak ally could become a target of aggression, which would force the United States to come to its aid. European allies must be made to understand that the United States will only be their last line of defense—compelling them to coordinate among themselves and generate real domestic defense capabilities.

DELIVERING THE PIVOT

The concerns that drive prioritization also did not begin with Trump. In 2011, Obama declared a pivot of U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military resources to Asia to address China's growing power and influence. But the pivot was less doctrine, more New Year's resolution—proclaimed, then abandoned. The Obama administration urged U.S. allies in both Asia and Europe to spend more on defense, but those pleas were ignored. American attention eventually strayed to the Middle East as civil wars erupted in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011, and to Europe after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The pivot was put on hold.

The United States cannot contain a superpower without allied support.

The first Trump administration renewed U.S. focus on Asia. Its 2017 National Security Strategy highlighted threats from China and Russia and emphasized the Indo-Pacific region as a priority theater. Trump, as a candidate and later as president, shocked European allies with his remarks criticizing their failure to meet NATO spending targets, and he warned that the United States might not protect allies that did not adequately fund their own defense. In 2020, the Trump administration even announced the withdrawal of 12,000 U.S. troops from Germany, although the Biden administration canceled this plan the following year.

When President Joe Biden came into office, his administration sought to repair relations with European countries, but it also tried to direct additional attention to Asia. It presented the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021 as a move that would permit greater focus on the Indo-Pacific. Through a "latticework" of security and economic initiatives with various regional partners, it sought to construct a counter-China coalition; through multilateral arms export controls, it sought to limit Chinese military might. But when war broke out in Ukraine in 2022 and in Gaza the next year, the Indo-Pacific once again took a back seat.

With prioritization, the second Trump administration is delivering the pivot that was long promised but never executed. Under this strategy, the United States would accelerate its preparations for a conflict in East Asia, with particular focus on the defense of Taiwan. To deter China and to improve U.S. warfighting capability, the United States would seek to restore its own weakened defense industrial base. It would maintain export controls that are designed to deny China cutting-edge weapons. Beyond the military realm, Washington would counter Beijing's regional economic influence with new trade, technology, and development initiatives.

Prioritization would still see the United States coordinating and training with its allies, as well as seeking increased defense contributions from them. Most of their defense budgets fall near or below the global average as a share of GDP, which is inadequate given the high threat they face. The United States cannot contain a superpower without allied support—containing the Soviet Union required the mobilization of Western Europe, particularly the military capabilities of West Germany. At its peak, the Bundeswehr deployed a force that in size and capability was the equal of the U.S. Army in Europe. Just as NATO countries mobilized to counter the Soviet threat, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and others must do the same to counter China today.

The shift of U.S. resources and attention to Asia will also mean resetting European expectations about the American role in any future European conflict. Since the late 1940s, U.S. deployments on the continent ensured that the United States would be the first to join the fight and would supply the largest contingent of forces. Prioritization would change that. The United States would stay in NATO, expecting to help defend its allies should the need arise, according to Article 5 of the alliance's charter. But the United States would reduce its ground and air forces stationed in Europe in peacetime, perhaps transferring some of them to Asia.

For decades, U.S. military planners have spent their days figuring out how to rapidly introduce forces to Europe in the event of a conflict. Now, the U.S. goal would be the opposite. According to the logic of prioritization, the U.S. military would reduce its ability to quickly deploy large numbers of troops across the Atlantic. Like other NATO allies, instead of arriving on day one with the preponderance of forces, the United States would plan to arrive later and with less. Only by removing this safety net can Washington push NATO allies to assume the financially and politically difficult task of taking the lead in their own defense.

European countries will have to adjust to this new normal. Most NATO armies are underfunded and undersized, lacking the personnel necessary to sustain high-intensity operations. They rely on the United States to provide key capabilities, notably command-and-control and functions related to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. European countries must overcome political disunity and serious budgetary problems to restore the continent's military power and fill the gaps that a diminished U.S. contribution would leave. The good news is that, with massive economic and technological advantages over Russia, Europe has the latent capability to address the threat.

THIS IS HAPPENING

For decades, U.S. and European diplomats described their alliance using words such as "ironclad" and "shoulder to shoulder" to nodding heads in Brussels conference rooms, at the annual Munich Security Conference, and at World War II commemorations. This language sought to assure anxious Europeans that the United States could be relied on to protect European security.

Trump tore up the script. In a memorable photo from a G-7 summit during his first term, the U.S. president sat, arms crossed, glaring at an indignant German Chancellor Angela Merkel. This February, Trump and Vice President JD Vance welcomed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House, only to berate him on television. When Vance attended the Munich Security Conference the same month, instead of delivering the usual soothing words, he lambasted Europeans for shirking on defense and for stifling freedom of expression in their countries. Next came punishing tariffs and reports of senior U.S. officials insulting European allies on a leaked Signal chat. To Kaja Kallas, the EU's top foreign policy official, it looked as if the United States were "trying to pick a fight" with Europe.

The Trump administration doesn't want a fight, exactly, but a separation. Its effort to create political distance from Europe advances its desired shift in U.S. strategy: to convince—truly convince—European foreign policy elites that there will not be a return to the "ironclad" relationship and that the United States will no longer provide the continent's first line of defense.

The change in the way Washington talks to and about Europe is not the only evidence of a shift toward prioritization. In Ukraine, the Trump administration is trying to end the war quickly in a manner that allows for a U.S. drawdown from the continent. European peace plans have sought to keep the United States engaged, proposing, for example, a cease-fire that would be guaranteed by a U.S.

security force. But the Trump administration has flatly rejected that prospect. In the logic of prioritization, a U.S.-led force in Ukraine would be a strategic mistake since it would trap the United States in a European quagmire, preventing it from pivoting to Asia and allowing NATO allies to offload responsibility.

By pushing for an end to the war, the Trump administration is trying to create a future that European countries can manage on their own. A smaller U.S. presence would ease Europe into de facto recognition of Russia's core interests near its borders, leaving Ukraine outside NATO. Compared with a situation in which the EU or, worse, NATO pushed eastward, which would provoke Moscow, this would reduce (if not eliminate) a key source of conflict between Europe and Russia. As long as European countries commit the financial and political resources necessary to develop strong defenses, they should be able to deter future Russian aggression—even from a Russia emboldened by gains in Ukraine and a U.S. withdrawal from the continent.

MOVING ON

Prioritization has attracted criticism not only from horrified European allies but also from American advocates of the previous U.S. strategy of global leadership. In the United States, those advocates on the center left and center right share the view that a militarily powerful United States, with a large network of alliances, provides essential, pacifying leadership in global politics. They argue that, as the strongest country in the world, the United States still has sufficient economic and military power to defend multiple regions. Some also downplay the threat posed by Beijing, arguing that China's power is exaggerated and that the country faces serious demographic and economic challenges that undermine its capability to establish regional hegemony. Voting against Colby's confirmation in April, Senator Mitch McConnell, a conservative advocate of U.S. global leadership, condemned the prioritization strategy Colby supports as "geostrategic self-harm that emboldens our adversaries and drives wedges between America and our allies" that those adversaries then exploit.

The outcry from many parts of the foreign policy establishment at the Trump administration's gutting of foreign aid encapsulates the differences between the old and new strategies. To those who favor a strategy of American global leadership, the move was callous and irresponsible, damaging U.S. credibility and squandering the relationships and soft power that Washington has built over decades.

For the administration, the disruption was exactly the point. Trump's foreign policy team dismisses soft power as a tool for managing a global order that it no longer intends to lead. U.S. policies today are aimed not at reassuring American allies but at energizing them. Aid programs may give the United States influence, but the Trump administration sees no need for that influence because it is not interested in managing politics across the so-called global South. More to the point, foreign aid, in the administration's view, is another example of taking care of the world's problems rather than those of the United States.

Prioritization, like any strategy, comes with tradeoffs. The biggest is that diminished U.S. credibility may lead to the spread of nuclear weapons in some regions, an outcome neither prioritizers nor their critics relish. Already, the Trump administration's efforts to distance the United States from Europe have fueled doubts about the reliability of the NATO nuclear sharing program. Since the 1960s, Washington has promised to transfer nuclear weapons to certain NATO allies in the event of a major attack. A U.S. pivot away from Europe could undermine faith in that commitment. Fearing a nuclear threat from Russia, European countries may then develop a joint nuclear force, or individual countries such as Germany or Poland could seek independent arsenals.

The possibility of nuclear proliferation is an argument against prioritization. But if navigating today's world means that countries must take responsibility for their own national security, then developments such as a European replacement for the U.S. nuclear umbrella in Europe may be unavoidable. Washington's handling the security for the entire "free world" may have sounded plausible in the late 1990s, when the United States enjoyed a budget surplus, economic and military primacy, and no rival superpower. In 2025, things are different. The spread of nuclear weapons would be lamentable, but that does not change the reality that the global leadership strategy that prevents it is no longer viable.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Prioritization creates additional tensions that must be addressed. For decades, the credibility of U.S. security promises enabled European leaders to cut back on defense and spend liberally on social welfare. They grew dependent on Washington, confident that the United States would protect them. A prioritization strategy rectifies this problem in Europe—but invites a similar dynamic in Asia. Having declared that managing China's rise is the foremost U.S. national security concern, the United States will have a hard time convincing its Asian allies to help it balance against China.

Indeed, even when the United States' attention was spread all around the world and less focused on their region, Asian allies elected to "cheap ride" on U.S. commitments. For the past few decades, while China rose and began asserting its claims to disputed territory more forcefully, Japan's defense spending remained flat at one percent of GDP. During the same period, defense spending in the Philippines and Taiwan fell. In the past few years, Japan has made some notable changes to its famously restrained security policy, including investment in counterstrike capabilities and a pledge to increase military spending. But Tokyo has not lifted significant legal limitations on its ability to dispatch military forces and to cooperate with allies, and its defense spending remains low, at a planned 1.8 percent of GDP in 2025. Taiwan's defense spending has also risen in recent years. But despite facing an existential threat from China, it still spends less than 2.5 percent of its GDP on defense, which is around the global average. A U.S. pivot to Asia, with all the resources and promises that come with it, would only weaken regional allies' incentives to spend more on security.

The Trump administration may be uniquely suited to mitigate this problem. If there has ever been a U.S. administration that is willing to work with allies but happy to walk away if they do not step up, it is this one. Trump himself has made clear that he is not deeply invested in alliances or in any particular vision for Asia's future, as long as it does not include Chinese regional dominance. Both the Japanese and South Korean governments understand this, which is why leaders in Tokyo fear Washington will cut some sort of deal with Beijing, and why leaders in Seoul fear that Trump will reach a nuclear agreement with North Korea that disadvantages South Korea. To be sure, motivating allies in Asia to contribute more to their own defense will be a persistent challenge, but the transactional nature of the Trump administration may reduce allies' temptation to cheap-ride.

Another problem with prioritization is that it is excessively confrontational toward China. To deny China regional hegemony, for example, prioritizers in the Trump administration argue, the United States must draw a redline between the mainland and Taiwan and enhance U.S. forces in the region to defend the island. In effect, the United States is adopting a strategy that would have it fight a war, if need be, against a nuclear-armed superpower that sees unification with Taiwan as a matter of national sovereignty. By making it impossible for both Beijing and Washington to achieve their core interests, prioritization seems to put the rivals on a collision course.

Asia needs U.S. defense resources more than Europe does.

Finally, although prioritization is driven by an appreciation of U.S. resource constraints, it does little to ease that pressure. In fact, the defense budget requested by the Trump administration is as big as or bigger than those of previous administrations. Meanwhile, U.S. annual deficits are enormous, debt is mounting, and entitlement spending will soon rise. And prioritization will only become more expensive if the United States enters a major war against China.

The solutions to these problems—the strategy's confrontational nature and its high price tag—may be intertwined. It is not surprising that the current version of this strategy is rather bold because its main advocates so far are those analysts and policymakers who have articulated the clearest vision of the dangers posed by Beijing. They were so energized by that threat that they made an effective case to overhaul decades of entrenched U.S. foreign policy thinking.

But even though future prioritizers will similarly focus on preventing China's regional hegemony, they need not accept the most assertive version of the strategy. There is nothing about prioritization that requires the United States to confront China with any particular redlines, set of allies, or military force posture. Where to draw the redlines and how best to counter Chinese military power in the region should be—and are already being—debated. Taiwan could be inside the protective bubble or outside it. The United States could contain China with a full spectrum of offensive military capabilities or with something closer to a "porcupine" strategy of strengthening the national defenses of regional partners against

Chinese predation. Some of those more restrained alternatives would demand less of the U.S. military and thus cost far less, too.

NO TURNING BACK

Many advocates of a U.S. global leadership strategy—particularly those in Europe—hope that the current moment is merely an aberration, that, as Biden did after taking office in 2021, the next U.S. president will announce that "America is back." They are likely to be disappointed. The seeds of prioritization were planted long ago. Since the Obama administration, all U.S. presidents have recognized the need to shift U.S. military resources to Asia, and they all wanted NATO allies to do more for their own defense. But no previous administration was willing to pay the political costs of making the necessary changes. Now, the second Trump administration is ripping off the Band-Aid.

Future U.S. administrations may reverse elements of Trump's foreign policy. They might reinstate foreign aid, arguing that a country as wealthy as the United States can afford to be charitable. They might also restaff international institutions or show greater warmth toward NATO allies. But once scarce defense resources are moved out of Europe, it is unlikely that another U.S. president would move them back. Asia needs those resources more than Europe does.

The last time the United States mobilized to confront a rising regional hegemon, when it embarked on a long-term project to contain the Soviet Union, the earliest formulations of the strategy were flawed. The first versions of containment asked little of U.S. allies, relied excessively on nuclear weapons to deter and wage a potential war, and seriously considered the possibility of initiating preventive war to defeat the Soviet threat once and for all. Strategy development is often an iterative process, and containment was fortunately refined over time. Washington eventually adopted more sensible approaches that mobilized the resources of key allies, developed a wiser balance between conventional and nuclear tools, and assumed a less confrontational attitude toward Moscow.

The new U.S. national security strategy is in its early stages and, like containment, will need to be refined over time. The United States will be Asia-focused, and China-focused, for many years to come. It now falls on both supporters and critics of the Trump administration to develop alternative versions of prioritization that minimize its costs and risks.

Absent at the Creation?

American Strategy and the Delusion of a Post-Trump Restoration

REBECCA LISSNER AND MIRA RAPP-HOOPER

In Donald Trump's first go-round as U.S. president, his heterodox approach seemed to portend a dramatic transformation in American foreign policy and potentially even the end of the rules-based international order. And yet for the most part, prevailing institutions, groupings, and rules endured. Washington's alliances held fast, U.S. adversaries advanced their interests in real but limited ways, and American power proved resilient. As a result, the Biden administration was able to renew traditional elements of American influence and restore key fundamentals of U.S. foreign policy, such as active

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Illustration by Joe Gough

global leadership, alliances and partnerships, and the defense of an open, rules-based international order.

But when Trump leaves office in January 2029, there will be no going back. Trump's reelection dashed the view that his first presidency was a mere aberration, and his second administration's early, seismic actions on global trade, skepticism toward allies, and affection for erstwhile adversaries have already changed the United States' role and image in the world. Some may argue that it is too soon to plan the next administration's foreign policy because no one knows what further disruptions are coming. But thinking of the future of American foreign policy solely in terms of the post-Trump inheritance runs the risk of being overly reactive or reflexively restorationist. One notable lesson from the early months of Trump's second term has been the scope and scale of policy change that is possible in a very short period. The next president should enter office with a clear and constructive vision for the future of American foreign policy and move to realize it with the same alacrity the Trump administration has displayed in its first 100 days. It is not too soon to start debating the contours of that vision.

To begin, the United States needs what accountants refer to as a "zero based" review of its foreign policy: a clean slate from which to reevaluate and justify its long-held interests, values, and policies. Four years from now, many of the familiar pillars of U.S. grand strategy—from alliances to multilateral organizations to global treaties—will likely be transformed beyond recognition. What's more, the world these tools were intended to help manage will have changed profoundly. No new president, whether a Democrat, a more traditional Republican, or a Trump disciple, will have the option of returning to the familiar approaches of the post–Cold War era. Starting from a zero base will guard against the tendency to default to old structures and concepts that might no longer reflect the United States' vital interests and geopolitical context or the needs and preferences of the American people.

Trump has exposed the growing cracks in the U.S.-led international order. But he is not interested in fixing them—quite the opposite. By the time his second term is over, that old order will be irreparably broken. Whoever follows Trump will have to reckon with a complex, multipolar international order and decide what role the United States should play in it.

BACK TO NORMAL?

During his first term, Trump's animosity toward international trade, opposition to multilateralism, and deep skepticism of alliances signaled an end to the rules-based international order. His unorthodox policy views had a magnifying effect on major global trends that had been well underway before Trump was elected, including the global diffusion of power, rapid and disruptive technological change, and political polarization and policy volatility. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2019, we argued that the United States would have to tend to an international order that was badly in need of renovation, including in the domains of critical and emerging technologies and through new forms of order building in the Indo-Pacific.

But to a degree that surprised us even after we joined the Biden administration, American power and global leadership proved highly resilient once Trump departed the scene. When President Joe Biden told the world "America is back," the world largely believed him. Relieved that the Trump era appeared to have passed, U.S. allies and partners aligned more closely with the United States. Growing coordination between China and Russia helped the Biden team rally Washington's closest partners in both Asia and Europe. The U.S.-led response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the United States' unparalleled ability to provide decisive military and intelligence assistance while isolating Russia from the global financial system.

Meanwhile, the combination of China's coercive "wolf warrior" diplomacy, draconian COVID-19 pandemic response, and worsening economic slowdown highlighted the benefits of aligning with the United States and diminished the appeal of hedging strategies that courted closer economic and technological ties with Beijing. The impressive post-COVID economic recovery in the United States—the strongest among advanced industrialized economies—underscored continued U.S. power, and allies and partners embraced Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy by aligning their own foreign policies with the United States and one another, spending more on defense, and pushing back against Beijing's aggressive actions from Taiwan to the South China Sea.

For at least the first two years of the Biden administration, American politics appeared to have moved past Trump, creating space for some notable areas of bipartisanship. Trump's decisive loss in 2020, the outrage at his attempts to overturn the result and at the ensuing insurrection, and the strong performance by Democrats in the 2022 midterms all seemed to indicate that Trumpism had run its course. Although partisan polarization remained as acute as ever, the passage of major legislation such as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act suggested that Congress was not only able to function but also finally ready to make much-needed generational investments in U.S. competitiveness that could modernize the country's global role.

Trump's protectionist turn strikes at the heart of the U.S. alliance system.

On the biggest foreign policy challenges the Biden administration faced, Republican members of Congress often pushed for sharper versions of the administration's preferred policy, such as advocating more aggressive support for Ukraine. Indo-Pacific policy was remarkably bipartisan, and a solid consensus formed around central tenets of Biden's China policy, which itself reflected some continuity with Trump's first-term approach. Taken together, these dynamics made the Biden presidency feel like a return to normalcy—a restoration, not an interregnum.

Yet the immediate success of this approach reduced the urgency within the administration to more fundamentally remake U.S. grand strategy for a new era. The war in Ukraine in particular appeared to reinforce the centrality of traditional foreign policy constructs by positioning the United States as the leader of a coalition—centered on its NATO allies—to defend the free world against the threat of Russian aggression. In areas in which the Biden administration recognized that reforms were needed—to modernize alliances, create new multilateral configurations, and attempt to build a post-neoliberal approach to international economics—the changes were evolutionary and in some cases incomplete. For instance, the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and reduce the United States' global counterterrorism footprint was bold and necessary, and it could have set the stage for a new era of strategic discipline. But despite defining China as the most consequential challenge for the United States and elevating the Indo-Pacific as the primary theater of competition, the Biden administration was consumed, from 2023 onward, by the war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East, precluding military posture changes and readiness investments that would have better aligned U.S. assets with U.S. strategy.

The risks of metastasizing instability in Europe and the Middle East, threats to Israel and close allies in NATO, and domestic political pressures diverted attention from long-term strategic adjustments to immediate crisis management. In short, the allies' and partners' warm reception of the American return, coupled with challenging conflicts, meant that in the time it had, the Biden administration prioritized foreign policy restoration over reinvention.

FOOL ME ONCE

No responsible analyst can claim to predict what will happen over the course of the first year of the new Trump administration—let alone all four. But the haphazard rollout of unprecedented global tariffs in April and the White House's goal of reshaping the postwar order indicate that upheaval is not just incidental but a central policy objective. Secretary of State Marco Rubio was explicit on this point in his confirmation hearing: "The post-war global order is not just obsolete," he told Congress, "it is now a weapon being used against us."

Although the secretary's characterization is extreme, it contains a kernel of truth: as the United States and the world have transformed, the liberal international order has not kept pace. Thanks to early moves by the Trump administration and dramatic shifts in economic, military, and technological power, the United States no longer has the option of returning to the international order and grand strategy it has known since the Cold War, perhaps even World War II. Trump's foreign policy is hastening the arrival of a multipolar world by unleashing and accelerating forces that will be difficult to reverse. Trade policies intended to punish China may well advantage Beijing and diminish the United States. As allies and partners grow more capable of self-defense, they will also become more autonomous. Already faltering multilateral institutions will further diminish in capacity. Threats to invade allies will undermine international norms of sovereignty and nonaggression. And great-power competitors will seize diplomatic ground the Trump administration freely cedes.

These trends converge most clearly in trade and economic policy. Trump's "Liberation Day" tariff announcement in April was expected to target China, a great-power competitor with whom the United States has a large trade deficit by dint of China's role as a manufacturing powerhouse that sends American consumers inexpensive goods. The 125 percent tariff that was levied outstripped even the most extreme forecasts and led to a monthlong trade war that roiled the global economy. Although a truce was reached in Geneva, it is a fragile one that could easily be broken by new U.S. sectoral tariffs. And in exchange for the upheaval, the United States extracted no concessions from Beijing.

Meanwhile, close U.S. allies and partners in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, were not spared from Trump's crippling tariffs. These countries are also manufacturing giants and were critical partners in U.S.-led efforts to break China's monopoly on global manufacturing. Many U.S. companies and partners are in the midst of moving their supply chains out of China to push back against the rising power's coercive economic efforts. Now, even if these partners manage to negotiate lower rates for themselves, the Trump administration's ten percent baseline tariff, should it stand, may make such an undertaking prohibitively expensive. Should these allies ultimately face tariff levels that are similar to China's, the "China plus one" strategies pursued by many companies to diversify manufacturing to countries other than China will be infeasible. And regardless of what tariff levels land, including as court proceedings play out in the United States, the shock of being economically kneecapped by a close ally has made many Indo-Pacific states rethink their reliance on the United States as a guardian of an open international economic order.

The Chinese government clearly intends to use the U.S.-led turmoil to its advantage. Throughout the standoff, official statements from Beijing projected confidence in the resilience of the Chinese economy, and Chinese leader Xi Jinping toured the Southeast Asian countries hit the hardest by U.S. tariffs, promising close partnerships and portraying China as the defender of the international order. That the United States folded so quickly has almost certainly validated Beijing's approach. Beyond its trade policy, the Trump administration has given little indication of its broader strategy toward China or the rest of the Indo-Pacific, creating ample incentive for even close allies to resume hedging and for Beijing to gain ground.

Indeed, Trump's hard protectionist turn strikes at the heart of the U.S. alliance system, which has historically paired strategic alignment and security guarantees with privileged access to American markets, resulting in impressive development curves for many American allies. The trade deficits that Trump abhors were a predictable and benign byproduct of this arrangement, particularly because the United States exports services that do not figure in these tallies to many of its closest partners. After 1945, the United States assumed global security and economic leadership because it believed that both served Washington's best interests. Redefining these interests is not simply a U.S. policy matter; it means the postwar international order is less appealing to the countries that accepted American leadership as the price for a system that enabled their own security and prosperity.

