

# FP

WINTER 2025

## TRUMP WORLD



KORI SCHAKE ON BIDEN'S FAILURE | RAVI AGRAWAL ON THE ART OF THE DEAL  
RAGHURAM G. RAJAN ON GLOBAL HEADWINDS | ADAM TOOZE ON CLASS WAR  
DANIEL W. DREZNER ON MADMAN THEORY



An aerial photograph of the Georgetown University campus in Washington, D.C. The image shows a dense cluster of red brick buildings, including a prominent tall clock tower on the right. The campus is situated along the Potomac River, which is visible in the background. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall scene is bathed in a soft, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

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# FOREIGN POLICY

WINTER 2025

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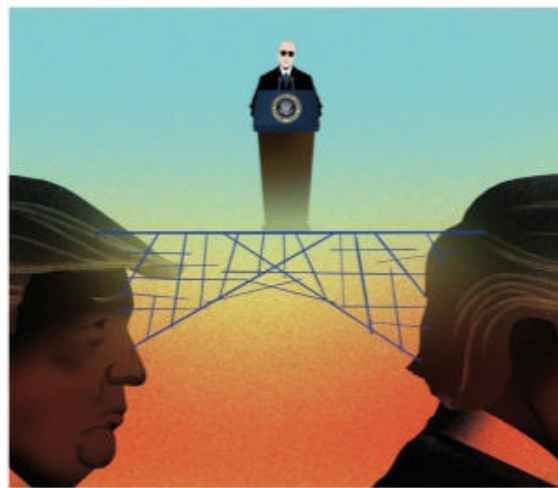
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**EVERYONE I KNOW SEEMS TO HAVE A PET THEORY** that perfectly explains why Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election. The stated reasons are familiar, from inflation and immigration to the culture wars and a global trend against incumbents. Every now and then, however, I hear a hypothesis that feels revelatory.

At a recent dinner, I was seated next to a Biden administration official who attempted to explain his boss's low approval ratings and why, ultimately, Vice President Kamala Harris lost. He told me that in his assessment, officials in the White House were so vexed by Trump's enduring popularity and so desperate to prevent the former president from winning again that they enacted plans designed to appeal to Trump's base. These policies included keeping in place tariffs against China even though they knew they weren't working; allowing the United States to become more protectionist not because of a strong conviction in its merits but out of a sense that it would be popular; and calling a climate change bill the Inflation Reduction Act and directing most of its subsidies to red states. In other words, there was a degree of fear and insincerity in their policymaking, and voters inevitably saw through it—or so this official thought. In trying to please too many constituencies, perhaps, the White House disappointed everyone.

President Joe Biden was keen to tell the world that the Trump years were a blip. But in the end, sandwiched between two Trump terms and no matter the merits of his policies, history will view Biden as a fuzzy interlude in an America First trajectory. For our Winter 2025 issue, we wanted to explore that theme further, examining how that happened and what Trump will mean for the world.

Kicking things off, the conservative national security scholar **Kori Schake** lists out why Biden's foreign policy missed the mark (Page 32). While she is withering in her criticism of Trump, the central failure in Biden's global vision, Schake writes, was "the expansive chasm between brave pronouncements and what the administration was actually willing to risk or commit to achieve its goals."

Even with Trump's return, the ideal of an isolationist United States might not thrive for too long. The economist and former Indian central bank chief **Raghuram G. Rajan** says cross-border trade and migration have historically delivered far better outcomes than fragmentation (Page 38). Once countries learn the true cost of erecting too many walls, he writes, they will inevitably come together again to think creatively about solving global problems.

To get there, the world, and especially the West, will have to grapple with the smugness of what has been called the Professional-Managerial Class, writes FP



columnist **Adam Tooze** (Page 43). Tooze describes how U.S. scholars have focused on income and education levels to map out voters' tendencies while failing to consider how class politics have built deep-seated resentment in society—an anger manifested in a vote for the norm-busting, name-calling Trump.

One of the essays in our cover package is by yours truly (Page 46). I've been thinking for a while about how Trump's foreign policy is defined by his transactional approach. There's a reflexive instinct to imagine that all countries necessarily fear a global system driven by self-interest rather than by rules. But for many rising economies—think of India or South Africa—Trump's crude realism is a welcome change from American pieties and one they are looking forward to exploit.

On that note, is Trump's unpredictability an asset? He certainly thinks so. Like Richard Nixon before him, the president-elect is a devotee of the "madman theory" of international relations, which postulates that a crazy affect puts adversaries on the defensive. Yet history shows that presenting as volatile works better with allies than enemies, **Daniel W. Drezner** writes (Page 52). Get ready for a wild ride: "Trump's improbable journey from convicted felon to second-term president could convince him to take even more risks," Drezner warns.

We live in particularly interesting times, don't we? As we start this new year, FOREIGN POLICY will be there to make sense of it all.

As ever,

*Ravi Agrawal*



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# ARGUMENTS

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People search Sednaya prison outside Damascus, Syria, on Dec. 9, 2024, hoping to learn the fate of those detained by the Assad regime.

## Assad Must Face Justice

*By Annie Sparrow  
and Kenneth Roth*

One can only rejoice in the demise of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Much is uncertain about Syria's future, but there is no question that the 24 years of Assad's rule, preceded by 30 years under his comparably brutal father, Hafez al-Assad, have been utter hell for the Syrian people. No crime was too heinous for the Assads as they did whatever it took to retain power. Few

governments worldwide have been as ruthless.

The catalogue of Bashar al-Assad's atrocities quickly transcends the toolbox of a run-of-the-mill dictator. It is deeply moving, if horrifying, to see people emerge from his prisons after decades in custody. In most countries, families can learn about their loved ones in detention, but few people departed from Assad's worst prisons, leaving the inmates completely



isolated. Their families had no idea if they were still alive.

Many were not. A Syrian military police photographer who adopted the code name “Caesar” had the unenviable task of documenting the bodies of Syrians who had been executed or tortured to death. (Even dictatorships want assurance that their orders are being carried out.) In August 2013, Caesar defected, taking with him tens of thousands of photographs showing at least 6,786 bodies of people who had died in Syrian government custody. Most had been detained by just five intelligence agency branches in Damascus, their bodies sent to at least two military hospitals in Damascus between May 2011, as Assad crushed an initially peaceful uprising against his rule, and August 2013.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a U.K.-based watchdog group, documented 157,634 people who had been arrested between March 2011 and August 2024 and who remained in custody. Many had been forcibly disappeared. These included 5,274 children and 10,221 women. For some, we will only now begin to learn of their fates.

Assad’s slaughter was not limited to prisons. Having inherited his father’s chemical weapons program, he was a rare leader who used these banned weapons against his own people. (The only other ones in recent history were Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, who used chemical weapons in his 1988 genocide against Iraqi Kurds, known as the “Anfal” campaign, and Russia’s Vladimir Putin, who has deployed the nerve agent Novichok against selected dissidents.) In August 2013, for example, Syrian forces fired rockets filled with sarin gas on Ghouta, a rural area east of Damascus that at the time was held by the armed opposition. The attack killed an estimated 1,466 people, mostly women and children.

Under threat of military intervention after then-U.S. President Barack



A torn portrait of Bashar al-Assad on the floor of the presidential palace in Damascus on Dec. 10, 2024.

Obama had declared that the use of chemical weapons would cross a “red line,” Assad in September 2013 agreed to surrender his chemical weapons. However, because chlorine has legitimate uses, the government was not required to eliminate its chlorine stockpiles. Between 2014 and 2018, the Syrian military periodically used chlorine as a chemical weapon, even though such use violates the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria had ratified. In April 2014 alone, there were 10 attacks in which chlorine was dropped on civilians in villages in northern Syria. An April 2018 chlorine attack on Douma in rural Damascus killed 43 people. Moreover, the government secretly kept a stash of sarin, which it used most lethally in an April 2017 attack on Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province, killing at least 90 people.

(U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has mocked Obama for not having used military force to enforce his red line. However, when Trump, along with Britain and France, responded to the Douma attack by bombing three suspected Syrian chemical weapons facilities in April 2018, it “prompted defiant celebrations in Damascus ... as

it became clear that the limited attack posed no immediate threat to President Bashar al-Assad’s hold on power and would likely have no impact on the trajectory of the Syrian war,” as the *Washington Post* reported at the time.)

Horrible as chemical weapons are, their death toll was dwarfed by conventional bombing. The Syrian air force notoriously dropped “barrel bombs” on residential neighborhoods in parts of the country controlled by the armed opposition. These bombs were improvised weapons: oil drums filled with explosives and metal fragments that were dropped without guidance from helicopters, typically hitting the ground with huge explosions and the widespread diffusion of deadly shrapnel. They pulverized neighborhoods, destroyed entire buildings, and left broad strips of death and destruction. One of the most dreaded sounds of the conflict was the “swish-swish-swish” of the barrels as they tumbled, with people below waiting horrible seconds to learn whether they would survive.

When Russia joined the conflict in September 2015 to prop up Assad’s regime, the Syrian-Russian alliance attacked more precisely. Jets targeted hospitals, schools, markets, and apartment buildings—deliberate war-crime attacks on civilians and civilian institutions—with the aim of depopulating regions in the hope of facilitating follow-up ground attacks on the rebel forces who lived there. The devastation was so bad that many compared the destruction of eastern Aleppo to Russia’s decimation of Grozny during the Second Chechen War. Russian and Syrian government airstrikes killed more than 100,000 Syrians since 2011, according to SNHR.

The government’s bombing and persecution forced more than 14 million Syrians to flee their homes, half abroad and half within Syria. That represents some two-thirds of Syria’s pre-war population.



Assad also used starvation and deprivation to force opposition-held areas to surrender. In eastern Ghouta and eastern Aleppo, Syrian forces imposed a total siege. Even when humanitarian agencies occasionally were allowed to deliver medical supplies, the Syrian military would “delete”—or ban—much of what was most urgently needed, a blatant violation of the legal duty even in time of war to allow humanitarian access to people in need. Gradually, one by one, these areas succumbed, with occupants given the “choice” to take their chances under Assad’s rule or to board the government’s dreaded green buses for a one-way trip to Idlib in northwestern Syria, the last area under the rule of the armed opposition. Most chose Idlib.

Idlib borders Turkey, making a siege impossible, but the Syrian government, with Russia’s help, tried to limit humanitarian access even there. They used a deeply disputed ruling by U.N. lawyers, backed by Secretary-General António Guterres, that cross-border humanitarian aid required either the consent of the Assad government or an increasingly difficult-to-obtain U.N. Security Council resolution. Over time, the Russian and Syrian governments limited aid there. Meanwhile, the U.S. and other governments gradually reduced the aid they supplied, overburdened by new crises in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan and conscious that the Syrian government was siphoning off large amounts of the aid delivered through Damascus.

With Assad and his henchmen now on the run, the prospect of bringing them to justice for these mass atrocities is no longer theoretical. There are two options.

The first is for national prosecutors in countries outside Syria to file charges under the concept of universal jurisdiction, which allows any authorized national court to address certain of the most heinous crimes, including torture as well as the war crimes of attacking

civilians and weaponizing health care. Several governments have already initiated such prosecutions, mainly for lower-level officials who happened to be in custody because they had fled Syria. For example, a German court in 2022 convicted a Syrian military intelligence officer for overseeing a torture center and sentenced him to life in prison.

France has also charged Assad for the August 2013 sarin attack on eastern Ghouta. As a sitting head of state, Assad had arguably enjoyed immunity for such national prosecutions under a controversial International Court of Justice ruling. Having now been deposed, he no longer enjoys any such protection.

The second is for International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim Khan to file charges. There is no question that Assad’s atrocities are worthy of ICC attention; Khan’s challenge has been jurisdiction. Syria never joined the court, and a U.N. Security Council effort in 2014 to confer jurisdiction was vetoed by Russia and China.

However, facing a similar challenge in Myanmar, Khan pursued a novel legal theory, obtaining jurisdiction by focusing on the Myanmar army’s mass forced deportation of Rohingya to Bangladesh, which is an ICC member. He is now seeking an arrest warrant for Myanmar’s junta leader. Despite the considerable global demands on him, Khan should use a similar theory to obtain jurisdiction over senior Syrian officials, including Assad, for their atrocities that drove hundreds of thousands of Syrians into Jordan, which is also an ICC member.

Such prosecutions are important not only as a measure of respect for the victims and an acknowledgment of their plight. They are also a critical tool for the future. We can only guess how Syria’s new rulers will act. Will they fall back on their jihadi roots, or will they abide by their recent more tolerant rhetoric? Establishing a precedent of accountability for the atrocities

of the past would be a significant way for the international community to signal expectations for the future. ■

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## Iran Has Every Reason to Go Nuclear

*By Ellie Geranmayeh*

**T**he recent conflicts in the Middle East have ignited open debate among Iran’s political elite over whether the country should weaponize its vast nuclear program. The rationale for doing so, from the Iranian leadership’s perspective, appears more convincing than ever.

Above all, Iran needs to reestablish a deterrence equilibrium with its longtime foes Israel and the United States. Traditionally, to deter its adversaries from attacking or implementing regime change, Tehran relied on a three-pronged approach focused on missiles, militias, and a nuclear program.

To offset its weak air force, Iran invested heavily in its missiles program, making its arsenal one of the most advanced in the region. Iran also anchors its asymmetric warfare strategy through the so-called “forward defense” policy of using militarized nonstate actors to encircle Israel and the U.S. regional military presence and to mobilize these forces to attack



if required. Tehran has cultivated its relations with groups that are hostile to the United States and Israel, building the so-called Axis of Resistance, providing them with arms—including sophisticated missiles and drones—as well as training and financial support.

However, Iran's missile capabilities and the Axis of Resistance have taken a hit in recent months. The Israeli onslaught against Iran's most trusted partner, Hezbollah in Lebanon, delivered a blow to its arsenal, fighters, and command and control structure. Iran was left humiliated by Israel's ability to assassinate Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh while he was in Tehran last summer. Following the killing of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in October, Israel seems determined to keep upping the ante to establish a new regional order.

Although Hamas and Hezbollah will continue to undermine Israeli security, the ability of these groups to mobilize in defense of Iran seems severely diminished while they fight for their own survival. Meanwhile, the United States has doubled down on its efforts to shield Israel, moving new anti-missile systems into the country, together with U.S. troops to operate them, in a bid to defang future attacks from Iran and its allies.

Perhaps Iran's biggest Achilles's heel is its self-restraint. Over the past year, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has repeatedly held back from a direct war with Israel and the United States. He has also shied away from triggering a full assault by the Axis of Resistance front. Israel has interpreted this restraint as a weakness and exploited it.

This shift in regional deterrence has strengthened the argument in Tehran favoring a nuclear umbrella. Iran has already obtained nuclear threshold status, placing it at the tipping point of weaponization. Iran can develop enough material for a nuclear bomb in just over a week, with some experts assessing that it could build a nuclear

warhead to carry these bombs within several months. In the same way that India and Pakistan achieved a relative cold peace, Tehran may look to check Israeli behavior through rebalancing the nuclear playing field.

Another argument for why Iran could dash for the bomb is that the country has already paid the high cost of becoming a nuclear weapons state without receiving the perceived benefits of having the bomb.

Ever since the Trump administration withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, which Iran was in full compliance with at the time, the United States has imposed its largest-scale sanctions to date against Iran. Western relations with Tehran have further plummeted over Iran's abysmal human rights record, its regional posture, and military assistance to Russia during its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Given the anti-Iran sentiment across Western capitals, the Iranian leadership would be correct to conclude that major U.S. sanctions relief of the type seen in 2015 is not on the horizon. If Iran is already being treated as a nuclear pariah state by the West, then why not secure the perceived security benefits of going nuclear?

Finally, the broader geopolitical conditions today mean the costs associated with Iran becoming a nuclear state are lower than a decade ago.



A mural with an anti-U.S. slogan on a building in Tehran on July 14, 2015.

Tensions between world powers now make it increasingly unlikely that Russia, and possibly China, will stand in Iran's way. The United States fears Tehran may have already capitalized on the Ukraine war by pushing to trade its military equipment—which Moscow desperately needs—for Russian nuclear know-how, technology, and defense at the U.N. Security Council.

Against this backdrop, those inside Iran favoring nuclear weaponization likely see two choices ahead: either Iran's nuclear facilities are eventually destroyed by Israel and the United States first, and then Tehran stumbles toward nuclear weapons over a longer timeframe with depleted resources, or Iran starts the weaponization now while it has advanced nuclear capabilities and Israel is bogged down in its wars. Iranian strategists may be swayed for the latter option when faced with a weakened Axis of Resistance, a formidable Israeli-U.S. military force, and an Israel poised to strike at Iranian nuclear sites. Despite the strong likelihood that the country will be bombed throughout this process by Israel and the United States, Iran's leadership may conclude that it can bear the brunt of military action and come out of it stronger.

Following the hits Iran has taken to its deterrence capabilities, there is an acute risk of Iran reaching for the bomb. Western governments should act now to shape the internal debate inside Iran to avoid this outcome. A nuclear Iran can act with greater impunity at home and abroad. It will almost certainly trigger a nuclear arms race across the Middle East. This outcome would make a region close to Europe even more dangerous, not just because of the increased risk of violent conflict among states but also the risk of terrorist groups gaining access to nuclear weapons.

Western governments need to warn Iran's leaders that if they decide to weaponize the country's nuclear program, it will backfire. Becoming



a nuclear state will likely offer Iran's leaders greater guarantees against large-scale military intervention and externally imposed regime change. But it will expose Iran to vicious cycles of military strikes, cyberattacks, and assassinations. Future Iranian nuclear weapons will not deter Israel against striking Iran—just as Tehran was not deterred against taking the unprecedented step last year of barraging Israel, itself a nuclear power, with missiles.

Over the past year, Europe and the United States have not seriously pursued a political off-ramp with Tehran. The United States has been trapped—by both Israeli and Iranian conduct—into an escalation cycle and seems willing to only play a military card. Absent a political agenda, Iran's dash to the bomb is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. History reveals that the more the United States and Israel carry out attacks inside Iran, the more Iran inches closer to the bomb.

The instances when Washington and Europe have shifted Iranian calculations away from weaponization involved serious diplomacy. The new Iranian government comprises technocrats who have a long history of supporting negotiations with Europe and the United States and have implemented the deals struck. Iran's new reform-minded president, Masoud Pezeshkian, has amplified his government's openness to diplomacy with the West—and this intent must now be put to the test.

In this diplomatic endeavor, a coalition of willing Western governments should ally themselves with Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Iraq, which among them have notable influence with Iran, Israel, and the United States. A new track of pursuing diplomacy with Iran within a coalition of regional actors is the best door opener for the West to prevent the Iran-Israel war spiraling out of control and to wedge open wider space to reduce tensions on other issues.

While there is considerable distrust

between Iran and the West at this moment, both sides need to engage in transactional, hard-nosed diplomacy to make a course correction. Otherwise, the current path will lead to the worst of all worlds. ■

**ELLIE GERANMAYEH** is the deputy director of the Middle East and North Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations.



## Only Africans Can Hold Their Governments to Account

*By Howard W. French*

**I**n Africa, one doesn't need to look hard these days to spot crises.

Case in point: the broad swath of the continent known as the Sahel. There, in recent years, one country after another—Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Guinea—has seen ineffectual elected governments fall to military juntas.

In Africa, soldiers face constant and seemingly irresistible temptation to step into political power vacuums.

But since the 1960s, military regimes have been unable to offer cures for the problems of the continent's struggling nations. Their record of instilling stability and economic health has been remarkably dismal.

Crises have arisen in many directions, from the deadly civil war in Sudan to the spread of Islamist insurgencies in Nigeria and other coastal nations to the seemingly endless fiddling with constitutions in countries such as Ivory Coast. Although less brutish than classic coups, "constitutional coups" are closely related and allow leaders to perpetuate their rule, often for life.

In recent months, Cameroon has offered the sad spectacle of a country whose leader so completely dropped out of public view during an extended stay in Europe last year that rumors of his death spread widely. That 91-year-old president, Paul Biya, has been in power since 1982. In an absurdist bid to quell speculation about Biya's condition, his government forbade media discussion about his health or whereabouts on "national security" grounds.

As different as each of these countries' circumstances might seem, there is a common underlying denominator: a state's inability to ensure even the basic well-being of its citizens. This includes services almost taken for granted on other continents, from universal access to electricity and clean water to decent and affordable schools.

The causes of Africa's economic woes are, of course, complicated. South of the Sahara, nearly all African countries have gained their independence, beginning with Ghana in 1957, as heirs of the abject exploitation and neglect of their colonial rulers. Despite the West's self-ennobling rhetoric of the white man's burden, imperial powers did little to spread literacy on the continent and even less to train people at a university level. The physical infrastructure that colonialism left behind was similarly scant and, in most instances, had been built to simply move raw





Demonstrators protest tax hikes in downtown Nairobi on June 18, 2024.

products to ports, where they could be shipped to Europe.

In the decades since independence, Africa has also been hobbled by its balkanization, including an imperial legacy of 16 landlocked countries, almost all of which are poor and unstable today. Less obvious, but just as insidious, is the structure of the global economy. For all the reasons just cited, Africa was spectacularly ill-prepared to profit from the globalization that swept the world beginning in the 1980s.

That era's biggest winner by far was China, which, by virtue of its large market, literate and experienced workforce, and low wages, captured a huge portion of the international investment in cheap offshore manufacturing. China's prodigious successes in building industries such as plastics, textiles, and basic assembly left little room for poorer, smaller countries hoping to industrialize in its wake.

Meanwhile, over the decades, Western-led international financial institutions—especially the World Bank—have frequently shifted directions in their lending and economic strategies toward the African continent, often with little regard for Africans' own priorities and economic needs.

By now, to state that Africa has often been ill-served by its foreign partners should not be controversial. Beyond the realm of economics and development, the West—especially the United States—has long talked up the virtues of democracy while sustaining some of its deepest partnerships in Africa with starkly undemocratic countries, from Ethiopia and Rwanda to Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Even China's emergence as a powerful economic player on the continent has begun to look like something of a false dawn. Enthusiasm ran sky-high in Africa after China went on a construction spree in the early 2000s, building modern railways, ports, highways, and airports across the continent. There was never any deliberate debt trap involved, as many critics have alleged, but hopes of a Chinese-fueled African takeoff have since dimmed, as Beijing has cut back on its lending to the continent and African countries have faced difficulties in servicing their debts with China and other creditors.

What this all means is that Africa must look inward, to its own resources—intellectual, social, cultural, and even economic—to fulfill its people's desires for healthy development.

The good news is that there are signs this is beginning to happen. Above all, I see these in the civil society groups that are fighting against official corruption and the capture of African states by political elites, against electoral and constitutional chicanery and wanton human rights violations.

There is evidence of rapidly growing civil pushback in countries as far-flung as Ghana and Nigeria in West Africa and Kenya in the East. Over the summer, Kenyans braved police bullets to resist their government's efforts to raise taxes, which are used in opaque—and, many people believe, corrupt—ways. In Nigeria, people have also taken to the streets in large numbers to fight government policies that are driving falling living standards; these include the end of long-standing state subsidies for gasoline and a stark decline in the value of the national currency, the naira. And in Ghana, thousands have protested the widespread devastation of the country's land and waters by illegal gold mining, which they consider closely linked to official corruption.

In and of themselves, these are not revolutions. Far from it. But the goal that underpins them is revolutionary: the normalization of citizens holding their governments accountable. This is something that the nominal democratization of many African countries through the regular holding of elections has clearly failed to achieve.

Africa's newly invigorated civil societies have many heroes, even if they still labor in relative obscurity or isolation, often at considerable risk to themselves. One of the most interesting figures recently has been Bright Simons, a Ghanaian gadfly whose social media presence on X and other platforms is something like a running public policy seminar on transparency and corruption. From one day to the next, his investigations and disquisitions can cover real estate speculation in shopping malls, routine corruption



in government procurement and contracting, and the murky ins and outs of oil leases signed with foreign exploration companies.

Simons is under no illusion about how much more needs to be done to ensure that the Ghanaian state delivers better results for its people. He would also be the first to say this cannot be the task of a few intellectuals such as himself, however well-intended. Instead, to be successful, these movements must include much of the middle class and broader citizenry.

Still, Simons sees hope in the spread of transparency and anti-corruption efforts around the continent, and he believes that Africa's fragile civil societies can advance faster toward these goals by building much stronger bridges between disparate citizens' movements.

"Individual [African] countries are very weak, and finding critical mass for anything in them is difficult. So how do you acquire critical mass in such a context? You unite civil society efforts across the continent," Simons said. "If there was, you know, 20 people [on transparency and corruption] in Ghana, 20 people in each of the other countries, you'd have a thousand people all of a sudden, which is more like a critical mass, and that's what we need for quality governance and accountability to become culture. ... If we can't find it in individual countries, we need to build it in a pan-African way."

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## Turkey's BRICS Bridge

By Jorge Heine and Ariel González Levaggi

**L**ast October's BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, featured a new participant: Turkey. A Kremlin official leaked in September 2024 that Ankara had applied to join the group, following repeated expressions of interest over the years. A spokesperson for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) then conceded that "a process is underway."

The BRICS group undertook a major expansion in the last year, adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, with Saudia Arabia still mulling whether to join. The acronym stands for the group's original members: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

Turkey's trade minister confirmed last November that BRICS had offered Turkey the status of partner state, though he did not specify whether Ankara had accepted. Regardless, Turkey's BRICS application is a watershed moment in geopolitics. If Turkey joins BRICS as a full member or partner state, it will become the first NATO member and longtime candidate for European Union

membership to have an active role in an entity seen by some analysts as a challenger to Western predominance.

Turkey's diplomatic demarche is yet another sign that the global south is rising in world affairs, and it underscores the growth of active nonalignment as an ideology. But it is not a major break in Turkish foreign policy: Ankara's BRICS application is an extension of its international balancing act, which aims to diversify alliances while maintaining ties with the West.