Trump's erratic approach to trade is converging with other economic and technological policies to undermine the United States' preeminent role. The American economy still has unmatched capacity for resilience and growth. But assuming that some tariffs will remain, many analysts have projected that the United States will likely enter a recession before year's end, if it is not already in one. Bond market volatility is also calling the dollar's primacy into question, and the United States' global credit rating has slid. Coupled with acute uncertainty, rising prices, and supply shortages, the American economy is wobblier than at any point since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technologically, the United States can continue to lead in AI and other critical sectors, but it faces more challenges to its innovation edge than at any time since the Cold War. Sectoral tariffs may make it more challenging for the Trump administration to invest in domestic manufacturing, including in critical technologies such as semiconductors, since the levies would increase the costs of imported components and make U.S.-manufactured chips less globally competitive. The administration's rescission of Biden's rules on AI chip exports, meanwhile, may make it easier for exquisite technologies to wind up in competitors' hands. And the administration's turn away from investments in clean energy technologies increases the likelihood that China could come to dominate that sector while cuts to education and basic research funding undermine long-term U.S. competitiveness overall.

These shifts will impose compounding geopolitical costs on the United States. Although it's difficult to know how much ground China or Russia may gain, it already appears likely that U.S. partners from Southeast Asia to Europe will hedge in China's direction. As revisionist authoritarian states such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia continue deepening their cooperation, the United States is inching further back from its role as the leader of a coalition of advanced industrial democracies. This is not an accident. In stark contrast with his first term, in which many senior officials steered the administration to focus on great-power competition, Trump appears to be pursuing a transactional approach to geopolitics based on dealmaking with other major powers. His early desire to coerce Ukraine into an unfavorable deal with Russia, for instance, and signs that he could seek an accommodation with China have raised fears that the United States will recede to the Western Hemisphere and leave Europe and Asia to Russia and China, respectively.

Whether Trump will commit to a spheres-of-influence approach is uncertain. But the question of which countries Washington views as adversaries and allies and why is very much open, particularly as the world watches Trump's assault on democratic norms and institutions at home. Partners will be hard-pressed to escape the conclusion that Washington has completely redefined its self-interests, even if the nature of its desired leadership role is not yet clear.

All of this will accelerate a profound global reordering. Some global rules, institutions, alliances, and groupings will withstand the test. But even as familiar structures remain, their roles, missions, and contexts may shift beyond recognition, and global perceptions of the United States will be forever altered. The post-Trump world will present both an opportunity and an epochal challenge: the need to build a new American strategy that goes beyond merely reacting to Trump and also avoids reverting to decades of postwar policy thinking.

Since the global financial crisis and the failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it has been clear that the United States is overstretched. But the temptation to tweak the United States' role in the world rather than overhaul it has carried the day in the last two Democratic administrations. After Trump's second term, the impulse to merely repair and restore traditional American leadership will seem quaint at best. The next administration will inherit something closer to a grand strategic tabula rasa than policymakers have seen since the end of World War II.

ZEROING OUT

In accounting, zero-based budget exercises begin with clean financial slates in order to justify every expense and allocate resources efficiently to meet strategic goals. In foreign policy, strategists should use this moment to zero out their assumptions about the U.S. role in the world rather than accept inherited premises. In bucking conventional foreign policy wisdom, the Trump administration has conducted a version of this exercise—one guided by impulse instead of analysis and strategy. The next administration can and must do better, taking advantage of an American foreign policy "Overton window" that has been blown wide open.

Such a review must start by taking stock of the conditions that best assure the security and prosperity of the American people. American grand strategists, for instance, have long defined U.S. interests in terms of preventing a hostile power from dominating Eurasia. But this construct implicitly favors military calculations and neglects the power and influence that come from dominating technological ecosystems, such as AI, clean tech, and quantum computing—the advantages of which may prove more consequential than securing particular geographies over the coming decades. Revising this assumption could reorient American strategy, centering technology cooperation with allies and partners and elevating the importance of Africa and Southeast Asia as regions whose demographics create opportunities for rapid growth in their digital economies. It could also put a premium on new tools of economic statecraft, such as revamped development finance and a U.S. government strategic investment fund, that enable Washington to help finance other countries' purchase of U.S. technology and infrastructure.

Biden tweaked, but did not overhaul, America's role in the world.

American grand strategists also need to ask whether the country still benefits from being the preponderant provider of global public goods, such as freedom of navigation. Defending the global commons—particularly shipping lanes—has been a guiding principle for the U.S. military in the post–Cold War world, whether countering piracy in the Horn of Africa, defending against Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, or conducting freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea. A zero-based review could help prioritize these missions, assessing whether the United States has sufficient capacity for the most taxing contingencies and identifying areas in which other countries could accept greater responsibility.

A zero-based review could also consider the appropriate place for values in American foreign policy. American grand strategy has long been oriented around the country's identity as a democracy. But is the spread or at least the defense of democracy still in the national interest? What role should democracy and human rights play in shaping Washington's global objectives and identifying its partners? A review might suggest a more modest emphasis on values as a matter of both rhetoric and substance and reckon with diminished American moral authority as a result of democratic challenges at home and perceptions of hypocrisy abroad. Such an approach might center international partnerships on shared principles rather than shared values, expanding the role for nondemocracies in U.S. coalitions. It could call for greater restraint in the use of sanctions to performatively punish countries for their internal conduct—especially if those sanctions compromise the United States' ability to cooperate on areas of mutual interest. And it could create space for expanded diplomatic engagement with countries whose values the United States finds repugnant.

Finally, a zero-based review must account for newfound constraints on American power and allow for tradeoffs demanded by a more multipolar world. Multipolarity, after all, does not imply equipoise. This version of it will be complex, with significant power wielded by the United States and China but with major roles for other players, including an increasingly autonomous Europe, a recalcitrant Russia, and an ever more powerful India. It will require a realistic assessment of American capabilities—acknowledging, for example, that the U.S. military already faces a readiness crisis, the cost of servicing the U.S. debt already exceeds spending on defense and Medicare, and Trump's cuts have already slashed the capacity of the federal workforce, including diplomats and development experts. In a more multipolar world that no longer presumes consistent American leadership, the exercise of influence over newer forms of international order could prove more taxing. With more limited capabilities, strategists will want to work with, rather than resist or reshape, the major geopolitical changes that are already underway.

Consider how policymakers might choose to approach the U.S. alliance system in a post-Trump world. The next several years could witness a crisis that tests alliances in Europe and Asia, as the United States continues to press partners to spend more on defense and threatens to pull back its commitments—and perhaps even does so. American unpredictability is already inspiring allies to take steps to invest in their own self-defense individually and through new collective arrangements and could result in some allies seeking nuclear capabilities.

Rather than reflexively aiming to reverse these trends, zeroing out decades-old assumptions could yield a fresh approach. New alliance bargains could prioritize countries with which the United States has the greatest strategic alignment and focus on domains that benefit the American people while dispensing with the separation of security, economic, and technological cooperation that has traditionally characterized U.S. partnerships. Alliances have long focused on nuclear and high-end conventional deterrence, but they could be recentered on economic and technological cooperation. New negotiated arrangements could include the harmonization of industrial policy; cooperation on vital supply chains, such as critical minerals and semiconductors; the alignment of climate and tax policy; and frameworks for collaboration on frontier technologies, such as AI, including aligned tech regulations and standards. Refashioning alliances in this way, moreover, will bring them into domains that manifestly benefit everyday Americans and better align them with the requirements of long-term competition with China.

These changes could also transform the United States from a wholesale security provider to something more like a security enabler, with allies assuming more responsibility for conventional deterrence and the United States supporting them with weapons sales and coproduction, technology sharing and innovation partnerships, intelligence collaboration, and operational integration. With European allies in particular, there could be an opportunity to strike a new bargain that accelerates investments in independent European self-defense, focuses allies squarely on the Russian threat, and reassesses the U.S. military posture on the continent. If smaller configurations of European defenses are layered atop NATO, the United States could explore new alliance approaches that leverage those efforts.

Such shifts would allow Washington to update its global force posture without hasty changes that surprise allies and create security gaps leading to deterrence failures. The United States could concentrate its military presence in a relatively small number of frontline allies, prioritizing Asia but including Europe, and it could focus on partners whose threat perceptions and capabilities are most closely aligned, such as Japan, the Philippines, Poland, South Korea, and the Baltic states. Within other alliances, the United States could then pay more attention to the areas of cooperation that benefit it most, such as technology cooperation and defense coproduction.

Without a zero-based review, strategists risk succumbing to restorationist tendencies that will leave the United States unequipped to meet the moment. In the wake of Trump's disruptive presidency, for instance, policymakers might choose to recommit to all treaty allies in Europe and Asia equally, particularly if Russia continues to threaten eastern Europe and Chinese-Russian cooperation increases. But in a world in which a smaller subset of European allies have supercharged their own defenses, an undifferentiated return to NATO risks perpetuating age-old frustrations about allied defense spending and burden sharing. A return to business as usual for NATO would also make it difficult to deal with the reality that some NATO allies will have warmed to China and others to Russia as hedges during the Trump years. What's more, it would fail to account for increased European capability and autonomy, and it would risk a recommitment of resources to the continent that the United States cannot afford.

Post-Trump planners might be able to better align grand strategy with public perceptions.

A zero-based review would also create an opportunity to account for the American people's foreign policy preferences, when they are discernible, and free strategists from imagined political constraints. Foreign policy practitioners and thinkers often discount the role of public opinion in foreign policy, arguing that the American people's preferences need not constrain the options available to policymakers. But this moment of profound change is occurring precisely because of a widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo. Many Americans, for instance, believe that the faraway military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were a mistake. Nearly every year since 2004, a majority of Americans have reported that they are dissatisfied with the country's role in the world. Although the public does not have clearly formed consensus views on many issues, post-Trump planners have an opportunity to better align grand strategy with public perceptions, which in turn should make public support for U.S. foreign policy more stable over time and across parties.

A zero-based review should also embed the new political openings that the second Trump administration will have enabled. In the past, U.S. presidents on a bipartisan basis have winced at foreign policies that might be seen as controversial within and across parties, including initiatives to negotiate with adversaries such as Iran or North Korea or the fundamental necessity of pressing allies to increase burden sharing. With the Trump team dispensing with all policy assumptions and conventions, more options will be available to whoever comes next.

BEGIN AGAIN

Foreign policy analysts often refer to *Present at the Creation*, a book by former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, when discussing the extraordinary global order-building effort undertaken by the United States after World War II. Explaining the title, Acheson noted that in the immediate postwar world, the Truman administration's task was "just a bit less formidable than that described in the first chapter of Genesis. That was to create a world out of chaos; ours, to create half a world, a free half, out of the same material without blowing the whole to pieces in the process."

Acheson's creation, of course, survived remarkably well. It was refashioned and embellished many times over and persisted after the end of the Cold War, which it helped win. Because history at that moment broke in Washington's favor, it produced a world in which American policymakers saw few constraints and many opportunities. The alliances and institutions that survived the midcentury competition between East and West appeared too healthy and American power too strong to warrant a post–Cold War overhaul.

The picture is completely different today. As new technologies, new rising powers, and long-standing tensions combine to form fresh chaos, the Trump administration has decided to wipe the slate clean. The world's opinion of the United States and receptivity to its desire to assume a refashioned leadership role are themselves new variables. Although global demand for American power has proved resilient before, there are no guarantees that an American president of either party come 2029 will be able to shape patterns of trust and cooperation the same way presidents have in the past. The world, meanwhile, continues to churn, as allies, partners, and adversaries make consequential decisions that will constrain the choices available to the next U.S. president. Washington needs a strategy fashioned for this post-primacy reality. To deflect this task would be to miss an exceptionally rare chance not only to be present at the creation of a new order but to be prepared for it.

How to Survive the New Nuclear Age

National Security in a World of Proliferating Risks and Eroding Constraints

VIPIN NARANG AND PRANAY VADDI

In 2009, when U.S. President Barack Obama came into office, nuclear weapons looked increasingly superfluous. As the Cold War faded into history, Moscow and Washington, the world's two nuclear superpowers, had long been working together to reduce their arsenals. At the same time, after years of protracted conventional wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the broader "war on terror," the U.S. defense establishment was far more preoccupied with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency than with nuclear strategy and great-power rivalry. The notion that any other country would attempt to reach nuclear parity with Russia and the United States seemed far-fetched,

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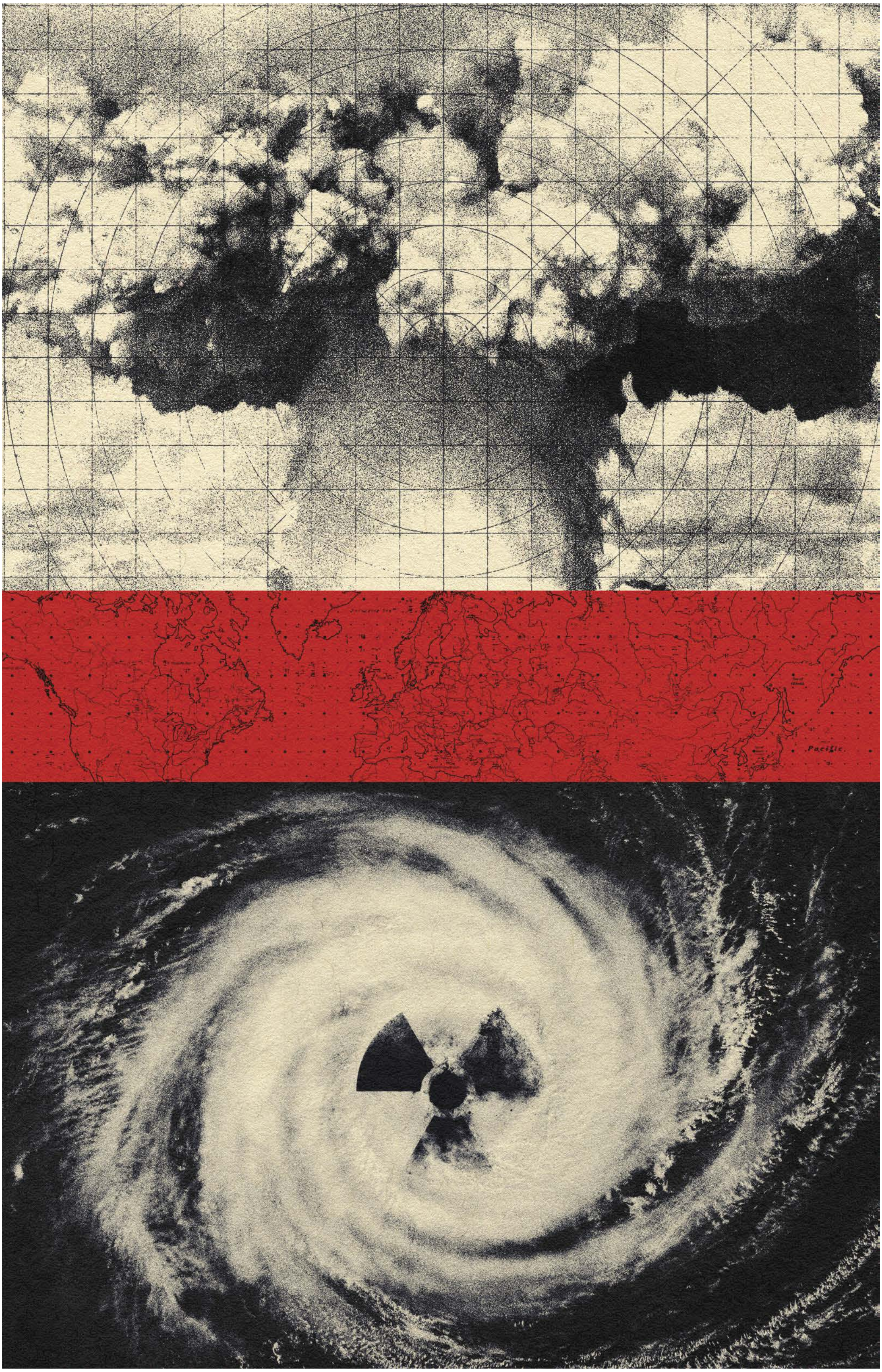

Illustration by Matt Needle

and American leaders were all too happy to delay an expensive refurbishment of the aging U.S. arsenal. So strong was the consensus that nuclear arms were a relic of a previous era that four top former national security officials—Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn, and William Perry, not one of them a dove—publicly called for "ending" nuclear weapons "as a threat to the world."

A decade and a half later, things could not be more different. The United States now faces a Category 5 hurricane of nuclear threats. After decades of maintaining only a minimal nuclear capability, China is on pace to nearly quintuple its 2019 stockpile of some 300 nuclear warheads by 2035, in a quest to attain an arsenal equivalent in strength to Russia's and the United States'. Far from being a partner in arms reductions, Russia is using the threat of nuclear weapons as a shield for its aggression in Ukraine. Meanwhile, North Korea continues to expand its arsenal, which now includes missiles capable of hitting the continental United States. Iran is closer than ever to producing a nuclear weapon. And in May, the world witnessed India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed powers, strike each other's heartlands with conventional weapons in the aftermath of a terror attack, a confrontation that—already unprecedented—could have escalated to a nuclear standoff.

These multiplying threats have not just brought nuclear strategy back to the center of U.S. defense concerns; they have also introduced new problems. Never before has the United States had to deter and protect its allies from multiple nuclear-armed great-power rivals at the same time. Like Russia, both China and North Korea may integrate nuclear weapons into offensive planning, seeking a nuclear shield to enable conventional aggression against nonnuclear neighbors. Moreover, there is a growing possibility that two or more nuclear powers—for example, China and Russia, or North Korea and Russia—might try to synchronize military aggression against their neighbors, stretching the U.S. nuclear deterrent beyond its means. Finally, the rapid erosion of nuclear guardrails, the diplomatic architecture that has for decades limited proliferation and brought security to dozens of countries under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, has pushed some Asian and European allies to consider acquiring their own nuclear weapons. All this has happened in an era in which the United States' antiquated nuclear arsenal has fallen into disrepair, with ongoing modernization efforts mired in delays and rampant cost overruns.

This coming nuclear hurricane poses far-reaching challenges. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Washington will need to develop more, different, and better nuclear capabilities and begin to deploy them in new ways. Given the scale of the problem, nuclear concerns can no longer be treated as a niche issue managed by a small community of experts. Officials at the highest levels of government will need to incorporate them into core defense policy in each of the major theaters of vital interest to the United States: Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East. At the same time, Congress will need to back an accelerated effort to overhaul the U.S. arsenal with significant funding and give the project urgent priority, to be able to address not just today's changing threat environment but tomorrow's as well. Above all, for the United States to effectively handle a highly volatile and quickly changing nuclear order, nuclear affairs must once again become a central part of American grand strategy.

CHINA'S BIG PLAY

The most momentous shift in the global nuclear weapons landscape is China's determination to become a nuclear powerhouse. As recently as 2019, the small Chinese arsenal scarcely factored into U.S. nuclear strategy. After first testing nuclear weapons in 1964, Beijing sought nuclear capabilities almost exclusively for defensive purposes and to be able to deter the United States (or the Soviet Union) from nuclear attack and "blackmail." To achieve these limited goals, Beijing maintained a handful of unfueled intercontinental ballistic missiles and stored the warheads separately—an arrangement that required hours, perhaps days, to prepare the ICBMs for launch. This posture enabled a retaliation-only strategy, accompanied by a "no first use" pledge to the world. As a result, U.S. strategists, both during the Cold War and after, were able to set China's nuclear forces aside as a "lesser included case" and concentrate on deterring the Soviet Union and its successor, Russia.

Sometime during the last decade, however, Chinese leader Xi Jinping ordered a breathtaking expansion of his country's nuclear arsenal. Along with hundreds of new ICBM silos, the new force will include regional low-yield ballistic missiles (and possibly cruise missiles), hypersonic delivery systems, an orbital warhead-delivery system designed to evade U.S. missile defenses, and an expanding submarine-based deterrent designed to survive a nuclear first strike. Moreover, Beijing is building this arsenal even faster than Washington had initially anticipated: in just five years, it has doubled its number of operational warheads to 600, a figure that is estimated to reach 1,000 by 2030 and possibly 1,500 by 2035. As a result, the United States may soon face not one but two rival great powers with large, diverse strategic nuclear forces comparable to its own.

China's nuclear rise poses a complicated dilemma for U.S. planners. Since the dawn of the nuclear age, American nuclear strategy has centered on convincing any adversary that there is no viable pathway to using nuclear weapons to achieve its political-military goals against the United States or any U.S. allies. This strategy has three parts. First and most important, the U.S. arsenal must be able to survive a first strike and impose assured destruction on its attacker in retaliation for such a strike. Second, to the extent possible, it needs to be able to meaningfully limit the amount of damage the attacker can inflict on the United States and its allies. To do this, the United States must maintain the capability to destroy as many of the attacker's nuclear weapons as practicable before or after they are launched, a principle known as counterforce targeting. Thus, in addition to flexible regional nuclear options that can manage escalation, Washington needs highly accurate U.S.-based strategic nuclear forces that can threaten to destroy the adversary's long-range arsenal, to prevent a limited war—wherein one or two nuclear weapons might be exchanged in theater as an escalatory step in an intense conventional conflict—from turning into a far more destructive one. The ability to limit damage is a core requirement of U.S. deterrence strategy and its nuclear guarantee to allies—that the United States could likely save Berlin without losing Boston. Third, the U.S. arsenal needs to be large and survivable enough to retain sufficient nuclear capabilities after an initial exchange to deter further attack by a weakened adversary or opportunistic aggression by one of the smaller nuclear-armed states. A nuclear force that is designed to meet these three goals with respect to only Russia, however, as the U.S. arsenal currently is, will be insufficient to do so against both China and Russia at the same time.

Adding to this problem is the specific composition of Beijing's new arsenal. Had Xi's nuclear expansion focused on building up survivable nuclear forces—for example, by placing more warheads on ballistic missile submarines—then U.S. strategists would mainly need to focus on enhancing antisubmarine tools. But Xi has chosen also to build hundreds of new silos for land-based ICBMs, which can be launched within minutes to devastate the U.S. homeland—a posture that seems designed to break U.S. strategy. For the United States to be able to credibly limit damage from China, it will need to account for each new silo. Moreover, the United States cannot assume, as some have argued, that Beijing merely wants a more credible assured retaliation capability. By acquiring new ICBMs and lower-yield short-range weapons, it could be fundamentally shifting the orientation of its nuclear strategy. For example, China could use lower-yield weapons "locally" in a battle against conventional forces, whether on the battlefield or to deter the United States from using similar capabilities if a Chinese offensive imperils U.S. conventional forces. The new ICBMs could also help China counter the United States' ability to threaten strategic escalation. Given the number of new Chinese ICBM silos and their geographic spread, and China's potential shift to a strategy that enables regional coercion, the United States will likely need a larger—and different—deployed nuclear arsenal to be able to deter both China and Russia in twin crises.

DANGER AT EVERY CORNER

To make matters worse, China's emergence as a major nuclear weapons state comes at a moment when Russia and other smaller nuclear powers have begun wielding their arsenals in far more dangerous and destabilizing ways. In recent years, Moscow has not only steamrolled over almost every arms control agreement with Washington but also made explicit nuclear threats against the West. In the fall of 2022, for example, when Russia's front in southern Ukraine appeared at risk of collapse, Russia's nuclear threats took on a new edge as its senior leaders credibly discussed using low-yield nuclear weapons to avoid conventional defeat. The U.S. intelligence community judged that the odds of such use were higher than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis—a "coin flip," as one aide to U.S. President Joe Biden put it. The Biden administration urgently set out to convince Putin that using a nuclear weapon would have "catastrophic consequences," and Putin decided not to test Western resolve—this time.

Nevertheless, the threat crystallized Moscow's stakes in the conflict and forced the United States and its allies to carefully weigh the escalation risks of providing military aid to Ukraine. Moreover, there was no "the other guy blinked" moment, as U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk famously stated when describing the Soviets backing down to end the Cuban missile crisis: the threat of Russian nuclear use may have receded after the 2022 crisis, but the conditions that generated it have persisted and intensified. Since then, the Kremlin has suspended the 2010 New START treaty—which had brought the U.S. and Russian arsenals down to their lowest levels in 60 years. It has also revised its nuclear doctrine, clarifying that it would consider targeting nuclear-armed states, such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, that provide aid to a nonnuclear belligerent at war with Russia, such as Ukraine. Putin has begun to deploy Russian nuclear weapons in neighboring Belarus, and U.S. officials assessed that Russia may have a reckless plan to put nuclear weapons in space.

> Russia's offensive nuclear strategy in Ukraine is a playbook for China and North Korea.

Notwithstanding Russia's saber rattling, Washington and its European allies announced more expansive military support to Kyiv, including F-16s, new munitions, and missiles that would allow long-range strikes against Crimea and into Russian territory. The United States and NATO allies also suspended compliance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe following Russia's withdrawal in 2023, a step that allows a greater number of U.S., NATO, and other forces to be stationed closer to the Russian border if necessary. Amid heightened Russian nuclear rhetoric and growing risk-taking by both sides, the nuclear threat has become a permanent feature of the conflict. What's more, Russia's strategy in Ukraine has provided a possible playbook not only for China but also for North Korea for using the threat of a nuclear attack as a shield to enable increasingly ambitious regional aggression.

Indeed, the complexities of the emerging nuclear landscape go well beyond rising China and revisionist Russia. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is steadily expanding his country's nuclear arsenal, seemingly disinterested in Trump administration efforts to reduce nuclear tensions in exchange for sanctions relief. In recent years, along with a newer generation of ICBMs capable of reaching U.S. territory, North Korea has added enough regional nuclear weapons to its arsenal to deter a combined U.S.–South Korean attack. North Korean strategists aim to convince Washington that it should not risk San Francisco to protect Seoul—that it should abandon South Korea to fend for itself. Meanwhile, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program, reducing the time required to sprint to a weapon to potentially days.

Weakened by the dismantling of its network of proxy forces over the past 18 months, it may also feel more urgency than ever to weaponize its nuclear capability. If Israel and the United States conclude that the Iranian regime is about to cross that threshold, they might feel compelled to launch a preventive attack, possibly setting off a destabilizing regional war. Although the Trump administration has said it is open to a new nuclear deal with Iran, making progress will not be easy. Too much pressure could backfire, causing Iranian hard-liners to push for rapid weaponization. But readiness to compromise could embolden Tehran to continue its secretive, creeping progress toward a weapon, setting the stage for future war.

Yet another threat comes from Pakistan. Although Pakistan claims its nuclear program is strictly focused on deterring India, which enjoys conventional military superiority, U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that the Pakistani military is developing an ICBM that could reach the continental United States. In acquiring such a capability, Pakistan might be seeking to deter the United States from either trying to eliminate its arsenal in a preventive attack or intervening on India's behalf in a future Indian-Pakistani conflict. Regardless, as U.S. officials have noted, if Pakistan acquires an ICBM, Washington will have no choice but to treat the country as a nuclear adversary—no other country with ICBMs that can target the United States is considered a friend. In short, mounting nuclear dangers now lurk in every region of vital interest to the United States.

NUCLEAR BULLIES, ANXIOUS ALLIES

Although each of these rising nuclear antagonists poses a challenge in its own right, the possibility of coordination or collusion among them is even more worrying. To aid Russia's war in Ukraine, for example, Iran has furnished the Russian military with drones; North Korea has provided at least 14,000 soldiers and huge amounts of munitions and has cemented a "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Russia. In addition to giving North Korea a dependable Russian veto in the UN Security Council against any additional global sanctions, the growing Moscow-Pyongyang axis means that a conflict on the Korean Peninsula could draw in China, Russia, and the United States, with each supporting its respective ally—creating a true nuclear nightmare.

By far the greatest concern, however, is the growing alignment of China and Russia. In 2023, China provided Russia with approximately 90 percent of its imports of goods that are subject to the G-7's high-priority export control list, according to a study by the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. Filling a massive import gap, this Chinese supply chain has helped Russia sustain its war economy and quickly reconstitute its depleted conventional capabilities. In return, Russia has helped China in strategic military domains such as space, missile defense, and early warning technologies—including a system that can detect an adversary missile attack from anywhere on the globe, a capability that only Russia and the United States possess.

Indeed, U.S. defense planners must now consider the possibility that Beijing and Moscow may try to synchronize aggression against their neighbors to further limit the U.S. ability to respond. If China attacks Taiwan while Russia is attacking eastern Europe, for example, U.S. forces would be split and stretched thin. Hypothetically, if it failed to deter Russia from using a nuclear weapon to further Moscow's regional aims, the United States might need to respond with nuclear use, and potentially with a larger nuclear exchange if it is unable to reestablish nuclear deterrence in Europe. In such a situation, with overall U.S. deterrence weakened, China could exploit the moment to launch a conventional attack against its neighbors, or even be emboldened to use nuclear weapons to stave off the United States. Confronted with this two-war dynamic, given the current U.S. arsenal, a U.S. president might be compelled to back down in one or both fights, with catastrophic consequences for American and global security.

Amid these volatile developments, a number of nonnuclear states—including, for the first time this century, Washington's own allies—are contemplating developing their own nuclear arsenals. For decades, a key pillar of American nuclear strategy has been extending the U.S. nuclear deterrent to at least 34 formal allies across two vast oceans, a responsibility no other power assumes. This policy was born not out of altruism but out of self-interest: the United States and its collective deterrent are stronger with the geography, capabilities, and political unity that allies provide. Fewer nuclear powers means fewer opportunities for nuclear use, a goal that has also allowed Washington to centralize alliance decision-making under its command.

With the rapid changes in both the global nuclear environment and U.S. foreign policy, however, some American allies have begun to question Washington's ability and willingness to extend deterrence. South Korea—anxious about American abandonment—is now most likely to engage in nuclear proliferation, although some NATO powers could also be candidates. In Europe, the United Kingdom's and France's nuclear arsenals can compensate to some degree for reduced U.S. engagement. But these forces, even combined with additional nonnuclear capabilities, are not positioned to limit the damage that Russia can cause to allies and thus cannot credibly replace the nuclear umbrella offered by the United States. As a result, countries such as Poland or even Germany could decide to seek their own nuclear weapons if they become convinced that the United States is no longer willing or able to protect them.

The advent of more nuclear powers, regardless of whether they are U.S. allies, would open a Pandora's box that Washington has fought for decades to keep closed. For one thing, the same nuclear powers these countries are seeking to deter—China, Russia, and North Korea—could decide to wipe out any emerging nuclear programs in a preventive attack. And even if a U.S. ally succeeds in acquiring nuclear weapons, its small arsenal would become vulnerable to more powerful adversaries as U.S. security guarantees fade, leading to growing instability. Consider South Asia, where India and Pakistan continue to engage in increasingly intense conventional strikes despite the ever-present threat of nuclear use, testing the limits of the so-called stability-instability paradox, wherein the existence of nuclear stability between two countries may actually increase the likelihood of conventional conflict. Moreover, if one U.S. ally—say, South Korea—developed nuclear weapons, it would likely encourage others, such as Japan, to quickly follow suit. This would deliver a damaging blow to an already fragile Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which has for decades served as a crucial brake on the spread of nuclear weapons. Keeping allies nonnuclear and preserving the treaty are core American interests—if nothing else, to prevent other states from starting, and dragging Washington into, nuclear wars that the United States has to finish.

A GAME WITHOUT RULES

Among the remarkable facts about the nuclear order in previous decades has been the general observance of formal and informal guardrails to limit the growth, spread, and use of nuclear weapons. Even at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States saw mutual benefit in verifiable strategic arms control. And after successful negotiations on shaping and limiting their arsenals in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks of the 1970s, the two countries began a series of agreements to massively reduce their military armaments, from the U.S.-Soviet Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987 to the U.S.-Russian New START Treaty in 2010. In this way, the countries managed a steady and precipitous reduction in their forces from the heights of Cold War military competition.

Today, these constraints are crumbling. Under Putin, Moscow has partially or fully abandoned many of the earlier agreements, and Beijing continues to refuse even discussing arms limits as it rapidly expands its arsenal. The looming 2026 expiration of New START, which limits Russia and the United States to 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads each on intercontinental delivery systems, may be a crucial inflection point. Without a successor agreement, the United States could find itself in a full-blown nuclear arms race for the first time in half a century—this time with both China and Russia expanding their arsenals simultaneously. At some point, Beijing, Moscow, and Washington may come to recognize that limits on strategic arms are in their mutual self-interest. But for the foreseeable future, the United States may have to face unconstrained nuclear competition in which it is potentially outnumbered and outgunned and does not have the means to quickly even the odds.

The lack of guardrails makes the new nuclear age all the more dangerous. The United States has had to deter a great power with a similar nuclear arsenal before, but it has never had to deter two. It has assured allies against a single major nuclear adversary in Europe, but it has never had to assure distinct groups of allies, thousands of miles apart on land and sea, against two. The United States has worked to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to so-called rogue states since the end of the Cold War, but it has not previously had to stop nervous allies from pursuing them this century. Although there are no easy solutions to these multiplying threats, U.S. leaders can significantly mitigate them by making astute, yet still modest, changes to the arsenal itself and to the overall role of nuclear strategy in U.S. foreign and defense policy.

In theory, the United States is already upgrading its nuclear posture to address these challenges: for 15 years, the government has been committed to a trillion-dollar-plus nuclear modernization program to update the land-, sea-, and air-based weapons that constitute the U.S. nuclear "triad." This includes replacing decades-old systems with more advanced alternatives: the 1970s Minuteman III ICBMs and Ohio-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines, for example, will be replaced by modern Sentinel ICBMs and Columbia-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines. The new B-21 stealth bomber will be equipped with a long-range nuclear stand-off cruise missile that can be launched at a target from outside an enemy's air defenses. In 2024, fifth-generation F-35 fighters began carrying the modern B61-12 gravity bomb for regional deterrence in Europe.

Yet this overhaul was conceived in 2009, when the United States had not even anticipated, let alone accounted for, the nuclear expansions of China and North Korea. Thanks to its strategic arms control agreements with Moscow, Washington also assumed that global nuclear stockpiles would continue to shrink, and it did not even seek to replace the full number of legacy capabilities. Take the submarine-based nuclear forces, which are both the backstop of nuclear survivability—deterring an adversary from targeting the U.S. homeland—and also essential for targeting as many of an adversary's ICBMs as possible. According to the modernization plan, the existing 14 Ohio-class submarines, which can (without New START limits) carry a maximum of 336 Trident ballistic missiles, are to be replaced by just 12 Columbia-class submarines with maximum capacity for only 192 Tridents—representing a launcher reduction of more than 40 percent, just as China completes its construction of hundreds of new ICBM silos.

Moreover, because of the low priority accorded to nuclear-armed conflict at the time, many parts of the plan started late, and further delays now mean that new capabilities are still years away and billions of dollars over budget. With the Sentinel ICBMs now likely ten years behind schedule, the legacy Minuteman III will need to be maintained until at least 2050, well beyond its designed life expectancy. Even if the United States completes the modernization as planned, the country's arsenal will still be insufficient to confront today's and tomorrow's nuclear challenges.

MORE, DIFFERENT, BETTER

The United States will need innovative approaches and a far more comprehensive strategy to manage the multiplying threats from China, North Korea, and Russia. Although the second Trump administration is pursuing an ambitious "Golden Dome" homeland missile defense architecture, the plan comes with risks of its own. Not only will it take decades to be fully realized and cost hundreds of billions of dollars that could be spent on other capabilities, but it may also spur adversaries to cheaply build and deploy more warheads and decoys, as well as more destabilizing exotic technologies, to potentially evade and saturate the system. More advanced missile defenses will be necessary to intercept small or residual adversary nuclear forces, but they—including Golden Dome—cannot replace the nonnuclear and nuclear forces that may be required to first eliminate as many adversary forces as practicable if an adversary miscalculates or threatens escalation in a war. As a result, the United States will need a nuclear arsenal that breaks sharply from that of past decades, and that deploys, for the first time this century, more, different, and better nuclear systems.

In Europe, the United States and NATO must assess what is required to create a strong regional deterrent against a revisionist Russia. Currently, Moscow possesses up to 2,000 lower-yield "battlefield" nuclear weapons that are unhindered by any existing arms limits. NATO has an opportunity to build resilience and redundancy into its nuclear mission, taking advantage of the common F-35 program and the expanded geography of the alliance with new members Finland and Sweden. But in the face of improving Russian air defenses, the alliance may need to develop a longer range air-launched nuclear weapon for deployment on F-35 fighter jets, or more cost-effective ground-based options, as successors to the B61-12 gravity bomb.

In the Indo-Pacific, the regional nuclear cupboard is even more bare. Although B-2 and B-52 bombers stationed in the United States can deliver gravity bombs and long-range, air-launched nuclear cruise missiles to the region, the tyranny of distance reduces the bombers' effectiveness. To enhance its sea-based regional deterrent, the United States has developed a lower-yield warhead (the W76-2) deployed on Ohio-class Trident ballistic missiles. But these weapons must take the place of higher-yield warheads, reducing the United States' overall counterforce capabilities, as well as the strength of the survivable second-strike force on which it relies to deter attacks on the homeland.

A promising alternative is to build dedicated regional deterrence capabilities for Asia. In 2023, Congress mandated that the Pentagon develop a lower-yield, sea-launched nuclear cruise missile for U.S. attack submarines. Such a weapon could deter China's first use or provide a limited escalation option should China attack a U.S. ally. It could also free up the Trident missiles for higher-yield strategic warheads, thus allowing the United States to more effectively target the growing number of Chinese ICBM silos within existing capabilities. The problem is that the new sea-launched cruise missiles may not be ready soon enough. In addition to exploring quicker ways to acquire this capability—such as by pairing lower-yield nuclear warheads with existing Tomahawk missiles on older, Los Angeles–class attack submarines—policymakers should assess the viability of apportioning to the Indo-Pacific some of the future air-launched or ground-based missile systems developed for Europe. Given the long timelines for developing new weapons, the United States needs to anticipate future needs in Asia and Europe now so that it can be ready when the storm hits.

> Some allies have begun to question the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

If China or Russia were to escalate a regional conflict beyond Asia or Europe, Washington would have to turn to "central" strategic deterrence to credibly deter a nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland. In a nuclear world in which either China or Russia can test the United States on its own, and in which the two U.S. adversaries could align to do so simultaneously or in rapid succession, a key challenge is figuring out how to deter one without compromising the ability to deter the other. The Biden administration first recognized this problem in its Nuclear Weapons Employment Planning Guidance, a report issued in 2024. This updated guidance directed the Department of Defense to prepare for deterring China, North Korea, and Russia "simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict." The broad implication is that Washington needs to deploy not only more warheads but also more systems than originally planned under the modernization program.

To do so amid continued delays, the Biden administration considered near-term options such as uploading additional warheads to Minuteman III ICBMs, which now carry a single warhead apiece; extending the operating lifetime for Ohio-class submarines for several additional years to ensure there is no immediate launcher shortage; and adding more Trident missiles to Ohio-class submarines, which have had four of their 24 missile launchers deactivated, or "capped," to comply with the expiring New START limits. To avoid the looming launcher cliff in the crucial sea component of its nuclear triad, however, the United States must build a larger number of Columbia-class submarines in the 2040s and beyond—at least 14, and perhaps more, to hedge against the further growth of adversaries' arsenals.

To be clear, there is no need for the United States to deploy more nuclear forces than those of China and Russia combined. Deterrence is not—and never has been—a function of raw warhead comparisons. The U.S. nuclear stockpile today, for example, is not identical in size or composition to that of Russia, which has a larger number of weapons overall, including its large number of regionally focused, nonstrategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems. Still, to counter the ICBM silos that China is now developing while maintaining deterrence against Russia, the United States will need to consider deploying additional warheads. Precisely how many more is uncertain and will depend largely on the choices adversaries make and on how much risk a president is willing to accept in both the most plausible and worst-case nuclear scenarios.

In response to China's nuclear expansion, some experts have called for a fundamental shift in U.S. nuclear strategy to avoid having to deploy additional nuclear weapons. According to the current counterforce approach, which in concert with missile defenses seeks to limit damage against allies and the homeland, the United States needs to deploy a sufficient number of nuclear and nonnuclear forces to be able to target adversary nuclear forces. Given the challenge of maintaining this capability against two growing nuclear peers, some strategists advocate shifting to a so-called countervalue approach, in which the United States would not try to target adversaries' nuclear forces, but would instead target a smaller number of key population centers, infrastructure, and sources of political control and economic wealth. Proponents argue that this strategy shift would require no adjustments to U.S. posture because U.S. submarines, hidden deep beneath the seas, could assuredly retaliate against centers of political power, infrastructure, and population in response to an adversary's first strike, deterring the attack in the first place.

Leaving aside the legal and moral issues of intentionally targeting civilian populations, abandoning the objective—or even the option—of damage limitation would force a U.S. president to expose the American homeland and population to a devastating reprisal. That prospect raises questions about whether a countervalue strategy would effectively deter adversaries and the extent to which it would unnecessarily risk additional American lives—what any U.S. president would value the most. The countervalue approach would also cause allies to question whether the United States would be willing to use nuclear weapons to defend them in a regional war. With

American cities under increased nuclear threat, and the United States holding its arsenal in reserve to deter against such attacks rather than to maintain extended deterrence, allies may conclude that they need to seek their own nuclear arsenals. A strategy built for general deterrence of attacks against the U.S. homeland is not credible in an era of extended deterrence, a lesson the United States learned in the 1960s and never revisited, as national leaders then and today correctly prioritized nonproliferation as a key component of nuclear strategy.

In view of these drawbacks, a better approach would be to adapt the current counterforce strategy for the new era. Since counterforce targeting is driven by the composition and not the size of adversaries' nuclear arsenals, this would require only a modest adjustment to account for China's growing ICBM silos. Indeed, unless China and Russia choose to increase the size of their own arsenals above what they already plan, the United States should not have to expand its overall existing stockpile of 3,800 or so warheads. But changing the composition of the arsenal will be crucial. This includes assessing the importance of regional nuclear capabilities to deterring local aggression by China and Russia, and analyzing how to prioritize, say, sea-based versus land-based capabilities to fortify strategic deterrence in a world of multiple major nuclear powers, given available forces. For example, although additional Columbia-class submarines may take decades to build, U.S. planners have various ways to use existing forces to rebuild credible deterrence, as the near-term options outlined by the Biden administration make clear. Designed in the right way, even modest short-term and long-term adjustments can maintain credible deterrence against both China and Russia at reasonable cost. But unless the United States is prepared to radically depart from its enduring nuclear strategy—and risk exposing the homeland to nuclear attack and undermining the credibility of its extended deterrence commitments—it will need to deploy more, different, and better nuclear forces. America needs a more flexible and robust arsenal not to fight a nuclear war but to prevent its outbreak.

HURRICANE WATCH

To make its nuclear strategy effective in a world of multiplying threats, Washington can no longer relegate nuclear issues to a small, insulated community of experts. The transformation of the nuclear landscape requires deep engagement from the most senior leaders in government, as occurred during the Cold War. Nothing will enhance the credibility of the extended deterrence the United States offers to allies in Asia and Europe more than a clear demonstration that the country's most senior leaders are actively preparing for the coming challenges.

To inhibit allies from seeking their own nuclear deterrents and to ensure that U.S. "hardware"—its military capabilities—is fit for purpose, the United States must explicitly reaffirm that its "software"—its political willingness to defend allies with the full range of capabilities—is equally strong. Washington must show that it remains committed to the concept of extended deterrence and that it is determined to make this guarantee credible against new and emerging threats. Previous U.S. efforts in this direction, including during the first Trump administration and the Biden administration, spurred allies to make greater contributions to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission, including by procuring and deploying more of their own nonnuclear capabilities. Similarly, in the Indo-Pacific, Washington's efforts to upgrade its extended deterrence relationships with Australia, Japan, and South Korea have helped reaffirm the U.S. nuclear umbrella. These efforts must now be redoubled to avoid a wave of proliferation of Washington's own making.

Nuclear affairs must once again become a central part of American grand strategy.

In addition to reaffirming extended deterrence, the United States should seek to revive arms control and nuclear risk-reduction efforts, even if today's environment has made such measures far more difficult. By adjusting its own nuclear posture, the United States could motivate China and Russia to come to the table. If that happens, Washington should tailor agreements to allow for evolving and emerging threats. For example, by permitting a higher warhead ceiling for deployed weapons, an updated New START agreement with Russia could, in theory, maintain mutually stable deterrence between Moscow and Washington while permitting the United States to counter and prioritize the increasing threat from China's ICBM silos. Because Russia retains a relatively fixed number of strategic nuclear delivery systems, a Russian effort to increase the number of warheads on a given delivery system would be largely immaterial to U.S. strategists: to maintain an effective counterforce deterrent, U.S. Strategic Command would still need to target an unchanged number of Russian delivery systems but would have the required additional warheads available to target Chinese ICBMs.

Getting the three major nuclear powers to agree to some form of nuclear guardrails across all domains—nonstrategic and strategic nuclear weapons, missile defenses, and space—will be highly complex. To have even a chance of success, any such agreement will need to be innovative and flexible. For example, it might impose warhead limitations on all nuclear weapons states but allow for specific exclusions, including for capabilities that address imbalances in the relative number of warheads, strategic delivery platforms, or other big-ticket items. A model for such an approach might be the 1922 Washington Naval Conference, which limited the overall tonnage of great-power navies with the goal of preventing a naval arms race, but tailored the specific limits to each party's needs, relationships, and naval status. Regardless of the path taken, American policymakers must urgently craft creative, practical solutions, both formal and informal, to manage a world of multiple nuclear actors that are currently unwilling to negotiate in good faith.

In the decades after the Cold War, many senior U.S. officials hoped that nuclear weapons might recede from global politics entirely. But that prospect turned out to be an illusion. Instead, nuclear weapons are back with a vengeance. To maintain a credible strategy for this new nuclear age, the United States must begin by recognizing and understanding the world as it is—not as many hoped or wished it would be. It will need farsighted analysis by some of the country's finest strategic minds. It will need to reaffirm American leadership to allies across the world. In no future is the United States safer without its network of allies, regardless of the costs the country must pay to ensure that its security guarantees and extended nuclear deterrent remain credible. And it will require a concerted effort by senior U.S. officials and members of Congress to realign the U.S. arsenal to meet today's and tomorrow's threats: the United States cannot simply hope that China's large nuclear expansion might someday be reversed.

One thing is clear. If the United States does not urgently prepare for the impending nuclear hurricane, it could find itself in a place it has never been: a situation in which China, North Korea, or Russia—acting separately or in concert—uses a nuclear weapon against a U.S. ally or even the U.S. homeland because Washington appears to be unwilling or unable to deter such an attack. The world has never lived through such a storm. For eighty years, U.S. strategists have successfully fought to prevent it from arriving. But it is now coming faster than anyone forecast, and complacency may be deadly.

Europe's Bad Nuclear Options

And Why They May Be the Only Path to Security

FLORENCE GAUB AND STEFAN MAIR

The early months of the second Trump administration have left Europe adrift. The continent was already reeling from the war in Ukraine and increasingly worried about the specter of Russian aggression. Now, new leadership in Washington is casting doubt on its commitment to the defense of European allies.

In the eyes of Europeans, even the U.S. nuclear umbrella, which for decades has shielded the continent from outside threats, no longer seems fully dependable. "I want to believe that the United States will stay by our side," French President Emmanuel Macron said in March. "But we have to be prepared for that not to be the case."

The way forward, Macron has argued, is to protect the continent from attack without relying on the deterrent power of American

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nuclear weapons. France's contribution, he has suggested, might be to put its own nuclear arsenal in the service of its European neighbors.