During two decades in office, Erdogan has promoted a non-Western-centric vision of the world and sought greater global autonomy due to frustration with the EU and the United States. For its part, BRICS is on a roll in terms of both membership and growing global clout. In addition to Turkey, countries such as Malaysia and Thailand also applied for entry and sent envoys to last year's summit.

Cooperation among BRICS members in energy, trade, and infrastructure development is growing at a fast clip. As a share of global trade, intra-BRICS trade in goods more than doubled from 2002 to 2022, reaching 40 percent. In 2015, the group created the Shanghai-based New Development Bank with \$50 billion in capital. The bank, headed by former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, has since lent \$33 billion for 96 projects.

BRICS now aims to create an alternative payment system to SWIFT, which it perceives as a Western-dominated international banking system. The project has taken on greater importance after Western countries disconnected Russia from SWIFT following the country's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

BRICS would benefit from Turkey's accession. From a geopolitical standpoint, Turkey's membership would enhance the group's stature as a proponent of nonalignment, as opposed to a bloc with an anti-Western agenda—though it would certainly increase Western suspicions about Turkey.





Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet at the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, on Oct. 23, 2024.

At present, the group is torn. China and Russia would like to build it into an anti-Western entity, while Brazil, India, and South Africa would prefer it to take a stance closer to nonalignment. Turkey's presence is likely to strengthen the second view. The same goes for most of the new members, except for Iran, which is likely to hew close to China and Russia.

Joining BRICS would also put Turkey, a NATO member, in a privileged position: Having a foot in both camps increases Ankara's foreign-policy leverage. "Being involved in these structures does not mean abandoning NATO," Erdogan told journalists at the United Nations General Assembly last September. "We do not think that this alliance and cooperation are an alternative to one another."

Despite Erdogan's high profile in global affairs, Turkey's domestic agenda has become increasingly challenging for the president. Last March, the AKP lost ground in municipal elections, while economic growth has slowed and inflation runs rampant. But domestic constraints have not limited Turkey's quest for influence across Eurasia; if anything, these international endeavors offer a welcome distraction.

Erdogan's foreign policy is built on a complex blend of Turkey's Ottoman legacy, nationalist aspirations, and a sense that the West's best days are

behind it. He seeks a more multipolar world, where Turkey can act independently of Western hegemony and search for strategic options beyond the West, even if this means partnering with historical enemies, such as Russia, or with countries that have pursued draconian policies against Muslim minorities, such as China.

Erdogan has sought to expand Turkey's strategic wiggle room through diplomacy. He has signed energy deals with Russia, allowing the Russian state-owned utility Rosatom to build, own, and operate Turkey's first nuclear power plant; mediated in armed conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war; and rallied support against Israel's military actions in Gaza.

Turkey's BRICS application is no different. It is not about breaking ties with the West but rather about recalibrating them in favor of broader and more diversified alliances that are important to Turkey's long-term national interests—particularly as Ankara's prospects for EU membership grow dim and strategic ties with the United States weaken.

Turkey's decades-long bid for EU membership has been marked by frustration. As Ankara has pushed for accession, EU responses have been lukewarm at best, especially after French and German opposition in the late 2000s. With a population of 87 million, Turkey would

be the largest country in the EU and the only Muslim-majority member. Democratic backsliding after the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the 2016 coup attempt has not helped its case. Today, while Turkey remains a candidate officially, its EU accession talks have stalled.

EU ambivalence over Turkish membership stems from concerns over the country's human rights record and growing authoritarianism under Erdogan's leadership. There are also disputes over Cyprus and maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean. The 2023 European Commission report on Turkey further strained relations; the report condemned Ankara's democratic erosion and suggested that it was nowhere close to reaching full membership.

Turkey's links with the United States have not fared any better. A major point of contention was Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, which led to Ankara's removal from the U.S. F-35 fighter jet program. In response, Turkey opted for F-16s, taking advantage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to upgrade its defense industry. The conflict also increased Turkey's leverage over NATO, particularly as it stonewalled Sweden's bid for membership.

Amid the war in Gaza, Erdogan's alignment with the Palestinian cause and vocal criticism of Western support for Israel have deepened rifts between



Ankara and Washington. In the past, the Turkish president also blamed the Obama administration for its support for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces during the Syrian civil war, an issue that has lingered. After the fall of Damascus to rebels in December, the Turkish military fired on the U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria, raising the specter of further escalation.

All the same, Turkey has proved that it is still indispensable to the West: It has acted as a key mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war, underscoring its delicate balancing act between its NATO commitments and partnership with Moscow. In this role, Turkey has achieved impressive results—such as facilitating the largest prisoner swap since the Cold War.

For Erdogan, these developments have confirmed Turkey's need to pursue a form of nonalignment and shift its focus toward the global south and non-Western entities. Turkey's pivot has led it to engagements across the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, where Ankara has expanded its networks and business. In this context, BRICS offers Turkey a unique opportunity to join a rising bloc that represents a significant portion of the global south as well as Russia and China—key actors in Eurasia.

In a world marked by great-power rivalry and competing grand narratives, Turkey stands to regain its role as a bridge between the West, global south, and Eurasian powers. The country's unique position draws on its geographical location and imperial history. By applying to join BRICS—an informal yet high-profile group—Turkey is signaling to the West that it should not be taken for granted. ■

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## Russia Can't Keep Spending Like This

By Agathe Demarais

Strange things are happening in Russia these days. In early October, the country inked a deal to sell chickpeas to Pakistan in exchange for mandarin oranges. A few weeks later, the Russian government advised international participants traveling to the southwestern city of Kazan for the BRICS summit to bring cash in U.S. dollars or euros, as major credit card companies such as Visa and Mastercard had suspended operations on Russian soil since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022.

During the BRICS summit, a Chinese official mentioned that Russia was facing "serious difficulties" with paying its membership fees to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation; the official blamed Western sanctions. As if this were not enough, the comment came on the same day that the Kremlin had to cancel bond auctions to issue nearly 600 billion Russian rubles (around \$5.6 billion) in sovereign debt for lack of buyers.

These examples might sound trivial, but taken together, they highlight how all might not be going hunky-dory for the Russian economy—contrary to the Kremlin's claims that Western sanctions have been ineffective and Russian GDP growth is booming. Like a cash-strapped household pretending that all is well while quietly burning through emergency savings, Moscow is trying to project economic normalcy by tapping into its vast financial buffers.

This is not a sustainable strategy: Without fresh inflows of cash, even the

largest of savings only lasts for a while. Russia could soon struggle to preserve costly social stability at home while waging its expensive war against Ukraine.

To understand Russia's economic troubles, inflation is a good starting point. Official statistics are fishy, but even without consulting them, it's easy to see that price growth is an issue in Russia. First, the ruble has lost one-third of its value against the U.S. dollar since early 2022, inflating the price of imports and therefore fueling inflation.

Second, Russian firms are struggling to hire because of the combined impact of a shrinking population; a high death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic; and the war in Ukraine, which has killed or seriously wounded some 2 percent of Russian men between the ages of 20 and 50 and is causing an exodus of highly skilled workers. To attract workers, Russian companies are raising wages, again fueling inflation. Third, the Kremlin believes that it can buy social stability by showering people with generous handouts—another inflationary factor.

Central bankers like to raise interest rates when inflation is high, seeking to tame price growth by weighing on demand. Russia's Central Bank has applied these principles to the letter; since mid-2023, it has gradually increased its key rate to a whopping 21 percent. Russian companies are feeling the pinch. Last October, Sergei Chemezov, the CEO of state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec, declared that high interest rates were eating into profits so much that most Russian industrial firms could soon go bankrupt. But there is a catch: Because of its obsession with social stability, Moscow is working to negate the impact of high interest rates on the population.

A recent scheme for subsidized loans provides an example. Since 2020, millions of Russians have signed up for real estate loans at a cheap rate of 8 percent, and the government has reimbursed banks for the difference between that face rate and the 20 percent or more



that higher central bank rates should command. That policy might boost economic growth in the short term, but it comes with high costs: Home prices in Russia have tripled since 2020, suggesting a real estate bubble that could soon burst. The scheme also comes with a roughly \$5 billion price tag for the Kremlin.

Russia's bigger fiscal picture looks dire. On the expenses side, war is costly, and defense spending keeps rising to record highs: Military expenses will make up 40 percent of Russia's public spending in 2025, for an eye-popping \$142 billion. (National security and "classified" expenses will absorb another 30 percent of Russia's federal budget.) Russia is also splurging to preserve social stability. In the next six years, the Kremlin plans to spend \$431 billion on all sorts of social projects, including sending children to summer camps in occupied Crimea, building brand-new student campuses across Russia, and raising the minimum wage by no less than 10 percent per year.

The revenue side of the fiscal balance does not look any better. Excluding dividends, Russia's state-owned gas giant Gazprom used to provide around 10 percent of the Kremlin's fiscal revenues. Such largesse is over: After losing access to the European market, Gazprom recorded a \$6.8 billion loss in 2023, making it impossible for the

company to transfer money to state coffers. (Gazprom sent \$40 billion to the Russian Finance Ministry in 2022.)

Russia has only a few options to find new income streams. Sustained economic growth would raise fiscal revenues through higher taxes, but labor shortages mean that this is not a credible plan. In September, the deputy governor of Russia's Central Bank acknowledged that "available production capacity is depleted." With social stability a constraining factor, Moscow can only apply fiscal Band-Aids.

Current plans include imposing higher taxes on wealthy households—for a mere \$1.5 billion a year, or less than 3 percent of total income tax receipts—and raising tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. It is not clear what Beijing will think of these protectionist measures in light of the supposedly unlimited friendship that binds Russia and China; Russian President Vladimir Putin has previously called U.S. tariffs on Chinese EVs "unfair."

With ever-rising expenses and dwindling revenues, Russia is now posting an annual fiscal deficit of nearly 2 percent of its GDP. For most economies, this is not an issue. Such a small shortfall can typically easily be financed through debt issuance. But Western sanctions have turned Russia into a pariah on the global financial scene, making it impossible for it to tap global debt markets.

Moscow's plan B was to tap domestic bond markets, but things are not going well on this front either, as shown by the auctions canceled in October.

With debt issuance out of the equation, Russia is now forced to turn to plan C: dipping into its savings. On paper, such a strategy could work for a while thanks to the vast holdings that Moscow accumulated in its National Wealth Fund (NWF) in the 2010s. However, these savings are now drying up: The liquid part of the fund has shrunk by more than half since the start of the war in Ukraine, to just \$54 billion last September. In 2023, the government stopped saving money in its NWF. Moscow is now resorting to selling the portion of its NWF reserves that it holds in gold; the fund's gold reserves have shrunk by around half, or about 262 tons of gold, since early 2022.

Russia is depleting its rainy-day holdings, and this cannot last forever. Looking ahead, the NWF's liquid reserves cover just around a year and a half of budget deficit. This assessment might prove optimistic: It assumes that official fiscal data is trustworthy—some experts believe that Russia's fiscal deficit could be closer to 5 percent of its GDP—and that the global economy won't suffer from major shocks. If global growth were to tank, according to estimates from Russia's Central Bank, the NWF's liquid reserves could vanish in less than a year.

In September, Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's defense intelligence chief, told attendees at a conference in Kyiv that Russia would try to force an end to the war in 2025, when the Kremlin could start facing genuine economic problems. This analysis might not be too far off—and it will be useful to keep it in mind as calls for negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow grow louder every day. ■

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Putin speaks with Alexei Miller, the CEO of the Russian energy giant Gazprom, at the company's headquarters in St. Petersburg, Russia, on June 5, 2024.



# Ireland's New Defense Reality

By Garvan Walshe

**O**n Feb. 3, 2022, just three weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine, the Russian navy conducted mysterious exercises in a surprising location: off the Irish coast. Coincidentally, of course, the exercises took place directly above a point dense with trans-Atlantic data cables, three-quarters of which pass near Ireland. These were not routine exercises, and Russia did not ask for permission to conduct them, but the incident exposed Ireland's inability to deter attacks on waters within its exclusive economic zone.

Despite being an island, Ireland has never developed a defense commensurate with its wealth or importance to the global economy. Its navy has six small ships, and its air corps—not yet a full-fledged air force—has no fighter jets.

The Russian exercises demonstrated how critical Ireland has become to Europe's economy, thus making it a target for Russian military harassment. Its role in international data transfer infrastructure places it at the center of the European strategic theater in a way it was not during the Cold War.

Given this new reality—and the fact that Ireland's immigrant population today has strong ties to the countries most threatened by a revanchist Russia—Ireland needs a major rethink of its defense plans. But doing so will require letting go of certain ideas that have long governed how it conceives of its security.

Among European countries, Ireland has a rather unusual alignment. Though it has been politically allied with the United States since independence

in 1921, Ireland declared military neutrality at the outbreak of World War II. Openly siding with the Allies would have risked both a German invasion and a British counterinvasion, neither of which the new state, free for just 18 years, could have hoped to repel. This specific neutrality evolved during the Cold War into a broader pacifism that purported to position Ireland between the United States and the Soviet Union, notwithstanding the ironclad anti-communism of its Catholic population.

The idea that Ireland's neutrality in World War II prevented it from joining a military alliance such as NATO eventually became conventional wisdom in Ireland. But this was a myth. Though Ireland did not join NATO, its reason was its dispute with the United Kingdom over control of Northern Ireland, not opposition to an anti-communist alliance. In fact, Ireland suggested a separate, binding defense treaty with the United States in 1949. In an exchange of letters with officials in Washington that year, the Irish government insisted that Ireland “has remained, to a greater extent than any other European State, immune from the spread of Communism. ... [W]ith the general aim of the proposed Treaty, the Irish Government is in agreement.”

Though there was no tradition of not joining military alliances, Ireland eventually came to embrace the stance later. The principle that applied during World War II was resurrected during the Cold War to bolster Ireland's legitimacy in diplomatic initiatives such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and in U.N. peacekeeping missions between the 1960s and 1980s. Neutrality afforded Ireland significant soft power and allowed it to present itself as both European and anti-colonial.

Controversy returned as the European Union started to develop a military component through the Treaty of Nice in 2001, followed in 2007 by the Treaty of Lisbon. In Ireland, opponents argued that adopting the treaties would

commit Ireland to joining a European military alliance. To defray such concerns, and to ensure that it could ratify the 2007 treaty, Ireland secured an opt-out from a common European defense that allowed it to maintain a veto over the deployment of its own troops, even as the common defense denied EU members such a veto.

In addition to the opt-out, Ireland increased the political salience of a long-standing policy on force deployment that became known as the “triple lock,” which prevents the deployment of the Irish army overseas unless three conditions are satisfied: a U.N. Security Council or General Assembly resolution, a formal decision by the Irish government, and a resolution by the lower house of Ireland's parliament. It is, however, a narrowly drawn restriction, and it doesn't prevent Ireland from joining common procurement projects, such as the EU's PESCO military cooperation initiative, or relieve it from mutual defense obligations.

Today, Ireland remains one of only four EU countries that are not members of NATO. Though its neighbors have tolerated Ireland's nonmembership, they are now much more concerned with the country's practical inability to defend itself against harassment from Russia. If NATO membership remains off the political agenda for the moment, changes in Ireland's deployment policy and defense spending are afoot.

New legislation is planned to remove the U.N. Security Council requirement because Ireland doesn't want Russia or China to be able to veto the deployment of its forces. Proposals to replace this part of the triple lock include only requiring the sign-off of a “regional organization,” which obviously includes the EU but could conceivably include NATO, too.

These changes in Irish posture, expected this year, have not yet, however, been matched by sufficient changes in budgets.

Just before Russia invaded Ukraine



in 2022, Ireland conducted a review of its defense posture that set out three levels of ambition, or LOAs, for its defense forces. The previous government was only able to win support to adopt LOA 2, which would provide a defense budget of 1.5 billion euros (about \$1.6 billion) by 2028. This plan will raise defense expenditure to 0.56 percent of modified GNI—an indicator designed to take into account that Ireland is a base for many multinational headquarters and the international aircraft leasing industry, which distorts GDP figures—up from 0.42 percent.

Ireland held elections on Nov. 29, which saw the Fianna Fail party win the most parliamentary seats. No matter what coalition is formed, the next government will face pressure because of the more dangerous international situation—as well as from allies who feel that wealthy Ireland should make a greater contribution to the defense of an economic system that produces this wealth—to increase the country's defense effort.

Moving up to LOA 3 would prompt Ireland to order combat jets and increase the navy's size from six to 12 ships. It would also increase the defense budget to 3 billion euros (about \$3.2 billion) per year, or 1.13 percent of modified GNI. This was what the 2022 review

assessed as the minimum required for Ireland to maintain a full-spectrum capability to defend its coastal waters, offshore wind energy potential, and trans-Atlantic cables from sabotage. Ireland's defense posture reviews and related documents rarely mention likely enemies by name, but a large, cold one on the Eurasian continent was undoubtedly on their writers' minds.

Yet even these plans have now become outdated following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The next government must consider what an LOA 4 would look like: sufficient to provide full-spectrum defense capabilities appropriate to a small maritime country and to contribute to common European defense and security.

To understand what a further increase could achieve, 2 percent of modified GNI corresponds to a budget of 5.3 billion euros (about \$5.6 billion) a year, nearly the same as Finland's military budget (and around a fifth of Ireland's projected budget surplus for 2024).

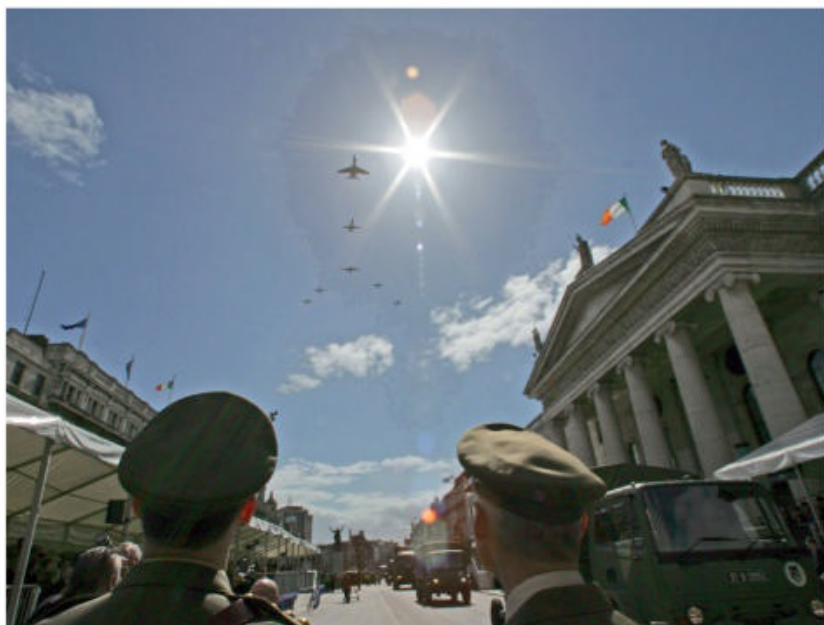
Ireland's defense needs are, naturally, very different from those of Finland, which has a long land border with Russia. Priority should be given to maritime defense tasks and equipment that can be of use for protecting European seas as well as Ireland's own, including

anti-submarine warfare and modern air defense, which Ireland doesn't currently possess. The Russia-Ukraine war has shown the increasing importance of uncrewed systems in naval warfare, including submersibles and sea drones, as well as uncrewed aircraft, essential for protecting renewable energy infrastructure.

Given Ireland's highly competitive labor market (the starting annual salary for a junior officer is around 50,000 euros, or about \$53,000), investment in automation of military systems appears necessary for economic reasons, too. In the longer term, Ireland might even think of cooperating in Britain's Type 83 destroyer program, a powerful new surface ship able to defend against submarine and air attack. If the ships were built in Belfast—now that the Good Friday Agreement has settled the conflict in Northern Ireland, unlike in 1949—that would allow an Irish one to become a symbol of U.K.-Irish cooperation.

Adopting such a defense policy will, however, require Ireland to convince its citizens with a new political argument: its role in European security. During the Cold War, the combination of military nonalignment and political embedding in the Western world made sense for a relatively poor country still under heavy British influence. But that time has passed. If 20th-century Ireland was principally focused on the English-speaking world, 21st-century Ireland is now decidedly more European, including its population. Just as Ireland's own freedom was helped by its diaspora in the United States, so it should commit to the freedom of East-Central Europe, so many of whose people now live in Ireland. Its defense posture and budget should reflect this new, European reality. ■

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Irish air corps planes fly over central Dublin on April 16, 2006.



## CHINA



# Xi Wants a Bull Market

By Lizzi C. Lee

**L**ate last September, China's stock market, beleaguered by weak economic indicators and a crumbling property sector, experienced an unexpected rally. After previous government hesitation over major interventions, new stimulus measures sparked a surge in Chinese equities, briefly reigniting optimism. Yet what truly puzzled market observers was Beijing's newfound approach to managing the market itself.

After allowing the market to lose trillions of dollars in value, with only limited state fund interventions when key psychological benchmarks were breached, Beijing abruptly shifted to a full-scale rescue. This involved forward guidance through press conferences, policy adjustments, and media engagements to restore market confidence. For the first time, stock market performance appeared to be a direct policy target—marking a sharp departure from President Xi Jinping's usual stance of keeping financial markets at arm's length.

Xi has long prioritized what he calls “real” sectors—manufacturing, technology, and infrastructure—over

speculative financial activities. Why the sudden interest in stock market management?

And if Xi is intent on fostering a bull market, why are we seeing only incremental measures rather than sweeping fiscal or consumption-driven stimulus? The answer lies in Xi's vision of the stock market: not as a tool for exuberant growth but as a carefully managed mechanism that aligns with China's broader economic and political objectives.

Xi's wariness of financial markets is rooted in the 2015 stock market collapse. China's market had soared on the back of speculative frenzy and margin lending, only to implode spectacularly that summer, wiping out trillions of dollars in value. Although stock market participation in China remains comparatively low, it was retail investors—the smaller players who dominate China's A-share market—who bore the heaviest losses. The concentrated impact on these individual investors turned the financial collapse into a political crisis, casting a long shadow over Xi's leadership.

The crash was a significant setback for Xi's economic agenda. At the time, China was making strides toward opening its capital markets, but the collapse halted that momentum. While the Chinese economy grew by roughly 30 percent between 2015 and 2020, the stock market lagged far behind, reflecting a reversion to a more closed and politically controlled model. Company listings appeared more tied to political connections than corporate merit, and insider trading remained rampant.

The episode cemented Xi's distrust of financial markets and reinforced his preference for state-led economic management. The government responded by tightening controls over speculation, slowing capital market reforms, and refocusing on sectors such as heavy industry and technology.

After years of viewing capital markets as frivolous and prone to destructive

bubbles, Xi now seems to recognize the value of a well-performing stock market. Government advisors suggest that Beijing, informed by the trauma of 2015, is not aiming for a rapid, unchecked bull market (a “mad bull”). Instead, the focus is on fostering a stable, measured bull market that supports China's broader economic ambitions while avoiding another crash.

Today, the weaknesses of China's capital markets are even more glaring. Chinese companies, facing increasing foreign scrutiny, need domestic funding options. With the real estate sector—where more than 70 percent of household wealth is concentrated—collapsing, Chinese citizens require alternative ways to store and grow wealth. Criticism of Xi's economic management increasingly points to the dismal state of the A-share market.

Based on conversations with policy advisors who recently briefed Beijing's financial leadership, there is broad consensus among decision-makers that the stock market can be leveraged as a tool to channel capital into key sectors and address challenges, such as the pension fund shortfall resulting from an aging population. According to these advisors, this shift is encapsulated in a multipronged strategy designed to align the stock market with China's broader economic objectives.

For years, China's property market served as the primary avenue for household wealth accumulation. Real estate attracted the savings of hundreds of millions of people, eventually producing speculative excess and unsustainable debt. Xi recognizes the need to provide these investors with a viable alternative, and the stock market is being positioned to fill that role.

Shifting wealth from real estate to equities is a delicate process, especially in a culture where property is closely tied to family security and social status. Unlike A-shares, housing is something tangible that can be lived in or used to demonstrate



financial stability in marriage prospects. Retail investors in China, often susceptible to herd behavior, heighten the risk of another bubble. To address this, Beijing has stepped up regulatory measures, focusing on investor protection and promoting the use of exchange-traded funds to encourage more stable, diversified investments.

Yet Xi's vision extends far beyond a simple redirection of household wealth. The declarations from the Third Plenum last July, coupled with Xi's emphatic rallying cry during a visit to Hefei in October—urging the “financial market to support science and tech breakthroughs” with the impassioned phrase “How many times can one strive for greatness?”—crystallize Beijing's intent. The message is clear: China is laser-focused on leveraging the capital market to drive its strategic imperatives in advanced manufacturing, high-tech industries, and green energy.

These sectors demand considerable investment across long-term horizons, from research and development to market adoption. Complicating matters further is Chinese law, which criminalizes the loss of state assets, adding a legal dimension to the inherent risks of investment and making large-scale capital deployment in these sectors a complex endeavor.

Xi's strategy is thus to cultivate a slow, steady bull market, designed to attract institutional investors—pension, insurance, and sovereign wealth funds—that can provide the patient capital to fuel these strategic sectors.

Unlike retail investors, institutional capital provides stability and a long-term perspective, both crucial for industries where returns may take years, or even decades, to fully materialize. Yet China's institutional investment in equities remains relatively modest, with pension funds allocating only 10-20 percent of their portfolios to stocks—well below the 50-60 percent typical in countries such as Canada and Japan. To address this, Beijing



Investors view stock market indicators at a securities sales department in Nanjing, China, on Oct. 8, 2024.

has signaled potential reforms aimed at creating new investment vehicles aligned with international standards, seeking to rekindle interest in private equity and venture capital.