It is too early to tell what will come of the French president's offer. A similar proposal Macron made in 2020 was ignored in other European capitals. But the continent's geopolitical predicament has grown much direr in the years since, and the probability of an attack on European NATO members is now at a level not seen since the late 1970s. Given that reality and the seeming indifference of the Trump administration to it, the continent needs to rethink its own deterrence strategies. If the American nuclear umbrella is no longer open, Europe might need one of its own. Ironically, this would run counter to U.S. President Donald Trump's ambition, stated in 2017, to "de-nuke" the world.

The credibility of any nuclear deterrent rests on two pillars: having the right capabilities and having the resolve to use them. Judged by those criteria, neither Macron's proposal nor any other option for an independent European nuclear deterrent currently passes muster. But even if the moment for Europe to decouple its security from that of the United States has not yet arrived, the continent's leaders must prepare for the possibility that it may before long. And that means beginning to take serious stock of their nuclear options. In the short term, doing so will signal that Washington needs to take Europe's deterrence concerns seriously. But it would also lay a foundation on which Europe could build should its fears of abandonment by the United States really come true.

FROM PROTEST TO PROLIFERATION?

Historically, most European countries have viewed nuclear weapons with skepticism and, in some cases, outright hostility. Antinuclear sentiment peaked in the 1980s, when NATO's "dual track" decision, which included plans to station American intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Western Europe, set off massive protests in cities across the region. Popular opposition was fueled in part by the belief that U.S. nuclear weapons were not a deterrent against Soviet aggression, as NATO leaders argued, but a vehicle for reckless provocation and warmongering. The 1983 film *The Day After* offered a fictionalized preview of what might lie in store: a U.S.-Soviet confrontation in Berlin spiraling into a small-scale nuclear war and, eventually, a global nuclear wipeout. Among the record number of dystopian nuclear-themed works of science fiction to have come out of the 1980s, many played on such fears.

In reality, what followed was not Armageddon but détente. The Americans and the Soviets agreed to limit their arsenals, and those agreements held after the Soviet Union fell and Russia took its place. As the Cold War receded into history, fears of nuclear war abated.

But in European policymaking circles, resistance to the logic of nuclear deterrence persisted. Outside Europe's two nuclear powers, France and the United Kingdom, European officials and thinkers still tend to associate all things nuclear with destruction more than with deterrence.

Europeans associate all things nuclear with destruction more than with deterrence.

Even so, the war in Ukraine has brought the nuclear issue back into focus, mainly in light of a renewed and growing nuclear threat from Russia. Part of the problem is the sheer size and potency of Russia's arsenal of around 5,580 nuclear warheads. It is unclear how many of those warheads are meant to target central or western Europe. But the dozens of nuclear warheads Russia has stationed in Belarus are cause for concern, as they could easily strike NATO countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland.

More worrying than the arsenal itself, however, is Russia's potential willingness to use it, including as a means of coercion and blackmail. Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated nuclear threats against Ukraine and its European supporters portend trouble for the rest of the continent, particularly in conjunction with the ongoing reorganization and modernization of Russia's armed forces. Russia appears to be reorienting its military capabilities and strategy toward the possibility of protracted conflict with Europe. It also aims to increase active military personnel from 1.3 million to 1.5 million by 2027, raising the possibility of a return to Soviet-style mass mobilization.

Even as the geopolitical danger from the East has increased, the protection afforded by the American nuclear umbrella no longer seems guaranteed, at least not since Trump took office for the second time in January. Of course, the United States still has the ability to provide Europe with a credible nuclear deterrent. What is increasingly uncertain is whether, under Trump, it still wants to do so. Trump and those around him have repeatedly suggested that the United States might not come to its allies' rescue if they were attacked, musing about pulling U.S. troops out of Europe and implying that Washington might not defend NATO members that do not spend sufficiently on their own defense.

To be sure, such rhetoric may just be an attempt to pressure European allies into higher defense spending. To actually push those allies out from underneath the American nuclear umbrella would undermine the United States' status as a superpower, alienate some of the most important partners in its geopolitical competition with China and Russia, reduce its leverage over Europe, and perhaps open the door to nuclear proliferation on the continent. But security experts could find themselves in a similar position to that of economists: despite near-total expert consensus that tariffs will spark a trade war and hurt the U.S. economy, Trump plowed ahead. In the economic realm, such missteps are harmful. In the domain of national security, the ramifications could be existential.

As the former U.S. diplomat and political scientist Ivo Daalder wrote in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year, the principle of collective defense enshrined in NATO's founding treaty "derives its credibility less from the formal treaty than from a belief among the members that they are all prepared to come to one another's defense." Potential aggressors must believe the same thing. Europe's entire post–Cold War security architecture rests on this belief. To throw it into doubt risks undermining the entire system from within and without.

So far, European debates on how to establish deterrence without U.S. assistance have centered on conventional, nonnuclear military capabilities, and understandably so. The limited conventional military capabilities of European NATO members could tempt Russia into carrying out a limited attack—seizing a small piece of territory from one of its Baltic neighbors, say, or engaging a European military vessel—with the expectation that it would not suffer any serious consequences. If such an attack took place and Europe lacked the means for an appropriate military response, NATO's credibility would be shattered. Recognizing that danger, most European countries have pledged significant increases in defense spending. It will likely take several years for those investments to fill the gaps, but at least the necessary political decisions have been made and there is broad public support for them.

A potential European nuclear deterrent is a different matter. European politicians have sporadically expressed concern about the nuclear threat from Russia, and defense experts have begun discussing Europe's nuclear options more seriously. What is lacking, however, is an informed public debate, despite Macron's recent proposal.

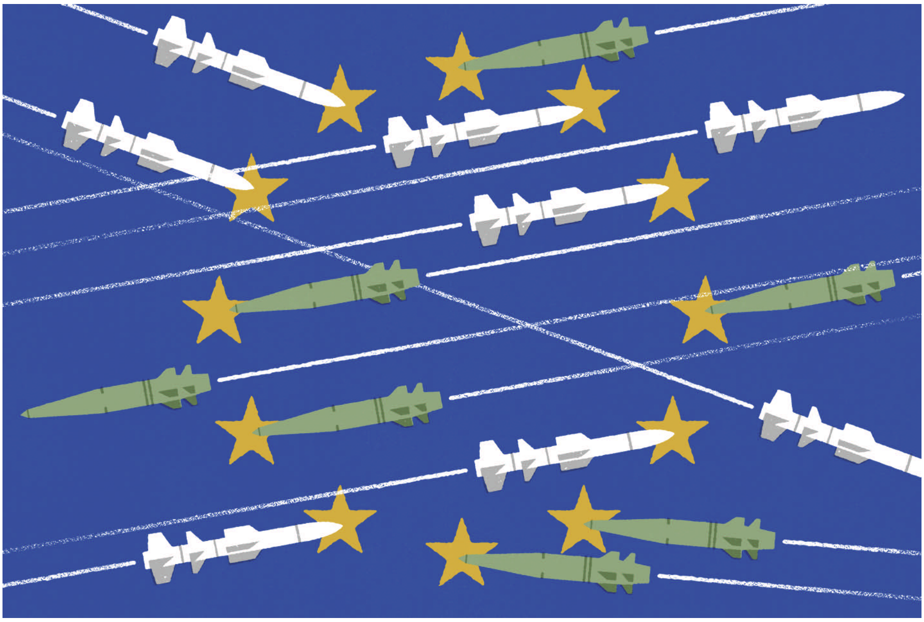
The conditions for such a debate are better than they have been in years. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, polling indicated that in four European countries that hosted U.S. nuclear weapons—Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands—a plurality of respondents opposed such hosting arrangements. By contrast, in a March poll of nine European countries, 61 percent of respondents said they would welcome a French nuclear umbrella covering the entire continent.

An extended nuclear deterrent of this type, provided by France but ideally also supplemented by the United Kingdom, would certainly merit closer scrutiny if the United States further diluted or even disavowed its security guarantees. Two other options, which seem less pertinent because they are even more controversial, also deserve attention. One is a collective nuclear deterrent: that is, an arsenal that would be controlled by a pan-European institution. The other is the acquisition of nuclear weapons by additional European states. If Europe chose any of these paths, it would need to meet two criteria to make its nuclear deterrent credible. First, its arsenal would have to be sufficiently large, technically sophisticated, and capable of surviving a first strike. Second, whoever controlled the arsenal would have to demonstrate a willingness to use it.

SOVEREIGNTY VS. SOLIDARITY

Of the three options, only one has been seriously discussed so far: an extended nuclear deterrent provided primarily by France, with complementary support from the United Kingdom. The new German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has indicated interest in such an arrangement, even if he has said it would serve only to supplement American nuclear guarantees, not to replace them. And in May, France and Poland signed a treaty to deepen their security ties, a step that Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk described as a step toward a potential French nuclear umbrella for his country.

As of today, however, French and British nuclear capabilities raise serious credibility concerns. Some 290 French nuclear warheads are



MATT HARRISON CLOUGH

ready for deployment; the United Kingdom can provide another 225. Taken together, that is a mere ten percent of what Russia can field.

Deterrence is no simple numbers game, but a gap this wide is a clear liability, for reasons of both objective and perceived weakness. For one thing, it effectively restricts European allies to what nuclear experts call "deterrence by punishment." Such deterrence rests on the threat of overwhelming retaliation—attack us, and we will respond by laying waste to your cities. For that threat to work, one's own nuclear assets must be able to survive the enemy's initial attack. France certainly has that capability, since most of its warheads are deployed on submarines, which are notoriously hard to detect and destroy. But what if the aggressor used low-yield tactical weapons, and what if the target lay on the far edges of the Franco-British nuclear umbrella? Would France and the United Kingdom, which lack tactical nuclear warheads of their own, be willing to use their high-yield strategic arsenal in response—and risk total annihilation if the enemy responded in kind?

The answer might be no, and the obvious implication is that France and the United Kingdom cannot currently offer their allies the kind of extended deterrent afforded by the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Getting there would require substantial investments in their respective arsenals to increase the number of strategic warheads, acquire tactical ones, and deploy them in a way that they could survive a first strike by an opponent. Given their budgetary constraints, it is unlikely that Paris and London could shoulder the burden of these investments on their own. Instead, most of the bill would have to be footed by the nuclear umbrella's future beneficiaries—that is, other European allies.

France and the United Kingdom have consistently maintained that any decision to use nuclear weapons is a matter of national sovereignty. They would thus need to issue credible assurances of protection to any third-party investors. Europe's limited geographic scale and deep economic integration make such assurances more plausible than transatlantic pledges of protection by the United States. Nonetheless, a credible deterrent would require further arrangements. Nuclear-sharing agreements between the United States and its allies offer a useful template: under these pacts, the U.S. military deploys nuclear weapons to a number of allied states, and the host countries then provide some components of the necessary delivery systems, such as carrier aircraft and pilots. But Washington retains the sole authority to order a nuclear launch. The credibility of Paris's and London's assurances could also be enhanced by the creation of a consultation mechanism similar to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, which discusses nuclear issues and reviews member states' policies but of which France is not a member.

Still, another major weak spot would remain. Judging by the outcomes of recent elections in France and the United Kingdom, one cannot rule out the rise, in both countries, of right-wing populist governments whose geopolitical instincts would lead them to pursue a France-only or United Kingdom–only nuclear policy. In other words, a Franco-British nuclear umbrella might one day snap shut for the same reasons the American one did.

DETERRENCE BY COMMITTEE

To mitigate the uncertainties that would complicate the Franco-British option, European leaders could set their sights on a more ambitious one: a collective, pan-European nuclear deterrent. During the Cold War, officials in the Kennedy administration considered a version of this arrangement: a multinational fleet of ships and submarines armed with American nuclear weapons but operated, owned, and controlled entirely by European NATO allies. The fleet would have carried enough warheads to destroy anywhere from 25 to 100 Soviet cities. But British opposition to the plan, as well as disagreements among other allies on how to implement and fund it, caused it to founder.

A modern version of this proposal could place French and British nuclear weapons under the control of the European Union or a new body. This plan would solve the political problem posed by the Franco-British option, since it would be less vulnerable to a change of heart on the part of France or the United Kingdom. In the short term, the technical shortcomings of the Franco-British option would remain, since the collective deterrent would rely on the two countries' arsenals. But Europe's nonnuclear powers would have a much stronger incentive to share the financial burden of modernizing and expanding the French and British nuclear stockpile than they would have under the first option, since they would be investing in a jointly controlled arsenal rather than in weapons wholly controlled by others.

Whoever controlled Europe's arsenal would have to be willing to use it.

Joint control would represent the arrangement's greatest strength for most of the continent, but it would be a nonstarter for Paris and London. Neither government would want to hand over its national arsenal to a European body and give up the final say on the weapons' use. Even if a multilateral nuclear force provided enhanced capabilities and thus a higher level of deterrence—whose benefits would also redound to the French and the British—the question of who held the ultimate launch authority would likely outweigh any other considerations.

Joint control raises other thorny issues, too. If only a single member state of the multilateral force suffered a nuclear attack, would the others really prove willing to respond? If they didn't, would that give the attacked country the right to conduct a unilateral retaliatory strike, using nuclear weapons stationed on its territory as part of the multilateral force? Would a nuclear strike require unanimity among member states, or would a majority suffice? In either case, decision-making would require more time than is available during a potential nuclear conflict. To avoid delays, launch authority could be delegated to a supranational body. But that body would not have enough democratic legitimacy to make life-or-death decisions for hundreds of millions of people. Until European nations have reached a level of integration that would allow a directly elected European government to make such a decision, option two would fail the credibility test.

WHO'S NEXT?

What remains is undoubtedly the most controversial and far-reaching option: instead of relying on or investing in the existing French and British arsenals, other European countries could build nuclear weapons of their own. If these states accumulated arsenals comparable in size to those of France and the United Kingdom, Europe's collective capabilities would extend beyond deterrence by punishment. Rather than merely threatening retaliation in the wake of an attack, European states would be able to engage in "deterrence by denial"—that is, to make it difficult or even impossible for an adversary to carry out a devastating strike in the first place.

Several major European powers, chief among them Germany and Poland, could theoretically acquire the technological capabilities and allocate the financial resources necessary to amass enough enriched uranium and ultimately develop nuclear weapons. But doing so would still take time—certainly enough time for a potential nuclear-armed aggressor such as Russia to carry out a preemptive conventional strike on enrichment sites and other development facilities. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, such a strike would have been unthinkable. Nowadays, hardly anything can be excluded.

To mitigate that risk, France and the United Kingdom could "lend out" some of their nuclear weapons on a temporary basis. The incentive for Paris and London to go along with this plan and support the nuclear ambitions of their allies would be to achieve strength in numbers: even without joint control, multiple European nuclear powers could establish a greater level of deterrence than France and the United Kingdom can establish for themselves today. The United States, for its part, would at long last be relieved of the burden of protecting Europe, freeing resources for alternative uses. But if the benefits are of historic proportions, so, too, are the potential costs—especially the raised risk of provoking a conflict with Russia.

In practice, there is no obvious contender for the position of Europe's third nuclear power. So far, only Poland seems to be weighing the option in earnest. "Poland must pursue the most advanced capabilities, including nuclear and modern unconventional weapons," Tusk, the country's prime minister, told Polish parliamentarians in March. "This is a serious race—a race for security, not for war."

The debate in Germany, meanwhile, is complicated by historical, political, cultural, and strategic considerations. Despite decades of reconciliation, integration, and democratic stability, the first half of the twentieth century—and Germany's role in it—still weighs heavily on European minds. A nuclear-armed Germany would entail a significant rebalancing of power in Europe and trigger deep concern in neighboring capitals. That is to say nothing of German society's own wariness. Its pacifist and antinuclear leanings run deep, as do its aversion to risk and its reservations about taking on international military responsibilities. Even the civilian use of nuclear energy has been phased out, with the last reactors shut down in April 2023. These societal and political instincts are hardly compatible with the role of a nuclear power.

The legal constraints on Germany are significant, too. As a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the country has renounced the production and possession of nuclear weapons. The same commitment is enshrined in Article 3(1) of the Two Plus Four Treaty, the 1990 agreement that provided the legal foundation for the post–Cold War reunification of East and West Germany. The Two Plus Four Treaty, in particular, is a daunting legal obstacle, as a violation of one of its central elements could put the validity of the whole document into question. That, in turn, would cause major concerns among its signatories and among Germany's immediate neighbors.

To be sure, recent events have already undercut the treaty's political basis. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the possibility of a U.S. withdrawal from Europe each threaten the very achievement that the accord was meant to secure, namely the full sovereignty of a reunified Germany. These unsettling changes could be reason enough for a joint decision by Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States to override Article 3(1). Nevertheless, any move by Germany toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons would be imaginable only in close consultation and concert with other European states, first and foremost Poland, where a nuclear-armed Germany would cause the most apprehension.

ALL OF THE ABOVE

For the time being, none of the three options easily pass the credibility test. A French and British nuclear umbrella would lack the necessary capabilities, and its beneficiaries would likely doubt its reliability in times of crisis. A pan-European nuclear deterrent appears even less feasible. It would transfer an existential political decision to an entity with only indirect democratic legitimacy. Doing so would amount to a serious challenge to European democratic norms at a time when they are already under assault by illiberal forces.

Deterrence is no simple numbers game.

Nuclear proliferation in Europe might provide effective and credible deterrence. But it would carry legal and political risks that, for the time being, are too great for European leaders to countenance. It could also set off a wave of nuclear proliferation outside Europe, including in states that Western governments consider hostile.

Then again, even if Europe stays put, there is no knowing if nonproliferation will hold in other parts of the world. If anything, current trends suggest that the first place it will buckle is East Asia. If the Trump administration continues to create a sense of uncertainty about the U.S. security guarantee to South Korea, for example, leaders in Seoul could reach a breaking point. As things stand, South Korea faces three politically hostile nuclear powers—North Korea, China, and Russia—in its immediate neighborhood. South Korean defense strategists have pointed out that this situation would become untenable if their country's only nuclear ally, the United States, were to withdraw. A nuclear-armed South Korea would, in turn, encourage Japan to pursue the same course.

Nuclear proliferation in East Asia would also alter the terms of the debate in Europe, where it might be viewed as a shift more real and definitive than Trump's threats alone. It is a sobering scenario: European leaders, faced with nothing but bad options, may prove incapable of breaking their nuclear impasse unless someone else takes the plunge first. Europe's safest bet, until then, is to at least prepare for all contingencies.

Southeast Asia Is Starting to Choose

Why the Region Is Leaning Toward China

YUEN FOONG KHONG
AND JOSEPH CHINYONG LIOW

More than most regions in the world, Southeast Asia has found itself in the middle of the intensifying U.S.-Chinese rivalry. Most major countries in other parts of Asia are already spoken for: Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are all solidly in the U.S. camp; India seems to be aligning with the United States, Pakistan with China; and the countries of Central Asia are forging ever closer ties to Beijing. But much of Southeast Asia, a region of nearly 700 million people, remains up for grabs. The superpower that succeeds in persuading key Southeast Asian countries—such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—to hew closely to its line stands a better chance of realizing its objectives in Asia.

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For decades, however, Southeast Asia's leaders have disavowed the notion that they have to choose. Even as Beijing and Washington have made their rivalry the dominant fact of global geopolitics, officials in the region repeat the mantra that they can be friends to all. Of course, they are not oblivious to the changing geopolitical reality. As Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it in 2018, "I think it is very desirable for us not to have to take sides, but the circumstances may come where ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] may have to choose one or the other. I hope it does not happen soon."

Southeast Asian governments may not recognize that they are, in fact, taking sides.

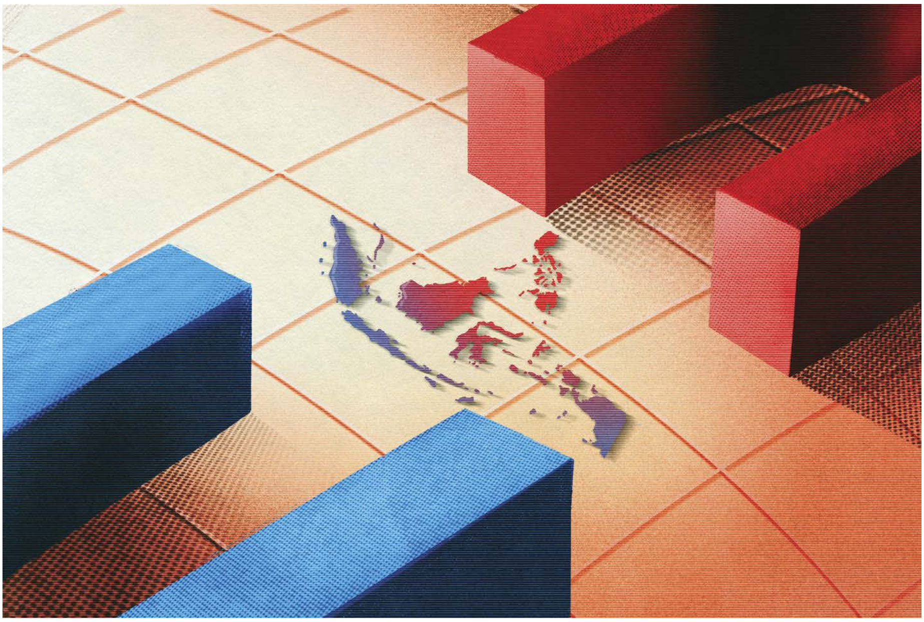
Lee's assessment of this predicament is representative of the views of not only most Southeast Asian countries but also much of the world. It reflects a profound consternation about the imperatives of the overarching superpower competition. A country such as Singapore, after all, has thrived in the era of globalization, styling itself as an entrepôt with its doors open to the world. Vietnam, an ostensibly communist dictatorship, has made itself into an important hub of global manufacturing that is plugged in to both Chinese and Western supply chains. The vast archipelago nations of Indonesia and the Philippines, once racked by internal conflicts, have seen their GDPs grow significantly since 2000. When Southeast Asian officials push back on the idea that they have to pick sides, they are in effect expressing their preference for the global order that prevailed after the end of the Cold War, one characterized by thickening economic connections and diminishing geopolitical contestation.

In the wake of the 2008–9 financial crisis, that order began to evaporate. Southeast Asia now finds itself in the midst of great-power competition. China and the United States are increasingly at loggerheads in Asia. And Southeast Asian countries, whether they like it or not, are no longer immune to the pressures that accompany great-power competition. By analyzing the positions of ten Southeast Asian countries on a welter of issues relating to China and the United States, one thing becomes evident: over the past 30 years, many of these countries have gradually but discernibly shifted away from the United States and toward China. Some shifts are more drastic and significant than others. A few countries have indeed managed to "hedge," to straddle the rift between two superpowers. The overall direction of travel, however, is clear. Southeast Asian countries may insist that they are staying above the fray, but their policies reveal otherwise. The region is drifting toward China, a fact that bodes ill for American ambitions in Asia.

POWER PLAY

According to the Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, which measures the relative strength of countries in terms of a number of variables, including economic and military capability and diplomatic and cultural influence, China's comprehensive power had approached 90 percent of that of the United States by the late 2010s. This was a result of China's spectacular growth since the 1980s and of the way that Beijing turned its economic achievements into diplomatic, military, and even cultural prowess. China's rise prompted American scholars in the 1990s to debate whether the United States should contain or engage the surging Asian giant; the engagers won, hands down. Although the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations had some tense moments with China, they did not view the country as an adversary. The wars in the Middle East after the September 11 attacks distracted Washington, and it was not until the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" that the United States recognized the potential challenge posed by China to American hegemony across the continent. Even then, Obama and his national security team did not identify China as a peer competitor or as a national security threat, in large part because they assumed, as their predecessors did, that China's integration into the U.S.-led economic order would make China more politically liberal in due course.

That changed with the election of Donald Trump. The first Trump administration dispensed with any notion that China would placidly join the liberal international order or that it would embrace liberal political reforms. This stance, further fueled by Trump's insistence that he would not allow China to be "bigger" than the United States, transformed U.S. policy. Washington now believed that an increasingly powerful, authoritarian China posed a strategic threat to the United States. The 2017 National Security Strategy, 2018 National Defense Strategy, and other China-related policy declarations of that era—including speeches by Vice President Mike Pence at the Hudson Institute in 2018 and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in 2020—all cast China



as the United States' most potent and dangerous geopolitical rival. That assessment survived Trump's electoral defeat in 2020 and the arrival of President Joe Biden to the White House. The Biden administration used more measured language, but the essence of its policy remained the same: China was "the most consequential geopolitical challenge" to the United States, Biden's 2022 National Security Strategy declared, and "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." The Biden administration, however, did the Trump administration one better by deftly corralling U.S. allies to help constrain China, as part of an "extreme competition" across all the relevant dimensions of power.

The U.S.-Chinese competition is likely to become more intense, complex, and dangerous than the U.S.-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War. Unlike the Soviet Union, which was an economic laggard compared with the Cold War–era United States, China is a much more formidable peer competitor. And there are many potential flash points in Asia, including in the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. As this rivalry becomes more intense, each superpower will want to get as many countries on its side as it can.

Southeast Asia, a region that receives erratic attention from Western capitals despite its enormous population and growing economic

DEENA SO'OTEH

clout, will be a major arena in this contest. For some countries in the region—especially those, such as the Philippines, that have alliance treaties or strong security ties with the United States—the lines are clearly drawn. They would like to maintain close ties with Washington in the belief that the projection of U.S. military power in the region is conducive to peace and stability. Southeast Asian countries that sided with the United States during the Cold War, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, generally prospered because of access to investments and markets; those that sided with the Soviet Union or China—Vietnam, for example—experienced much more lethargic growth. During the Cold War, it was obvious that the Soviets were no match for the West in economic terms. Today, however, many Southeast Asians believe that China can give the United States more than a run for its money.

It is not surprising that many countries that have not already chosen between Beijing and Washington would prefer not to choose at all; they want to have their cake and eat it, too. The conventional (if simplistic) view is that Southeast Asian countries look to the United States for security and to China for trade, investment, and economic growth. But both China and the United States are growing frustrated with this hedging. Beijing wants to wield more than just economic influence in the region. Washington under the second Trump administration wants to strengthen economic and commercial ties with Southeast Asia, in part to extract compensation for the security umbrella it has built in Asia.

Some of the most significant diplomatic alignments in Southeast Asia are yet to be determined. ASEAN, a consortium of the region's ten countries, has no overarching position on the two superpowers, owing to the varied national interests of its member states. In fact, differences over relations with China and the United States have tested ASEAN's solidarity in the past and will do so again in the future. To get a better sense of where the region is heading, it is more helpful to look at the alignments of individual ASEAN countries based on their policy choices.

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

To understand the alignments of ASEAN countries, we examined five domains of interaction between these states and China and the United States: "political-diplomatic" and "military-security" engagement, economic ties, cultural-political affinity (or soft power), and signaling (the public messaging of states). We tracked four indicators in each domain, totaling 20 measures of alignment overall. For example, on the political-diplomatic front, we assembled data on UN voting alignment, the strength of bilateral cooperation, the number of high-level official visits, and membership in multilateral groupings. On the economic front, we examined imports, exports, business associations, and levels of foreign debt. Combining these measures allows us to arrive at a single score for each country. A score of zero indicates full alignment with China; a score of 100 indicates full alignment with the United States. By this metric, we consider the countries that fall within the range of 45 to 55 to be successful hedgers straddling the divide between the two superpowers.

Indonesia may be sleepwalking into closer alignment with China.

The index, which we have called "The Anatomy of Choice Alignment Index," offers two major findings. First, when Southeast Asian countries say they don't want to choose between China and the United States, it doesn't mean that all of them are on the fence. Averaging out their alignment positions over the past 30 years, we found that four countries—Indonesia (49), Malaysia (47), Singapore (48), and Thailand (45)—can be thought of as successful hedgers, doing their best to straddle the divide. Other ASEAN countries are more closely aligned with a superpower. The Philippines (60) is clearly aligned with the United States, whereas Myanmar (24), Laos (29), Cambodia (38), Vietnam (43), and Brunei (44) are all aligned with China.

Second, by disaggregating the 30-year period into two 15-year timespans, a more dynamic picture emerges of how alignments have changed—one that favors Beijing. Indonesia's alignment score for the first period (1995–2009), for example, was 56, but in the second period (2010–24) it was 43, a change of 13 points in China's favor. The country moved from being marginally in the United States' camp to being marginally in China's camp. Until 2009, Thailand was a determined hedger (49), but it has since leaned China's way (41). The Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, has also moved a bit closer to China even as it remains in the United States' camp; it scores 62 in the first period and 58 in the second. Malaysia (from 49 to 46) and Singapore (from 50 to 45) have also moved marginally in China's direction, although both remain within the band of hedgers. Cambodia (from 42 to 34), Laos (from 33 to 25), and Myanmar (from 24 to 23) continue their drift toward their northern neighbor, aligning solidly with China. The only country that has moved somewhat away from China and toward the United States in the past 30 years is Vietnam, although not by much (from 41 to 45). Our measurements in the more recent period suggest that Vietnam is about to join the likes of Malaysia and Singapore in straddling the superpower divide.

PUSH AND PULL

Southeast Asia's drift toward China is due not to any single force but a mix of factors, including the domestic political needs of Southeast Asian governments, perceptions of economic opportunities and U.S. staying power, and geography. Domestic politics can play a decisive role. Cambodia provides an illustrative case. The 1997 coup that eventually brought the country's leader, Hun Sen, to power set in motion a serious decline in U.S.-Cambodian relations and an improvement in Chinese-Cambodian relations. The United States suspended aid and instituted an arms embargo on Cambodia after the coup, which it condemned for undermining democracy. In the 2010s, the United States also denounced Cambodia's poor record on human rights and corruption. Because of this naming and shaming, the Hun Sen regime came to see Washington as a threat to its security. It is not surprising that Cambodia chose to align more strongly with China, from which it derives myriad forms of support and has received little criticism. Beijing provides Phnom Penh with significant foreign investment, political support, and military assistance; it also does not seek to undermine the legitimacy of the regime.

Many governments in the region draw legitimacy from their ability to deliver strong economic performance. This, too, has aided China, which has become the largest trading partner for ASEAN. Nondemocratic regimes in ASEAN believe that China will best support their economic needs and their desire to secure political legitimacy. When it comes to foreign direct investment, China lags behind the United States in the region, but it is catching up fast in several countries through its Belt and Road Initiative, which has financed major infrastructure projects all over the world.

Such investment has forced many countries to revise their traditional ways of seeing the world. The Indonesian military, for instance, was suspicious of China and sympathetic to the United States during the Cold War, a dynamic most gruesomely illustrated by the mass killings of ethnic Chinese people and alleged communist sympathizers in the 1960s. But in recent decades, new political elites and business groups have succeeded in pushing a pro-growth agenda. They see China as a source of economic opportunity, not as a source of ideological threat. And they have steered Indonesia in China's direction by welcoming Chinese investments, conducting high-level visits—in 2024, newly elected President Prabowo Subianto's first foreign visit was to China, and in May 2025, Chinese Premier Li Qiang made a reciprocal visit to Indonesia—participating in military exercises with China, and avoiding the common practice of targeting ethnic Chinese Indonesians as scapegoats for Indonesia's economic ills.

Trump's return to the White House has stoked further anxiety about U.S. military and economic commitments to Southeast Asia. The second Trump administration seems intent on shifting responsibility for Europe's security to European governments. The administration's strategy regarding China and Asia more broadly remains unclear. On the security front, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's March visit to the Philippines and Japan suggests that the United States remains keen to consolidate its Asian alliances, starting with two of its most steadfast allies in the region. As the Philippines spars with China over disputed maritime territories, Hegseth claimed that the U.S. commitment to the Philippines is "ironclad." But Thailand, another formal U.S. treaty ally, was not on Hegseth's itinerary. A wiser approach, based on an understanding of Thailand's drift in China's direction and the United States' interest in arresting that slide, would also have taken Hegseth to Bangkok.

Other strategic partners of the United States will also be keeping a close eye on the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia; they will have to recalibrate their security reliance on and cooperation with the United States if they conclude that Washington is likely to retreat from the region. In 2017, Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein voiced concerns about hints from the first Trump administration that it could reduce U.S. overseas commitments. He hoped that the United States would reconsider scaling back its engagement in the Asia-Pacific. If not, he continued, ASEAN had to be prepared for heavier security responsibilities. More recently, in April 2025, Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong argued that the "new normal" will be one in which "America is stepping back from its traditional role as the guarantor of order and the world's policeman." No other country, however, is ready to fill the gap. "As a result, the world is becoming more fragmented and disorderly." Trump's belief that the projection of U.S. military power serves the protected more than it serves the United States has alarmed some in Southeast Asia. In February, Ng Eng Hen, then Singapore's defense minister, noted that the image of Washington in the region had changed from "liberator to great disruptor to a landlord seeking rent." As one senior Southeast Asian diplomat based in Washington said half-jokingly to one of us after the debacle of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's February visit to the White House: "Ukraine has critical minerals to offer. What do we have?"

On the economic front, Trump slapped high "reciprocal" tariffs on Southeast Asian countries in early April. Although they have been paused and their future is uncertain, that threat now looms over the region's economies. Southeast Asian countries fear not just the serious loss of access to U.S. investment and the American market but also the United States' abdication of its economic leadership—the ceding of its historical role in shaping the economic architecture of the region to others. If it becomes clear that the United States is disengaging economically and militarily from the region, its ten countries will increasingly have to rely on one another and engage with Australia, Japan, and South Korea more seriously. But that imperative will be counterbalanced, and perhaps even overwhelmed, by the temptation to gravitate toward China.

At a fundamental level, geography shapes the decisions many of these countries have to make. Those that share a border with China, such as Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, will feel the natural gravitational pull of Beijing. To be sure, that may be tempered by historical suspicions or animosity, as in the case of Vietnam, which fended off a Chinese invasion in 1979. But proximity can force compromises. In Myanmar, the military junta that took power after the 2021 coup has become reliant on China for diplomatic support and trade, even though it is aware of Beijing's support for ethnic armed insurgent groups operating in border regions. Laos has become almost entirely reliant on Chinese funds for the building of hydroelectric dams along the Mekong River within its borders; infrastructure loans from China now account for half of the foreign debt that the landlocked country has incurred. Geography also helps explain why Vietnam has only cautiously inched toward the United States. Despite Washington's avowed interest in elevating relations with Hanoi to the "comprehensive strategic partnership" level, Vietnam resisted until 2023, which is 15 years after it had established such a relationship with China. The United States remains far away, no matter its wide network of military bases. And its remove may make it less likely to commit resources and personnel to ensuring peace and stability in the South China Sea, one of the major regional flash points, if push ever comes to shove.

CEDING THE FIELD

Even though Southeast Asia is clearly leaning toward China, alignment patterns are not set in stone. Countries can change their orientation rather quickly. For example, under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from 2001 to 2010, the Philippines leaned toward China. Her successor, Benigno Aquino III, who ruled from 2010 to 2016, pulled the country back toward the United States. Rodrigo Duterte, who followed Aquino, swung toward China; his successor, Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., has swung back toward the United States.

Among Southeast Asian states with Muslim-majority populations, including Indonesia and Malaysia, anger over Washington's support for Israel's war in Gaza has led governments to distance themselves from the United States and to cast doubt on American invocations of the so-called rules-based international order. A 2024 ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute survey found that half of the nearly 2,000 experts it polled across ten Southeast Asian countries—people drawn from academia, think tanks, the private sector, civil society, media, government, and regional and international organizations—agreed that ASEAN should choose China over the United States; just a year earlier, 61 percent of those polled had favored the United States over China.

Many Southeast Asian governments may not recognize that they are, in fact, taking sides. Because they maintain ties with both superpowers, they assume that their foreign policy is finely calibrated and balanced. They pick à la carte from American and Chinese offerings. They can sign on to China's Belt and Road Initiative, its Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, the free-trade deal known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and Beijing's Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative. At the same time, they would have been able to participate in the U.S.-led (but now abandoned) Trans-Pacific Partnership or join the more recent Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and other U.S. schemes designed to counter the Belt and Road Initiative. They also welcome American private-sector investments with open arms. U.S. foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia surpasses American investments in China, Japan, and South Korea combined. Through such choices, a country may reach a tipping point and end up more in one camp than the other without realizing that it has crossed a line. Indonesia, for example, may be sleepwalking into closer alignment with China—not as a result of conscious, coherent, and grand strategic choice but because the accumulation of its choices (such as its joining of various Chinese multilateral initiatives) in different sectors may over time tilt it decisively toward Beijing.

> Beijing still has a lot of work to do to win trust.

Even as China rises and the United States retreats, Southeast Asians are not willing to give up on Washington. Poll after poll shows that Southeast Asia sees China as the most influential economic and strategic power in the region, outpacing the United States by significant margins. But Southeast Asians also harbor considerable reservations about how China might deploy that power. When asked whom they trust, elites from various sectors of society rank Japan first, the United States second, the European Union third, and China a distant fourth, according to the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute's 2024 poll. Put another way, even though China will remain a persistent and formidable challenger to the United States, and even though much of Southeast Asia seems to be gravitating toward China, Beijing still has a lot of work to do to allay concerns and win the trust of regional states.

The second Trump administration may make Beijing's task easier if the punishing "Liberation Day" tariffs that it imposed on April 2 on key ASEAN states, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, are not lowered significantly; if key U.S. officials fail to show up for the annual ASEAN meetings; and if it acts on its threat to impose 100 percent tariffs on countries that have joined (Indonesia) or are moving to join (Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam) BRICS, a coalition of non-Western powers that includes China and Russia. If it doesn't change its ways, the Trump administration will freely cede the trust and goodwill that its predecessors have built up in Southeast Asia over the past half century.

Tell Me How This Trade War Ends

The Right Way to Build a New Global Economic Order

EMILY KILCREASE AND GEOFFREY GERTZ

On April 2, a day he dubbed "Liberation Day," President Donald Trump stood in the White House Rose Garden and announced a sweeping new program of tariffs intended to rebalance U.S. trade. Trump's tariff rates were shockingly high, triggering a stock market selloff and a flight away from U.S. assets, rare rebukes from some Republicans in Congress, and diplomatic outrage around the world. After a week of mounting backlash, the president announced a 90-day pause on most of the country-specific tariffs, leading foreign counterparts to scramble for deals that would allow them to escape the levies before the clock ran out. U.S. court

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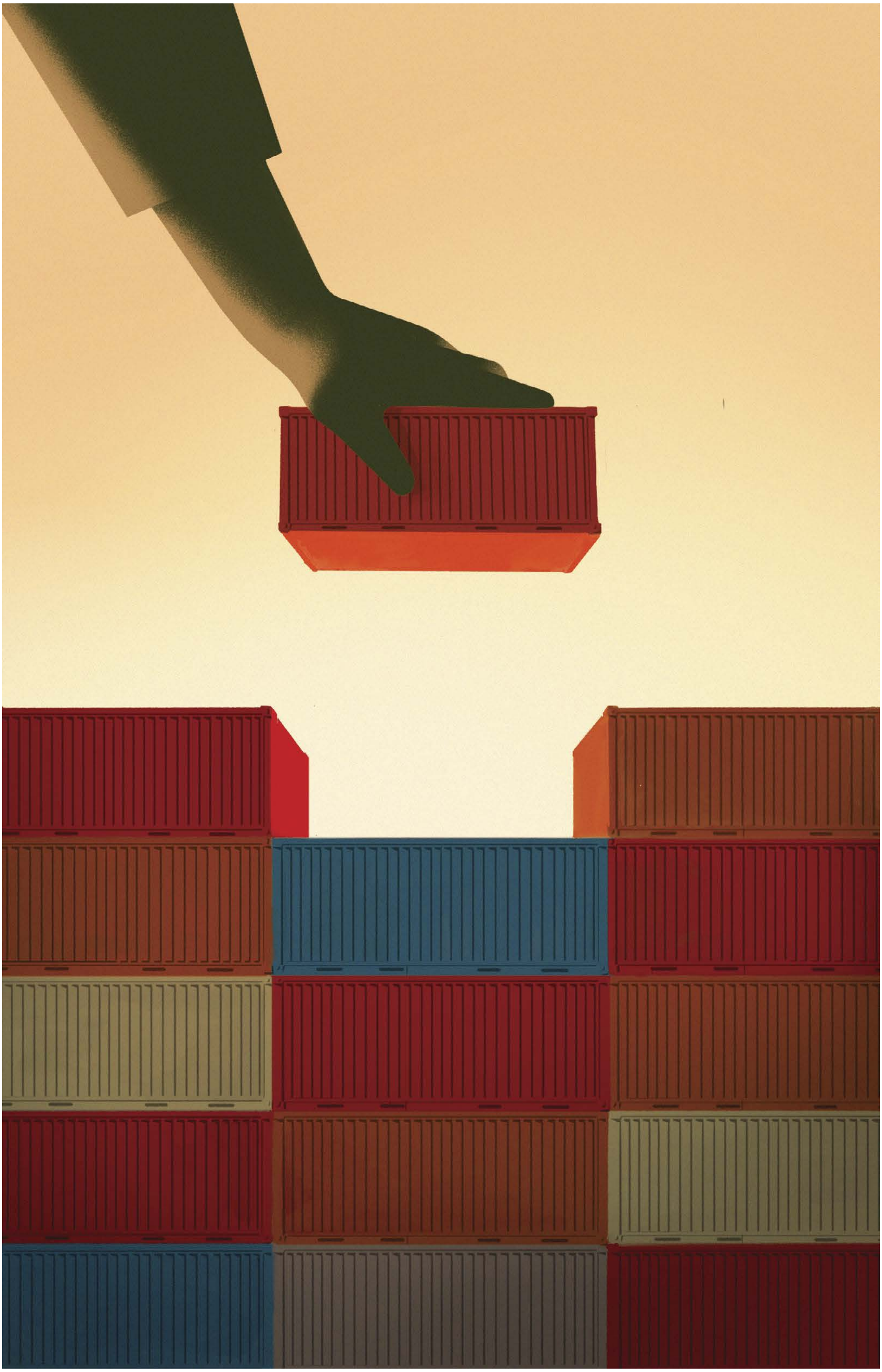

Illustration by Carlo Giambarresi

rulings questioning the legality of the president's tariffs have added further uncertainty.

The Trump administration's trade policy chaos has already caused harm, slowing growth, raising prices, and sparking dire predictions about the fate of the world economy. Yet there is a kernel of truth in the president's insistence that the international trade system needs a reset. Distrust of free trade has been rising in both political parties in the United States. Governments around the world are more and more willing to intervene in their economies to safeguard national interests. The U.S.-led global trading order, constructed over eight decades following World War II, has frayed.

What comes next is uncertain. But there is no going back to a time when the United States championed ever freer trade. Although many of the targets of Trump's tariffs, including businesses and foreign states, may pine for such a world, structural geopolitical changes have made it untenable. Instead of trying to turn back time, these actors should push the administration to usher in the needed transformation of the global trading order.

Disruptive tariffs, then, can create an opportunity. And despite the president's erratic behavior, the United States retains deep-rooted structural advantages that give it the power to lead a new trade effort. Many countries are dependent on the U.S. market, and few see China as a viable alternative. Most major economies will seek accommodation with the United States, even after being beaten up by heavy U.S. tariffs. Washington can therefore leverage its trade wars to achieve a productive restructuring of the international economic system.

To do so, however, the Trump administration must look beyond securing simple, short-term wins—such as one-off purchase agreements of U.S. commodities or temporary tariff truces—and cease bullying the United States' trade partners. It must instead build a new set of rules and norms that facilitate integration among like-minded states and that disentangle them from adversarial ones, especially China. A better path is possible, one that leads to gains for the United States and its allies. But they need to leverage the current chaos, rather than letting it consume them.

ORDER OVER CHAOS

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States led a process to create a set of economic rules that promoted an open, multilateral trading order. The country struck bilateral and multilateral free trade and investment deals. It set up institutions to help govern commerce, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and, later, the World Trade Organization. These bodies and rules provided economic and political stability, encouraged trade and investment flows, and offered trading partners reliable, peaceful, legal mechanisms to resolve their disputes. The resulting system, which favored openness and integration, was well suited to a geopolitical era marked by American hegemony. Washington viewed the rules-based economic order as vital to its own prosperity and strategic interests, and it had every reason to uphold it.

But the United States is no longer the sole superpower. As of last year, China is the world's largest trading nation in terms of goods, having clawed its way up by diverging from market principles and creating enormous friction in the global economic order. Many countries, including the United States, practice industrial policy, but China's systemic abuse of the open trading system is in a category by itself. And Beijing has used its economic growth to enhance its military power and expand its territorial ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, raising concerns in Washington and other governments. Meanwhile, new shocks and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have highlighted vulnerabilities associated with deep economic interdependence. Rather than a unipolar order premised on U.S. leadership, the global economic landscape is now characterized by emerging alternative power centers and, for many countries, a privileging of security concerns over economic efficiencies. If a rules-based economic order is to persist, governments will need to adapt the rules to meet today's strategic interests.

At its core, the current trading system prioritizes nondiscrimination and the "most favored nation" principle that trading partners should treat each other alike. But economic and national security concerns differ by trading partner: trade with close allies can strengthen a country's security, while trade with adversaries can make it more vulnerable. It thus makes little sense to require countries to treat all trade partners as "most favored." The trading system allows members to break with this universalist ethos on national security grounds, but it provides little guidance on what conditions must be met to take advantage of this exception. In the past, this mattered little as states acted with a presumption of openness and minimal restrictions. But over the last decade, increasing geopolitical competition has compelled more and more countries to impose export controls, sanctions, and other economic restrictions on trading partners. Such recurring deviations from the rules, even when justified, have bred disorder and uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, Trump has turned the United States into a revisionist power seeking to shatter what remains of the economic order. Thus far, his approach has been needlessly chaotic. But there is still an opportunity to wrest a positive outcome from the current tumult. The president's willingness to take bold action has set in motion ambitious trade negotiations, which normally proceed at a snail's pace. And there is reason to think they could yield favorable results for the United States and its allies.

In March, the Center for a New American Security ran a simulation of a trade war to examine how foreign governments might respond to sharply increased U.S. tariffs. Participants included experienced trade negotiators from the United States and several foreign capitals, as well as regional experts and security analysts. In the trade war simulation, the team representing the United States introduced expansive levies on all major trading partners but remained open to negotiating alternative arrangements. Teams playing the roles of foreign governments had to choose to negotiate with or retaliate against the United States. The simulation was designed to create complex and hostile negotiating conditions, including U.S. provocations on nontrade issues, such as the status of Greenland and the sovereignty of Canada. But by the end of the game, the U.S. team had unexpectedly succeeded in laying the foundation for a highly integrated democratic trading bloc that shut out China.

This process was hardly seamless. Teams representing traditional U.S. trade partners such as Canada, Mexico, and Europe bristled at Washington's bullying. But even as they recognized that the United States might not be a reliable partner, they concluded that they needed to work with American officials to mitigate the tariffs' damage. A trade war version of the classic prisoner's dilemma played out: country teams recognized the value of coordinating to form a coalition to counter the United States, but each still prioritized its own access to the American market. Most country teams tried to sprint to the front of the line to negotiate with Washington.

In the game, the Chinese team's attempted charm offensive mostly fell flat. As long as the U.S. team signaled an openness to dealmaking, the players representing major advanced economies did not view deepening economic integration with China as a sensible option. In fact, many agreed to align with the U.S. team on counter-China measures. In the real world, Beijing is working hard to take advantage of Washington's plunging global standing, courting foreign governments with a message that China, not the United States, is the reliable partner committed to the rules-based trading system. But to date, that message hasn't stuck. Rather than pursuing deeper integration with China, many countries are scrambling to ensure that the incipient trade war does not bring a flood of cheap Chinese exports into their markets.

The insights from the trade war simulation show how American policymakers might salvage Trump's tariff chaos. But real-life success is far from guaranteed. Multiple contingencies could propel the world trading system in a different direction. Foreign governments, for example, might face intense domestic political pressure to push back against the United States. Even in the absence of popular outrage, U.S. provocations on nontrade issues could tank any talks. To achieve a positive outcome, Trump will have to prioritize good-faith trade negotiations and tamp down the more chaotic aspects of his trade policy, such as imposing tariffs so extreme that he is forced to roll them back once it becomes painfully obvious that they are unsustainable.