Recent memories of heavy-handed interventions, regulatory uncertainty, and market volatility have left many institutional investors cautious. In the second quarter of 2024, foreign investors pulled a record \$15 billion from China, reflecting deep pessimism about the country's economic outlook.

Xi also sees the stock market as a vital instrument for addressing China's structural challenges, chief among them the demographic crisis placing immense pressure on its underfunded pension system. Recent reforms have allowed pension funds to allocate a greater share of their assets to equities, offering the potential for higher returns than traditional bonds or fixed-income investments.

This strategy bolsters the pension system while injecting long-term, stabilizing capital into the stock market, which in turn supports market stability during periods of volatility. Historically, China's pension funds have been conservative, predominantly investing in low-yield assets such as government bonds. But as their liabilities grow, a more dynamic approach is essential.

Policy advisors familiar with Beijing's strategic deliberations have indicated that the government is considering easing restrictions on equity investments to boost returns and address the growing pension shortfall. These advisors have also suggested the possibility of allowing pension funds to invest in global markets, offering diversification while hedging against geopolitical and currency risks. Additionally, there is discussion of expanding other investment avenues, such as real estate investment trusts, to diversify portfolios and mitigate market risks.

One of the most immediate and pressing elements of Xi's stock market strategy is the push for corporate consolidation to create national champions, built on more profitable and sustainable business models.

Policy advisors in China have proposed a localized version of the success of U.S. tech giants such as Amazon, Apple, and Tesla, focusing on sectors critical to state priorities such as green energy, advanced manufacturing, and technology. To this end, Beijing has implemented regulatory reforms aimed at encouraging mergers and acquisitions, particularly in strategic industries.

By leveraging the market to absorb wealth after the property collapse,



channel capital into key sectors, bolster an underfunded pension system, and cultivate internationally competitive tech giants, Xi is aligning the stock market with state objectives, in line with his preference for state-led development.

Despite the emphasis on fortifying capital markets, Xi's strategy is not to ignite a stock rally for its own sake but rather to foster a slow, steady bull market that underpins the real economy. This explains his incremental approach to fiscal stimulus, despite the short-term boosts such policies might offer. By promoting patient capital, encouraging corporate consolidation, and using the stock market as a lever for addressing structural challenges, Xi seeks to cultivate a "slow bull" that advances China's broader economic goals while steering clear of the perils of an overheated market.

Yet reforming China's capital markets is not easy.

Persistent issues—transparency, regulatory inconsistency, and weak corporate governance—continue to plague China's stock market.

The financial industry's intricate and often fraught relationship with state regulators complicates the landscape. Market sentiment remains fragile, and retail investors are acutely sensitive to any shifts in policy tone. Xi's anti-corruption campaign, which has ensnared numerous high-ranking financial officials, has cast a palpable chill over the sector, leaving financial elites increasingly demoralized and risk-averse amid growing uncertainty. Compounding this, the salary cuts under the "common prosperity" initiative have led to a significant exodus of talent, further exacerbating the industry's growing challenges.

Despite the apparent contradictions, Xi's pivot toward managing the stock market is, in many ways, a reflection of his consistent—even stubborn—economic philosophy. Rather than allowing the market to function autonomously, Beijing is actively steering its course to address China's economic challenges.

But can Xi truly tame the bull? His track record in economic management gives the market ample reason for caution. Heavy-handed regulation, an overemphasis on control and security, poor coordination between central and local governments, bureaucratic inertia, and the mismanagement of the COVID-19 response have all undermined previous reform efforts. Guiding the bull while keeping it in check is a challenge that even the boldest of matadors might hesitate to face. ■

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## China Is Not the Global South

*By Sarang Shidore*

**I**s China a part of the global south? Beijing certainly thinks so. For instance, at last year's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, a conference held every three years between China and African leaders, Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke of the global south's "shared path toward modernization." China has set up a development fund containing the term "South-South." And Foreign Minister Wang Yi has also explicitly stated more than once that China is and will always be a member of the global south.

Though the terms used have changed over time, China's rhetorical embrace of the developing world is not exactly new. Its roots go back to the early years of Chinese Communist Party rule. After the revolutionary fervor of the early 1950s subsided somewhat, China participated in the historic 1955 Bandung Conference

that brought Asian and African leaders from recently decolonized countries together in a common front against global inequities. In 1964, Premier Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong's righthand man, formulated China's Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries. Mao's own worldview defined two "intermediate zones" between the United States and the Soviet Union, the latter zone comprising Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The intermediate zones framing later morphed into the Three Worlds theory. In a conversation with Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda in 1974, Mao defined the "Third World" as including Africa, Latin America, and all of Asia, except Japan. This brief reference was elaborated on at length in a famous speech by Deng Xiaoping to the U.N. General Assembly that same year, in which he said: "China belongs to the Third World."

Mao, like many of his contemporaries, defined the Third World in predominantly economic and postcolonial terms. The framing made sense in the 1970s, when China was among the world's poorer countries. The average Chinese lived no better, and sometimes worse, than people in the wide swath of recently decolonized countries.

Fast-forward to today, and much has changed. A different understanding of the meta-region stretching from Latin America to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands is needed—and in turn, China's place within it must be reconsidered.

In this meta-region, 45 states that the United Nations has dubbed "least developed countries" remain mired in poverty and, in some cases, state failure. But about 80 others have grown substantially. Many, especially in Asia, made globalization and capitalism their own and turbocharged growth with corresponding social investments. They industrialized, integrated with the global economy, and built respectable levels of domestic infrastructure.



China itself is among the biggest beneficiaries of this transformation—from a country that experienced state-induced famines during the disastrous 1958-62 Great Leap Forward to now a highly industrialized, upper-middle-income country.

As economies diverge and the colonial era recedes into the past, the term “global south” has gained currency, especially since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It is best described as a “geopolitical fact,” a vast middle that sits outside the great-power system made up of the three great powers and core U.S. allies in Europe, East Asia, and Australasia. The “rest” have achieved varied levels of economic and social development but remain outside the select club of core alliances and global rulemaking. By definition, therefore, a great power cannot be a part of the global south.

China’s sheer size; high levels of GDP, trade, investment, and increasingly innovation; and successful military modernization mean that it now qualifies as a great power. It has joined Russia and the United States in this select category—though the United States is clearly the most powerful of the three

and Russia barely makes the grade.

China is indeed working closely with a few global south states on major issues, for example with Brazil on a Ukraine peace plan, and as a part of the BRICS grouping. But Beijing’s global south rhetoric, while drawing on a real shared history, is today a stratagem, designed to win influence among the developing world and further its aims of influencing the global order. If anything, China’s emergence as a great power opens the door for a divergence from the global south on three important fronts: trade and investment, climate, and geopolitics.

Divides on trade are already visible. Middle-income global south countries such as Indonesia and Chile have recently slapped tariffs on Chinese imports, as China has increasingly shifted into advanced manufacturing. Jakarta has banned a giant Chinese online retailer, citing threats to local businesses. Mexico wants to reduce Chinese imports in its supply chain. Concerns over local trade have also triggered actions against Chinese imports in Brazil.

Meanwhile, Beijing’s flagship investment program, the Belt and Road

Initiative, has become much smaller and more targeted of late, with spending falling off sharply as a slowing China focuses more at home. China is also on the “other side” when it comes to negotiating debt relief with poorer states in the G-20’s Common Framework, an odd position for a nation that claims to still be developing.

China and the global south have historically cooperated closely on climate change in the G-77+China coalition. They routinely push the U.N. principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” (CBDR) and legitimately demand much greater climate finance commitments from wealthy states. The CBDR principle puts the onus on financing the energy transition on the global north, since wealthy countries have been the dominant contributors to destructive climate change due to their much larger cumulative carbon emissions. Unsurprisingly, Washington tends to minimize or ignore CBDR in climate negotiations.

But China’s own emissions have risen to the point that it has itself become a major contributor to not only annual but also historical emissions. With 15 percent of the global share, China ranks



Men twirl dragon streamers on the Bund promenade along the Huangpu River in Shanghai on Sept. 7, 2022.

ED JONES/GETTY IMAGES



third in cumulative emissions since 1750, not far behind the United States and the European Union. (The leading global south emitter, India, comes in much lower at nearly 3.5 percent.) The CBDR principle puts China on the side of wealthy states much more than developing countries.

China could justifiably point to its already significant efforts as a source of climate finance. But it will resist what should be a logical shift in its status and oppose formally taking on climate finance targets.

China and the global south may also yet diverge on the broader geopolitical plane. Highly militarized U.S.-China competition can destabilize the global order and risk major conflict; it is therefore not in the global south's interests. Any actions by Beijing contributing to regional or global destabilization will not be welcomed in the global south. (The same is true for any such behavior by Washington.)

But China's relative weakness compared with the United States, and an economic slowdown at home, also creates incentives for a revived G-2 in order to craft updated rules of global governance. Xi seemed to propose exactly this last year.

Washington, either under the current or the next administration, is in no mood to engage in such a conversation with Beijing due to China's perceived threat to its global primacy, sharp differences over Taiwan, and the Russia-Ukraine war. But as planetary challenges multiply, and as China closes the gap in strategic innovation despite its economic crunch, both sides may be incentivized toward deeper, though sectoral, cooperation—perhaps after a nasty crisis that stops short of war.

Any new, future G-2, even if partial, would sit uneasily with most of the global south, as the latter's demands might not be factored into a backroom deal between the two most powerful states in the international system. The very act of excluding these states from

such a conversation would also rankle. The net effect would be to widen their divide with Beijing.

China could bridge its growing gap with the global south by being more proactive on issues such as debt, climate, and trade and refraining from provocative actions in theaters such as the South China Sea. Continuing U.S. failures that cost the lives of innocents (such as in the conflict in the Middle East) or U.S. overmilitarization in Asia could also ensure that China remains attractive in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

While Beijing has traditionally enjoyed a natural convergence with the global south, the future looks a lot more complicated. ■

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## China Has Become Powerful Before It Is Rich

By Jo Inge Bekkevold

**O**n Aug. 22, 2024, China commemorated the 120th anniversary of the birth of former leader Deng Xiaoping, whose market reforms catapulted China from communist backwater to global economic power. Chinese President Xi Jinping praised Deng for his contribution to the party and nation. But despite their common goal of a powerful China, Xi's strategy for achieving it markedly differs from Deng's. By abolishing the

two-term limit favored by Deng and making no preparations for a transition of power during his lifetime, Xi has discarded one of Deng's main ideas for ensuring long-term political stability. Whereas Deng emphasized market reforms, Xi is reasserting the party-state's control. But the most remarkable change has been Xi's abandonment of Deng's famous dictum that China should keep a low profile in international affairs while it is busy building wealth. Instead, Xi has prioritized competing with the United States for global power—with the result that China has become powerful before it is rich.

While Beijing is the world's second-largest military spender after Washington, China's gross national income (GNI) per capita is only one-sixth that of the United States: \$13,400 versus \$80,300 in 2023. On this basis, China is about as rich as Mexico and Argentina. The enormous gap between China's global ambitions and middling prosperity is about to become a serious challenge as Beijing grapples with mounting economic problems. Has Xi made a strategic blunder by placing too much emphasis on superpower competition too soon?

The relationship between power and wealth is an enduring debate in the study of international relations. States build military power to improve their security, and wealth is a fundamental requirement to build military power. This creates a dilemma: Excessive military spending will hamper long-run prosperity and ultimately constrain a state's ability to continue building power. This dilemma presents itself in two major ways.

First is the so-called guns-butter-growth trade-off. A state's budget can be spent on the military ("guns"), citizens' welfare ("butter"), or investments that may boost the economy ("growth"). Spending on one leaves less to spend on the others. This trade-off is not the main concern for China: Beijing spends only around 2 percent of GDP annually



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on defense, far below what Washington and Moscow spent during the Cold War. In fact, Chinese leaders are keenly aware of the Soviet Union's struggles with military overspending and want to avoid making the same mistake.

The second power-versus-wealth dilemma is the trade-off between guns, butter, and openness—and here Beijing faces an increasingly grim situation. Reduced openness and shrinking ties with the world economy as a consequence of Xi's embrace of superpower competition are emerging as major stumbling blocks for future growth. For half a century—ever since Washington engaged Beijing in the early 1970s as part of its containment policy toward Moscow—China has been able to access Western markets, capital, technology, and knowledge, and this integration into the world economy has been a crucial factor in China's rise.

But once competition becomes geopolitical, security considerations start influencing trade and investment flows. As China demonstrates the ambition to seriously challenge U.S. interests, the United States and its allies are responding by reducing their economic interdependence with China as part of a comprehensive de-risking policy. This reaches far beyond tariffs and includes limiting investments, homeshoring production, and denying China access to high-end and dual-use technologies. Even some emerging-market countries have begun to reduce economic ties with China. Altogether, these policies could restrict China's path to high-income status, undermining its future position as a superpower as a direct consequence of Xi's choice for China to exert power before becoming rich.

The timing of Western de-risking is highly problematic for Beijing. China's economy may not be headed for collapse, but its economic model is at a crossroads. Its population is rapidly aging, the workforce is shrinking, and youth unemployment is

rising. Growth is declining fast, limiting Beijing's ability to tackle these challenges. According to the International Monetary Fund, China achieved an average growth rate of 8.6 percent from 2010 to 2014. Over the next five-year period (2015-19), that average fell to 6.6 percent before declining further to 4.6 percent during the last five years (2020-24). By 2029, growth is expected to slow to an annual average of 3.3 percent. As China's economy grows larger and more modern, flatter growth is no surprise: Japan and South Korea experienced a similar trajectory, with three to four decades of high export-led growth before annual rates fell below 4 percent. It has been more than four decades since Deng's reforms, so one could even argue that a deceleration was overdue.

Yet unlike Japan and South Korea, which had already been high-income economies for several years before growth dropped off, China's economy is slowing significantly before passing that threshold. The World Bank classifies countries as high income once they reach a GNI per capita of \$14,005. With growth slowing quickly, Beijing will find it much more challenging to make the transition from an export- and investment-driven economic model to a more domestic- and consumer-based one, which is not only the hallmark of most rich countries but would also give Chinese citizens a bigger share of the economic pie. Recent surveys indicate that the national mood is changing from optimism about China's prospects to pessimism and waning confidence in Xi's economic leadership.

In addition, China's structural imbalances largely remain unsolved. Investment has remained above 40 percent of GDP for the last two decades, far higher than the G-7 average of 23 percent in 2023. Even when compared with the earlier experiences of Japan and South Korea, China's growth model is extreme. Moreover, Xi appears to be moving



toward even more state-driven investment in manufacturing. He has also defined national security as the pivotal foundation for China's modernization, suggesting that his decision to tighten the state's grip on the economy is influenced by China's rivalry with the United States. With these choices, Xi is not only postponing a rebalancing of China's economic model toward private consumption but precipitating even more concerns in the West about Chinese industrial overcapacity, resulting in higher tariffs and other restrictions.

Could Xi have chosen another path? In short, yes. Of course, China would at some stage have become a peer competitor of the United States regardless of Xi's policies, simply due to its size, vast resources, and uninterrupted economic growth. Still, different choices could have alleviated the threat perception associated with China's rise and given the country more time to build a robust economy.

First, Xi could have spent less on clearly offensive weaponry. Beyond total spending and force size, it matters greatly whether a country is building offensive or defensive capabilities. A focus on defending the homeland would have mitigated what scholars call the security dilemma, whereby one state's growing power is often perceived by another as a growing threat. Instead, China has built an increasing number of offensive platforms capable of projecting power, including long-range bombers and hypersonic missiles. But it is China's massive naval buildup—including aircraft carriers—that has significantly changed the threat perception. Moreover, China is testing these platforms in increasingly complex military exercises far beyond its home waters.

Second, Xi could have chosen a less confrontational foreign policy. During the first decade of the millennium, Western engagement with China was at its zenith. Since then, a number of

events have established an image of China as hawkish and aggressive—including military clashes with India in the Himalayas, challenges to the movement of U.S. vessels in the Western Pacific, testing of Japan's military reactions in the East China Sea, and the assertion of vast unilateral claims over the South China Sea through land reclamation and maritime confrontations with regional neighbors.

Furthermore, Xi's policy of "wolf warrior" diplomacy, whereby Chinese officials talk and behave in an openly hostile manner toward other countries, has also eroded China's image abroad. Beijing's response to then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2022, including unprecedented military activities around the island, led to one of the worst U.S.-China crises since the Cold War. Finally, Beijing's unwavering support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has been particularly damaging for relations with Europe. A more measured Chinese approach on these issues would clearly have made a difference.

It is still too early to conclude how seriously China's economy will be affected by Western de-risking. Because China is so integrated into the world

economy, de-risking will be costly for the West as well. Nonetheless, the list of sectors and technologies covered by Washington's de-risking policies is already wide-ranging; it includes strategic items such as semiconductors and critical minerals, as well as electric vehicles, solar cells, and medical products. The list is expected to expand in tandem with the U.S.-China rivalry. China now has to find its way around sagging growth, an aging population, and the shift to high-end manufacturing even as the door to global economic integration is closing. This is far removed from Deng's open-door policy. Xi will find that placing power above plenty too soon comes with serious costs to China. ■

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Visitors take pictures in front of portraits of Chinese leaders at an exhibition marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing on Sept. 26, 2019.



## AMERICAS



# The Great Deportation of 2025

By Edward Alden

A decade ago, the U.S. Congress was on the cusp of passing a bill that would have put most of the nearly 11 million people living illegally in the United States on a path to citizenship. Now, come Jan. 20, the country is set to launch the largest mass deportation effort in its history.

“We know who you are, and we’re going to come and find you,” said Thomas Homan one day after President-elect Donald Trump named him as the incoming administration’s “border czar,” responsible for border security and the removal of unauthorized migrants. Homan has promised to carry out “the biggest deportation operation this country’s ever seen.”

If he succeeds, it will reshape migration for a generation or longer—not just in the United States but in much of the world.

This moment has been building slowly. Since roughly the 1960s, most advanced economies gradually opened themselves to larger flows of migrants. In the United States, the foreign-born share of the population rose from less

than 5 percent in 1970 to nearly 15 percent today; in Britain, that share rose from a little over 6 percent to more than 16 percent.

Most Western countries saw immigration as an economic winner, bringing talent and ambition and helping to fill labor shortages in occupations from farm work to health care. There was a strong humanitarian impulse as well: Horrified by the refusal of most countries to admit European Jews fleeing Nazi persecution, Western governments adopted generous asylum laws obligating them to admit many of those escaping persecution, torture, or death threats around the world.

But in the 21st century, that welcoming spirit has crumbled. In the 2000s, Congress tried several times to pass legislation to legalize unauthorized migrants who were longtime U.S. residents, as it had done during the Reagan administration in 1986. The final effort failed in 2014.

Then, over the past decade, both the United States and Europe faced a series of migration crises, with displaced people arriving at their borders in far larger numbers than governments could handle or their populations were willing to accept. Tinkering with asylum processing and enlisting help from transit states such as Mexico and Turkey bought occasional breathing room—until the number of arrivals inevitably soared again, creating a fresh crisis.

With the number of displaced people worldwide doubling over the past decade, to nearly 120 million, immigration has become more politically charged around the world. In Europe, populist parties running on anti-immigrant platforms have made widespread gains. Even countries that have historically welcomed large numbers of migrants, such as Canada and Australia, have become warier and are reducing immigration quotas.

But in no country is the about-face as stark as in the United States. Trump

returns to the White House with what he believes is a mandate to sweep the country of unauthorized migrants, including millions who have lived there for decades.

Trump’s first appointments attest to his seriousness. Homan has four decades of experience on migration issues; as the acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during Trump’s first term, he designed the controversial policy of separating migrant parents from their children when they crossed the border from Mexico illegally.

Trump’s new deputy chief of staff for policy, Stephen Miller, has spent the last 15 years schooling himself in the intricacies of U.S. immigration laws to wield them in the service of a xenophobic agenda. At a Trump rally in late October, Miller told the cheering crowd that “America is for Americans and Americans only.”

And Gov. Kristi Noem, nominated to head the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), deployed National Guard troops from her state of South Dakota to help stop migrants at the southern U.S. border.

It is not at all clear, however, that Americans actually voted for this agenda. Immigration was a big issue in the campaign, but voter surveys indicate that it was a second-tier concern. And polls are all over the map. Nearly 9 in 10 Trump supporters, and 56 percent of registered voters overall, told the Pew Research Center that they favor “mass deportations of immigrants living in the country illegally.” But 58 percent also favor allowing undocumented immigrants to stay if they are married to a U.S. citizen. Even larger majorities want to admit more refugees, foreign college graduates, and immigrants who can fill labor shortages.

The next administration’s actions will be a test of which of these competing priorities Americans will actually support. In his first term, Trump did not push very hard. While he all but





Asylum-seekers rush to be processed by U.S. Border Patrol agents at an improvised camp near the U.S.-Mexico border in Jacumba, California, on Feb. 2, 2024.

shut down refugee admissions from overseas, curbed legal migration, and tightened the U.S. border with Mexico during the COVID-19 pandemic, his administration did little to remove migrants already in the country. The total number of deportations reached 1.5 million—half as many as during President Barack Obama’s first term and similar to outgoing President Joe Biden’s four years.

What would mass deportation look like? Unless Congress changes them, U.S. laws make a huge increase in removals unlikely. Migrants targeted for deportation are permitted to appeal to U.S. immigration courts, where the backlog is more than 3 million cases and wait times for hearings can stretch to two years or longer. U.S. detention capacity for all migrants—either recent arrivals or those awaiting removal—is only around 40,000.

Miller wants to expand that capacity by creating tent cities along the border, but the costs would be high. The American Immigration Council has estimated that it would cost \$88 billion annually to detain and deport 1 million migrants per year—nearly nine-tenths of the entire current DHS budget. And many countries are reluctant to take their own citizens back. Venezuela has

at times refused entirely, and others, including Cuba and China, are considered “recalcitrant.”

Homan has promised to start by focusing on “public security threats and national security threats,” which is pretty much what the Biden administration and others have already done. Beyond that, things get harder. Homan has promised to revive “worksite enforcement,” in which ICE targets workplaces such as slaughterhouses and farms suspected of employing large numbers of undocumented migrants.

The history of such raids is not encouraging. During Trump’s first term, only one large-scale raid was conducted. Some 700 migrants working at chicken processing plants in Mississippi were deported, but the employers got off with a slap on the wrist. Many of Trump’s wealthy donors rely on foreign workers, including unauthorized migrants, and are likely to push back against the resumption of workplace raids.

Reaching deep into American communities will be harder still. To start, it is challenging simply to find undocumented migrants; unlike some countries, the United States does not have a central residence registry or require residents to carry documents proving their right to be in the country. Many

states and cities also have “sanctuary” laws that prevent local law enforcement from cooperating with ICE agents, making arrests and detentions more difficult still.

Homan has promised to ignore such obstacles. “If sanctuary cities don’t want to help us, then get out of the way, because we’re coming,” he said on *Fox & Friends*. Miller wants friendly red states to call up National Guard forces and send them to assist ICE agents in blue states. This could set up unprecedented clashes across state borders.

The public reaction is hard to predict. Most immigration enforcement takes place near the border or quietly, when unauthorized migrants are detained on criminal charges and turned over to ICE. Sending agents into neighborhoods to arrest individual migrants will be far more explosive; nearly 14 million U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents live in households where at least one member is unauthorized.

All of this assumes that the next administration chooses to be constrained by existing laws and norms. Other options exist. With Republicans controlling Congress, Trump may push through laws not only to boost funding for removal operations but also to weaken protections for unauthorized migrants.

His officials are likely to expand the use of expedited removal, a provision that permits deportation of recent arrivals without a court hearing. Trump has also suggested that he may declare a national emergency, allowing him to deploy the U.S. military to speed deportations.

Even if his plans fall short, just attempting them on a large scale will mark a revolution in the U.S. approach to migration. Until now, conservative critics of immigration, including Trump during his first term, largely focused on tightening borders and reducing new arrivals. European right-wing parties have set similar priorities. But if the United States

starts mass deportations, populist governments elsewhere could shift to more draconian measures as well. Despite the political controversies, the United States has long been something of a model for embracing immigration, with more than one-fifth of all the world's migrants residing in the United States. Mass deportation will send a far uglier message.

If the effort proves too difficult and Trump buckles to the inevitable backlash, the U.S. political debate may revert to where it has been for decades: how to provide a reasonable level of border security while continuing to admit new immigrants who benefit the economy—and looking the other way at the millions of unauthorized migrants who have built lives in the country.

For decades now, that has been the messy and uncomfortable compromise. But the alternative promises to be much worse. ■

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## Lula and Trump Might Get Along

By Andre Pagliarini

**I**n 1817, U.S. President James Monroe sent lawyer Henry M. Brackenridge to South America to advise on U.S. policy toward the region. The vast Portuguese colony of Brazil stood out to Brackenridge in part because it was not experiencing the violent upheavals of the independence movements rocking Spanish America. “As an American, I

cannot but feel a kind of pride in looking forward to the lofty destinies of this new world,” he wrote afterward, concluding that “when we consider the vast capacities and resources of Brazil, it is not visionary to say, that this empire is destined to be our rival.”

Brazil today is not a rival of the United States, but some Western commentators worry that it has not done enough to distance itself from Washington's antagonists. Under the center-left government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who was elected in 2022 after serving as president from 2003 to 2011, Brazil has engaged more than ever with the BRICS bloc, which aspires to a world order independent of U.S. hegemony. Lula's stances on issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Russia's war in Ukraine have also occasionally created friction with U.S. President Joe Biden.