A DURABLE RESET?

If the Trump administration hopes to salvage a victory from its trade wars, Washington must use tariffs as leverage in pursuit of clear and achievable trade objectives rather than as a blunt tool wielded in pursuit of myriad and mutually incompatible ones. The administration has offered an array of rationales for the tariffs: that they will reindustrialize the United States, raise revenue for the U.S. government, lower trade deficits, and induce other countries to take actions that benefit the United States. Targeted tariffs could help the administration realize some of these objectives, but not all of them, and certainly not all of them at once. The administration was always going to have to prioritize its aims; the sooner it does so, the better.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the administration is to establish credibility that it will honor any future commitments. After all the chaos Trump has unleashed, foreign governments rightfully worry that a U.S. promise to lift tariffs today will not protect them tomorrow. Trump's trade wars with Canada and Mexico highlight this point acutely, as the president's tariffs violate the rules that he himself negotiated in his first term under the 2020 U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

There is no simple solution to the credibility problem. The Trump administration came to power determined to demonstrate that it would be a disruptive force not bound by existing norms, and it has done just that. The president's early moves to impose tariffs primarily relied on emergency powers, since these allow for speedy action unencumbered by routine democratic processes (such as soliciting public comment on the potential impact of his policies). This erratic approach has already led to outcomes that are plainly ridiculous, such as the administration's punitive tariffs on the Heard and McDonald Islands, which are inhabited largely by penguins. Actions that were meant to seem aggressive have instead come off as uninformed and unsustainable.

But the Trump administration can still improve U.S. credibility, if not rescue it entirely, by bringing more order and predictability into the trade policymaking process. Trade policy, after all, does not need to be this chaotic. The president has a variety of legal avenues to pursue his objectives. The administration could use instruments such as Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, which addresses unfair trade practices, and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act, which allows the United States to impose tariffs or take other remedial actions on national security grounds. These mechanisms require fact-based investigations by the administration and input from the public, which are at odds with Trump's unilateral style. But they give the government a chance to uncover and address unintended consequences. The slow and steady pace of these trade tools also affords the private sector time to prepare and adjust rather than throw their supply chains into disarray overnight.

Washington must also clarify what it expects of allies. At present, the United States' trading partners don't even know what they can do to secure tariff relief. Foreign governments leave meetings with the Trump administration confused about the American president's endgame. Trump may believe that keeping trade partners on their toes is a smart negotiating strategy. But in reality, the administration's opacity stands in its own way. A durable reset of the trading system is possible, but only if the administration views allies as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Trump has demonstrated little interest in adopting a more deliberate, methodical approach to negotiations or to recalibrating his means to meet more achievable ends. But the chaos unleashed by his trade policies is already bumping up against external constraints. Such backlash could nudge the administration toward a more moderate path. The U.S. courts, for example, are weighing in on the administration's actions. Congress, too, may opt to rein in some of the executive's tariff authorities. American consumers are souring on the president's tariff obsession and anticipating higher inflation. And if government bond holders panic again, as they did in April, Trump may once more be forced to announce a tariff pause.

The Trump administration would be wise to get ahead of these mounting external pressures by adopting a more predictable approach. Continually rejiggering the tariffs signals incoherence, perhaps even weakness, to allies and adversaries alike. Meanwhile, many trade partners, having witnessed the whims of Trump's on-again-off-again approach, may now believe they should simply wait out the president rather than come to the table with substantive offers.

A NEW ARCHITECTURE

Even if Trump could be convinced to implement a more deliberate strategy in the trade wars, the question remains—to what end? At present, the administration appears focused on negotiating shallow "framework agreements," which provide some partial relief from tariffs in return for modest trade concessions and purchase agreements but gesture only vaguely at possible future cooperation. If the trade wars end in a series of such deals, the United States will merely paper over the flaws in the existing trading system while burning valuable leverage.

There is an alternative, even more worrisome path the trade wars could take. After tearing up the existing global trade rules, the United States could advance a more nakedly transactional approach in its international economic relations, eschewing any rules or shared norms that might constrain U.S. action. As the world's largest economy turns inward and adopts beggar-thy-neighbor policies, other countries would respond in kind, adopting regressive protectionist policies, as happened during the Great Depression. In such a scenario, disorder would prevail.

Yet a third path is also possible. Having used tariffs to shake trading partners out of their complacency, the United States can work with these countries to negotiate a reset of the trading system—one that preserves many of the advantages of the old system while rectifying its shortcomings. The starting point should be relaxing the principle of nondiscrimination and accepting that trade policy will differentiate among trade partners and allow democracies to favor one another. Indeed, this would simply reflect the fact that the United States already treats China, its principal geopolitical adversary, differently from other trading partners.

The United States should continue to trade with China in low-end manufacturing, agriculture, and a handful of other areas. But in more strategic sectors, such as chips and pharmaceuticals, Trump should prioritize "de-risking" from China, as he did in his first term. The administration should maintain targeted tariffs that would allow the United States to build capacity in these critical industries. Additionally, Washington should make significant investments in domestic manufacturing and research and design, coordinating with other major economies wherever possible.

Should China and the United States partially decouple, Americans could feel some economic pain. To offset the loss in trade, Washington will have to deepen economic integration with like-minded partners and allies. Doing so will help the United States and its partners replace what has been lost and scale up production in sectors essential to a strong defense, technology, and innovation base—which will be required for long-term competition with China. To that end, they should coordinate their use of export controls, investment screening, and data security measures. They will also need to address China's overcapacity and unfair trade practices in key industries, such as steel and aluminum. These steps will help build shared expectations about when trade and investment restrictions are legitimate for national security concerns, fostering predictability and stability in the new economic security order.

Ultimately, Trump should aim for a future order made up of the following concentric circles: deep economic and security integration for close allies and partners; predictable, rules-based exchange among most countries; and careful de-risking from competitors. Such an order would provide a more stable framework for the world as it is. To realize that order, Washington should seek to establish legally binding commitments with its close partners that provide the clarity, consistency, and credibility that businesses and governments require. The 90-day framework agreements the Trump administration has been negotiating should be exactly that: frameworks for more concrete rules to be hammered out in the months ahead. If the framework agreements are instead treated as ends in themselves, without any ambitious follow-through, the tariff pain will not be worth the very modest resulting benefits.

The United States' trading partners correctly fear that Trump is breaking an economic order that cannot be rebuilt, and their near-term objective is tariff relief. But they must also look further ahead. They must see this as an opportunity to work alongside the United States in building a new architecture that addresses their shared challenges. Whether they like it or not, geopolitics has shifted in ways that make the previous rules-based order unsustainable. Trump's shock to the system may not be pretty. But it could open the way for a much better system.

REVIEW ESSAY

How China Wins

Beijing's Advantages in a Revisionist Order

JULIAN GEWIRTZ

Upstart: How China Became a Great Power
BY ORIANA SKYLAR MASTRO. Oxford University Press, 2024, 336 pp.

Should the World Fear China?
BY ZHOU BO. Hurst, 2025, 376 pp.

The United States and China see eye to eye on very little these days, but there is one surprising point on which their top officials agree: the world is becoming multipolar. In one of his first interviews in office, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio insisted that the unipolar dominance the United States had enjoyed in recent decades was "an anomaly" and "a product of the end of the Cold War." The United States, in his view, was no longer the unrivaled global hegemon but one of a handful of "great powers in different parts of the planet." Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi agrees. At the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, Wang declared, "A multipolar world is not only a historical inevitability; it is also becoming a reality."

To be sure, Beijing's and Washington's understandings of multipolarity are different. Trump administration officials picture a world in which the United States has been freed from many of its overseas obligations and can act unilaterally, focusing mainly on the Western Hemisphere and "America first" policies while tolerating spheres of influence elsewhere. "The Chinese will do what's in the best interests of China, the Russians will do what's in the best interest of Russia," and the United States will do "what's in the best interest of the United States," as Rubio put it in January. For their part, Chinese leaders see multipolarity not merely as an opportunity to dominate Asia but also as heralding the emergence of a transactional global system

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in which the reach of U.S. power is curtailed, key U.S. partners are less aligned with Washington, autocracy faces less pushback, and China—along with its strategic partner Russia—has far greater freedom of action and global influence.

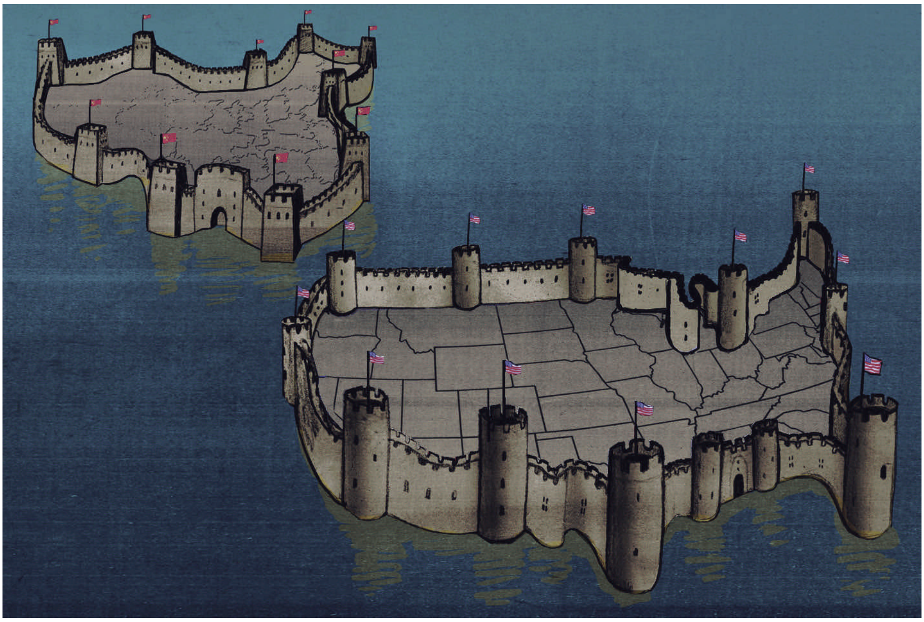
Both of these visions are reshaping the world. U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping are ushering in an era of what can be called "mercenary multipolarity"—a transformed international order centered on self-interested great powers that generally disdain using their influence to benefit or cooperate with others and are primarily concerned with maximizing their own security, prosperity, and power.

How did a multipolar world emerge in the first place? Two new and very different books help answer that question. In *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power*, the Stanford University political scientist Oriana Skylar Mastro, who also serves in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, provides a systematic and creative examination of how far China has come in pursuing its goals "to close the gap in relative diplomatic, economic, and military power." By contrast, the Chinese analyst and former People's Liberation Army (PLA) senior colonel Zhou Bo insists that China's rise should not be cause for concern. In *Should the World Fear China?*, a loosely curated collection of his essays, Zhou emerges as a resolute polemicist for China's cause whose perspective reflects mainstream currents in Chinese strategic thinking.

In recent years, many analysts have hotly debated the scope and scale of the challenge that Beijing poses to the international order. This debate now finds itself in a peculiar moment, as Trump has made the United States appear as the more explicitly revisionist power, openly upending the international order it once championed. By withdrawing from UN bodies; placing tariffs on the entire world, including on U.S. allies; threatening to seize Canada and Greenland; and undermining collective principles of law and pluralism, the second Trump administration has given China unprecedented space to present itself as both a defender and a reformer of the existing order. That is allowing China to gain greater influence in existing institutions, exploit fear and uncertainty to pull long-standing U.S. partners closer to Beijing, and build its own alternative institutions and relationships even as it continues to flout international rules and norms. Trump and Xi are turning U.S.-Chinese competition into a story of two self-interested, domineering superpowers looking to squeeze countries around the world—and each other—for whatever they can get. This dramatic shift plays into China's hands and undermines core U.S. strengths in the long-term competition over the future international order.

WATCH AND LEARN

The growth of China's global influence, which has shaped the emerging multipolarity, was the result of a careful strategy pursued over decades and tied closely to Beijing's analysis of U.S. power, as Mastro demonstrates in *Upstart.* She provides a fresh framework for understanding China's rise by drawing from an unlikely source: the extensive scholarship on industry disruption



ELLIE FOREMAN-PECK

in the business sector. Mastro applies the concept of industry "upstarts," which push out established firms, to power shifts in international relations and, specifically, to the case of China. She shows that Beijing has risen to great-power status over the past 40 years mainly by exploiting gaps in U.S. power and the international order while selectively innovating new approaches and occasionally emulating U.S. actions. She writes that the United States, like an industry-leading firm, has been the "primary reference for Chinese decision-makers" and that China's strategies of exploitation, entrepreneurship, and emulation are constantly evolving.

Upstart's most important contribution is to explain how China was able to grow powerful without triggering, until relatively recently, a major response from the United States. One of Mastro's core insights is that China, during its rise, often chose not to emulate the United States when it assessed that emulation would have been either too costly or likely to trigger a backlash from Washington. (In these pages in 2019, Mastro described China's rise as that of a "stealth superpower.") Although China's growing power was plain to see, its intentions and ambitions were not. Great powers such as the United States often measure their rivals' growing power by comparing it with their own, looking for signs of similar strategies that helped them rise. But Mastro shows how Beijing limited the kind of emulation that would have made clear to U.S. policymakers that China had ambitions to challenge the United States' position on the global stage. Chinese leaders knew, Mastro argues, that if Washington felt threatened, the United States could thwart their country's ambitions.

To head off such an outcome, they deployed a strategy to obfuscate threats to U.S. interests and thereby delay a response from Washington, even as they engaged in a dramatic military buildup. Examples of this strategy that Mastro cites include Beijing's focus on building commercial ports instead of more overseas military bases and training foreign local law enforcement instead of foreign militaries. Such policies allowed Chinese officials to characterize their country's actions as benign and to insist that they were committed to a "peaceful rise." As Beijing developed a powerful military, advanced technology, and a dominant role in international trade, Mastro observes, China was able to transform in just a few decades "from diplomatic isolation to having as much diplomatic and political power on the world stage as the United States."

The emergence of a multipolar world has depended on the interaction between the United States and China that Mastro illuminates in *Upstart*. For the United States to maintain an edge in this competition, she argues that Washington should pursue "its own version of an upstart strategy," which would entail closing the gaps that China exploits, outmaneuvering China when the United States and its allies have competitive advantages, using entrepreneurial approaches of its own, and even emulating some Chinese successes. One such U.S. advantage, Mastro writes, is immigration: "In innovation, for example, a more open immigration policy that encourages skilled labor to settle in the country is an option Beijing does not have." The overall goal of such a strategy would be "to move competition into areas where the United States has an advantage and reduce the impact of Chinese strategies where China enjoys advantages."

Mastro's proposal for a U.S. "upstart strategy" is not the approach the Trump administration is taking. Instead, under Trump, the United States is creating new gaps for China to exploit by withdrawing from international institutions and undermining U.S. competitive advantages, such as its global network of alliances and partnerships and its robust domestic research and innovation base. In April, Xi traveled to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia to sign agreements on trade, technology, and other fields in a region that had, in recent years, developed deeper partnerships with the United States but was hit hard by Trump's tariffs earlier that month. Beijing is also working to draw Europe closer as the continent faces intense pressure from Washington; for example, China has lifted sanctions on members of the European Parliament and dangled other concessions ahead of an EU-Chinese summit scheduled for July 2025. Chinese leaders are trying to take advantage of an opportunity that Washington's actions have handed them.

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

As Beijing recalibrates its international strategy in response to the second Trump term, some Chinese foreign policy thinkers are speaking openly about opportunities for China to advance its vision of a multipolar world favorable to its interests. "By the end of Trump's second term, America's global standing and credibility image will have gone down," Zhou, the former PLA colonel and author of *Should the World Fear China?*, bluntly told CNN in March 2025. He continued, "And as American strength declines, China, of course, will look more important."

In his new book, Zhou offers paeans to China as a responsible and stabilizing player in a chaotic world, and his essays can best be understood as a theme and variations on the official party line, sometimes stepping beyond it but never wandering far. He argues that China does not "really want to reshape the international order," as the United States claims, because "there is no liberal international order." Such a phrase is simplistic and carries "an apparent air of western triumphalism," Zhou writes, because it overlooks seven decades of postwar history that included Cold War rivalry, postcolonial independence, and the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as the institutions that have emerged since the Cold War, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the G-20, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Zhou argues that the changes wrought by China "shouldn't be taken as an erosion of the international order" but as steps that "could change the world for the better." Given the often coercive nature of Chinese behavior, seen, for example, in Beijing's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, many readers will reject such an argument made by a former PLA officer. Zhou's efforts to cast China in a benign light are often implausible, such as his claim that it was "not exactly use of force" when "the Chinese coast guard used water cannons against Filipino ships in 2024."

Zhou cheers an emerging multipolar world. Alternative power centers—such as the BRICS, the group whose original members were Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and has grown to include Indonesia, Iran, and others; and the SCO, which focuses on security and economic issues across Eurasia—are "thriving with expansion." He triumphantly notes that the BRICS' economies are larger in size than the G-7's, although one might question whether the BRICS, even if it has scale, will ever be able to muster the unity of purpose that the G-7 has demonstrated in recent years. (Zhou himself offers a derisive assessment of India as a competitor to China, despite the two countries' membership in the BRICS.)

Russia, China's closest partner in the BRICS and the SCO, is of particular interest to Zhou. Perhaps the most noteworthy piece in his collection of essays is an op-ed he originally wrote for the *Financial Times* in October 2022, when Russian President Vladimir Putin was engaging in dangerous nuclear saber rattling. At the time, Zhou argued, "Given Beijing's huge influence on Moscow, it is uniquely positioned to do more to prevent a nuclear conflict"—an argument also made by prominent voices in the United States and Europe but that stood out coming from a Chinese commentator. A few weeks later, after a meeting in Beijing between Xi and then German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the Chinese government stated that the two leaders "jointly oppose the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons"—the most pointed public statement that Beijing had made since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of that year. But Beijing and Moscow remain firmly aligned on major strategic questions, Xi's comments on nuclear weapons notwithstanding.

Zhou sees a subtle difference in Russia's and China's worldviews, even if both countries talk about a multipolar world order. "China is the largest beneficiary of globalization, which relies on the existing international order," he points out, whereas "Russia resents that order and considers itself a victim of it." Whatever one thinks of this attempted distinction, it is particularly ironic that assertions from Trump administration officials—such as Rubio's statement in his confirmation hearing that the postwar global order is "a weapon being used against us"—reflect a similar sense of victimization that Zhou here ascribes to Russia.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Zhou's book is one that lurks in the background: that the Chinese Communist Party allowed a former military officer to publish an essay in an overseas paper, such as Zhou's in the *Financial Times*, at such a sensitive moment. At a time when the CCP's control over the information environment is tighter than ever—including, for instance, threatening economists who spread "inappropriate" views—the fact of Zhou's prolific international publishing is itself revealing. Beijing is eager to cultivate voices that, as Xi put it in 2013, "tell China's story well" and strengthen its "international discourse power," or its influence over global public opinion, which Xi believes is an important element of national power. But China has struggled to strengthen its discourse power in recent years. This, too, is an area in which Beijing sees opportunity in the second Trump term.

VISIONS OF ORDER

Mastro's and Zhou's books could hardly be more different, but both authors' perspectives shed light on the still protean multipolar world that is being shaped by the competition between Washington and Beijing. In the United States, prior optimistic assumptions that China would join existing institutions as a "responsible stakeholder" were long ago replaced by a more coldly realistic understanding that as China became more powerful, it sought to fundamentally change aspects of the international order to favor its authoritarian system of government, state-dominated political economy, and geopolitical objectives. And the Trump administration has framed its unilateralism as a necessary response to China's actions. As Rubio put it in his confirmation hearing, "We welcomed the Chinese Communist Party into the global order and they took advantage of all of its benefits, and they ignored all of its obligations and responsibilities." Because China rose to power by taking advantage of the rules and institutions that have undergirded the postwar global order, that order must be destroyed, the logic goes, and the United States must look out for its own interests as ruthlessly as China has. Deferring to Russia and disregarding Europe fit into this perspective because Trump sees Russia, not Europe, as another great power.

Chinese officials, of course, have a different version of events. As Mastro notes, they see U.S. leadership of the international order and U.S. alliances and partnerships as crucial advantages that the United States enjoys over China—and they are jubilant at the Trump administration's rejection of what they see as sources of U.S. strength. They speak less openly than the Trump administration about their own pursuit of narrow self-interest and their intent to revise the international order, often shrouding their transactional diplomacy in the language of multilateralism. At the Munich Security Conference earlier this year, Wang reflected that although some critics had, over the years, accused China of wanting to change the international order, they were falling silent "because now there is a country that is withdrawing from international treaties and organizations." China, by contrast, was, in Wang's words, "growing within the existing order," and it would therefore "move the order in a more just and reasonable direction."

Zhou would no doubt agree with Wang's claims here, which some in the audience described as more plausible because U.S. Vice President JD Vance's speech at the conference—perceived by many as a harsh attack on U.S. allies in Europe—immediately preceded Wang's. But what is most troubling for U.S. interests is that despite Chinese support for Russia in its war against Ukraine, the threat that Chinese manufacturing overcapacity poses to European industry, and the many other European interests that would in theory cut against strengthening ties with China, American pressure and Chinese incentives may very well lead European leaders to explore closer partnerships with Beijing.

The erratic nature of the Trump administration makes it impossible to predict exactly how its views on China and the international order will evolve in the coming years. But it is already apparent that the world has entered an era of mercenary multipolarity that will be much more chaotic and dangerous than what has come before. A multipolar world could take more or less cooperative forms and feature more or less great-power acceptance of continued interdependence. But it now seems highly unlikely that cooperation will be a major feature of the emerging international order over the next several years. Instead, the world appears fated to witness the decline or even the collapse of international institutions, which may then be replaced by less influential multinational institutions and intensified fragmentation, competition, and transactionalism.

If more countries come to believe that they are simply facing a choice among big, selfish superpowers, they will make token concessions and then likely implement long-term foreign policy strategies that align with neither Washington nor Beijing. Many countries may even persuade themselves that they can get a better or more durable deal with China than with a unilateralist United States. They may be less willing to take risks to join the United States in upholding peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait or limiting advanced technology exports that can be used by the PLA. And they will be less interested in looking to Washington to lead the future international order—unless they can be persuaded once again that the United States is looking out for them and not only for itself.

REVIEW ESSAY

The Arctic Great Game

And Why America Risks Losing It

HEATHER A. CONLEY

America in the Arctic: Foreign Policy and Competition in the Melting North
BY MARY THOMPSON-JONES. Columbia University Press, 2025, 344 pp.

"Fighting it out over the Arctic, with the vast resources of the Arctic, is going to be the new great game of the twenty-first century," Steve Bannon, who served as chief strategist early in President Donald Trump's first term, declared in an interview in February. The power struggle unfolding in the far north does indeed have much in common with the original Great Game, the nineteenth-century competition between the era's two great powers, the British and Russian Empires, over access to strategically and economically valuable territory in Central Asia. In today's contest, China, Russia, and the United States are similarly pursuing territorial expansion and influence. The modern powers are again eager to access economic riches and build protective buffer zones. And should the competition intensify, the players' military adventures could even end the same way their predecessors did: thwarted by cold weather.

With nineteenth-century power dynamics resurgent, the former U.S. diplomat Mary Thompson-Jones's recent book, *America in the Arctic*, offers a timely and informative narrative of how the United States acquired and maintained its status as an Arctic power. After a largely successful history of building a U.S. presence in the Arctic, Thompson-Jones warns, Washington is now paying insufficient attention to a region that has become a focus of the world's great powers.

Even in the short time since *America in the Arctic* was written, new developments have raised the stakes. After

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taking office, Trump trained his sights on potential Arctic acquisitions, making frequent, controversial references to Canada as "the 51st state" and vowing that the United States would "get" Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, "one way or another." Cooperation between Russia and China, meanwhile, has been growing since their 2022 announcement of an "unlimited partnership," which in the Arctic has translated to joint scientific, space, and military operations, including coast guard and naval patrols. And Washington's recent outreach to Moscow has introduced a wildcard: should talks yield some kind of grand bargain, the resulting geopolitical realignment could change the game entirely.

Whatever happens, a contest over critical minerals, maritime routes, fisheries, natural resources, seabed mining, and satellite communications is coming, and the United States is not ready for it. For years, Russia and China have been preparing to take advantage of new Arctic shipping routes, improving their undersea military and scientific capabilities, and honing their hybrid warfare tactics while U.S. attention has been elsewhere. To compete, the United States will need to dramatically increase its military, economic, scientific, and diplomatic presence in the Arctic, in close cooperation with U.S. allies. If Washington does not resolve the deficiencies and contradictions of its Arctic strategy soon, it may find that it has already lost the new great game.

MEET THE CONTESTANTS

Thompson-Jones provides a rich history of the United States' experience in the Arctic, including its active role in shaping the Arctic policies of Canada, Denmark (via Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden, incorporating memorable vignettes from each Arctic country. A former U.S. diplomat who served in Canada, Thompson-Jones conveys her deep admiration for the people who live in the Arctic and her appreciation of the unrelenting effects of climate change, the desire for security, and the value of friends and allies "when the ice breaks," as the Inuit proverb goes. The book closes with a stark—and accurate—lament of Washington's distinct lack of ambition in its recent Arctic policies. Thompson-Jones, writing before the U.S. presidential election last year, recommends that future leaders increase their focus on climate change and multilateral diplomacy in an expansive Arctic strategy. That advice, unfortunately, quickly became outdated with the return of Trump.

More likely to suit the sensibilities of the U.S. president is Thompson-Jones's suggestion that the United States have what she calls a "Longyear moment"—a reference to a Midwestern industrialist named John Longyear, who in 1901 sailed to the Svalbard archipelago in the sea north of mainland Norway and "saw iron ore and big possibilities." In 1906, Longyear founded the Arctic Coal Company and sought to build and sustain an industrial presence in the Arctic, with the eventual support of the U.S. government. Thompson-Jones writes that this venture represented a "profound conceptual shift" in U.S. approaches to the Arctic, ushering in an era of heightened ambition.

Over a century later, the United States needs to pursue "big possibilities" in the Arctic once again if it is to compete with its rivals, Russia and China. All three players are invested in the region, but in different ways. For Russia, which holds vast swaths of Arctic territory, the region is vital to its military and economic survival. For China, the Arctic represents an opportunity to diversify its global economic interests. And for the United States, which secured its Arctic presence with the 1867 purchase of the territory of Alaska from Russia—a sale that Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's former deputy prime minister, has described as a "betrayal of Russian power status"—the region is a northern frontline of defense.

The Arctic animates Russian President Vladimir Putin's geopolitical strategy. He seeks to develop a maritime passageway, the Northern Sea Route, that traverses Russia's northern coastal waters and is dotted with new port infrastructure linked by rail to the country's sub-Arctic regions. A new fleet of Russian icebreakers would escort registered vessels along the route, which would facilitate the export of Russian natural resources and the east-west transit of Chinese goods. In that kind of large-scale project, Thompson-Jones traces echoes of a brutal legacy: the savagery of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's Arctic infrastructure campaign, in which roads, railways, and mines were built by prisoners and forced laborers, many of whom died during the construction. One road was known as "the Bone Road" because so many workers were buried in its foundation that "there is one body for every meter of road."

Putin's economic and military buildup in the region is less ruthless than Stalin's but similarly ambitious, driven by Russia's chronic sense of insecurity and fear of losing control over its territory. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Arctic military bases were closed, damaged infrastructure was left unrepaired, and many Arctic populations, cut off from state subsidies, moved elsewhere. Today, Russian authorities are trying to prevent a further deterioration of the Arctic population by delaying residents' requests to leave. Polar gulags are also the preferred place to send political prisoners who threaten the government, such as the opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died under suspicious circumstances in one such prison in 2024. Russia is constructing and refurbishing Arctic military bases, in part to improve its monitoring capabilities as commercial activity increases along the Northern Sea Route. The sudden appearance of Russian flags, crosses, and Orthodox priests across not just the Russian Arctic but also, worryingly, the Norwegian High North are declarations of Russia's past, present, and future ownership.

China joined the Arctic game more recently. Despite lacking Arctic territory of its own, China has declared itself a "near Arctic" state on the basis of fifteenth-century maps and its interest in Arctic governance. Beginning in 2004, when it established its first research station on Svalbard, it has used scientific cooperation to boost its Arctic presence and knowledge.

DEFENSIVE LINES

Military buildup in and around the Arctic

Source: Military Footprints in the Arctic, *Simons Foundation Canada, 2024.*

Later, China pursued business ventures with Canada and the Nordic states, but these countries were wary of its investment terms—and under pressure from Washington—and slowly restricted Beijing's access. Another opening came with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As Moscow faced the loss of its European markets, the end of its partnerships with Western energy companies, and wartime budgetary limitations, it welcomed Chinese investment as a way to fill the gap. China increased funding for Russia's liquefied natural gas projects in the Arctic and related infrastructure development along the Northern Sea Route, expanding its commercial presence in the region.

For its part, the United States has been an Arctic economic power since it acquired Alaska to secure access to the territory's natural resources. It first attempted to purchase Greenland in 1868 for the same reason. (Further attempts to acquire the island—in 1910, 1946, and 2019—had a mix of economic and security motives.) After World War II, the United States expanded its Arctic presence through a network of regional alliances and infrastructure projects. In the 1950s, it built the Distant Early Warning Line, a string of radar stations that traversed Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands and remained operational until 1993 to defend against a potential Soviet missile attack. In cooperation with Canada, the United States constructed the Alaska Highway and created an integrated air defense system known as NORAD. Together with NATO allies, U.S. forces patrolled the waters and airspace of the North Atlantic, particularly around Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, to detect Soviet, and later, Russian nuclear submarines and bombers.

The Arctic remains vital to U.S. economic and security interests. Anchorage, Alaska, is home to the fourth-busiest cargo airport in the world. Nearly all of the United States' radar systems and ground-based missile interceptors are located in the state, whose high latitude enables earlier detection of incoming threats. Recent bilateral defense agreements with all five Nordic countries and the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, in 2023 and 2024, respectively, have strengthened collective defense in the Arctic. But Washington has neglected its own capabilities in the region. U.S. military officials often decry the lack of port and aviation infrastructure, icebreakers, satellites, sensors, and cold-weather equipment and training that are necessary to defend Arctic territory.

THE GAME BOARD

The prize that Russia, China, and the United States are all after is control. As the American aviator Billy Mitchell quipped in 1935, "Whoever holds Alaska will hold the world." Control of Arctic land offers several advantages. Crossing over polar regions shortens the distances that cargo vessels, airplanes, undersea cables, or intercontinental ballistic missiles must travel to reach their destinations. The region hosts satellite ground stations and orbital launch sites that are important to both civilian and military operations. High-latitude communications infrastructure, although limited, is vital for tracking vessels, monitoring weather, and integrating surveillance systems. Arctic lands and seabeds also hold vast quantities of critical minerals and energy resources, and Arctic waters are becoming an increasingly important source of food as warming ocean temperatures compel fish to swim north seeking cooler waters.

The main battle lines will thus be drawn along the Arctic seabed, in international waters, and en route to outer space. U.S. and Russian nuclear submarines already patrol zones where undersea cables connect Europe and the United States, and security is likely to get tighter as Russian and Chinese vessels target new cables. Countries will also be looking to lock in access to critical minerals. In 2023, a United Nations commission associated with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) issued recommendations that supported most of Russia's claims to extend its outer continental shelf deep into the central Arctic. (Russia must eventually negotiate with Canada and Denmark to resolve overlapping claims.) Seabed mining in this area could increase Russia's commercial and military presence in international waters.

Disputes over the status of two Arctic maritime routes, the Russian Northern Sea Route and the Canadian equivalent, the Northwest Passage, are likely to continue. Both Russia and Canada claim these passages as internal waters, but the United States and other countries consider them to be international waters and therefore not subject to national laws or restrictions. As polar ice melts, a third transpolar route that lies almost entirely in undisputed international waters could open up, and the United States will need additional maritime and monitoring infrastructure to prepare for its increased use. China has already begun testing the viability of the route, sending an icebreaker through it in 2012. Finally, the positioning of satellite ground stations and polar orbit launching stations in the Arctic will be a key front of the space race. As Russia has demonstrated in its war in Ukraine, the country that controls global navigation systems and can disarm the satellites of its adversaries will have enormous military advantages.

PLAYING TO WIN

The United States is woefully unprepared for the emerging competition. Despite efforts from Congress, especially the delegations from Alaska, Maine, and Washington, to push successive administrations to devote the necessary resources to the region, the U.S. defense community has treated it as a low priority. Insufficient funding and insufficient attention create a vicious circle, producing uninspired Arctic strategies that lack adequate budgets and clear command structures. To get back in the game, the United States needs to ramp up its military and economic presence in the Arctic, working closely with its Arctic allies to strengthen its scientific and surveillance networks to better identify and defend against threats.

The most visible sign of the United States' inadequate preparation is its aging icebreaker fleet. The U.S. Navy has no ice-strengthened surface ships, a class of ship that can navigate mostly ice-free waters. The U.S. Coast Guard has only three icebreakers—a stronger ship designed to clear passages through solid ice—but just two are operational today, and they must serve both the Arctic and the Antarctic. Just one, a 50-year-old ship, can break through 20 feet of ice. In 2024, Washington purchased the third, a commercial icebreaker built in 2012, but work must be done on it before it becomes operational, expected next year. This ship, which can break nearly five feet of ice, is meant to serve as a backup to the United States' older icebreakers until a new, more powerful icebreaker that the first Trump administration commissioned in 2019 is constructed. The target date for that project, currently 2030, has been delayed by repeated design changes and the erosion of expertise at U.S. shipyards, which have not built a heavy icebreaker—one that can cut through ice 21 feet thick—since the 1970s.

The problem goes well beyond icebreakers. The United States does not have sufficient military presence or maritime infrastructure, such as deep-sea ports, to defend large swaths of Arctic territory. U.S. forces are able to operate Pituffik Space Base on the north coast of Greenland, for example, but they cannot secure the entire island. The Trump administration has also been jeopardizing critical Arctic alliances. Its aggression toward Canada and Denmark has pushed both countries to enhance their capabilities—Canada announced plans to construct two new icebreakers and three new Arctic military bases earlier this year, and Denmark announced a $2 billion security upgrade in January and another $600 million for surveillance vessels in April—but threaten to damage their relationships with the United States in the long term. If Washington is to compete with China and Russia, it needs its Arctic friends fully on its side.

Washington must also start putting real money behind the development of U.S. Arctic capabilities. Trump has spoken repeatedly about U.S. interests in the Arctic, and since 2021 Congress has pushed for multiyear funding for an Arctic security initiative to be included in the Pentagon's budget. It is time to make that plan a reality. The U.S. Navy needs ice-strengthened ships. Trump has repeatedly called for the construction of 40 icebreakers, but this quantity is unnecessary and unrealistic. The Coast Guard has said it needs eight or nine, and even reaching this number within a reasonable time frame would require most of the building to be done by foreign shipyards. Runways, radar systems, and other military installations damaged by thawing permafrost must be repaired and stabilized. Increased deployments of personnel and long-range bombers, more and better port facilities and sensors along the coasts of Greenland, and upgraded satellite communications, underwater drones, and sea-floor mapping are necessary to monitor the vast expanse of the Arctic and particularly to detect Russian or Chinese military activity. As U.S. General Gregory Guillot, the head of the U.S. Northern Command, put it in his congressional testimony in February, "You cannot defeat what you cannot see."

The U.S. military must also streamline responsibility for operations in the Arctic under a single regional command. In the existing structure, developed in 2011, operational responsibilities are divided between the U.S. European Command, which covers the European Arctic, and the U.S. Northern Command and the U.S.-Canadian organization NORAD, which together cover North America. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, meanwhile, manages the bulk of the U.S. Army's cold-weather and airborne capabilities based in Alaska. With each command focused on its own area, no single entity has eyes on the Arctic as a whole. Even the east and west coasts of Greenland fall under separate military jurisdictions. A unified subregional U.S. Arctic Command would be able to detect and respond to adversaries' activities across the Arctic and support regional commands.

There are clear steps the United States can take to access the Arctic's critical minerals, too. One is for the

Energy and State Departments to create a dedicated Arctic initiative, building on the Minerals Security Partnership (a grouping of 14 countries, plus the European Union, formed in 2022), to boost public-private investment in sustainable mining and related infrastructure in Alaska, Greenland, and other Arctic locations. Another step is to enlarge U.S. Arctic territory—not by trying to buy Greenland or incorporate Canada, but by extending the U.S. outer continental shelf in the Bering Sea and the Arctic Ocean. The Biden administration began this process in 2023 by mapping 151,700 square nautical miles as an extension of the land mass of Alaska, as defined under UNCLOS. Although not a signatory to the treaty, Washington can still submit a claim to these waters to the associated UN commission. The United States, moreover, ought to ratify this treaty, which both China and Russia have signed, in order to shape future governance of seabed mining and to use its provisions to hold Beijing and Moscow accountable for violations of maritime law.

For the past two decades, Washington has written dozens of Arctic strategies while letting its Arctic capabilities atrophy and, more recently, alienating its Arctic allies. But this is the time for concerted action. Russia and China have already made their opening moves. The United States, following a line from Rudyard Kipling's 1901 book, *Kim*, set against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Central Asia, must now "go far and far into the North, playing the Great Game."

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REVIEW ESSAY

Behind the Firing Line

How William F. Buckley Reinvented Conservatism

CHARLES KING

Buckley: The Life and the Revolution That Changed America
BY SAM TANENHAUS. Random House, 2025, 1,040 pp.

Was there ever anyone quite like William F. Buckley, Jr.? The founder of *National Review*, once the preeminent conservative magazine; the host of a talk show, *Firing Line*, that over its more than three decades on air formed a visual and oral history of the United States in the contemporary era; the author of popular tracts, memoirs, travelogues, and thrillers, more than one a year for stretches of his life; and the urbane and witty intellect behind the American conservative movement, Buckley embodied a style and a sensibility that belong to the last century. But he pioneered a mode of politics that came fully into power in the present one, in the person of Donald Trump.

For much of the post–World War II era, few Americans could name the precepts that defined conservatism, but they knew Buckley stood for them. Young men didn't want to follow him so much as be him. Today, if younger conservatives have moved on in their admiration—to a right-wing provocateur such as Charlie Kirk or a supposedly straight-talking podcaster such as Joe Rogan—that is only because the posture and principles that Buckley represented have become the oxygen of the American right, invisible yet essential.

Buckley, who died in 2008, did not live to see the rise of Trumpism. But it is impossible to read *Buckley*, Sam Tanenhaus's monumental, honest, fair-minded, and spectacularly enlightening biography—some 30 years in the making and undertaken with Buckley's cooperation—without

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Illustration by John Lee

seeing in it the trailhead to our own time. Buckley was among the first to sense that American politics is downstream of culture, meaning that the drivers of political life are affect and positioning, not interests and policies. On the page and on the screen, Buckley didn't so much articulate conservative ideas as perform them: a preference for order over voice, a desire to limit participation rather than enable it, a belief that public morality should have religion near its center, and a conviction that a new elite must remake the Republican Party as the first step toward retaking the United States.

Today, listening to what Buckley had to say—and, crucially, how he said it—can hit like a revelation. Trumpism is often characterized as a fractious coalition of techno-libertarians and populists or a new American version of older European authoritarianism. But through the prism of Buckley's life, it looks more like a radical return to something more recent and closer to home. What Buckley saw more clearly than any conservative thinker of the twentieth century was the degree to which figures such as U.S. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan were not fulfillments of the American rightist tradition of Buckley's youth but aberrations from it. Mainstream conservatism, such as it was, had evolved from old-style liberalism, with its conviction that a good society would magically emerge if government got out of the way. What conservatives lacked, Buckley felt, was both a program for a rightly ordered America—hierarchical, suspicious of opposition, and protective of a civilization under threat—and the will to achieve it. That vision and its pamphleteering defense would be his life's work. To understand the ideas animating Trump's world, a good place to start is Buckley's.

PRODIGIOUS SON

Buckley, born in November 1925, was his household's sixth child and third son but the one his parents decided should carry the paternal name. His father, William Sr., was a Texas oilman who made his fortune in Mexico and Venezuela. His mother was New Orleans aristocracy. The Buckleys were old Irish rather than Yankee, weekend sailors and equestrians but also Catholic and fecund, and in the years before World War II, they were deeply America First. Their Connecticut estate, Great Elm, housed ten children and a cavalcade of heady guests such as Albert Jay Nock, the author, anti–New Dealer, and casual anti-Semite. (Another visitor, the jazz pianist Fats Waller, a cousin of the Buckleys' butler, was left to entertain the servants.)

Large, loving families have their unique vices, among them self-satisfaction. At Millbrook, the New York boarding school, a teacher reported that Buckley was the kind of student who displayed the "dangerous habit of generalizing at times in order to prove a point without knowing the facts." The problem in the South was not that Black Americans were denied the vote, Buckley wrote in one Millbrook essay, but that too many white citizens of low intelligence were allowed it. He would make the same point, decades later, in his famous debate with James Baldwin at the Cambridge Union.

From Millbrook and then a stint in the U.S. Army after the war, Buckley went to Yale. It didn't take him long to find his calling as a talker and writer. He excelled in debate, discovered his favorite subjects, and honed his personal style in the *Yale Daily News.* A university fundraising campaign had yielded extra money that undergraduates proposed should be used for scholarships for "deserving Negro students." But how would donors feel, Buckley complained in print, if they didn't have full say in how the funds were spent? That rhetorical sleight of hand would become characteristic. Liberal schemes for improvement might not be bad on their face, but they rested on some deeper principle that was ultimately self-defeating.

Today, more young people aspire to be influencers than public intellectuals, which is why it is hard to re-create how astonishing it was, in 1951, to read *God and Man at Yale*, which Buckley published when he was in his mid-20s. The book, a broadside at Yale's faculty and administration, would define the genre of academic jeremiad. Buckley's diction was twisty, his sentences often a yard short of the target, but his core arguments were clear. Yale claimed to be a place of free expression, yet the curriculum demonstrated a preference for the relativistic, the atheistic, and the collectivist. If universities were schools of indoctrination, as they seemed to be, then Americans should have a chance to decide which doctrines were worth instilling.

A review in *The New York Times* chastised Buckley for being too young to have earned a conservative outlook on the world, but the attention helped catapult the book, and Buckley, to fame. *God and Man at Yale* "contained the seeds of a modern movement," Tanenhaus observes. A manifesto rather than a playbook, it redefined conservatism by leaping back over World War II and repackaging the prejudices of Great Elm for the coming television age.

In the years that followed, Buckley would intuit that the political battles of the 1950s and 1960s, not least those over civil rights, might be profitably framed as constitutional. White Southerners were already trying out the claim that resistance to desegregation was about state-federal relations, not race. (Confederates and Southern Redeemers had been blindingly clear during the previous century: it had always been about race.) Buckley perfected the argument. Racial politics, it went, was just one symptom of a political tradition and constitutional order in crisis, beset by ungrateful minorities and socialist malcontents at home and mobilized communists abroad. What America deserved was a movement, then a party, then a government with the courage to defend a civilization under threat.

FROM CRITIC TO KINGMAKER

One of the vehicles for Buckley's ideas was the magazine *National Review*, which he founded in 1955 with the famous editorial promise to stand "athwart history, yelling Stop."

Every excess of the political right became an excuse for enumerating the greater sins of the left and then focusing on deeper principles, a technique he had already used in a book-length defense of Joseph McCarthy the previous year. On the pages of *National Review* and, after 1966, on *Firing Line*, Buckley pioneered the do-your-own-research rhetorical style: whataboutism and verbal misdirections that often slipped into intellectual nihilism. McCarthy might have been guilty of "oversimplification" on occasion, Buckley said on an early episode of *Firing Line*, but what was the difference between his exaggerations and similar overstatements by, say, Franklin Roosevelt or Lyndon Johnson? The distinction, of course, was that it was one thing to exaggerate for political gain and quite another to say things about real people and real events that were plainly false, as Buckley's guest, the lawyer and refugee advocate Leo Cherne, pointed out. That Buckley couldn't—wouldn't—admit the difference was a Yale debater's trick. Diffused in American media and civic life, the same rhetorical move would turn out to be corrosive.

Buckley's commitments would often place him on what American schoolchildren, at least until recently, were taught to think of as the wrong side of history: standing by McCarthy, opposing much of the civil rights movement (he called Barry Goldwater's vote against the 1964 Civil Rights Act a "profile in courage"), and callously grandstanding during the AIDS crisis. "Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm . . . and on the buttocks," he wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed in 1986. He attempted once to turn his notoriety into votes, with an unsuccessful bid for mayor of New York City in 1965. But Buckley was a performer, not a policymaker, and in any case, the great affairs of the day—civil rights, Vietnam, the counterculture, Watergate—cried out for copy. Then came Ronald Reagan.

"We have a nation to run," the editors of *National Review* wrote after Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election. Buckley had supported Reagan and served as a bridge between the California governor and the Republican Party's East Coast establishment. But it was the harder Reagan (fiercely anticommunist, friendly to the extremists), rather than the softer one (avuncular, enamored of "peace through strength"), that most attracted him. During the campaign, Buckley hosted Reagan on *Firing Line*. His first question was about how Reagan might deal with a hypothetical "race riot" in Detroit. Reagan responded that handling a riot was the responsibility of local authorities but that the federal government might step in to protect citizens against overzealous policing. Buckley looked visibly disappointed.

Buckley was by that point an institution rather than a barricade stormer, and the years of Reagan and his successor George H. W. Bush were a time of valedictions as much as victories. He handed off the editorship of *National Review*. His wife, Patricia, rose to fame as a socialite and tireless fundraiser for charitable causes, including AIDS research.

The Berlin Wall fell. Buckley was "an aesthete of controversy," in Tanenhaus's phrase, and with Republicans in power, communism defeated, and the Western left soon to be reshaped by the third-way politics of President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, his canvas shrank.

CONNECTICUT YANQUIS

In an ambitious (and sometimes antic) life, there were plenty of misses, from the disappointing to the tragic. Buckley would never finish his magnum opus of political philosophy, to be titled *The Revolt Against the Masses*, a reference to the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's classic *Revolt of the Masses.* He helped secure the release of a death-row murderer, Edgar Smith, largely because Smith was a *National Review* reader and loved Barry Goldwater—only for Smith to try to kill again. Buckley had turned "owning the libs" into a profession before anyone had invented the term, and when he slipped, he did so spectacularly. At his debate with Baldwin in 1965, on the proposition "The American dream is at the expense of the American Negro," the audience saw him outmaneuvered by Baldwin in peak oratorical form. Buckley lost by a vote of 544 to 164.

He could be rattled by people who were "wittier and sharper" than he was, an old friend, the historian Alistair Horne, reported to Tanenhaus. The rattler in chief turned out to be the novelist and gadfly Gore Vidal. Buckley had reluctantly agreed to join Vidal as an on-air commentator for ABC News at the 1968 Democratic Convention. At one point, Vidal and Buckley were in the middle of arguing about demonstrators who raised the Viet Cong flag at the Chicago convention site. The moderator wondered how Americans would feel if it were the Nazi flag. Buckley endorsed the comparison (his whatabout stratagem, again), and once he had taken the bait, Vidal set the hook. "The only crypto-Nazi I can think of is yourself," Vidal said. Buckley lost it. "Now, listen, you queer," he spat at Vidal, who was bisexual at a time when one didn't announce that fact. "Stop calling me a crypto-Nazi or I'll sock you in your goddamn face and you'll stay plastered." Vidal smiled like the Cheshire Cat. It was the greatest public disaster of Buckley's career.