Both sides, however, have sought to ease any impression of lasting animosity. “We can have these disagreements, even profound disagreements, ... and still continue all of the vital work that we're doing together,” U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a February 2024 visit to Rio de Janeiro.

Last year marked the bicentennial of U.S. recognition of Brazilian independence. Now, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's second term will test ties between the hemisphere's two largest democracies.

The obvious reading is that Trump's victory, with his unilateralist and protectionist approach to foreign policy, will create new challenges for Brazil, especially on trade and environmental issues. Trump's first term was characterized by nationalist, protectionist, and xenophobic stances that generated friction with governments around the world. Trump's second term will likely accelerate Brazilian efforts to seek new alliances and further diversify its economic relationships.

Lula is not in the same political

camp as Trump; the Brazilian president is a leftist who leads a centrist government due to the realities of coalition politics. Yet that does not mean there will automatically be conflict between them. After Barack Obama was elected to succeed George W. Bush as U.S. president in 2008, Lula told the *Wall Street Journal* that “Bush's policies toward Brazil were dignified. But I think they can be infinitely better with Obama.”

Obama, in a famous gesture of appreciation toward his Brazilian counterpart, in 2009 called Lula “the most popular politician on Earth.” However, despite Bush's bellicose foreign policy and that Lula had criticized Bush, the Brazilian president would conclude in 2018 that “in relation to Brazil, Bush and Condoleezza [Rice] were much more democratic than Obama and Hillary Clinton.” He meant that Bush proved more likely than Obama to keep his word—and allowed Brazil to pursue its own foreign policy even in the face of disagreement with the United States.

Lula said Obama “could give magnificent speeches on any important issue but never actually delivered on his promises”—a reference to the former president's failure to close the prison at Guantánamo Bay, which many Latin American progressives consider a stain on human rights. Celso Amorim, Lula's former foreign minister and current special advisor on foreign affairs, wrote of Obama in 2017: “Even his friendliness toward Lula in front of the cameras concealed, in my view, a certain degree of condescension, in contrast to the frank and direct approach of Bush.”

Bush, focused on the Middle East, did not pay much attention to South America. This neglect gave Brazil more room to maneuver on the world stage, especially in its own region. Bush, for example, did not criticize Lula's proximity to socialist Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, counting on Brazil to help balance its neighbor's open



hostility toward the United States. Obama, by contrast, was much more conflicted about ceding any initiative to Brazil, which under Lula sought to weigh in on major global issues.

In 2009, according to Lula and Amorim, Obama asked for Brazilian help in negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran, which was granted. “Brazil aimed to get the West to partially lift sanctions on Iran if Turkey offered guarantees to safely handle Iran’s enriched uranium,” Jorge Heine and Thiago Rodrigues wrote in *FOREIGN POLICY* in 2023. But then U.S. politics got in the way, and “a new round of U.S. sanctions on Iran tanked the deal.”

In short, the Obama administration solicited Brazilian participation in a high-stakes geopolitical matter and then chafed at the country’s diplomatic efforts—only to find itself effectively making the same deal years later, in 2015. Obama’s waffling prevarication annoyed the Lula government.

In his memoir, Obama described crashing a private meeting between the leaders of Brazil, China, India, and South Africa at the United Nations climate negotiations in 2009, depicting them in an unflattering light. This dramatic confrontation reflected a tendency under Obama for the United States to reassert its global leadership by deferring less to democratic partners in the global south. Biden has notably departed from this trend.

At 78, Lula is around Trump’s age. Like the president-elect, he has occasionally been criticized for jocular yet insensitive remarks about women, minorities, and LGBTQ people. Lula could, if necessary, seek to establish a throwback kind of working relationship with Trump centered on their strong, charismatic style rather than on shared ideology on policy matters.

Tellingly, in an interview he gave while in jail on corruption charges in 2019, Lula described his vision of national leadership in a way that could intersect with Trump’s nationalism.



Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva gives two thumbs-up during the G-20 meeting in Rio de Janeiro on July 24, 2024.

“Does anyone think that the United States will do anything to favor Brazil? Americans think of Americans in first, second, third, fourth, and fifth place. And if they have time left, they think of Americans,” Lula said. “We are the ones who have to do something for us. We need to get over the inferiority complex, raise our heads, and [recognize that] the solution to Brazil’s problems lies within Brazil.”

It is not unthinkable that Trump, who responds to political performance and social cues, would see Lula as a leader worthy of respect.

In considering the coming Lula-Trump relationship, it is worth recalling the relationship between Trump and former Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The leftist López Obrador managed a functional relationship with Trump by focusing on common economic interests, such as prioritizing the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement; helping to enforce Trump’s Remain in Mexico policy; and avoiding direct diplomatic confrontations.

In some respects, Brazil might even benefit from Trump’s presidency. Trump’s hostility toward the post-World War II global order established and maintained by the United

States could further multipolarity, a development that would favor Brazil and serve Lula’s own geopolitical agenda.

Furthermore, in recent months, Lula has begun distancing himself from the authoritarian regime of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, potentially neutralizing a major source of tension with Trump. Until recently, Lula was arguably the most prominent democratic world leader who was on friendly terms with Maduro. Now, in the aftermath of contested July elections—which Maduro claims without evidence that he won—and amid widespread repression in Venezuela, Brasília and Caracas have escalated a diplomatic standoff.

None of this suggests that Lula looks forward to dealing with Trump. Trump’s protectionist policies could prove especially damaging to Brazilian steel, textiles, and other key exports. Equally concerning is the fact that Trump’s win has provided an enormous boost to Lula’s far-right opponents within Brazil, who venerate the once and future U.S. president.

Lula himself made his election preference clear in a February 2024 interview: “Make no mistake, although I am not an American voter,” he said, “I obviously think Biden is more of a guarantee for the survival of the democratic regime in the world and in the United States.” Lula reportedly told allies last September that “God willing, Kamala wins the U.S. elections.”

However, the future of the U.S.-Brazil relationship was not up to God. Instead, it depended on a few thousand voters in a handful of U.S. swing states. How Lula and Trump choose to move forward with the result lies with them alone. ■

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# Why Mexico Elected a Woman President First

By Carin Zissis

**M**exico and the United States both held presidential elections in 2024, but along the campaign trail, two different conversations were taking place. In Mexico, Claudia Sheinbaum rallied voters with the catchphrase “It’s time for women.” She beat her next closest rival, also a woman, by 32 points—nearly 20 million votes. On election night, supporters in Mexico City’s main square greeted her with shouts of *presidenta*, celebrating at once her victory and, by using the feminine form of the word, their first woman president.

In the United States, eight years after Hillary Clinton championed the dream of breaking the ultimate glass ceiling, Vice President Kamala Harris avoided the issue altogether as a presidential candidate. As she sought to win over swing state voters, Harris leaned more into emphasizing her career as a prosecutor than the potential of marking a historic milestone and even deflected when asked directly about it.

But electing a woman president isn’t the only area where the United States lags behind Mexico. The steep rise since 2018 in the number of women in the U.S. Congress has slowed to a standstill. Only about a quarter of Senate seats in the recent election went to women, and the House of Representatives still isn’t breaking the 30 percent threshold. Mexico, on the other hand, hit gender parity in both houses

of its Congress three years ago. It ranks fourth worldwide when it comes to women’s legislative representation, per the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The United States ranks 75th.

The difference is startling, given that more than three-quarters of Mexicans say their country suffers from machismo. Mexico didn’t even give women the right to vote until 1953, more than three decades after its neighbor to the north. Still, last March, with official campaigning just underway, 61 percent of Mexicans said they would prefer a woman to be their next president, compared with 14 percent who said a man. Meanwhile, only 1 in 4 Americans believes it’s very or extremely likely that the United States will have a woman president in their lifetime—and that was before Harris lost. Why are attitudes so different between these two neighbors?

The story of how women’s representation skyrocketed in Mexico dates back 30 years and involves tactical lawmaking—not to mention unity across political lines and parties—to build the world’s most sophisticated gender parity laws.

It started at a time when much of Latin America was leaving behind a period of authoritarianism and Mexico itself was shedding the constraints of decades of one-party rule. In 1991, Argentina became the first country in the world to pass a national quota law requiring that 30 percent of parties’ legislative candidates had to be women. Since then, most Latin American countries have passed some form of gender quota reform, and at least 10 have upped the ante to gender parity laws. While countries around the world have adopted gender quota measures, “Latin America has always been at the vanguard,” said Jennifer Piscopo, a professor of gender and politics at Royal Holloway, University of London, adding that gender quota advocates took advantage of the region’s flurry of electoral reforms in the 1990s and 2000s to

incrementally usher through measures in larger reforms.

No Latin American country has passed more reforms expanding women’s representation than Mexico. In 1996, the country started with a measure recommending that at least 30 percent of political parties’ legislative candidates be women. In 2002, it became compulsory, and by 2008, the quota level rose to 40 percent. A 2014 amendment upped the level to gender parity for candidates for federal and local legislative seats. Along the way, a network of women across civil society, academia, media, and government worked strategically to win support and close loopholes that made it easy for parties to run women candidates in districts where they were likely to lose anyway or swapping a man into a post after a woman wins a seat. Mexican women went from having single-digit representation in Congress 30 years ago to holding an equal number of seats today.

Then came a 2019 constitutional reform backed by women from all major parties: *paridad en todo*, or parity in everything. With it, not only is parity mandated across the legislative, executive, and judicial branches at the local and federal levels, but 50 percent is a floor—not a ceiling—for women’s political representation.

The reform won unanimous approval, but it’s worth asking why Mexican men would concede power. Patricia Mercado, a federal deputy who ran for president in 2006, questions whether they have. She recalls that one of Mexico’s first female senators in the 1960s lamented that her male peers didn’t treat her as an equal, saying: “They give me the chair, but they don’t give me a space.” Mercado says women have gained political space but men still control the halls of power.

Indeed, while Mexico ranks 14th out of 146 countries for political empowerment in the World Economic Forum’s latest gender gap report, it sits at 109 for



economic participation and opportunity. (The United States ranks 63rd and 22nd, respectively.) When it comes to economic leadership, about 12 percent of corporate board seats are held by women in Mexico, compared with a U.S. rate that, while still low, is 28 percent.

Gender-based violence is an even starker contrast between women's leadership gains and on-the-ground impact. Over the time period that Mexico increased gender parity, its Congress also passed laws aiming to prevent violence against women. But in Mexico, where only 4 in 100 crimes are even investigated, the impunity rate for domestic violence runs around 98.6 percent. It's unsurprising that, in recent years, with roughly 10 women murdered a day in Mexico, a younger generation of women have taken to the streets with a new demand: Stop killing us.

Passing laws does little good if they're not enforced. In Mexico, where legislative seats are filled through a combination of direct election and proportional representation, political parties pick their candidates based on internal processes, giving their leaders sway over who gets into office. Where improving rule of law or implementing public policy is complex, parity rules offer parties a chance to say they hit the numeric target. But, said Lisa Baldez, a professor of government at Dartmouth College, "You're going to get women who, for the most part, are going to toe the party line."

More than 130 countries have adopted quotas. That makes the United States, which has not done so, an outlier. It's also one of a handful of countries that never ratified the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in large part due to polarization between the conservatives and religious groups against it and the progressive rights organizations in favor.

It's only harder to imagine Washington taking such actions after an election cycle that saw the winning side

People take photos with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum after her swearing-in ceremony in Mexico City on Oct. 1, 2024.



belittle Harris as a "DEI hire." Last June, then-Sen. J.D. Vance co-sponsored legislation to eliminate federal diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, calling DEI "destructive ideology."

But even if the presidential races led to different outcomes for Harris and Sheinbaum, both women carry the baggage of the men who backed their candidacies, not to mention the kinds of questions about leadership capacity that female leaders tend to face. Harris inherited the weight of President Joe Biden's low approval and, during a short campaign, faced questions about whether she would carry on his unpopular mandate.

In contrast, Sheinbaum benefited from the high approval of her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. But she, too, has faced constant questions about whether she will be able to govern in her own right. Just as campaigns were getting underway, López Obrador unveiled a massive reform package that made his legacy her agenda and saddled her government with controversial overhauls to the judiciary, energy sector, security, and more. The victory of Donald Trump, who has pledged to slap tariffs on Mexican goods, only complicates the scenario.

But Sheinbaum has taken steps to make her mark on women's equality. For one thing, on Oct. 3, just three days into office, she presented a reform package aiming to build substantive gender equality, close the wage gap, and protect women from violence. But, as Leticia Bonifaz, a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, put it: "Building real equality is a practical matter, not a theoretical one." The reforms build on existing laws and will take funding and policy to have an impact. Until then, they run the risk of being just more words on paper.

Mexico's Congress unanimously approved them. ■

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# A REQUIEM FOR AMERICAN RENEWAL







BIDEN'S FOREIGN POLICY  
NEVER MET HIS OWN  
GRANDIOSE STANDARDS.

BY KORI SCHAKE







At its inception, the Biden administration proudly declared that “America is back.” The 2022 National Security Strategy announced that by “leveraging our national strengths and rallying a broad coalition of allies and partners, we will advance our vision of a free, open, prosperous, and secure world, outmaneuvering our competitors, and making meaningful progress on issues like climate change, global health, and food security to improve the lives not just of Americans but of people around the world.”

The central elements of that aspiration were a “foreign policy for the middle class” (meaning, industrial policy, restricted trade, and expansive government spending), weighting diplomacy over military force, and deepening and expanding alliances. The policy explicitly connected democracy at home and abroad. In a recent essay in *Foreign Affairs*, Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote that the administration was able to successfully enact “a strategy of renewal, pairing historic investments in competitiveness at home with an intensive diplomatic campaign to revitalize partnerships abroad.”

The standards that the Biden administration set for itself are one way by which to measure the success or failure of its policies. And by the Biden team’s own criteria, its foreign policies have not met its grandiose standards. The middle class appeared more concerned about inflation than democracy at home or America being back abroad; near the end of Biden’s presidency, two-thirds of U.S. voters considered the country on the wrong track. And rather than strengthening democracy at home, the Biden administration has become the bridge between the first and second Trump presidencies.

**THE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. TROOPS** from Afghanistan in 2021 depressed President Joe Biden’s approval, and from there it never recovered. Even though then-President Donald Trump’s 2020 deal with the Taliban set the disaster in motion, Biden’s refusal to acknowledge any responsibility for the outcome or error in execution, and its amplification by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, justifiably called into question the competence of a team that took pride in and marketed itself as a safe pair of hands after the squalid upheaval of the Trump administration.

But even before the Afghanistan debacle, Biden demonstrated indifference to the foreign-policy consequences of

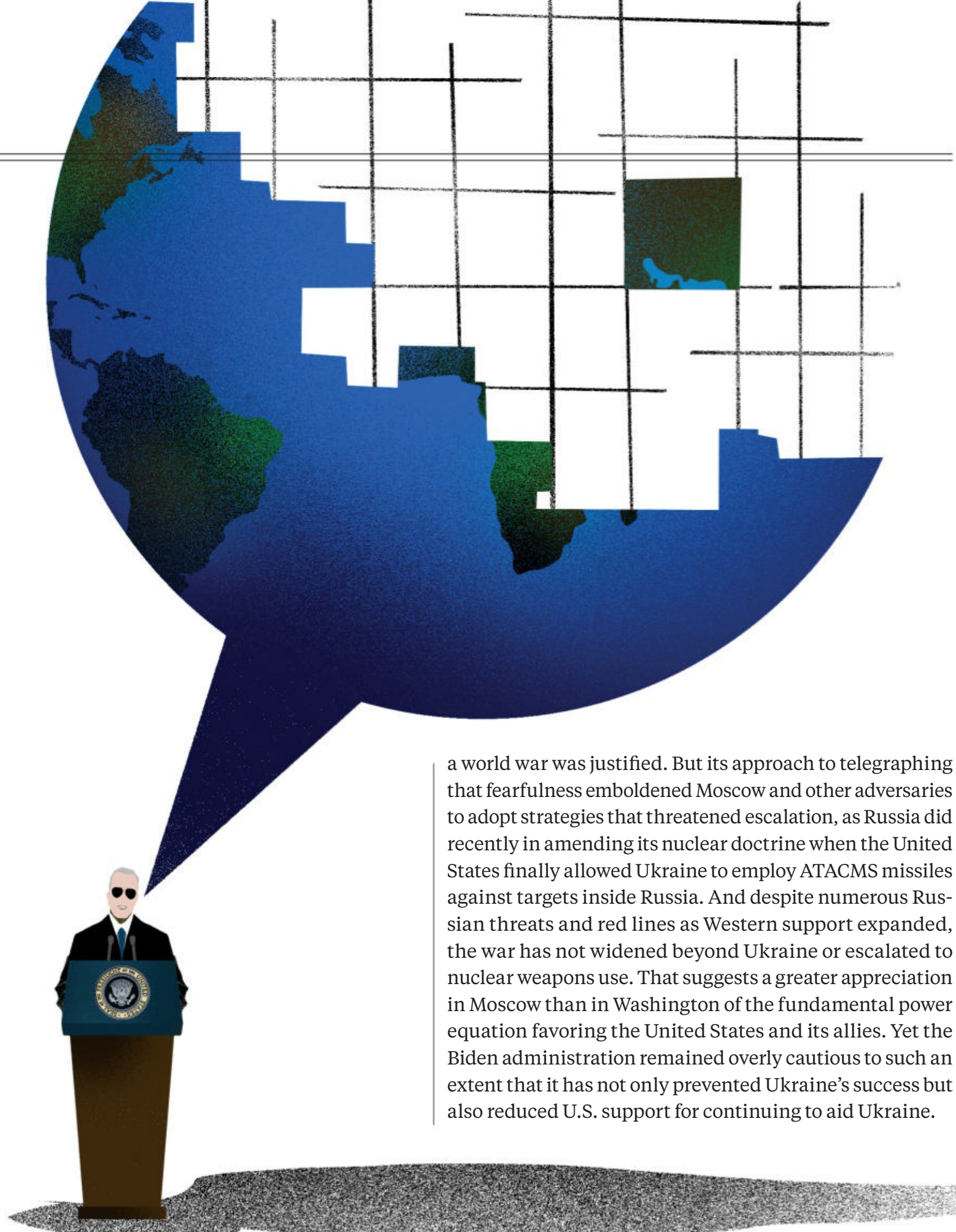
his glib public pronouncements. He called Russian President Vladimir Putin a “killer” and threatened to make Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman a “pariah.” While those sentiments were admirable, they weren’t matched by policies and instead wilted when those leaders imposed consequences on the United States. Such utterances are of a piece with the president declaring at least four times that the United States would send troops to defend Taiwan: The policy isn’t the problem, but the disconnect between the statement and procuring the military force to achieve it, and the lack of a campaign of public education to prepare Americans for a war against China, is. Given the precedent of obsequious capitulation—as when Biden officials discovered that Saudi Arabia was actually important to U.S. objectives in the Middle East, could affect the U.S. economy, and had the option of cooperation with China—the likeliest Biden reaction to China calling his bluff would have been a failure to carry out his stated policy.

This is the central failure of Biden’s foreign policy: the expansive chasm between brave pronouncements and what the administration was actually willing to risk or commit to achieve its goals. In theory, Biden’s policy toward Iran was that unless Tehran forswore developing nuclear weapons and committed to a longer and stronger nuclear deal, the United States would destroy the country’s nuclear infrastructure. Yet it is impossible to imagine a president so committed to reducing U.S. involvement in the Middle East, and broadly skeptical about the use of military force, carrying out that policy.

Nowhere is the gap between objective and risk more evident or damaging than Ukraine. Biden officials repeatedly said the United States would support Ukraine “as long as it takes,” committing more than \$100 billion in assistance, but they provided that assistance more slowly than needed, without consideration of the costs in blood and momentum from their fear of escalation. Their hesitance to commit to Ukraine regaining its internationally recognized territory even produced the unusual circumstance of America’s European allies initiating transfers of weapons that Washington had hesitated on providing. Only then was the Biden administration reluctantly shamed into matching the courage of smaller, more at-risk allies.

The administration wasn’t wrong to be cautious early in the Russian invasion; its fearfulness of a regional war becoming





a world war was justified. But its approach to telegraphing that fearfulness emboldened Moscow and other adversaries to adopt strategies that threatened escalation, as Russia did recently in amending its nuclear doctrine when the United States finally allowed Ukraine to employ ATACMS missiles against targets inside Russia. And despite numerous Russian threats and red lines as Western support expanded, the war has not widened beyond Ukraine or escalated to nuclear weapons use. That suggests a greater appreciation in Moscow than in Washington of the fundamental power equation favoring the United States and its allies. Yet the Biden administration remained overly cautious to such an extent that it has not only prevented Ukraine's success but also reduced U.S. support for continuing to aid Ukraine.

**This is the central failure of Biden's foreign policy: the expansive chasm between brave pronouncements and what the administration was actually willing to risk or commit to achieve its goals.**

The Biden administration also averted its eyes from mushrooming problems such as the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs. In early 2020, Iran's breakout time was a year; it's now likely one to two weeks. In 2021, experts estimated that North Korea had assembled between 10 and 20 nuclear warheads; it now has roughly 50, with fissile material for 70-90 more. Biden's team didn't appear to have a North Korea policy until 2023; North Korea didn't even merit a subtitle in the National Security



Strategy, as food insecurity and climate and energy security did. Instead, there was just a passing reference to the threat of the North Korean nuclear and missile programs. The Biden administration simply ignored the provocations of an expanded nuclear weapons arsenal, repeated missile and satellite launches demonstrating improved ability to target the United States, repudiation of Korean unification by Pyongyang, and provision of artillery and other weapons to Russia.

The commitment of at least 10,000 North Korean soldiers to Russia's war in Ukraine provoked such alarm among allies in both Europe and Asia that the administration finally had to respond. Biden declared Pyongyang's behavior "dangerous and destabilizing" and said something must be done, but he didn't do anything beyond ineffectually encouraging China to restrain North Korea and claiming that he would now belatedly allow Ukraine to begin using some U.S. weapons at their effective ranges—but only in the vicinity of one part of the battle, once again telegraphing Washington's anxieties to the aggressor. Deterrence doesn't work that way. Instead of creating uncertainty and fear in its adversaries about how the United States would use its strength to prevent or penalize their malign actions, the Biden administration projected the constraints it put on U.S. behavior.

Another major deficiency in the Biden administration's foreign policy was the absence of meaningful trade initiatives. Allies in Asia hoped the Biden administration would rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership; what they got were belated empty vessels in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity, neither of which provided market access provisions. The Biden White House privately said it would vigorously pursue bilateral and narrow sectoral trade agreements, but it didn't accomplish much. The president added insult to injury at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in November 2023 by pulling a deal already negotiated with 13 other countries.

That dearth of opportunity has been coupled with retaining Trump tariffs on allies, "Buy America" restrictions, and subsidies to U.S. businesses, making U.S. international economic policy regressive. What allies want is a vision for mutual prosperity without having to rely on China, and what

they have gotten from the Biden administration is further restrictions on their businesses and threats of sanctions against doing business with China.

Trade policy was not the only major regression in the levers of U.S. power during the Biden administration: Defense spending looms even larger. The U.S. defense budget failed to keep pace with inflation in any of the four years of his term. The U.S. military has lost ground rather than gained it in those four years. In the first year of the Biden administration, Congress on a bipartisan basis added \$25 billion to the president's budget request. In the second year, Congress added \$45 billion to the president's budget request. Currently, Congress is deciding between adhering to the president's budget caps (in the House of Representatives) and raising his request by between \$21.5 billion (Senate Appropriations Committee) and \$37.4 billion (Senate Armed Services Committee).

Meanwhile, Russia has increased its defense spending to record levels, such that it will make up a third of the country's budget in 2025, and China has more than doubled its budget since 2015 (and that's just using Chinese government figures—calculating China's defense spending as the United States calculates it brings it to more than \$700 billion, approaching parity with U.S. spending). The Biden administration describes China as the "pacing challenge," and it has allowed the country to outpace the United States on virtually every metric of defense and defense industrial capability.

A humiliating retreat from Afghanistan, allowing deterrence to corrode, adopting a risk-averse approach to adversaries, persisting in an unsuccessful approach to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, trade policy missing in action, and inadequate defense spending—those are all big things to get wrong in national security policy. There were lesser disappointments, too, such as the 2021 Summit for Democracy designed to "bolster democratic governance at home and abroad," which exacerbated tensions with excluded allies and produced nothing.

There was also a major missed opportunity in the consolidation of North America as a labor platform, an energy production and distribution grid, and a supply and manufacturing base. If the United States and its immediate

neighbors could find ways to deepen their cooperation, they would have the economy of scale to confront China, secure supply chains, and reduce immigration by both increasing standards of living in Mexico and giving the United States strategic depth to manage the flow of immigrants at Mexico's southern border. It would be an enormous lift for the three governments, but the alternative is Mexico sinking into criminality and China getting a back door into the U.S. economy

**The U.S. defense budget failed to keep pace with inflation in any of the four years of Biden's term. The U.S. military has lost ground rather than gained it.**



and expanding its influence in Latin America. The Biden administration didn't even attempt it. In fact, one of Biden's first official acts was to cancel the U.S.-Canada Keystone XL pipeline project.

**THE ADMINISTRATION'S RECORD** is not just a litany of failures, however. It had very important successes. The United States didn't become involved in a major war during Biden's term, and given how dangerous the world is becoming, that is a major accomplishment. I would have preferred deterring more and conceding less to achieve it, but keeping the United States out of major wars is good for the country—especially when domestic disputes loom large and are intractable.