Buckley could be generous, charming, and funny, especially with people he liked and, better yet, respected. He made a habit of conversing publicly with his political and cultural opponents, a practice that now seems ancient and utterly lost. But the role he nurtured was that of an instigator. What he offered was a credo tethered to a pose—a conviction that his job was to "say no to the barbarians," as he once phrased it, and that a posture of insouciant ridicule was the hallmark of a winner. Earnest moral outrage belonged to the weak.

What is most striking, however, is that, in a long life of reading and conversation, in interviews with everyone from the antipoverty activist Michael Harrington, his first *Firing Line* guest, to Henry Kissinger, one of his last, it's not clear what Buckley felt he had learned. From Millbrook to the Cambridge Union, from Yale to the television studio, he often seemed to be ill prepared and winging it. As he aged, he rethought some of his earlier positions, including on civil rights. But nowhere in Tanenhaus's account is there anything that approaches a turning point or moment of reckoning that helps us make sense of Buckley as a thinker. Few people have a Rosebud, an experience that explains everything that comes after. But for an essayist, editor, and movement leader who could radiate maturity, it is remarkable how much of the precocious child remained alive in him. He never quite gave up performing for the adults in the room.

A reason for that is right at the top of Tanenhaus's book. "Everything he learned, and all he became, began at home," reads the second sentence of *Buckley*. It is a thesis that Tanenhaus earns. People often took Buckley's affectations—the patrician languorousness, the liquid consonants—for Briticisms, and he could certainly seem like an Oxford don. But he was actually closer to a *don*. The Mexican revolution of 1910 and the overthrow of the dictator Porfirio Díaz had been ruinous for the oil business overseen by William Sr., but he had gained a love for the culture and class of his local partners. William Jr. would learn Spanish before English and grow up in a household where attitudes toward history and human nature chimed with those of the wealthy, European-descended Mexican elite: intensely caste-conscious and fearful of the ethnically mixed, teeming mass below. Buckley would gain his own experiences in Mexico briefly as a student in the 1940s and again as a CIA operative in the early 1950s.

What all this produced in Buckley was a quiet sense that the truly compelling models of society and governance lay in the Spanish-speaking world. Francisco Franco was "an authentic national hero," he wrote after a visit to Spain in 1957, and "only as oppressive as it is necessary to be to maintain total power." Buckley's interview with the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges in 1977 is one of *Firing Line*'s most boring episodes, in part because he and Borges—who welcomed the military coup that had unseated President Isabel Perón a year earlier—found so little to disagree about.

"Connecticut Yanquis" is Tanenhaus's label for the clan at Great Elm, and it is suggestive. Via Buckley, the great unappreciated thread in American conservatism may well be the Hispanic one. Trump's second administration is America First, revanchist, and McCarthyite—not so much New Right as Very Old Right—which the young Buckley, at least, would have applauded. But it is also the first American presidency to have yielded a genuine strongman, a would-be caudillo.

FROM BUCKLEY TO TRUMP

Buckley was "a founder of our world," Tanenhaus concludes, but "he speaks to us from a different one." The book runs to around a thousand pages with notes, but it rolls up quickly, with little in the way of grand conclusions about its subject's legacy. Trump is mentioned only once, for example, in a passage about his mentor, the disgraced lawyer (and McCarthy's chief counsel) Roy Cohn, a friend of Buckley's. Part of Tanenhaus's message is that the line of succession in American conservatism ended with Buckley. There has been no one since his death of similar stature on the right—or, for that matter, on the left, a fact that says as much about the state of political ideas in the United States as it does about conservatism. If the alternatives in politics are now reduced to either defending every federal program or becoming a national version of Florida—shaped by permanent culture war, single-party government, and an administrative system of patronage and payback—Americans will have lost sight of the great debates that drew Buckley's generation into civic life.

Buckley was not always a creature of practical politics. His movement was built for poking fun and pointing out contradictions, not governing. But he bequeathed one big idea to the conservativism of today: The problem with liberals wasn't just that they wanted more government. It was that they wanted to share government with people who, out of ignorance, indoctrination, or natural inadequacy, could be relied on to muck it up. That view, even in the absence of a post-Buckley torchbearer, became Trumpism.

Buckley's genius was to see that, from the New Deal to the Cold War, American conservatives had bent themselves into timid naysayers. They knew they were opposed to "big government," but in all the great battles of the twentieth century—over everything from the social safety net to civil rights—they had been cowed into accepting a liberal understanding of the ends and means of governance itself. What they lacked was a dream for what their country could become once it was freed from the barbarians. Since returning to the White House, Trump has begun to implement a substantive program in ways Buckley could have only imagined a Republican president would. The executive branch has dismantled decades-old government programs inherited from liberal administrations; sought to control universities and silence the professional media; made common cause with repressive regimes abroad; denied due process to alleged radicals and noncitizens; suspended refugee admissions (except for white South Africans); and elevated loyalty and "national masculinity," as Buckley once put it, above competence and decency as political virtues. These moves are not attempts to manage a "new fusionism" of traditionalist and libertarian conservatism, but expressions of the same American rightist heritage that formed Buckley, one whose roots run back to the isolationism of the 1930s, to the Old South, and to continental European ideas of natural orders and social castes. Buckley imagined a conservative future that would resemble his own experience of the journey toward it: liberating, raucous, and full of energetic joy. What is so maddening about Buckley's life is that he embraced the transgressive fun of an opposition movement without thinking too hard about the cruelty it could produce once it held power.

REVIEW ESSAY

Your Land Is Our Land

Property, Power, and the Coming Age of Territorial Conflict

SUNIL AMRITH

Land Power: Who Has It, Who Doesn't, and How That Determines the Fate of Societies
BY MICHAEL ALBERTUS. Basic Books, 2025, 336 pp.

Conflicts over land and territory will likely proliferate as the accelerating climate crisis collides with rising geopolitical tensions. The International Organization for Migration has estimated that between now and 2050, as many as a billion people will be displaced from their homes by the effects of climate change. This is already happening. In many parts of Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, unprecedented peaks of heat, prolonged droughts, more violent storms, and sea-level rise are pushing regions to the limit of ecological viability.

In Europe and North America, media coverage of "climate migrants" encourages the idea that people will move in large numbers to the world's wealthiest countries. But doors are closing in an era of racialized hostility to migration. The overwhelming majority of people who are forced to leave their homes because of heat, aridity, or deluge will move within the borders of the countries where they live, almost all of them in the so-called global South. Their ability to sustain themselves will depend on access to land.

The political scientist Michael Albertus's capacious and illuminating *Land Power* shows that the distribution of land ownership explains a great deal about where wealth and power reside in the world today. At the heart of Albertus's story is what he calls "the Great Reshuffle": a planet-spanning redistribution of land that began roughly 200 years ago, driven by the expansion of modern states and empires. During this period, the earth's human population grew from one billion to eight billion. In many places for the first time, land

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became scarce and coveted. Its seizure and redistribution locked in patterns of racial domination, gender inequality, and environmental harm—what Albertus considers "the world's greatest social ills." But his account is far from fatalistic. As long as states learn from past failures, they can redistribute land in ways that avoid calamities and empower and uplift their citizens.

EXHAUSTING THE LAND

Societies have been "reshuffling" land for a very long time, at least since the last Ice Age, nearly 12,000 years ago. As one review of the evidence points out, scholars can trace a global "succession of land system regime shifts" back 3,000 years or more, with evidence from every continent of increased land clearance, the domestication of plants and animals, and more extensive cultivation. But the scale and intensity of land use underwent a marked change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, leading to an increase in human population, the emergence of new elites enriched by trade and manufacturing, and an expansion in the capacity of states to control land and extract resources. These developments are what Albertus labels the Great Reshuffle. "Our lives today," he writes, "are determined by the choices that were made when the land shifted hands during the Great Reshuffle."

What changes catalyzed the transformation of this long-term process into the Great Reshuffle? Here, Albertus relies on a familiar narrative of modernity in which Europe looms large. The French Revolution, in his account, was the "turning point in human history." Its leaders sanctioned the mass appropriation of lands from the nobility and their distribution to smaller farmers and the urban bourgeoisie. The revolution—and counterrevolutions across Europe—would speed the formation of nation-states in the nineteenth century. European nation-states made new claims on their subjects and their territory, which led to both the greater democratization of access to land and a rise in landlessness among the least powerful in society. Nation-states, he says, "firmed up their borders, established a monopoly on the use of force, and raised standing armies and centralized bureaucracies."

Albertus's account neglects the fact that imperial states and kingdoms in Asia did much the same during this period. A generation of scholarship in global history has demonstrated parallel and often comparable trajectories of intensified land use around the early modern world. The Mughal Empire's hunger for land taxes, for instance, drove an assault on eastern India's forests in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which redistributed land to pioneer cultivators willing to undertake that work of settlement. Similar incentives simultaneously drew Russian farmers to the forests in the steppes of Central Asia and Chinese settlers to what is now Sichuan Province during the same centuries—land grants, tax relief, and the prospect of land security. To "exhaust the land" was the guiding principle of Chinese provincial governors under both the Ming and Qing dynasties. Their aim was to leave no patch of land uncultivated in order to secure food for a growing population. To see the origins of the Great Reshuffle only in political developments in

Europe underplays the extent to which this was a global process from the start, driven by the growing capacity of states to extract taxation, by the pressures of swelling populations with rising material expectations, and by the global movement of crops and animals in a period of extreme climatic instability.

A VACANT SOIL

The modern age, in Albertus's view, is characterized by several types of rearrangements of land ownership. What he calls "settler reforms" cast the longest shadow, shaping the long-term development of global inequality. The term is Albertus's rather mild moniker for the violent way European settlers seized swaths of the earth, dispossessing and often killing those who already inhabited them. "In a vacant Soyle," wrote the New England clergyman John Cotton in 1630, "hee that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his Right it is." The Narragansett leader Miantonomo countered this claim to property with an account of the settlers' violence toward the land. "Our fathers had plenty of deer and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods," he said around 1640. "But these English having gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes fell the trees; their cows and horses eat the grass, and their hogs spoil our clam banks, and we shall all be starved."

Albertus furnishes a wealth of examples of how this settler revolution unfolded in North America, in Canada, and in Australia—and at whose cost. *Land Power* vividly shows the lasting consequences of this redistribution of land, for instance in the case of the Cahuilla Indians of California's Coachella Valley, a people first confined to reservations and then evicted from even those lands in the 1950s. The conquest of the American West served as a model for would-be conquerors elsewhere. Heinrich Himmler, the architect of the Holocaust, imagined a future in which German settlers had at last subdued the "endless primeval forest" of eastern Europe and made there "a paradise, a European California."

Ranged against these settler reforms, in Albertus's schema, is the twentieth-century movement that sought to institute a very different relationship between states, lands, and populations: collective reforms, inaugurated in the early years of the Soviet Union before sweeping through China and across the decolonizing world in the second half of the twentieth century. Collectivization, in which states sought to industrialize agricultural production by eliminating private landholding, was an idea animated by legitimate moral and political imperatives—even as it often produced disasters.

Schemes of collectivization sought to overturn inequalities in landholding. Albertus's account of their calamitous, violent failure is mostly familiar, but he shows clearly how and why they failed. In the name of liberating cultivators, states ended up exploiting them. Governments dismantled family farms. They expropriated agrarian surplus to force-feed industrialization, in the process bringing famine to Ukraine in the 1930s, for instance. They laid waste to soils and rivers and forests in their rush to achieve impossible targets. China's Great Leap Forward, Mao Zedong's breakneck plan for rural industrialization that lasted from 1958 to 1962, caused famine and mass suffering while leaving a trail of environmental destruction.

Often in *Land Power*, examples of successful reforms come from Latin America, where Albertus has done fieldwork. In Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, collective or cooperative land reforms—less grandiose and more grassroots than the Soviet or Chinese variants—brought substantive and lasting social change. They were implemented by both right-wing populist-authoritarian regimes and left-leaning ones. The reforms gave small farmers security of tenure and made their farms more viable by grouping them in larger units managed either by the state or by farmers' cooperatives. Albertus cites the assessment of the anthropologist Enrique Mayer on the impact of Peru's land reforms of the late 1960s: the reforms "completed the abolition of all forms of servitude in rural estates, a momentous shift in the history of the Andes, akin to the abolition of slavery in the Americas."

The most widespread type of land reform in the twentieth century is also the form that Albertus sees as the model for the most effective land reforms of the twentieth century: he calls them "tiller reforms." Like collective reforms, tiller reforms also broke up landholdings, but their beneficiaries were small farmers—often former tenants or sharecroppers, who now gained formal ownership of the lands they had previously worked on behalf of large landowners. In Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan after World War II, tiller reforms went furthest in reversing rural inequality: they boosted the prosperity of farming families and

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provided them the security that facilitated social mobility through mass education. American support was crucial in all three countries. Emboldened U.S. and World Bank policymakers saw tiller reforms as both a panacea for rural distress and an alternative to communism. But the model ran aground in Vietnam, where the modest scale of enacted tiller reforms could not overcome support for the more revolutionary land transformation promised by the communists.

India emerges as an example of the downside of tiller reforms' incrementalism. After independence in 1947, the Indian government viewed the redistribution of land as an essential way to tackle deep social and economic inequalities. Committed to democratic processes, and to gradual rather than revolutionary transformation, the Indian state undertook extensive reforms. Beginning in the 1950s, between 20 million and 25 million households gained ownership of plots of land through the government's scheme to abolish the colonial-era *zamindari* system of tax-collecting landlords. Laws set a ceiling to the amount of land any one person could own. Tenant farmers across the country benefited from the greater security of tenancy. But by the start of the twenty-first century, when these reforms largely ended, they had barely had any effect in reducing rural inequality. Wealthy and well-connected farmers found ways to circumvent the changes or twist them to their own advantage. Distressingly, the consequences of certain reforms, such as those that made tenancies heritable, hurt women and deepened rural India's "epidemic" of gender violence and discrimination.

The Great Reshuffle brought previously unimaginable abundance to some parts of the world and above all to the settler colonies of North America and Oceania. Indigenous and colonized people paid the price, dispossessed of their lands. Socialist and postcolonial states made several attempts to redistribute land to small farmers and landless rural people, with mixed results and many devastating consequences. The vast expansion in the variety and quantity of agricultural commodities land can produce has enabled the global population to more than triple since 1950. But unequal access to land has locked in deep disparities along the fault lines of race, class, and gender.

HUNGRY FOR MORE

Throughout *Land Power*, Albertus pays surprisingly little attention to the one factor that draws his story together, lending land its tremendous power in the first place: the demand for food. In Albertus's account, population growth appears as a largely extraneous trigger for the Great Reshuffle, requiring little explanation. Yet the lifespans of Europeans and Americans lengthened in the nineteenth century precisely because swaths of prairie were planted with wheat and hundreds of millions of cattle, pigs, and poultry could be killed for meat in industrial facilities. As access to land and long-distance transportation of grain and meat improved the diets of even the poorest Europeans and Americans, the last quarter of the nineteenth century brought mass famines to Brazil, China, India, Java, and southern Africa. In each case, growing landlessness and the pressure to cultivate cash crops reduced local resilience in the face of prolonged droughts and other disasters, such as outbreaks of bubonic plague and cattle disease.

Despite a public focus on resource extraction, humanity still exerts its greatest impact on the natural world via agriculture. Agriculture accounts for a quarter of all greenhouse gas emissions: 31 percent of that from livestock and fisheries, 27 percent from crop production, and 24 percent from the clearance of forests for cultivation (of which only a third is land devoted directly to food for humans, and the rest is devoted to growing food for livestock). Food production is by far the most important cause of biodiversity loss. All the while, according to a 2021 UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimate, 3.1 billion people, or 42 percent of the global population, could not afford an adequately nutritious diet.

Toward the end of *Land Power*, Albertus suggests that a further reshuffle is already underway—a renewed redistribution of land in a warming world. He speculates about the potential impact of future population declines but has less to say about a more present phenomenon: the so-called global land grab, in which large investors, both international and domestic, are buying up huge tracts of land in low- and middle-income countries. Agricultural investment funds, which treat farmland as a distinct asset class, grew tenfold between 2005 and 2018, yielding a rise in speculative investments in farmland. A major new driver of land grabbing lies in countries' and corporations' quests to meet carbon reduction targets through offsets, which they purchase by acquiring carbon-absorbing forested areas. This so-called green grabbing now accounts for around a fifth of global land deals, often to the detriment of local people's food security. Furthermore, many large land deals, whether they aim to secure grain or offset carbon, have failed—leaving ruin and abandonment in their wake.

SEEDS OF RENEWAL

Still, Albertus ends on a note of cautious optimism. Drawing examples from South Africa and Australia, he argues that it is possible, although formidably difficult, to begin to undo the degrading legacies of earlier land reshuffles. He highlights the halting, incomplete, but substantive land reforms enacted in South Africa after the fall of apartheid, where he says progress has been "both rocky and real." Substantial lands have been redistributed to Black farmers since the 1990s, but the slow pace of change generates frustration in what remains one of the most unequal countries in the world; many South African land rights activists would see Albertus's assessment as overly sanguine.

Albertus concludes in Australia, where he says land stands as a "bedrock for autonomy, self-determination, and symbolic parity" for indigenous Australians, centuries after their initial dispossession by white settlers. Restitution has gathered momentum since the 1990s, to the point that indigenous communities now claim rights or ownership over more than half of Australia's lands—albeit very little in the country's most prosperous coastal regions. "The seeds of justice are finally starting to blossom," an Eastern Maar man in 2023 told reporters, after the state of Victoria recognized his community's ownership of an expanse of coastal land.

In a book focused mostly on institutions, this is a salutary and moving reminder that ideas matter. Land has always been a source of identity and belonging as much as it has been a resource. Throughout the Great Reshuffle, conflicting ideas about how to value land—by its market price, its potential future value, or its spiritual significance—have animated conflicts around the world. Listen to people describing the most outlandish dreams of space colonization, and you'll hear the echoes of a very old language of settler conquest. As climate change shuffles species around the planet and puts greater pressure on natural resources, humans urgently need a new way to talk about land and their attachments to it. But old narratives die hard.

Albertus believes that the world is on the threshold of a new global struggle for land. Territorial conquest is on the agenda in a more explicit way than it has been since the middle of the twentieth century. As climate change accelerates, lands that were previously too frozen to sustain large populations will become newly productive, sharpening the divide between those who benefit and those who suffer as a result of planetary warming. New sea routes will heighten the strategic value of places such as the Danish-ruled territory of Greenland—which the Trump administration has threatened to use force to take over—while spurring Russian and Chinese ambitions in the Antarctic. It is hard to reconcile the prospect of a violent new era of empire with the more optimistic thrust of Albertus's book, which sees possibilities for social transformation in "shaking up who owns the land." But one of the many strengths of *Land Power* is that it shows that opportunities for positive change can arise unexpectedly—and it is full of lessons for how to seize them.

Letters to the Editor

Be China to Beat China?

To the Editor:

U.S.-Chinese competition has long been framed as a contest between two countries with opposite roles in the global economy: China as the producer and the United States as the consumer. Now, however, each country is attempting to become more like the other in a race to rebalance its economy. Can the United States substitute for lost production from China faster than China can substitute for lost consumption from the United States?

In their thought-provoking article "Underestimating China" (May/June 2025), Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi argue that, to win this race, Washington needs to achieve sufficient scale by stitching together a network of allies. Assembling a Team America might solve the scale problem, but it will prove insufficient to compete with China's industrial capacity and manufacturing might. The United States will also need to do the hard, often politically challenging work of digging up raw materials, building infrastructure, and deploying technology inside its own borders. In short, scale alone won't be able to meet the challenge of amassing an integrated supply chain from mining and manufacturing to material science.

If the United States wants to become more like China, it will need not only to match Chinese scale but also to replicate aspects of how Beijing organizes and mobilizes its production economy, especially when it comes to speed and agglomeration. Think of it as an industrial policy with American characteristics. The United States must cut red tape, such as the lengthy reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act, so that companies can build infrastructure faster, as they can in China. In 2023, Shanghai's municipal government and local state-owned enterprises built an AI accelerator in Shanghai in just 38 days. The United States should also cluster industries to generate efficiencies and drive down costs. Here, the experience of Hefei, a Chinese city that has become a manufacturing center for electric vehicles—akin to a twenty-first-century Detroit—might be instructive.

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Campbell and Doshi reply:
A rich debate about American renewal is underway, much of it focused on domestic affairs. Our article aimed to connect that domestic conversation to foreign policy. We agree that it is necessary for the United States to adopt an industrial policy to compete with China, but it is also insufficient. Allied scale is equally critical; it offers a path to competitiveness through pooled markets, two-way flows of technology and process knowledge, and a moat against China's capacity to produce goods at low cost. Domestic production without allied scale is financially unsustainable; allied scale without domestic production is a bridge to nowhere. And success requires recognizing that the domestic politics of U.S. allies matter for the United States, too. We hope this thoughtful letter and our article together help advance a renewal agenda that integrates both domestic and foreign determinants of national competitiveness.

Real Friends, Real Talk

To the Editor:
In "The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy" (May/June 2025), A. Wess Mitchell makes a compelling argument in favor of reinvigorating American diplomatic muscle. But in making his case, he mischaracterizes U.S. President Joe Biden's record on India. According to Mitchell, "The Biden administration failed to properly activate New Delhi against Beijing because it was too busy fighting with India's government over unrelated things."

In reality, Biden took major steps to strengthen relations with India, which will yield long-term dividends bilaterally and in the Indo-Pacific region more widely. He improved technological cooperation between the two

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countries by launching the U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology, which has led to advances in areas such as artificial intelligence and clean energy. The Biden administration elevated the status of the Quad, a coalition made up of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, demonstrating a commitment to working with allies and partners on pressing national security challenges. And during Biden's term, Washington rebuilt productive bilateral initiatives among U.S. and Indian civil servants who specialize in science, trade, space, health, and climate.

It is true that the Biden administration raised human rights concerns with India, but it did not undermine the strategic partnership because it was done in the context of a more trusting relationship that allowed for frank discussion. For over two decades, there has been strong bipartisan support in Washington for U.S.-Indian partnership. As Mitchell implies, the United States should use diplomacy to advance its national interests—recognizing that India will do the same.

SUMONA GUHA
Senior Director for South Asia, National Security Council, 2021–22

FOR THE RECORD

The article "The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy" (May/June 2025) incorrectly stated that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue consists of Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In fact, the members are Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

THE ARCHIVE

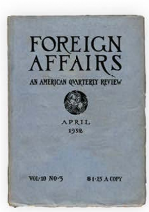
April 1932

"Trade, Tariffs, the Depression"

PERCY WELLS BIDWELL

As the Great Depression continued to deteriorate, Percy Bidwell, an economist who had served on the U.S. Tariff Commission, warned of the consequences of protectionism. After the stock market crash of 1929, U.S. policymakers had passed the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act to shield American industry from foreign competition. Other governments had erected trade barriers, too, sparking a global trade war that exacerbated the economic crisis. "Tariffs are not only results of the depression," Bidwell argued, "they are also among its causes."

For it is one of the plainest lessons from the experience of recent years that, far from being a cure, tariffs are to be numbered among the active causes of our present disaster. The instability in the world prices of crude foodstuffs and agricultural raw materials, which was one of the first signs of the approaching crisis, was in large part caused by the increasing obstacles which tariffs and import restrictions placed in the way of international trade in these commodities. Not only European critics but also some of the keenest observers in our own country hold the American policy of high protection responsible for the extraordinary accumulation of gold in the United States in the years 1922 to 1929, and for the frenzy of speculation and its aftermath . . . .



It is quite true that should the United States choose commercial isolation her industrial system would no longer be in danger of shocks from without. Business crises in foreign countries would no longer affect us. But no tariff wall can protect us from shocks from within, and these might even be the more disastrous because of the very fact of isolation. For foreign trade often acts as a safety-valve for domestic business. More than once an impending crisis in the United States has been warded off by a favorable turn in export trade, and more than once a period of depression has been shortened by the same beneficent influence.

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