The administration prioritized threats, with China paramount, expanding both cooperation and the tools to deal with them. It joined AUKUS, a tripartite arrangement with Australia and the United Kingdom for cooperative military development. It deepened defense cooperation with the Philippines and supported Manila's maritime claims and has started trilateral Japan-Philippines-U.S. consultations. It encouraged Japan's initiative for rapprochement with South Korea and institutionalized it with the Camp David agreements. It expanded cooperation through the Quadri-lateral Security Dialogue with Australia, India, and Japan. It gained support from NATO allies for China as an alliance concern. It brought creative economic statecraft into play, with the U.S. Commerce Department taking a leading role in determining what to prohibit and how. It returned attention to neglected small states across the Pacific being intimidated or seduced by China.

Under the able leadership of Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and CIA Director William Burns (with a uniformed assist from Gen. Paul Nakasone at the National Security Agency until his retirement last February), the Biden administration restored the reputation of the U.S. intelligence community, with accurate assessments, increased transparency, and expansive intelligence sharing. Not only was it right, but it was right early enough for allied governments to align their policies in advance of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It repeatedly showcased remarkable penetration of the Russian government without exposing its sources. It appears to have recovered from China's decimation of its network of agents, doubling resources and establishing a CIA mission center focused on China.

The Biden administration has held the NATO alliance together through its greatest test since the 1956 Suez crisis. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine could have shattered

If the United States and its immediate neighbors could find ways to deepen their cooperation, they would have the economy of scale to confront China, secure supply chains, and reduce immigration.

the alliance (and may yet). Instead, the Biden administration not only reassured allies but led them to a strong and unified stance on defense of the NATO area and provision of material support to Ukraine. And allies have continued to increase their defense spending, an upward trend that began with Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine: 23 allies now meet the agreed-on 2 percent of GDP committed to defense. Successful negotiation of Sweden's and Finland's accession to the alliance required painful interactions with Turkey and would have been impossible without sustained effort from the Biden administration.

The administration also organized a colossal international effort to provide military aid to Ukraine. U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin corralled more than 50 counterparts to meet monthly with Ukrainian officials for updates on the war and needed assistance. The Ukraine Defense Contact Group is a reminder of what U.S. leadership can accomplish and how much it is needed in a dangerous time.

Many of these achievements are likely to be squandered by the Trump administration. Donald Trump is temperamentally ill-suited to multilateral or institutionalized cooperation, preferring personal bilateral dealings that maximize U.S. leverage and center attention on him. His record is decidedly mixed on deterring aggression, and no one knows what he will propose budgetarily. He is deeply distrustful of the intelligence community and military leadership. His cabinet appointments so far are long on wrecking balls and short on construction crews.

A reflection by the great 19th-century short-story writer Washington Irving seems applicable to the recent U.S. election: "There is a certain relief in change even though it be from bad to worse! As I have found in travelling in a stage-coach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position, and be bruised in a new place." America, and the world, is about to be bruised in a new place. ■

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# WALLED OFF

*On trade and immigration, the United States is following a worldwide trend.*

BY RAGHURAM G. RAJAN



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**D**onald Trump's reelection as U.S. president is sending shockwaves around the world, but his victory is just the latest episode in a continuing saga. The old Western consensus in favor of globalization started breaking down in the 1990s and early 2000s as emerging markets began realizing its benefits. It accelerated with the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and growing geopolitical tensions. Now, with Trump's promises to increase import tariffs across the board, the richest, most powerful country in the world is turning against the global order it built, and it is not alone in doing so. The world is fragmenting, slowly but surely—global trade as a fraction of GDP has been flat since the financial crisis, and foreign direct investment has fallen. Meanwhile, the number of trade restrictions that countries have imposed annually has grown more than tenfold since 2010.

Why is the United States rejecting the system it created, and why is this pattern emerging across the industrialized world? Some reasons are well known, but they need to be knitted together. And as global challenges that require cooperation, such as climate change and migration, mount, countries will eventually want to draw together again.

**AS THE DISAPPEARANCE** of comfortable middle-class jobs for moderately skilled workers has upended the prior economic and political consensus, the blame has been placed on trade competition. Everyone can see when the local manufacturer closes down and shifts operations to Eastern Europe, Mexico, or China. Yet the more significant killer of routine jobs, by far, is technological change, whether it is the tax accountant losing her job to a software program such as TurboTax or an autoworker displaced by a machine. This is true even in emerging markets—as in India, where much of cellphone assembly, the quintessential low-skill manufacturing job, is now done by machines, not by workers.

Artificial intelligence promises yet more disruption. It is hard, however, to protest steady technological change. Politically, the foreign producer offers an easier target.

As technological progress hollows out jobs in the middle, global competition for the manufacturing jobs that remain has increased. It used to be that the developed-country worker was far more productive because they were better educated and skilled and had access to better infrastructure, more capital, and more intellectual property. Their higher productivity

once offset the higher wages they were paid. This is no longer true in a growing number of sectors: The rest of the world is catching up to, even leapfrogging, the developed world.

For instance, Chinese electric vehicles are often better and cheaper than EVs made by traditional Western manufacturers because they are designed from the bottom up around the digital core and do not attempt to wrap the new technology around the old motor car. Workers in many emerging markets use the same machines and often work longer for less pay, which is why Apple has not manufactured anything itself since 2004, instead outsourcing manufacturing to firms, such as Foxconn, that produce in the emerging world.

Technological change and foreign competition for the remaining “good” jobs have also become more salient politically because comfortable middle-class jobs for the moderately skilled were typically filled by men, often from the majority group. They are the ones who are seeing the greatest relative fall in status, especially as today's good jobs entail more intellectual and less physical work and women are far more able to compete. And unlike the victims of technological change in the past or those in less democratic countries, they are vocal and can organize politically. That, according to the AP Vote-Cast survey of more than 120,000 voters, 60 percent of white men (versus 53 percent of white women), 48 percent of Latino men (versus 39 percent of Latina women), and 25 percent of Black men (versus 10 percent of Black women) voted for Trump is consistent with which groups are most dissatisfied with continuity, though there are other explanations, of course.

There is no surefire way to move more workers from precarious jobs to good jobs in the face of technological change. Experimental policies to help workers adapt will take time to show results, and it will take more time for successful experiments to be rolled out widely. A cautionary note is that through the first Industrial Revolution ending in 1840, workers' wages stagnated in Britain—a phenomenon termed “Engels's pause.” Only subsequently did livelihoods improve. Worryingly, it is hard to point to any large developed-country government in the post-financial crisis era that has made citizens confident about the future—and that's even though unemployment across the developed world is at historical lows.

But if developed-country workers are hurting from technological change and competition, workers in poor developing countries have it much worse. The prices of many commodities, those countries' traditional exports, have barely increased in recent years. The growth path followed by successful emerging markets focusing on manufacturing-led exports is narrowing because of protectionism, automation, and extreme competition. In addition, in the global south, traditional livelihoods such as agriculture are threatened by climate change and conflict.



The pandemic was a further blow—despite the very limited assistance developing-country governments provided their populations, it was enough to push their strained finances over the edge. This was the last straw for many desperate people, and they have set off in rickety boats and through dangerous jungles for the developed world.

Understandably, no country wants to be overwhelmed by foreigners. People are attached to their culture and traditions and would rather immigrants assimilate. These broader concerns are accentuated in a left-behind population that sees the immigrant as competing with them.

In truth, the most desperate immigrants often take jobs that the native population shuns—indeed, that only previous immigrants did, one reason that existing immigrants sometimes oppose new immigration. Immigrants are often a source of energy and vitality, provided they get the right supports initially. With Western populations aging, and their entitlements underfunded over the medium term, sensible immigration policy that accepts both the most and least qualified immigrants in reasonable quantities will keep the workforce younger and ensure a country's long-run fiscal health.

However, any country that adopts reasonable immigration policies today in the otherwise broadly hostile environment understandably fears that it will be swamped—Canada is a recent example. So, what has been the political reaction to these hard-to-solve problems?

**WHEN A POLITICAL PARTY** has no answers, there is still a time-tested alternative for gaining popularity: the politics of polarization—that is, blame others and block the sources of change where possible while plying supporters with fiscal largesse.

For instance, these parties blame globalist elites for opening borders to goods while protecting their own service professions; the diversity and inclusion bureaucracy for opening doors to the supposedly less competent while closing doors for the meritocratic; multinational corporations for urging open borders while moving investment to the cheapest countries; foreign manufacturers for cheating while taking advantage of free trade; and so on.

The finger-pointing is not entirely baseless. Take, for example, the allegation, often pointed at China, that foreigners cheat. One claim is that China has stolen intellectual property. This is likely true, but as development economist Ha-Joon Chang has argued, so have most countries in their development stage, though perhaps less so than China. Eventually, countries start creating more of their own IP, as the Chinese are now doing in areas such as EVs and batteries, and then they protect IP more. While the desire to punish past actions is understandable, China may well be more willing today to commit to curbing its infractions.

Another claim is that China subsidizes manufacturers, for instance with cheap credit. This is probably also true. However, every country subsidizes. For instance, the extensive developed-country supports to corporations during the pandemic were subsidies, as is the Federal Reserve and Treasury's implicit and explicit support to the U.S. financial sector. And now many countries are embracing Chinese-style industrial policy, with government subsidies for key domestic firms that they expect will become national champions in the industries of the future.

In sum, it is not sufficient to say China subsidizes but rather that it subsidizes more than developed countries. One crude measure of public support is the growth in government indebtedness. By this metric, no country or region is blemish free. A full accounting for subsidies is difficult but necessary—the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have started such analysis, but much more work is needed.

Perhaps the greatest antidote to subsidies embedded in new industrial policies that governments are embracing is that they rarely work. China has built such massive overcapacity in the industries it helped, such as solar cells and EVs, that few firms are making profits. This experience is likely to be repeated by countries subsidizing chip manufacturing. Eventually, experience will compel governments to back off from intervening.

In the meantime, however, scapegoating the foreigner and trade leads to non-solutions that deflect the domestic debate away from the right reforms. For instance, the United States already applies substantial tariffs on solar panels from China. In response, China exports solar cells to third countries, which assemble them into panels and then reexport them with a hefty markup to the United States. The shift from direct trade to indirect trade is self-defeating in so many ways, including hampering the fight against climate change. Even if panel imports were somehow stopped altogether and U.S. manufacturers did produce them, it would not create many U.S. jobs—given the high cost of labor in the United States, manufacturers would more likely use machines rather than workers, as we have seen Indian manufacturers do.

If the U.S. trade deficit is seen as a weakness, it would make far more sense to bring it down by reducing the fiscal deficit, since trade deficits reflect, in part, an excess of domestic spending over saving. Conversely, if China views its trade surplus—a measure of its dependence on foreign consumers—as a vulnerability, the solution is to adopt domestic policies that would boost household confidence, encouraging Chinese households to consume more. The United States and China could have a useful dialogue on how each other's domestic actions (or lack of them) are creating global vulnerabilities.

Instead, as the two superpowers point the finger at each



other in an environment of rising geopolitical rivalry, distrust and fragmentation increase. For instance, multinational firms have learned that their supply chains need to become more resilient to disruptions. And the Russia-Ukraine war has taught countries not to be dependent on a potential enemy for key inputs. There are sensible ways to achieve more resilience and national security. But in a polarizing world, everyone is a potential enemy, and every product is capable of being weaponized, so these needs become the cover for blatant protectionism on even the most quotidian products.

## Scapegoating the foreigner and trade leads to non-solutions that deflect the domestic debate away from the right reforms.

The unfortunate implication of finger-pointing is that we can be better off by eliminating the ostensible source of disruption. Almost surely, that will not take us back to the much-romanticized past. Not only will the U.S. manufacturing jobs lost to China typically not come back if the United States only applies tariffs, but any effective reshoring of production through more draconian government actions against imports will increase costs. It will render the U.S. airplane exporter—which now has to use high-cost U.S. steel—less competitive, even if retaliatory protectionism does not hit its sales. It will reduce household consumption, as the earphones that used to cost \$50 now retail for \$100. And it will reduce foreign incomes so that foreigners can afford fewer U.S. goods. Each of these hurts U.S. job creation. Protectionism helped trigger the Great Depression. Few should want to go back to that past, yet so many want to experiment with past follies again.

**WHILE HISTORY SUGGESTS** what will not work, it offers no magic solutions on how to enable workforces to adapt continuously to technological change. But I want to point to two reasons for hope that the trend toward isolationism will eventually be arrested.

First, the electorate, while willing to try anything, wants real solutions. As the polarizers fail, they are thrown out, so long as their countries stay democratic; the United Kingdom and Poland are recent examples. Countries will get windows for sensible reforms, and, hopefully, examples of success will emerge.

Second, many emerging markets and developing countries

want to maintain an open world. They will be partners in any effort to construct a new open order, even if the largest economies stay aloof for now. Coalitions of the willing must create foundations for that new order, with others joining as their domestic politics change.

On the domestic side, countries need to equip people for the work of the future, even if the full payoff will come only with time. Wherever possible, arrangements to do so are better coordinated by local government than at the federal or state level.

Countries that seem to have prepared their workers best for technological change are small, decentralized ones such as Switzerland or the Scandinavian economies. Reforms to the ways that countries have of reskilling workers may be more appropriate if designed and implemented locally, as local government, businesses, NGOs, and educational institutions come together to find solutions. This also allows for multiple simultaneous experiments to find out what works.

More generally, an antidote to the sense of helplessness induced by massive global change is local empowerment, with light-touch federal support where needed. The guiding principle should be that of subsidiarity—devolving powers to the lowest level that can exercise them.

While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, we do need to move forward at the global level. Let me sketch three possible areas.

For one, we need climate action among the willing, else migration will be the only option in poor countries. Country actions should be differentiated based on capacity and need, a principle more honored in the breach than the observance. Developed countries and emerging markets should take on the burden of mitigating emissions and finding robust ways of financing the necessary investments. More specifically, the world needs better measurement and disclosure of emissions and mitigation efforts and clearer national commitments to do so; enhanced carbon-trading opportunities; agreements to exempt green goods from trade protectionism with, if necessary, temporary and limited safeguards to allow domestic industry time to adjust; and greater sharing of green IP.

Developing countries, which face growing climate calamities today, should focus their scarce resources on helping their people to adapt to climate change—for instance, moving homes to higher ground, expanding water harvesting and irrigation, or growing hardier crops—while ensuring that new investment is green. Of course, as developed countries perfect ways of financing green investment, developing countries can use them to attract capital and replace old high-emission capital stock.



Second, we must preserve the momentum for greater openness in other areas as goods trade becomes protectionist. Specifically, improvements in communications technology now allow high-skill services such as consulting, telemedicine, retail financial services, and design to be provided at a distance. Global services trade, already growing faster than goods trade, can explode if we bring down barriers.

Importantly, developed economies have a comparative advantage here; the world's biggest exporter of services is the United States, followed by the U.K. However, service exports also offer an alternative growth path for developing economies. To expand service exports, including from developing countries, we need global agreements on issues such as mutual degree recognition, data privacy and storage, and adequate digital infrastructure to support services trade.

**Cross-border trade, investment, and migration have made the world far more prosperous than could ever have been imagined, but fragmentation will make us poorer.**

Opening up services trade has other benefits. Capable professionals in developing countries can earn good incomes from abroad without emigrating, boosting the local economy with their consumption. Domestic inequality in developed countries will fall as competition increases in previously protected highly paid professional services, increasing their availability and reducing their price. Growth in services consumption is also more environmentally sustainable than goods consumption.

Finally, multilateral institutions have been ineffective thus far in fighting fragmentation, in part because they are dominated by increasingly protectionist developed countries. We must make them fit for purpose through reforms while envisaging new institutions, such as a World Immigration Organization, that will help inform and coordinate country efforts.

For instance, consider the IMF, which was set up with power vested in an executive board dominated by the United States and its allies. Even today, this board micromanages everything down to operational decisions, such as who gets loans.

Not surprisingly, the old powers do not want to cede board power to rising economies. It is telling that China has voting power only as large as Japan at the IMF even though its economy is more than four times bigger; however, the IMF's December 2023 quota review made no change in relative

votes. Rising powers therefore do not trust the IMF to be evenhanded, which makes it less able to mediate conflicts and disagreements between countries.

A key reform would be to take executive powers such as individual loan decisions away from the IMF board, vesting them in a technocratic professional management with allegiance to the organizational mission, while making the board responsible only for overall governance. This would depoliticize operational decisions and analysis, making the IMF more trusted and able to come up with unbiased proposals for global problems. It would also make the old powers more willing to cede their dominance since the rising powers would not control operational decisions. Interestingly, it is what economist John Maynard Keynes recommended when the IMF was set up, only to be overruled by the United States.

Similar reforms are possible in other institutions such as the World Bank and the WTO. No doubt the United States will still resist somewhat, but it has come a long way from when President John F. Kennedy said that "we shall pay any price, bear any burden ... to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Other nations ceded power to Washington because it was willing to fill gaps with its resources and military. With the United States now wanting other nations to assume their fair share of responsibility, it should also be prepared to share power in multilateral institutions. The alternative is to see them become irrelevant.

Cross-border trade, investment, and migration have made the world far more prosperous than could ever have been imagined, but fragmentation will make us poorer. The U.S. election was just one act in an unfolding play. We must resist the play's overall theme that isolationism will make every nation great again.

Successes will be few and far between for a while. Unlike in the past, we have much less belief in a shared destiny—that countries benefit when others are successful, that we can come together to solve the gigantic problems we face. That belief will return more strongly, if nothing else, as we experience the costs of isolationism. The task today is therefore to tackle the root causes of fragmentation, preserve openness where we can, and build necessary institutions where possible so we can regain lost ground and time quickly when that moment arrives. ■

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# CLASS IS IN SESSION

*Why did workers support a billionaire  
businessman in the 2024 election?*

BY  
ADAM  
TOOZE



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xit polls from the U.S. presidential election indicated an approximate 15-point swing toward Donald Trump among voters earning less than \$50,000 a year, the poorest block of voters in the United States. For the first time since the 1960s, a majority of Americans in that low-income bracket voted Republican. At the other end of the scale, the most affluent voters shifted to the Democrats. According to voter surveys and exit polls, Vice President Kamala Harris scored a majority of votes from those making above \$100,000 a year—the top third of the income distribution.

One might wonder whether this means that the materialist class analysis of the classic kind has been turned on its head. Are we witnessing a fundamental realignment? Or is it even helpful to think in terms of “classes” voting? As the historian Tim Barker has remarked about last year’s election, “Perhaps the safest thing to say is that the working class, as a class, didn’t do anything. The vote is evidence of *dealignment*, not realignment: voters below \$100,000 split basically down the middle.”

Clearly, there is a blurring of once established social and political boundaries. But does this mean that we have to abandon class analysis altogether? I think not. All too often when materialist analysis is applied, it is a byword for crude simplification. What is actually called for to fulfill the promise of materialist analysis is almost painstaking attention to detail and something akin to a novelist’s flair for atmosphere.

At the very least, in analyzing the U.S. political scene, we have to allow for a three-class rather than a two-class model.

On one side, you have what you might call the working class. Let’s define that in terms of dependent employment—working for somebody else, earning a relatively low income, and enjoying little or no control over one’s work, all of which tends to go hand in hand with relatively less education.

On the other, you have what you might call the rich, the upper class, who enjoy not just higher incomes but wealth and power and the security that goes with that. In the Marxist sense, they may actually literally control the means of production—a big hotel, a factory, a retail outlet, a fast food franchise.

But you can’t understand the politics of the United States right now unless you acknowledge that there’s a third social class, what Barbara and John Ehrenreich called the

Professional-Managerial Class, or PMC, whose members are credentialed by the education system, occupy positions of authority within the economy and society at large, and exercise control—directly, often—over working-class Americans.

That starts at the beginning, in kindergarten or elementary school, where you have a college-educated person taking charge of working-class kids. By the time you get to elementary school and middle school, it is not just the parents but the children themselves who are making formative experiences that can shape subjectivity for life. In modern society, the PMC is everywhere, starting in the hospital where your kids are born and your parents die, from the folks who regulate what you can build in your front yard to those who run the human resources department where you work. The entire apparatus of managerialism is activated and managed by the PMC.

Once you’ve gotten this thoroughly materialistic three-part schema in place, you can more easily understand the dynamics that are in play in the confusing configuration of class forces around Trump. The stereotypical working-class Trump voter admires Trump as the bullying, freewheeling rich dude that he is, in part because he clearly scorns the PMC. The billionaire businessman and his cronies exercise the privilege of having done well by speaking their mind and doing their own thing.

Above all, what they’re allowed to do is flaunt and show disrespect and scorn for the values of the professional middle class, which the rich folks can spit on and working-class people suffer from. Trump and Co. say out loud what many ordinary Americans think. They aren’t afraid to say they don’t share the values of the PMC, starting with the schoolteacher and the librarian all the way up to the Ivy League professor and the folks on television who want to talk about transgender rights or structural racism or climate change.

This is not anti-materialist or a refusal of materialism. It’s a very specific set of resentments, deeply embedded in the everyday experience of tens of millions of working-class Americans. If you start from this point of view, is it really hard to understand why working-class men are not keen to vote for fancy, high-powered lawyers like Harris as candidates for the Democratic Party? The distaste is compounded by the fact that the fancy female lawyer treats Trump as if he’s a buffoon.

One of Harris’s most successful punchlines, as far as the *New York Times*-reading class was concerned, was the retort “I’m speaking now” when Mike Pence tried to interrupt her during the 2020 vice presidential debate. What her supporters read as an appropriate assertion of authority scanned for others as a typical assertion of PMC authority. Is it really surprising that white women without college degrees



preferred Trump over Hillary Clinton in 2016 and then Harris by 27 and 28 percentage points, respectively?

**IMAGINE YOU ARE IN AN AVERAGE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL** and two kids throw a party. One is the state spelling bee champion on her way to a fancy college. The other is the son of a local businessman who knows how to have a good time and may also be on his way to a fancy college but certainly isn't going there on merit. Which party would you expect the less academically ambitious kids in the class to show up at? How is this even a question?

The very fact that American liberals find this obvious social geography of gender, sexuality, class, and educational merit so hard to navigate is itself deeply telling. The PMC struggles to see beyond the bounds of its own conceits, especially concerning merit and appropriate social and political order. The virtue of the norms it defends is simply obvious.

**You can't understand the politics of the United States right now unless you acknowledge that there's a third social class, the Professional-Managerial Class, which exercises control over working-class Americans.**

One of the reasons why we can't see this powerful three-way split is that it's very badly captured by the statistics that we have to rely on. It's really appalling how inadequate the sociological data is on U.S. elections. We have to rely on two axes to do almost all the work. One is college-educated versus non-college-educated, and the other is a crude, three-way split in income bands: below \$50,000, \$50,000 to \$100,000, and \$100,000-plus. It is telling that if you just combine those two elements, you end up with something quite informative, which is that for men without college degrees, there is a huge propensity to vote Trump among those with more than \$100,000 in annual income.

This is the boy who did not thrive academically in high school but nevertheless does well in a skilled manual job or as a small-business owner. The one thing that this man knows for certain is that he succeeded despite the dominant values of the PMC.

There are also important lessons here about the politics of welfare. The liberal approach to addressing inequality in the

United States has focused on redistributing the gains of economic growth through taxation and the provision of government benefits. But this often fails to consider the class politics involved in being on the receiving end of such transactions.

When people in states like West Virginia and Tennessee vote in a way that suggests they do not want to be Medicaid recipients, they should be taken seriously. In 2023, the economist J. Bradford DeLong wrote, "Social democracy's problem was that most people did not want to be passive recipients of government benefits; rather, they wanted the social power to earn (and hence to deserve) their slice of the growing pie." They instead want a strong economy in which they can earn what they deserve and so be able to stand on their feet and buy health insurance.

There is a social ideal at work here, one that traces directly to the tripartite class structure of American society. The ultimate aspiration of many of the Trump working-class voters is self-employment because self-employment gives

you the means to both assert independence and break out of the constraints—which are very material as well as cultural—of the professional middle class and its assumptions about norms and values.

A welfare system that embraces the vast majority of the population and offers a general view of uplift may be one that is precisely not centered on the state or even on government. Rather than providing material benefits in the form of redistribution, it may require focusing on improvising social standing in the first place.

This extends to the embrace by conservatives such as Oren Cass of the organized labor movement. Their support for initiatives such as sectoral bargaining is part of a push to give working-class Americans a more robust and resilient social position in the economy. But conservatives also seek to separate this reformism from the liberal values espoused by the PMC. They believe that a better material bargain that allows people to freely express whatever political opinions they want will actually unleash a popular conservatism.

This remains a fantasy, of course. Trump is most unlikely to bring about a strengthening of U.S. trade unions. But these glimpses into the conservative imagination illuminate the need for a more refined and complex understanding of the socioeconomic and cultural hierarchies at work in the 2024 election—and at work in the liberalism of the PMC, our liberalism. ■

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# THE ART OF THE DEAL

TRUMP'S TRANSACTIONAL APPROACH COULD OFFER  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR COUNTRIES WITH CLOUT.

BY RAVI AGRAWAL

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onald Trump is commonly described as transactional. At some level, however, all leaders are transactional. What defines the U.S. president-elect is his unabashed opportunism, often at the expense of values, alliances, and even treaties. For Trump, who co-wrote the 1987 book *The Art of the Deal*, every transaction is zero-sum, with a clear winner and loser. More than anything else, Trump likes to be seen as a winner, even when he isn't.

Pundits reflexively see Trump's nakedly transactional nature as an attribute that might terrify other global stakeholders. The reality is more complicated. States that have come to rely on U.S.-backed alliances will certainly need to recalibrate. Global markets will experience turbulence. But countries and companies will also sniff out opportunities. The ones with the means to do so will look to exploit the president-elect's tendency to prioritize his self-interest. As Trump begins a second term, world leaders and corporate executives are more prepared than they were in 2016. They have not only learned lessons from his first stint in the White House but also since pored over abundant reporting about Trump's non-traditional leadership style, his what's-in-it-for-me mindset, and his reliance on family members for dealmaking.

Trump may retain his ability to shock, but the world is no longer surprised by an opportunistic United States. The post-World War II order that managed the globe for seven decades had already begun to fray before Trump's first term. Countries that aspired to abide by an equal, rules-based international system have watched as Washington has resisted sharing power in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. China's unprecedented rise, along with a growing global disillusionment with free trade and globalization, has turned the United States toward protectionism and made it less likely to privilege norms and professed values when they conflict with interests. This trend was already underway, perhaps most visibly since the start of the Iraq War two decades ago. Trump's return will only accelerate a move toward a more transactional global system.

**THE WORLD WILL NAVIGATE** Trump's zero-sum mindset in a variety of ways. For countries that have historically relied on Washington's friendship, the next years will bring painful disruptions. At a campaign event last February, Trump recounted

how he told an unidentified NATO member he would encourage aggressors to "do whatever the hell they want" if that country hadn't allocated what he deemed to be the right amount of defense spending. "You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills," Trump concluded. The president-elect's supporters argue that he is right-sizing U.S. policy and that his maximalist statements are designed to reach desirable outcomes in negotiations. Critics counter that the mere suggestion he won't abide by a treaty alliance destroys U.S. credibility.

Either way, Europe must respond to a changing relationship with the United States. Beyond encouraging European armies to beef up their militaries, Brussels is already preparing to buy American to make Trump feel as though he's winning. In a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde affirmed this plan by suggesting that Europe should employ a "cheque-book strategy," in which it increases purchases of U.S. exports. Similarly, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has proposed giving U.S. firms special access to the country's rare minerals to appeal to Trump's quid pro quo mentality.

While countries in Europe are making the best of the circumstances presented to them, there's little doubt they'd rather deal with a different president in the White House. According to a poll of 30 countries and territories conducted by the *Economist* in July and August, resounding pluralities in Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain preferred a Democratic winner over a Republican one. And it's not just Europe. Respondents from two other countries that have signed U.S. defense treaties—Japan and South Korea—also marked a preference for a candidate other than Trump.

In contrast, a plurality of respondents from emerging markets such as Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Vietnam expressed a preference for a Republican candidate over a Democratic one. This shouldn't be surprising. First, none of them have defense agreements that Trump could threaten to abandon. And second, while these countries acknowledge the risks under a Trump presidency, they also see abundant opportunities. Many of these rising economies have grown tired of Western lectures on human rights and democracy and are instead itching to deploy their growing clout to strike the best deals for themselves.

"Republicans place more importance on a convergence of interests than coalescing values," said Syed Akbaruddin, a



former Indian diplomat who served as New Delhi's ambassador to the United Nations during Trump's first term. "As a neo-realist power, India feels it can deal with a transactional Trump. If it's a question of give-and-take, we know we can give some and take some."

The larger the economy, the more touchpoints for give-and-take. One element of Trump's style that seems to lend itself to transactions is his inclination to pick family members in official roles. Daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner played significant roles in domestic and foreign policy in Trump's first term. Trump has now named Jared's father, Charles Kushner, as his ambassador to France and Massad Boulos, father-in-law to Tiffany Trump, as his Middle East advisor.

There's a track record of countries reaching out to family members to draw closer to Trump himself. Six months after leaving the White House, Jared Kushner's private equity firm received a \$2 billion investment from a Saudi sovereign wealth fund controlled by the country's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman. The seed money was approved despite objections from the fund's due diligence committee, according to documents seen by the *New York Times*. One way of interpreting the decision is as an investment in a member of the future U.S. president's inner circle.

India tried a different approach during Trump's first term as it scrambled to get on an inside track. In November 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rolled out a red carpet to welcome Ivanka Trump to Hyderabad for a business summit focused on empowering women. No expense was spared: Roads were repaired, pavements cleaned up, and curbsides painted as the city put on a charm offensive for the president's daughter, with adoring TV reports on the country's government-friendly cable channels. The entire operation was designed to catch the transactional Trump's eye, a leader

known to enjoy not only pomp and circumstance but also favorable media coverage.

**IF U.S. ALLIES AND EMERGING MARKETS** have a relatively clear strategy to appeal to the opportunistic part of Trump world—flattery, deals, buying American, and leveraging family connections—it is less obvious how U.S. adversaries might fare. Rivals such as Russia and China, already sanctioned and sidelined by the United States, are bracing for tougher penalties while simultaneously relishing the prospect of a more unstable global order. Russia sees NATO's strength—backstopped by the United States, of course—as a mortal,

long-term threat. China, meanwhile, has complained of Washington's desire to create an "Asian NATO" in the form of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a group that also includes Australia, India, and Japan. If Trump denigrates either alliance to reach better deals in one domain, then U.S. adversaries will gain in another. Similarly, if the success of U.S. attempts to curb Chinese development of high-level semiconductors hinges on cooperation with U.S. allies, then Beijing would welcome any disruption in those partnerships.

Tariffs are likely to play an outsized role in Trump's negotiating tactics; he has already deployed them in the past as a tool to bludgeon China and has more recently described "tariff"

as "the most beautiful word in the dictionary." What is unclear is how they will serve U.S. interests. In the short term, tariffs function mostly as a sales tax, with immediate inflationary impacts that are likely to affect lower-income families more acutely than richer ones. Economists linked to Trump argue that over time, tariffs could raise immense amounts of revenue, funding tax cuts and encouraging businesses to produce locally, thereby correcting some of the key problems they diagnose in the U.S. economy. Even



**The larger the economy,  
the more touchpoints  
for give-and-take.**



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if those assessments have merit, they are inherently longer-term projects. Yet, in the short term, tariffs are likely to cause two things Trump loathes: inflation, as mentioned, but also panic in the stock market. Paradoxically, Trump's favorite tactic is likely to be the one he may not have the patience to see through. And by all accounts, Beijing has a sophisticated understanding of this dynamic and is therefore unlikely to react passively to tariffs designed to damage its economy. If China can contribute to a stock market downturn, it likely will, knowing how much Trump will dislike it. And while Beijing has reduced its exports to the United States, it retains significant leverage over key U.S. companies such as Apple and Tesla, which continue to run large manufacturing operations in China.

Spare a thought for a final group of countries that stands to lose the most in the likely scenario where Trump shuns multilateralism and prioritizes bilateral transactions: the more than 100 nations with populations under 10 million.

**Countries from the Maldives to Mauritania lack the size, strength, or salience to lobby for preferential treatment in the event of blanket global tariffs.**

Countries from the Maldives to Mauritania lack the size, strength, or salience to lobby for preferential treatment in the event of blanket global tariffs or the Trump team's search for favorable deals on the global stage. A majority of these countries are developing economies spread out across the global south, generally flying under the radar of great-power politics.

"Smaller countries—by their very definition—would like a world with more rules. They don't have the leverage larger countries have," said Akbaruddin, the former Indian diplomat. And in many ways, smaller and lower-income countries have never needed more leverage. After the peak years of free trade and globalization in the latter part of the 20th century, and the China-led commodities boom at the start of the current century, there is no longer a rising tide lifting all boats. Instead, there's the existential threat of climate change, which smaller countries do not have the funds to build defenses for; a world that has become more protectionist, prioritizing large-scale industrial policy and

domestic production, and in which smaller countries lose out; and growing global conflict, leading to mass migration and instability in the food and commodities markets, which tend to generate the biggest disruptions for the tiniest nations. In each of these cases, a more transactional global order re-creates the scenario Thucydides once described: The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer as they must. If the law of the jungle dominates statecraft, where does that leave the art of diplomacy?

**THE BIDEN YEARS NOW REPRESENT** a blip in the longer trend line of Trump's America First. It's worth noting that President Joe Biden himself frequently struggled to mask the contradictions between his rhetoric and his actions. Two weeks after assuming the presidency in 2021, Biden declared at the State Department that "America is back." His words were designed to reassure the global community that Trump's first term was an aberration. "Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy," he said.

Yet while he was fond of promising that his White House would defend freedom and uphold universal rights, Biden found himself in the awkward position of visiting Jeddah in the summer of 2022 and fist-bumping Mohammed bin Salman, whom he once branded a "pariah" for his role in the murder of the dissident Jamal Khashoggi. Riyadh's muscle in the oil markets turned out to be more valuable than Biden's idealism. More recently, Biden's seemingly blind support for Israel's war in Gaza—a lonely stance in the very multilateral organizations the United States helped create—furthered a global sentiment that Washington had one set of rules for friends and another for everyone else.

Biden was also not immune from nepotism. After repeatedly denying he would pardon his son Hunter for his three felony convictions, Biden did just that after his final family Thanksgiving dinner as president. Once again, Biden's lofty words had come back to bite him.

Trump won't have these kinds of problems. Global expectations of him are lower to begin with. Having won a popular vote while making clear he will put America first—at all costs and unconstrained by concerns about human rights, values, the climate crisis, or migration—Trump will assume he has a free pass to pursue what he sees as being in Washington's brazen interest. For much of the rest of the world, this won't feel like a massive course correction. Instead, it'll confirm a collective instinct that the old world order is no longer fit for purpose. ■

**RAVI AGRAWAL** is the editor in chief of **FOREIGN POLICY**.



# IT'S A MADMAN'S WORLD

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*Richard Nixon's theory  
of unpredictable leaders  
is about to be stress-tested.*

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BY DANIEL W. DREZNER

**WHEN DONALD TRUMP FIRST RAN** for U.S. president in 2016, he sounded mad an awful lot of the time—in both senses of the word. Trump had no problem displaying anger on the campaign trail. In a 2016 Republican primary debate, he leaned into this emotion, saying he would “gladly accept the mantle of anger” because he believed the country was a “mess” and run by incompetent people. Trump also embraced the notion that he was a different kind of mad. In statement after statement, he stressed that he would be a different type of president because he was willing to be a little bit crazy, a little bit unpredictable. In 2015, he told an interviewer, quoting another businessman, “There’s a certain unpredictability about Trump that’s great.” In his first major foreign-policy speech of that campaign, he blasted U.S. foreign policy during the Barack Obama years, saying, “We must as a nation be more unpredictable.”







Trump sounded different from post-Cold War presidents, but his sentiments echoed Richard Nixon, who also liked to get mad in both meanings of the word. Indeed, according to his staffer H.R. Haldeman, Nixon coined the term “madman theory,” explaining that he wanted the North Vietnamese to believe he was capable of doing anything to bring the Vietnam War to an end—up to and including the use of nuclear weapons. The madman theory posits that a leader who behaves as if he could do just about *anything* has a better chance of persuading other global actors to make concessions they otherwise would not make.

Nixon subsequently denied that the conversation ever happened, but the idea of the madman theory has an intellectual lineage that stretches back to Niccolò Machiavelli. Furthermore, the scholarly literature on the theory has shifted in recent years—suggesting that under certain circumstances, such a gambit might work for someone in Trump’s position.

Could Trump’s madman theory be so crazy that it just might work?

**IN SOME INSTANCES** during his first term, Trump intentionally cultivated a reputation as a madman. This was most evidently on display in his approaches to North and South Korea. For much of 2017, Trump ratcheted up his rhetoric toward North Korea, telling reporters that August, “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. ... They will be met with fire, fury, and frankly power, the likes of which this world has never seen before.” In his U.N. General Assembly speech one month later, Trump nicknamed North Korean leader Kim Jong Un “Rocket Man” and promised that the United States could “totally destroy North Korea.”

Trump’s madman approach extended to South Korea. In 2017, his administration sought to renegotiate the terms of the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement. Jonathan Swan reported in *Axios* that Trump explicitly ordered chief trade negotiator Robert Lighthizer to tell his South Korean counterparts that Trump was a madman: “You tell them, ‘This guy’s so crazy he could pull out any minute.’ ... You tell them if they don’t give the concessions now, this crazy guy will

pull out of the deal.” Swan further noted, “Plenty of world leaders think the president is crazy—and he seems to view that madman reputation as an asset.”

Trump stopped taunting Kim in return for three meetings that generated little beyond some glossy photo-ops. The free trade agreement was successfully renegotiated, though the changes to the deal were minor. Still, acolytes of the former and future president could argue that Trump did well for the United States. For all his rantings and ravings, Trump secured modest trade concessions from South Korea and a brief pause in missile tests from North Korea—all without having to carry out his seemingly crazy threats. In other words, he was sounding irrational for entirely rational reasons.

This was different from Trump’s staffers and subordinates telling reporters that he was acting like a madman. That trope was prevalent enough for CNN’s Jim Sciutto to write a book about Trump’s foreign policy titled *The Madman Theory*. According to Bob Woodward’s *Fear*, White House staff secretary Rob Porter spent a third of his time talking Trump down from his impulsive ideas. Woodward himself concluded that the United States “was tethered to the words and actions of an emotionally overwrought, mercurial and unpredictable leader.”

Yet the idea that by acting like a madman, a leader could profit in world politics has a longer pedigree than Nixon. In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli suggested that “at times it is a very wise thing to simulate madness.” In the early years of the Cold War, strategists Daniel Ellsberg and Thomas Schelling thought about the possible virtues of cultivating a reputation for madness in coercive bargaining situations. Schelling wrote in *The Strategy of Conflict* that “it is not a universal advantage in situations of conflict to be inalienably and manifestly rational.” If others believe a madman could do just about anything if he does not get his way, the threat of escalation becomes more credible—making it logical to concede more to de-escalate.

Neither Ellsberg nor Schelling ever advocated for a U.S. president to behave in this way. In the end, neither of them thought the madman gambit would work well over the long run. And until recently, the scholarly literature on the madman theory was equally skeptical of the likelihood of success. For example, according to multiple first-person and scholarly accounts, Nixon’s madman gambits yielded nothing in the way of concessions.

More recent work on this topic, however, has been less definitive. Penn State professor Roseanne McManus has written on this subject extensively. Her initial research suggested that under a narrow set of

The ploy benefits leaders who are deemed mad because of their extreme preferences rather than their extreme tactics.



circumstances, the madman strategy could work. The gambit benefits leaders who are deemed mad because of their extreme preferences rather than their extreme tactics, as well as leaders who are deemed to be mad about a particular situation rather than madness being inherent in their character. In other words, actors who felt strongly about a particular issue, and only that issue, could use the madman gambit to some effect. In a follow-up paper, McManus concluded that the madman approach “may be helpful in crisis bargaining ... when the reputation for madness is slight.” This does seem to be a fair description of Trump. Other recent research argues that there can be virtues in unpredictability as a strategic doctrine.

There are many reasons to doubt that Trump will be able to effectively play the madman in his second term, however. The most obvious is that Trump’s first-term efforts at coercive bargaining went largely for naught. His administration’s track record on economic coercion was less than stellar. Trump’s greatest foreign-policy success—the Abraham Accords—was due to proffering inducements rather than crazily threatening sticks.

Trump’s madman schtick worked better with U.S. allies than adversaries. The former group of countries, rattled by his threats to withdraw from long-standing alliances and trade treaties, at least made some public displays of fealty. Trump, however, was too busy trying to ingratiate himself with the autocratic rulers of China and Russia to act crazy in front of them. His efforts to employ the madman strategy with Iran proved mixed. He approved the drone strike that killed Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iran’s paramilitary Quds Force—but only after he backed down at the last minute from retaliating against Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia. In a recent interview, Trump even suggested that he was the calm, rational one compared with National Security Advisor John Bolton.

This highlights another problem: Most foreign leaders are now intimately familiar with Trump’s playbook. One reason Nixon’s madman gambit failed was that Soviet officials, familiar with Nixon from his decades in public office, knew when he was pretending to play the madman. As one Soviet official explained, “Mr. Nixon used to exaggerate his intentions regularly.” Trump’s past track record has made him more predictable to a host of foreign leaders who had to deal with him the first time around. As it turns out, the first rule of the madman theory is that you do not talk about employing the madman theory. Expecting Trump to stay silent on such matters, however, is a fool’s errand.

Finally, as the scholarly literature has stressed, successful

**What is worrisome is that this time around, Trump might think he can pull it off even when the rest of the world does not.**

coercive bargaining requires two kinds of credible commitment. First, the target has to believe that the other actor will carry out their threats, no matter how costly they are. Second, the target must also believe that the threatening actor will cease and desist from any coercion once an agreement has been reached. Acting like a madman might make the first kind of commitment more plausible, but it makes the second kind of commitment less plausible. Or, to put it more plainly: What is the likelihood that any foreign-policy leader will believe Trump when he gives his word about anything? As McManus put it to me in an email, “Most perceived madmen do not benefit from their madness reputations.”

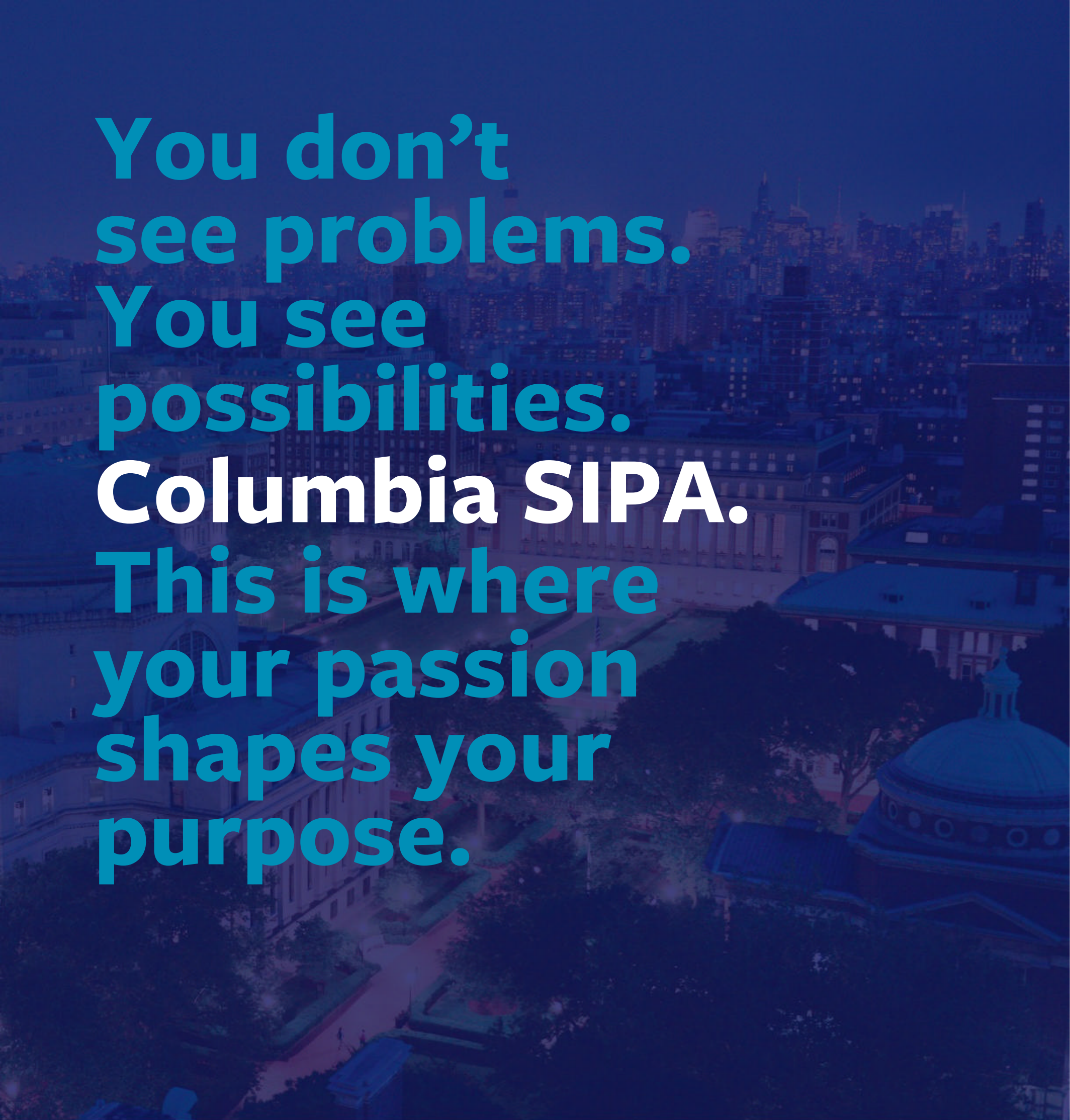
Trump’s attempt to reprise his madman approach to international relations is unlikely to work during his second term, but he will likely try it anyway. Trump is a man of few moves, and this is one of them. His political allies noted during his first term that Trump is rarely playing three-dimensional chess: “More often than not he’s just eating the pieces.”

What is worrisome is that this time around, he might think he can pull it off even when the rest of the world does not. Trump’s improbable journey from convicted felon to second-term president could convince him to take even more risks. As one Trump advisor told *Politico* in November, “Look, he survived two assassination attempts, he’s been indicted how many times—he really is at this moment feeling kind of invincible and sort of emboldened in a way that he never has before.”

The problem is, if Trump is unable to convince anyone else that he really is a madman, then the only way he can prove it is to follow through on his most outlandish threats. Maybe that would work, but it could also lead to a conflict spiraling out of control. Which sounds, to be perfectly honest, like a pretty crazy idea. ■

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# REVIEW

## Misunderstood Merchant Ivory

The independent production company made so much more than costume drama.

*By Jordan Hoffman*



If it weren't for an overlap of appointments at a San Francisco art dealership, we might never have the cache of extraordinary films—43 in all—made by Merchant Ivory Productions from 1961 to 2007.

In 1956, James Ivory had just completed a short film, a documentary about Venice. Enamored of the city's art and hoping to give himself a little present for a job well done, he sought out prints by Italian painter Canaletto and arrived at the office of art dealer Raymond Lewis just as Lewis was finishing up with a previous client. On display was a collection of Indian miniature paintings. It was Ivory's first encounter with this art form and, as the Oscar-winning filmmaker says in *An Arrested Moment*, a new 30-minute documentary about Indian art, was comparable to the rush of that first exposure to falling madly in love.

Ivory's next film, *The Sword and the Flute*, used Indian miniatures to investigate the Mughal Empire and its advancements in art and philosophy. At a screening at the Indian Consulate in New York in 1959, he was approached by an admirer—an upstart film producer named Ismail Merchant. They went to see a Satyajit Ray film and soon formed a partnership in movies and life that lasted more than four decades.

Initially, Merchant Ivory Productions set up shop in India with the idea of making films there for the domestic and world markets. Over time, it expanded, eventually bringing us celebrated classics such as *A Room With a View*, *Howards End*, and *The Remains of the Day*.

In anticipation of the release of a new feature-length documentary about Merchant Ivory Productions directed by Stephen Soucy (called, simply, *Merchant Ivory*), 96-year-old Ivory opened his archives and lent his curatorial eye to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. A small exhibition, "Ink and Ivory: Indian Drawings and Photographs Selected With James Ivory," is on display at the museum through May 4 and boasts about a dozen pieces that Ivory acquired during his early travels to India as well as 25 or so works he selected from the museum's permanent collection. It's a one-of-a-kind opportunity to go straight to the source of where this man's remarkable career all began.

Gallery 458 is not unlike a great many of the characters from Ivory's films—it aims to be discrete. After getting lost in the maze of the outer wings of the Met, and ultimately admitting I needed to ask a guard for orientation, I finally found the right room tucked in the farthest corner of the massive building. Once explored, however, the detail, craftsmanship, and beauty are extraordinary.

**MERCHANT IVORY PRODUCTIONS** is without question one of the most successful independent film companies in history, with no shortage of devoted fans. If you live in a city with

Previous page: Members of the cast and crew, including director James Ivory, of the film *The Remains of the Day* at Corsham Court in Wiltshire, England, in November 1992.

repertory cinemas, you don't often have to wait long for a screening from its deep résumé.

A "Merchant Ivory movie" is its own genre for many people—shorthand for lavish, quintessentially British period pictures with an impeccable eye for detail and an ear for searing dialogue. By the end of its run, the partnership had adapted three novels by Henry James and three by E.M. Forster and achieved 24 Oscar nominations and six wins.

Not everyone, however, was a fan of the brand. Tilda Swinton, in a 2002 essay for the *Guardian* that cheered on the punk rock attitude of her early collaborator Derek Jarman, referred to the Merchant Ivory corpus as "Crabtree and Evelyn Waugh." Director Alan Parker, in one of his newspaper doodles, called the partnership's work "the Laura Ashley school of film-making." What's amusing—and front and center of Soucy's *Merchant Ivory*—is how a closer look at Merchant Ivory Productions reveals it was far more than its critics realize.

First, despite the extravagance on screen, only during the last few years and a partnership with (of all places) the Walt Disney Co. did any of these movies have real money behind them. For years, the productions, despite regularly bursting with opulence, were put together on favors, extended credit, and prayer. Second, Merchant and Ivory didn't *just* make those British costume dramas. Indeed, their first films were shot and set in India. Last, not one of the three key creatives in the group that made some of the most British movies in history—neither Ivory nor Merchant nor writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala—was British. Indeed, this outsider positioning was probably the secret ingredient for why Merchant Ivory Productions' movies about British society were so good. (When I floated this theory in a 2016 interview, the soft-spoken Ivory urged me not to read too much into it, saying that the creative partnership "just got on.")

Ivory, the laser-focused artistic center of the group who directed 27 of the 43 films, was born in Oregon to a family with roots in Louisiana and Texas. His father owned a lumber company, and Ivory's original interest was architecture

**This outsider positioning was probably the secret ingredient for why Merchant Ivory Productions' movies about British society were so good.**





Clockwise from top left: Helena Bonham Carter and Julian Sands in *A Room With a View*, Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson in *Howards End*, James Wilby and Hugh Grant in *Maurice*, and Hopkins and Thompson in *The Remains of the Day*.

and interior design. Ivory went to the University of Southern California to study set building for movies. (His father's company had a contract with MGM Studios, which meant many Hollywood classics already had part of Ivory in their bones.) Time and again in *Merchant Ivory*, actors including Emma Thompson, Simon Callow, and Hugh Grant talk about just how calm and patient Ivory is as a director, even though a single wasted frame of film was often money the company didn't have.

Merchant was born Ismail Rahman in Mumbai (then Bombay) to a conservative Muslim family. His father was a textile salesman, and it was in the milieu of the bazaar where Merchant learned the art of the hustle. During the period of Partition, Merchant's family refused to leave for Pakistan, and young Merchant was witness to a great deal of street violence. He soon befriended a Bollywood star named Nimmi and later left to study filmmaking at New York University. Though he would occasionally direct throughout his career—a high point being the 1993 film *In Custody*, a humorous and weary look at the preservation of Urdu poetry—his true métier was as a wheeling and dealing producer. He was an explosively charismatic man who could convince actors to work for nothing, cities to open their parks, wealthy people to lend their homes, all based on smiles and handshakes until somehow it was opening night at the Cannes Film Festival.

Jhabvala, the screenwriter for 23 Merchant Ivory films and responsible for some of the most biting lines of dialogue in all of cinema, didn't even speak English until she was 12. She was born in Cologne, Germany, to a Jewish family who had fled to Britain during the war. (Forty members of her father's family, many of whom fled to the Netherlands instead of Britain, were ultimately killed during the Holocaust. Upon learning this, her father killed himself.) In England, she met the architect Cyrus Jhabvala, and after they married, the couple relocated to India. There, Jhabvala began writing novels. When Merchant and Ivory came to India (first with a commission from New York's Asia Society to make a documentary about Delhi), they asked her to adapt her third book, *The Householder*, for a feature script.

*The Householder* starred Shashi Kapoor as a young teacher new to marriage and responsibility. Filmmaker Satyajit Ray, whose work Merchant and Ivory saw on their first date, advised the young duo during postproduction and kept the movie to a relatively lean 101 minutes. *The Householder* isn't a masterpiece, but it has some great performances, music, and details.

In the early 1960s, foreign entertainment companies doing business with India were forced to keep their money in the country. ("Blocked rupees," this was called.) As such, Columbia Pictures, which had funds it could not extract, ended up buying *The Householder* for international



distribution. Merchant Ivory Productions put that money directly into its next production, *Shakespeare Wallah*, which ended up being a surprise hit.

*Shakespeare Wallah*, also starring Kapoor, focuses on a band of British actors roving through India, loosely based on tall tales from the film's co-stars Geoffrey Kendal and his daughter Felicity Kendal. The fun and freewheeling vibe of the script, an Ivory-Jhabvala original, is right there in the title. "Wallah" is a suffix in several Indian languages that is the rough equivalent of "meister." One goes to a chaiwallah to buy a cup of tea, for instance. So a pack of classics-minded showfolk, even if they are roughing it, could cheekily be called Shakespearewallahs. The movie, released in 1965 and filmed in black and white, has a jazzy snap to it. It was in dialogue with other new wave movies of the time, such as John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, and John Cassavetes's *Shadows*, but was still, to non-Indian audiences, a look at a distant land. The movie won Madhur Jaffrey a surprise best actress award at the Berlin International Film Festival, helping to put the film, and Merchant Ivory Productions, on the map.

*Shakespeare Wallah* clicked so well for everyone because it was almost a group autobiography. Like the characters in the film, Merchant Ivory Productions was something of a traveling circus, making art on the run. (In *Merchant Ivory*, Felicity Kendal explains how she had one chance to nail her final shot in the movie. If she flubbed it, that was it; they were literally out of film.)

After some more features and short documentaries—including a colorful look at Bollywood called *Bombay Talkie*—the group made their first film outside of India, an allegorical comedy about social evolution called *Savages*. It was shot partly in England, partly in upstate New York and, though released in 1972, has a very "late '60s" sensibility. (The plot follows a group of grunting, primitive "mud

people" who follow a croquet ball and end up at a Westchester estate in the 1930s.) It was an important development in that it was the company's first movie to showcase Western high society, even with a jaundiced view—though a close reading of their upcoming work, particularly the Forster adaptations, would say the partnership never lost that, just tamped it down. *Savages* did not involve Jhabvala, but it holds a great bit of bar trivia, as the screenplay was co-written by Michael O'Donoghue, the rather coarse comedy writer from the early days of *Saturday Night Live*.

Merchant and Ivory's output during the 1970s is their least known, though the company produced a few winners as it moved between India and the United States. (In time, Merchant, Ivory, and the Jhabvalas would all live in the same Manhattan apartment building.) In 1975, Merchant Ivory Productions completed the hourlong film *Autobiography of a Princess*, a mix of fiction and documentary and one of my favorites in the catalog. In it, Jaffrey is an exiled Indian princess living in London receiving company for the afternoon—an old friend played by James Mason. She shows him old home movies (much of which was footage Ivory shot in India years before) and narrates about what her life used to be. It's simple. It's elegant. It's perfect.

The following year, the company produced a short documentary called *Sweet Sounds* about the Manhattan music school in which Jhabvala enrolled her daughter. It was directed by Massachusetts-born Richard Robbins, who soon entered the Merchant Ivory Productions sphere and became the composer for nearly all the company's remaining work. And though the specifics are a little vague, *Merchant Ivory* dishes a little about how Robbins became Merchant's lover and was also, for a spell, attached to Helena Bonham Carter, who would star in many of the company's films. Later, the whole company, Robbins included, moved to several homes on a large chunk of land in the Hudson Valley, with



Producer Ismail Merchant drives Ivory while filming *The Deceivers* in Madhya Pradesh, India, in 1988.

MIKKIANSIN/GETTY IMAGES





From left: Merchant, writer Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and Ivory sit onstage in Boston in September 1989 after Jhabvala received an award for outstanding achievement in screenwriting.

room for editing suites and summer parties by the lake. As *Shakespeare Wallah* represented the company during the early years, once it achieved a level of success its players began to mirror some of the complicated lives of the characters from their “sophisticated” films.

In 1977, popular culture was swept up by *Saturday Night Fever*, a contemporary dance exploitation picture set in Brooklyn. That same year, however, Merchant Ivory Productions released a curious gem, *Roseland*, set in a vast Manhattan ballroom frequented by ghosts of a different era. This marvelous movie, based on an original Jhabvala script, is essentially three short films in a shared setting with a vision of 1970s New York attuned to disappearing styles and behaviors. It’s a real treasure. In addition to spectacular performances from older actors such as Teresa Wright, Lou Jacobi, and Lila Skala, there’s also a great turn from a young Christopher Walken as a gigolo. The other main star is the Roseland Ballroom itself, with its colorful saloon and enormous ladies’ room parlor. The film (and *Autobiography of a Princess*) features the Merchant Ivory hallmark of melancholy characters in an exquisite setting, yearning to connect.

Skipping ahead seven projects to 1983, we come to another Indian film, *Heat and Dust*, based on a Jhabvala novel that moves between contemporary and historical settings, featuring a young woman (Julie Christie) investigating the life of her great aunt (Greta Scacchi) who lived in India in the 1920s. The film is absolutely dazzling in its design and rich characters, so it was amazing to learn in *Merchant Ivory* just how much of a mess this seemingly refined production actually was. Stories are told about how money was so tight the cooks threatened to stop feeding the crew and how actors’ agents in London and Los Angeles would send telegrams to the hotel in Hyderabad, telling their clients to stop working until promised checks were delivered. Merchant would get up early to yank these telegrams out of mail slots before

anyone could see them. When the actors found out, they were furious, but Merchant was so charming they couldn’t stay angry for too long.

In 1984, Merchant and Ivory headed back to the United States for *The Bostonians*, an adaptation of Henry James’s novel starring Vanessa Redgrave (who was nominated for an Oscar), Madeleine Potter, and Christopher Reeve. It’s a story about the early days of the women’s rights movement that emphasizes what was always left ambiguous to readers on the page—the same-sex longings of its lead character. The movie’s ending isn’t quite the progressive victory or doomed tragedy we would expect today, so contemporary audiences may scratch their heads a bit. Still, for its time, this was chancy material.

Though Merchant and Ivory’s romantic companionship was known to many for years, it was only very recently that Ivory ever confirmed it publicly, with the release of the gay coming-of-age film *Call Me by Your Name*, a post-Merchant Ivory writing gig that won him an Academy Award. (Merchant, who died in 2005, did not want to trouble his family with specifics of his sexuality.) After *The Bostonians*, the pair would, however, make a much more explicitly sympathetic gay film with *Maurice* in 1987, but before that came their first bona fide smash, *A Room With a View*, in 1986.

Starring the fetching, wide-eyed Bonham Carter (only 19 at the time), a twerpy Daniel Day Lewis, the blindingly handsome Julian Sands, plus Maggie Smith, Denholm Elliot, Judi Dench, Simon Callow, and the always photogenic city of Florence, Italy, Jhabvala’s adaptation of Forster’s novel is a supernova of erudite badinage fixated on delicate social mores and set against gorgeous images and a mix of Puccini arias and Robbins’s original score. While it was far from the first film about upper-class British people in beautiful vistas worrying about love, it had a delicious, almost self-aware quality that said, “If we’re going to do this silly thing, we’re



going to do it right.” The elevated quality of the production (still strung together by Merchant’s beg, borrow, and steal methods) led to five Oscar nominations, including for best picture, and wins for Jhabvala’s script, the production design, and the costumes.

After the international success of *A Room With a View*—a movie that broke out of the arthouses and played mainstream theaters—Ivory urged the company to adapt *Maurice*, Forster’s work on forbidden gay love that wasn’t published until after his death in 1971. Merchant was hesitant but agreed. Jhabvala was working on a novel so did not adapt the book but did offer suggestions for the structure and a key added storyline. It is a heartbreaking film about two gay men (James Wilby and Hugh Grant) terrified by the illegality of their true nature, released at the height of the AIDS crisis. It was condemned in some corners of Britain for not taking the health epidemic seriously, as if watching this drama set in Cambridge rooms and country estates would somehow turn audiences gay and expose them to HIV. The health angle was just an excuse some critics took to dismiss something that made them feel uncomfortable.

Perhaps Jhabvala wished she could have taken a crack at *Maurice* because she was the one who first suggested “climbing the mountain” of Forster’s richest work of all, *Howards End*. A few films later, they did just that, and if you want to say this is the greatest costume drama ever made, I’m not going to stop you. Starring Thompson, Bonham Carter, Redgrave, Anthony Hopkins, and the most symbolic bookshelf in cinema, the movie is a rich and meaningful look at people trapped in their social classes, but it is also funny and accessible. It won Thompson the Oscar for best actress, plus another for the production design and Jhabvala’s screenplay.

Merchant Ivory immediately went back into action with *The Remains of the Day*, in which Thompson and Hopkins played opposite each other again but this time as servants in a great house. It’s one of the most powerful odes to repressed feelings and missed opportunities, a portrait of self-doubt and the inability to break loose of social constrictions. (Put bluntly, they’ve got the hots for each other for years but just can’t seem to make a move.) Eight Oscar nominations followed, and the one-two punch of *Howards End* and *The Remains of the Day* meant a “Merchant Ivory film” was a known quantity to everyone, even if they’d never actually seen more than a television commercial. Forget that along the same stretch of time they released *Slaves of New York*, a contemporary piece of underground antics based on Tama Janowitz stories with music by Iggy Pop and Neneh Cherry, and were also producing films by up-and-coming directors in India.

**WHILE THE COMPANY CONTINUED** to do good work, *The Remains of the Day* was the end of an era. After that success, they

signed a deal with Touchstone Pictures, a subsidiary of Disney. Raising money wasn’t an issue anymore, but the increased budgets didn’t really jibe with Merchant’s handshake style or the office’s streamlined culture. After decades of doing it their way, there were adjustment issues. The next few films, starring Nick Nolte in *Jefferson in Paris* and Hopkins in *Surviving Picasso*, left many critics cold. The movies from this period and after are probably due for a second look. I’ll confess that I never made it out to the cinema for some of these later ones. Ivory’s final film as a director was *The City of Your Final Destination*, which Jhabvala adapted from Peter Cameron’s novel, shot after Merchant’s death and long after the dissolution of the Disney deal. It wrapped production in January 2007 but wasn’t released until April 2010. It co-starred Hopkins and was a bit of a boondoggle, resulting in the actor suing the company for back wages. I never saw it. They say the location photography in Argentina is magnificent, and I’m sure that’s true.

But even with Merchant, Jhabvala, and Robbins now gone, Ivory remains busy. His adaptation of André Aciman’s novel *Call Me by Your Name* for director Luca Guadagnino in 2017 won him his first Academy Award at age 89, making him the oldest recipient to do so. He recently adapted Édouard Louis’s novel *The End of Eddy* for a yet-to-be-produced television series and co-directed the 2022 documentary *A Cooler Climate*, in which Ivory looks back at diaries and images he took in Afghanistan during an early pre-Merchant Ivory trip he took there hoping to make a short film. He is also an executive producer on *Merchant Ivory*, subjecting himself to many interviews, and is seen chatting about art and strolling through the Met in *An Arrested Moment*, which is screening on a loop at the museum. A reminder that the guy is 96!

It would be too easy to say, “There’d be no *Downton Abbey* without Merchant Ivory.” BBC productions such as *Upstairs Downstairs* have plenty to do with chumming those waters. But certainly the bar for excellence was raised by Merchant Ivory. As one clearly enamored of their work, my hope is that Ivory’s busy schedule at the end of his life renews an interest in people who may otherwise shrug away their films as being stuffy or snooty costume dramas. While one does need to meet these films on their level—an early scene in *Maurice* is devoted to the aesthetics of Tchaikovsky—there’s much more going on than simple snobbery. Beneath each line, no matter how frilly they sound, is a person bursting at the seams, an outsider like *Howards End*’s Leonard Bast hoping desperately to make his mark—the voice of three artists who are still, all these years and awards later, at risk of being misrepresented and misunderstood. ■

**JORDAN HOFFMAN** is a film critic and entertainment journalist living in Queens, New York.



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# Zombie Diplomacy

A geopolitical satire envisions a horrifying G-7 summit.

By Megan DuBois

O

n a recent trip, I found myself in the National Museum of Ireland staring at the preserved body known as Old Croghan Man. He died a brutal death: strangled, stabbed, decapitated, severed in half at the waist, and drowned. Yet I could see the pores on his skin, the careful manicuring of his fingernails. His final form is rather expressive—an uncanny reminder that what is dead is not always past.

Old Croghan Man is a bog body, one of many naturally mummified corpses found in the raised peat bogs of northern Europe. A combination of high acid, low temperature, and low oxygen preserves hair, skin, and internal organs as the calcium of the bones is leached away. The result is a tanned and shriveled body preserved in remarkable detail.

At some point, perhaps during his final ordeal, Old Croghan Man's nipples were mutilated as a symbolic gesture, according to Eamonn P. Kelly, the former keeper of Irish antiquities at the museum. This detail is key to a bigger mystery. He was not just any man but a king, and in ancient Ireland, kings were wedded to the land and tasked with ensuring good harvests. Sucking a king's nipples

The fictional leaders of the G-7 gather for a dinner at their annual summit in the film *Rumours*.



was a gesture of fealty, so “cutting them would have made him incapable of kingship,” in Kelly’s words.

Old Croghan Man may have met his grisly fate because he failed to deliver on his promises to his people, making him unfit to rule as a king in this life or beyond. He was sacrificed to the earth for better harvests to come. There are plenty of theories seeking to explain bog bodies, but only Kelly’s has been embraced by the makers of a new dark comedy film about a fictional G-7 summit.

In *Rumours*, from renowned Canadian oddball director Guy Maddin and frequent collaborators Evan and Galen Johnson, the leaders of the world’s most advanced economies attend a summit but are soon left to fend for themselves in a dark forest among a horde of reanimated—and horny—bog bodies. The film takes this premise and uses it to skewer the failures and hypocrisies of modern diplomacy.

*Rumours* stars Cate Blanchett as the bureaucratic and lustful chancellor hosting the annual G-7 summit at an estate in the idyllic German countryside. Joining her are a couple competent but distractable counterparts: the polite and intelligent British prime minister (Nikki Amuka-Bird) and the passionate Canadian prime minister (Roy Dupuis), who downs bottles of wine to forget that he is being driven from office by a rather boring scandal.

The rest of the bunch are so caught up in either idealism or their own intellectualism that they are rendered useless, as is the case with the French president (Denis Ménochet) and the Japanese prime minister (*Shogun*’s Takehiro Hira), or they are useless from the start, as with the bumbling Italian prime minister (Rolando Ravello) and the nostalgic U.S. president who can’t stay awake (*Game of Thrones*’ Charles Dance).

On a tour of the property, the German chancellor shows the group a recently excavated bog body: that of a former leader also sacrificed for failing to deliver on his promises. His penis has been severed and hung around his neck, and the group looks on with fascination, disgust, and admiration (on the part of the U.S. president). They pose for an awkward photo, ceremonial shovels in hand, but the moment otherwise passes without much thought.

After settling in for dinner at a lakeside gazebo, the group is left alone to draft an outline of a provisional statement on a global crisis. This simple and probably pointless task preoccupies and eludes them for the remainder of the film. With great effort, the group brainstorms a pathetic slate of

buzzwords and platitudes. They want to be clear, the German chancellor suggests, but not so clear that they put themselves in an awkward position.

The whole exercise is more a game of diplomatic word association than the kind of critical thought that one would expect from world leaders. They are self-congratulatory about what little they have accomplished, convinced that terms such as “geopolitical issues,” “bilateral,” and “supply chain management” are profound. Although at least the U.S. president recognizes that what people really want is “concrete action, not vague promises or proposals,” this brief self-awareness quickly dissipates; he falls asleep again, and the group carries on.

It is a scathing, if predictable, indictment of the current state of global leadership. The specifics of the crisis at hand are unimportant, left blank as a Rorschach test for the viewer—it could be climate change, genocide, nuclear weapons, or war. *Rumours* is not a particularly subtle satire, but it’s not trying to be. The obviousness is entirely the point.

Amid this dithering, the group realizes that it has truly been left alone, and a movie about the horrors of diplomacy becomes an outright horror movie. High-minded ideals quickly give way to visceral, bodily fear as the world leaders are—literally and figuratively—lost in the woods, trying to escape a horde of reanimated bog bodies masturbating and traipsing through the castle grounds.

In many respects, the group is running from the past. The members of this fictional G-7 pride themselves as a bastion of modernity—no longer a club exclusively for old white men. But they are clearly not the visionaries that they imagine themselves to be, merely mimics of culturally sensitive public relations speak intended to keep the press and protesters at bay: The French president takes great care to proclaim that the bog body could be that of a man *or* a woman; it’s a man. The Italian is asked whether his meat snack is traditional Genovese salami; it’s from the hotel buffet. One leader wonders what those ceremonial Japanese fans are called; they are just “fans.” When they encounter a diplomat speaking a language they cannot understand, they wonder whether it’s any number of forgotten tongues—Galindian, Skaldian, Ruthenian. It’s Swedish.

At every turn, the leaders are more concerned with saying the right thing than doing it. The theme of the G-7 summit is “regret,” and when asked about their biggest regrets, none of them seem too bothered by their own political failings. The Japanese prime minister says he regrets not learning to ride horses, while the Italian regrets dressing up like Benito Mussolini for a costume party—but not that much. The Canadian leader effectively gives a land acknowledgement to the bog bodies, offering “profound apologies for the hurt and offense we have caused,” before axing one of them in the face.

This faux handwringing undoubtedly echoes Canada’s

***Rumours* is not a particularly subtle satire, but it’s not trying to be. The obviousness is entirely the point.**



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recognition of its shameful treatment toward Indigenous peoples. It's not the only moment that recalls the real world. Other than the fact that he inexplicably speaks with a British accent, the American leader obviously satirizes the United States and, at times, specifically U.S. President Joe Biden. He blathers on about American greatness, falls asleep at critical junctures, isolates himself from the group, and at one point says he could be president for another hundred years.

Yet the directors seem to chastise viewers for reading much into it. The characters nearly break the fourth wall at one point, when the overly intellectual French president wonders whether it might be "illuminating" to view the situation allegorically. Much of the satire of *Rumours* is either muddled or just not that deep, and it is tiring to keep up with a movie that oscillates between baiting the audience with seriousness and then mocking them for taking it seriously.

Despite its flaws, *Rumours* is laugh-out-loud funny, particularly if you're the kind of person who enjoys jokes where the Treaty of Maastricht is the punchline. It also captures the sense of nihilism that many people, particularly young people, feel toward world leaders and institutions more accurately than anything I've seen in recent memory.

In this carnival of madness and snark, one choice does feel particularly thoughtful: the bog bodies. Looking at Old Croghan Man was so frightening because of how realistically he was preserved, defying the kind of abstraction usually afforded to zombies, ghosts, ghouls, skeletons, and the like. Forced to really see him in the flesh, you remember that he was once alive, capable of the kind of touch and feel that any of us are.

*Rumours* portrays its G-7 leaders as inept and out of touch, but it goes to great lengths to characterize them as human. They are not cold and calculating policymaking robots. They feel big feelings and try to run away from them with a glass of wine. They are fussy, distracted, delightful, and emotive. That ancient mummies have come to life and a giant brain has been found in the forest—let alone whatever geopolitical crisis is at hand—ultimately concerns them less than their own marital problems, sexual desires, hunger, and need for sleep.

The G-7 leaders may be running from the bog bodies, but they have nothing to fear because they and the bog bodies are one and the same. The leaders' bones have dissolved, rendering them spineless. They are jacking off as the world unravels under their stewardship. The question that remains is how long it will take before the leaders of *Rumours*—clearly unfit to rule—are tossed in the political bogs, an offering to make way for a new generation of leadership more attuned to the problems of this world. ■

MEGAN DUBOIS is an assistant editor at FOREIGN POLICY.



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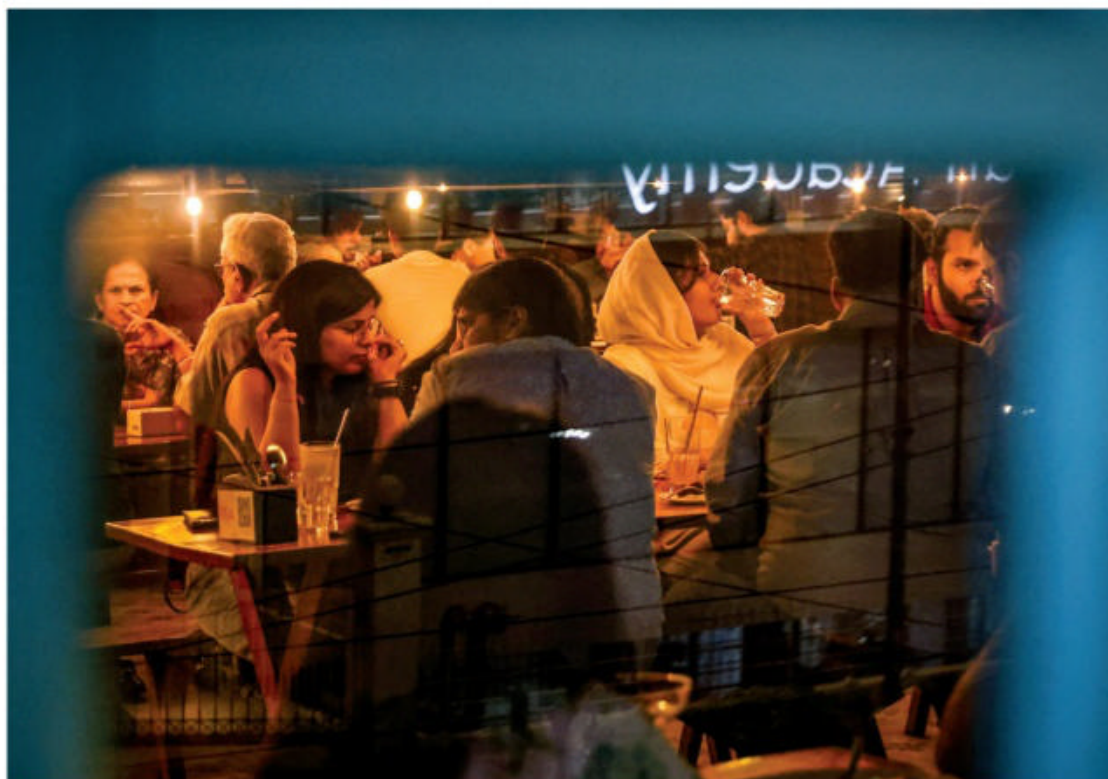
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## Modi's Youth Army

A debut novel dives into  
the psyche of the new India.

*By Somak Ghoshal*

**I**n the opening pages of Devika Rege's debut novel, *Quarterlife*, one of the protagonists, Naren Agashe, goes to the Lincoln Zoo in Nebraska to buy a coffee. After an older man threatens him at his usual café, Naren doesn't want to take any chances: He'd rather sip the insipid beverage sold at the zoo's gift shop, the only place nearby that sells coffee, than risk another round of abuse from the racist loon, who he fears may pull a gun on him if provoked.

As he walks around the zoo, Naren is arrested by the sight of an odd creature. It is a "jaguon," according to the placard before its enclosure, a "hybrid born of the accidental mating of a black jaguar and a lioness." Watching the animal pacing a "cage barely the size of his kitchen," Naren feels its restlessness. Even if it were to leap out of its prison and escape, its "animal brain," he thinks, would be "bewildered by a sudden cellular longing for a non-existent habitat."

In the jaguon, Naren seems to recognize something of his own predicament as a green card-holding white-collar professional in the United States in the 2010s. The 31-year-old Wharton graduate from India has clung to a consultant job even after the financial crash. Yet he is unable to rise in corporate America, a fate made worse by a bad breakup. An object of pity to his colleagues, deracinated from his homeland, Naren longs for his own non-existent habitat—until a landmark election in India opens the door to unexpected economic opportunity back home.

Young people  
gather in a brewery  
in Bengaluru, India,  
on April 27, 2024.



Back in New Delhi, the right-wing Bharat Party has come to power with a sweeping popular mandate after campaigning on a promise to end corruption and usher in a new India. Soon, brain drain begins to reverse as prodigal Indians like Naren return home, seduced by the promise of a trillion-dollar economy and a newly anointed prime minister. Liberal Indians accuse the leader of having innocent blood on his hands for fueling sectarian violence, but his loyal army of militant Hindus ignores his past as a blip on the path to progress.

The parallels with India's 2014 national elections and the rise of Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party are conspicuous. But Rege doesn't focus on the political aftermath of those elections, such as the mob violence against minorities that erupted in the years that followed or the country's deepening youth unemployment crisis. Instead, *Quarterlife* dives into the psyche of the generation born on the cusp of India's economic liberalization in 1991: young people awakening into political consciousness in the 21st century, confused by the baggage of their colonial inheritance and globalization bringing in non-Indian ways of thinking and living.

**QUARTERLIFE, WHICH WAS PUBLISHED IN INDIA** in 2023 but came out in the United States last September, is one of several recent books by Indian or Indian-origin writers that explore the rise of Hindu nationalism among young people, who currently comprise more than half of India's population of 1.4 billion. This includes the novels and nonfiction of Aatish Taseer, who has examined how Indian communities came to wield Hinduism as a political weapon, and the work of journalists such as Snigdha Poonam and Kunal Purohit, whose reportage has sought to make sense of the role of young Indians in shaping their country's political apparatus over the past decade.

In *Quarterlife*, Rege is interested in what takes place inside the drawing rooms of Mumbai's nouveaux riches—Exhibit A being Naren's family and its social circle. They are part of an upwardly mobile class who live in a fictional complex called Imperial Heights ("a ludicrous name," Naren thinks, "just the kind to appeal to upstarts come into money by accident").

The Agashe family, whose scions are spread across Mumbai,

Pune, and Brisbane, has recently become wealthy through the sale of ancestral land to a mining shark, whose operations are wreaking havoc on the environment. Only Naren's uncle, a small-business owner, has remained steadfast in refusing to sell his portion. Like millions of Indians, he is a bundle of contradictions. He considers himself a "leftist" who cares for the environment and his workers, but he also supports the ruling government in spite of its environmentally unfriendly and right-wing policies, as he lost faith in the previous system that was nominally socialist.

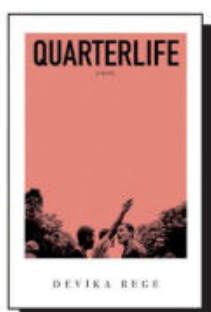
Naren and his younger brother, Rohit, are clearer about their political allegiances, swayed by the new government's promise of turning India into a global superpower. But they soon realize that they are deeply divided from their peers in their experience of the world.

Between the Agashe brothers—who are Chitpavan Brahmins, a sub-caste within the highest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy—and their assorted friends, Rege packs in a wide range of characters across India's social strata. They include a lower-caste filmmaker from rural Maharashtra; a woman who, despite her class privilege, is marginalized as a Muslim; a young liberal shaped by the secular values of the Indian Constitution (the kind of person routinely mocked by India's right wing as "sickular"); and a member of India's Zoroastrian Parsi community who thinks his insignificance in the religious hierarchy protects him from anti-Hindu hate—until the police upbraid his Hindu boyfriend not so much for being gay but for dating someone from a minority community.

The plot of *Quarterlife* is organized around two main events: Naren's move to India from the United States and his American friend Amanda's decision to tag along with him to work with an NGO. As Naren negotiates the dynamics of big business, Amanda steps into a Mumbai slum to document the lives of its women and children. Overwhelmed by this other India that borders the pockets of luxury inhabited by Naren and his friends, she spirals into a personal crisis, complicated by an unexpectedly intense love affair with Rohit.

On the face of it, Rohit and Amanda come from utterly disparate backgrounds—one having grown up in suburban Mumbai, the other in small-town New Hampshire. But in the age of free trade and movement, they are both homogenized as "global citizens." Amanda feels at home with Rohit's English-speaking, cocktail-sipping, Adidas-wearing friends. As time passes, however, these commonalities begin to crumble.

**WHILE QUARTERLIFE FOLLOWS A STRUCTURED PLOT**, it is also a deeply discursive novel. Pages of dense dialogue are interspersed throughout, with ideas and opinions flying thick and fast. The protagonists are outspoken and unafraid of verbal



*Quarterlife:*  
A Novel

DEVIKA REGE,  
LIVERIGHT,  
416 PP., \$29.99,  
SEPTEMBER 2024





Young people stand on a street popular for its nightlife in Bengaluru on April 27, 2024.

duels, their arguments wearing the fabric of their friendship thin, jeopardizing loyalties, and ruining romantic possibilities. These exchanges, often excessively verbose, serve as windows into the inner lives of the characters, who act as conduits of anxiety and aspiration for their class and community.

As the moon-eyed, white American do-gooder, Amanda serves as a foil to her peers. She may not know what a Dalit is, but she sees hunger and poverty where her Indian counterparts ignore it. “Honestly, people fighting for two meals a day don’t care about half this stuff we’re debating,” she says in a fit of rage, disrupting an intellectual tirade at the Agashes’ residence. Her moral edge doesn’t land well, especially with Rohit. He is stung by her self-righteousness toward people like him, who have been lifted out of semi-poverty through luck or labor to reach India’s 1 percent.

Two other characters allow Rege to explore deeper questions of belonging. First, there’s Kedar, Naren’s cousin, who is mocked as a “vern timer”—a pejorative for those who speak vernacular as opposed to English—by his city-bred cousins. He is a reporter for Hindi and Marathi newspapers, exposing land encroachment by greedy industrialists. Kedar’s idealism is bracing, just like Amanda’s, but in his case, it comes at a devastating price.

In contrast, Omkar, Rohit’s newfound friend, is raring to forge his way ahead in the new India. A young man from a small town in the state of Maharashtra, he deplores the upper-caste Marathas, who rejected him for his lowly social standing (“backward caste, class, everything”). His ambition is to make a documentary on the Ganesha festival, but liberal arthouse film producers won’t support him because of his dedication to the Bharat Party as a foot soldier of the party’s youth wing.

Omkar is elated by the soaring wave of Hindu nationalism.

He sees the party’s ascension as a triumph of anti-elitism rather than a successful strategy of targeted violence against minority communities. “Only the Bharat Party cares for all Hindus,” he boasts. In Omkar’s view, the time has come for people like him, who are the voice of “Bharat”—a Sanskrit and Hindi name for India—to speak as one, overcoming their historical neglect by the Anglicized classes representing “India.” (Modi, incidentally, identified his nation as “Bharat” while chairing the G-20 summit in New Delhi in 2023.)

Rohit’s friendship with Omkar becomes the trigger that blows up close-knit allegiances. Rohit is charmed by Omkar’s “son of the soil” pitch; he sees Omkar’s steadfast faith in the Bharat Party’s doctrine as a sign of hope, especially when compared with the political cynicism of others in his milieu. But his friends attack Omkar’s earnest championing of Hindu nationalism. They gang up on Omkar, calling him a fraud and trickster, and accuse him of manipulating the sympathies of the urban elite for personal gain. The two faces of India and Bharat ultimately fight out a bitter blame game, each pointing fingers at the other for bringing the country to a state of crisis.

In an *Indian Express* article, Rege wrote that *Quarterlife* is an “attempt to understand how, around 2014, our political identities became all-encompassing in a way that they had not been before, and what this meant for the spread of Hindu nationalism.” The outcome of her quest isn’t flawless, but it captures a fundamental truth about the 21st century, not just in India but all over the globalized world: that life is riddled with conflict and asymmetry among people close to and far from one another. ■

**SOMAK GHOSHAL** is an independent writer, editor, and reporter based in New Delhi.



The background of the entire page is a blue-tinted photograph of several people in professional attire. In the foreground, a man on the left is seen in profile, looking towards the right. Behind him and to the right, another man is partially visible, also looking right. In the background, a woman is seen from the chest up, gesturing with her hands as if in conversation. The overall scene suggests a collaborative work environment or a meeting.

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## Monkey Business

China's first big-budget video game has become a source of national pride.

*By James Palmer*

When I was a little boy, I thought Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, was the greatest hero of all. Stronger than Superman, sharper than Spider-Man, he fought, tricked, and joked his way across my father's bedtime stories, freely borrowed from *Xiyouji* (*Journey to the West*), the classic 16th-century novel

that defined the character for centuries of Chinese storytellers to come.

There are hundreds of adaptations, sequels, and spinoffs of *Xiyouji*; the latest of them is the Chinese video game *Black Myth: Wukong*.

Since its launch by developer Game Science last August, it has become one of the fastest-selling video games of all time, making more than \$700 million in less than three weeks and moving more than 20 million copies in its first month.

Three-quarters of these sales have been in China, where the game has become a point of pride in a country where video gaming often has a hard time getting the stamp of government approval. But the game's rendition of China's most iconic hero has also become caught up in familiar culture wars.

*Xiyouji* is, as the novel's latest translator into English, Julia Lovell, told me, "a story about shapeshifting that itself shapeshifts." Like the Monkey King

A screen grab from the video game *Black Myth: Wukong*.



himself, the story has wriggled between forms and remains difficult to pin down. It has no certain author: In the 1920s, Hu Shih, a great Chinese critic and journalist, attributed it to Wu Cheng'en, a then-obscure Ming dynasty author, quite possibly wrongly.

There is a distant historical reality to the book: the journey of the very real seventh-century Chinese monk Xuanzang (referred to in the text as Tang Sanzang, sometimes translated as Tripitaka) to India to recover important Buddhist scriptures. By the time *Xiyouji* was written, however, the historical monk had long become associated with the Monkey King, created from a variety of simian legends from across China and India.

*Xiyouji* itself is a gallimaufry text, throwing together poetry, demons, piety, banter, and satire. It invokes the salesmanship of serial storytellers, telling the reader, "And if you want to know what happened next, you'd better read the next chapter." It is primarily Buddhist, freely satirizing the competing faith of Daoism; at one point, Sun and his companions trick evil Daoists into drinking their urine under the guise of holy water. But the novel happily throws Daoist and Confucian ideas into the mix when it suits the story.

The flexibility of the tale has made it interpretable as everything from a proto-Marxist attack on the ruling classes to a deep spiritual allegory to an astrological primer. It's also very, very long: some 1,400 pages in a full English translation. Many versions in English, beginning with Arthur Waley's 1942 *Monkey*, are abridgements that contain about a third of the text.

Yet at the heart of the story is the interplay between the four pilgrims (and their horse, a transformed and repentant dragon). Poor Xuanzang, in real life one of history's greatest travelers, has become a damsel in distress, constantly in danger of being eaten or violated by a range of demons. The comic fuel of the book is the relationship between the Monkey King and his fellow pilgrim Pigsy (Zhu Bajie), a somewhat repentant hog-demon who loves food, women, and booze even more than Monkey does. Sandy (Sha Wujing) rounds out the party, a former ogre who acts as a straight man for his raucous colleagues.

After the book's publication in 1592, the public demanded even more than *Xiyouji*'s hundred chapters. Ming dynasty publishers rushed to put out sequels or rename older texts with the Monkey King in them. In *Journey to the South*, he gets a fierce demon daughter; in *Further Adventures on the Journey to the West*, he wanders through a poetic dreamscape. The pilgrims became stock figures of Chinese drama and opera—and then of film and TV.

And with every version, the Monkey King was refitted for the times. My childhood images of the Monkey King were shaped by two of the dominant 20th-century adaptations:

the 1978-80 Japanese TV show *Saiyuki*, screened in the West in the early 1980s, and the Chinese animated film *Havoc in Heaven*, first screened in full in 1965. In the Japanese series, actor Masaaki Sakai's raffish swashbuckler is the closest any actor has gotten to the spirit of the book's Monkey King, bellying "I love to fight!" in the opening credits, which also, in true 1970s fashion, proclaim him "the funkiest monkey that ever popped."

*Havoc in Heaven* was a direct product of modern China's history, made by the four Wan brothers, who formed the country's first animation studio. Their first full-length feature, 1941's *Princess Iron Fan*, is also a *Xiyouji* adaptation, in which the four pilgrims have to learn to work together in an analogy of anti-Japanese resistance.

By 1961, when they started making *Havoc in Heaven*, the political demands were very different. *Havoc in Heaven* is based on the opening of *Xiyouji*, where the Monkey King rebels against heaven and thrashes the gods. Originally the story was a Peking opera, and the film's designs use the bright colors and sharp lines of stage makeup.

But whereas the novel and opera end with the Monkey King being subdued by the infinite power of the Buddha, the film finishes on a firm note of revolution, with Sun celebrating his overthrow of heaven among the other monkeys. (That wasn't enough to save the animation team, who, like most artists, were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution on the grounds that the film was anti-Maoist.)

So how does *Black Myth* fit into this long tradition of a shape-shifting story?

Well, first of all, it had to carry extra weight because it's a video game. Film versions have become routine, almost expected, in China over the last 30 years, but video games are on more uncertain ground. The Communist Party sees



A scene from the Chinese animated film *Havoc in Heaven*.





From left: A statuette of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King; a student performs as the Monkey King at the Peking Opera in Beijing on May 9, 2007; viewers point to a lantern depicting the Monkey King in Guangzhou, China, on Jan. 19, 2004.

video gaming as a dangerous distraction for the young and, like other media, as a possible vector of foreign influence. Over the course of *Black Myth*'s development since 2018, there have been numerous crackdowns on video games, including a nine-month freeze on licenses for new games that helped drive 14,000 gaming companies out of business. Another set of measures wiped out more than \$100 billion in stock value last January until the government backpedaled.

And while the Chinese gaming industry is measured in the tens of billions of dollars and Chinese firms own substantial chunks of major gaming studios, China's creative output in video gaming has been tiny by comparison. That's different for smaller mobile platforms, where there are hundreds of Chinese-developed game apps, such as the massively popular *Honor of Kings*.

*Black Myth* is the country's first ever AAA game—meaning a blockbuster video game that takes years and \$60 million or more to develop. As such, Chinese fans have been obsessing about the game since it was first announced, desperate for a big story all their own after years of playing Western and Japanese games.

*Black Myth* stages its story as a sequel, opening with the Monkey King still being pursued by his heavenly foes after the journey is over—and then being defeated and trapped. You don't play as Sun but as a random monkey chosen to inherit his legacy, known in the game as the Destined One. If you don't know the *Xiyouji* story already, there's no hand-holding here about who any of these characters are or what they're doing.

All that time and money paid off in a very good game, a solid A-, excellent but just short of being a masterpiece. The landscapes and characters are stunning, from mountain temples to murky swamps. Structurally, it's a "boss rush" game, featuring long fights with complicated and

dramatic enemies; you bumble around the landscape a bit in between but mostly in search of more bosses to fight as you whack the minor baddies.

These are great boss fights. The enemies, many of them taken straight from the demons and dragons and gods of *Xiyouji*, are monstrosly satisfying—tough to beat but not so frustratingly hard that the player gives up.

Chinese games, like Chinese films, have often been hampered by the country's spotty censorship of religious, magical, and fantastic themes; when magic makes an appearance in Chinese movies, for instance, it has to be explained away with pseudoscience or as Scooby-Doo style trickery. But *Xiyouji* is so embedded in the canon that it gets a free pass, and the monsters can be straightforwardly creepy, from twisting snake demons to giant scorpion-men.

And it's very satisfying to feel like the Monkey King, or his non-union equivalent, the Destined One. The player's arsenal is full of familiar powers, acquired over the course of the game: a giant staff or magic gourd that transforms as you fight or a handful of hairs that can be thrown into the air to become dozens of smaller Monkey Kings to batter your opponent.

Yet *Black Myth* is strangely lacking in the original tale's humor. The protagonist is entirely silent. There's an odd bit of dialogue, but you defeat bad guys by hitting them repeatedly—not, as Sun often does, by beating them with cunning or taunting them into mistakes. (One of the game's few genuinely funny moments comes in an endgame fight that is a walking spoiler but which uses both the story and the game to great effect.) You change forms to smash enemies, not to foil them.

Contrast this with the Spider-Man games, where the hero's traditional quipping and trickiness are worked into both dialogue and gameplay. *Black Myth*'s voice acting, in



both English and Chinese, is serviceable, but there's nothing of the quality of Richard Schiff's Odin as a New York huckster in *God of War Ragnarök* or Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson in *The Last of Us*.

The Destined One's repeated deaths struck me as another missed opportunity to work in the spirit of the original story. Getting beaten over and over again is a staple of boss rush games, as is being whisked back to the nearest respawn point—shrines, in this case. But losing fights is also a staple of *Xiyouji*: Sun gets beaten, fools his opponent while running away in one of his disguises, and finds another angle. It would have been fun to have this kind of variation instead of the old die-and-respawn routine.

The animated sequences that play after chapters of the game, explaining the backstory of each segment's chief villain, in different styles that evoke everything from hand-drawn scrolls to anime to the 1986 Chinese TV adaptation of *Xiyouji*, offer a much more interesting artistic vision. It's a shame that the quality of writing and lore evidenced in these sequences wasn't brought into the main gameplay.

Yet, for Chinese fans, it's clear that what mattered wasn't the quality of the story so much as it being a Chinese story, period. "The visuals are Chinese and have local characteristics," one reviewer wrote on the PC gaming platform Steam, "but can be compared to the most exquisite foreign ones." Another wrote: "It's an Eastern fantasy masterpiece that stirs the DNA of our cultural sentiments." The pleasure of seeing a story told with your heroes, instead of somebody else's, is real.

An uglier side of video game culture has also emerged over *Black Myth*. Ever since an IGN report on Game Science's history of sexism, some Chinese fans have used the new game to attack feminism—a line picked up by Western video gaming culture's own rich crop of reactionary idiots. Game Science didn't help by telling reviewers of the game that

they couldn't discuss "feminist propaganda," echoing the Chinese government's own repression of feminists online.

It's not a problem with the original story. Compared with other classical Chinese novels, *Xiyouji* might not have the richness of women's lives depicted in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but it also doesn't have the rank misogyny of *The Water Margin*. Lovell told me that she'd thought about gender issues while picking the stories for her abridged translation, focusing on parts that Waley, a quintessential English gentleman of a translator, left out. "I really love when they go to the Land of Women," she said, describing a long, satirical segment where the pilgrims find themselves the uncomfortable targets of the female gaze.

There's little of this in *Black Myth*, but it is not worth criticizing the game for its relative lack of female characters. There's just not that many characters of any kind, as opposed to enemies. I'm not certain that it's a win for gender representation to know that the multi-armed spider demon you're beating up is female. The game's plot is largely an excuse for spectacle, not an exercise in storytelling.

Yet, however lackluster *Black Myth*'s plot may be, the first entries in classic video game franchises have often been far more clunky in their storytelling and dialogue. The first *God of War* is a melodramatic murder-fest, and subsequent entries were often deeply cringeworthy. Nearly two decades later, the games have become moving stories of grief, fatherhood, trauma, and hitting monsters in the face with an ax.

Sequels to *Black Myth* are already promised, and other studios are attempting their own AAA products. As Chinese games mature—and if the government lets them—the storytelling might start to live up to the visuals. We may even get a Monkey King worthy of the story's legacy. ■

JAMES PALMER is a deputy editor at FOREIGN POLICY.



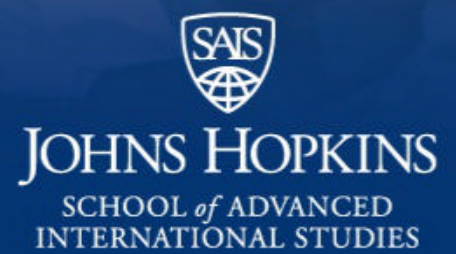
A screen grab from the video game *Black Myth: Wukong*.





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# Razing Hell

*The bulldozer reflects India's imbalance along religious lines.*

By Ambreen Agha

**B**ulldozers are ubiquitous on construction sites the world over. But in India, they are also something more. Bulldozers have become a symbol, a perpetrator of a divisive and violent brand of retributive justice that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has developed since Modi first came to power in 2014 and, despite growing political and judicial resistance, continues to propagate. Used to target

Muslims under the guise of governance, the bulldozer reflects India's current imbalance along religious lines.

"Bulldozer justice" first gained prominence in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, under the leadership of Yogi Adityanath, a saffron-clad Hindu monk and the state's chief minister. Since 2020, state officials under Adityanath, a member of the BJP, have regularly ordered the use of bulldozers to demolish the properties of individuals, mostly Muslims, accused of involvement in criminal activity or protests against the government. Adityanath, who is known for making inflammatory and provocative remarks against Indian Muslims, hailed the bulldozer as a tool of justice that led him to earn the sobriquet "Bulldozer Baba," or bulldozer monk.

The extrajudicial use of bulldozers as weapons against Muslim homes, businesses, and places of worship in the name of allegedly dispensing justice was later replicated by states such as Assam, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan—all ruled by the BJP. Modi himself endorsed Adityanath's bulldozer politics during a speech last May in Uttar Pradesh. In February 2024, Amnesty International



## OBJECT OF THE GLOBAL MOMENT



A bulldozer demolishes the house of a Muslim man whom state authorities accused of being involved in riots in Prayagraj, India, on June 12, 2022.

released a report on “bulldozer injustice,” expressing concern over the increasing number of politically motivated punitive demolitions “instigated by senior political leaders and government officials,” which had impacted at least 617 people, largely Muslims.

And despite setbacks experienced by the BJP in last year’s general elections, bulldozer justice is still being enacted against Muslims. In June, 11 houses belonging to Muslims were demolished in Madhya Pradesh’s Mandla district after authorities claimed that they found beef in their refrigerators. In October, authorities in Rajasthan demolished a house they said was built illegally on temple land. The

**Hindutva pop music regularly glorifies the enforcers of bulldozer justice, presenting them as heroes and protectors of Hindu identity.**

actions followed allegations against the homeowner Naseeb Chaudhary and his son of involvement in a knife attack at a Hindu temple.

Meanwhile, the bulldozer has become an inextricable part of India’s political culture, a symbol of Hindu-nationalist political iconography. In political rallies across the country during the 2024 elections, hordes of bulldozers—adorned with flowers and posters of Modi and Adityanath—were on display as props.

The bulldozer is not only a political symbol; it has permeated the national culture, with bulldozers as popular toys and stylized images on snack wrappers. In the aftermath of the BJP’s victory in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh elections, young male supporters lined up in front of tattoo studios to get bulldozers inked on their skin. Another notable example is the regular evocation of bulldozers in the lyrics of Hindutva pop, a genre of music that infuses Hindu-nationalist ideology with popular music styles and catchy beats.

The genre regularly glorifies the enforcers of bulldozer justice, presenting them as heroes and protectors of Hindu identity. Bulldozers themselves are glorified for perpetrating retributive violence. One popular song features the lyrics “He is tough on anti-nationals / Bulldozer Baba is saffron-clad.” The song, released two years ago on YouTube, has some 4.2 million views.

The BJP’s disappointing results in the 2024 general elections have triggered a conversation about whether the party’s divisive approach to sectarian politics, as symbolized by the bulldozer, is sustainable. But the bulldozer continues to be central to Adityanath’s political strategy.

In a parliamentary session last July, Uttar Pradesh state minister Sanjay Nishad, a BJP ally, attributed the party’s losses to the “misuse of bulldozers.” In response, Adityanath stood by the “bulldozer policy,” asserting that he was not motivated as chief minister by the mere desire to hold a job but “to ensure that those guilty also suffer.” Many BJP voters clearly support this view. On Nov. 9, 2024, several of Adityanath’s supporters attended his public rally in the city of Mainpuri riding on a bulldozer. It was an obvious threat that the public should toe the sectarian line or face consequences.

The weaponization of the bulldozer has already widened the cleavage between Hindus and Muslims in India. But the instigation of division through political symbols is nothing new. Hindu-nationalist forces have long used religious imagery and idioms as tools in the politics of belonging and othering. Today, BJP leaders still promote the idea that the two communities are unified blocs with distinct, and often opposing, interests. Adityanath has often used the slogan “*Batenge toh katenge*”—that is, Hindus will be slaughtered if they are divided—invoking it after the 2024 elections, urging the community to stay united. And during





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People watch as a bulldozer demolishes the house of a Muslim man in Prayagraj on June 12, 2022.

the recent state election campaign in Maharashtra, Modi reiterated Adityanath's message, saying, "We are safe if we are together." The implicit message (often made explicit) is that the opposition Indian National Congress party is responsible for dividing Indians, by playing intercaste politics among Hindus.

India's diversity is reduced to a religious binary, with Muslims depicted as a group that poses a threat and needs to be disciplined. The bulldozer enacts this discipline.

In India, the putative home of religious diversity, Hindu nationalism is thus actively advancing social fragmentation. The BJP-controlled government amplifies the anxieties of Hindu society about the Muslim minority, which produces prejudices that, in turn, influence electoral politics and policy. This pattern of mutual reinforcement offers no guarantee of electoral success, as the BJP saw last year. But it nevertheless deepens societal divides and threatens to worsen the precarious position of Muslims and other minorities for generations.

The bulldozer is the latest avatar of this destructive majoritarian politics. Yet there is now a glimmer of hope—albeit a tenuous one—that Indian Muslims may be spared its use in a physical, if not symbolic, sense. Last November, after four years of bulldozer justice, India's Supreme Court delivered a judgment denouncing extrajudicial demolitions. In its ruling, the court criticized the authorities' bypassing of due process, deeming such actions unconstitutional. The response so far from Adityanath and Modi has been a conspicuous silence.

Even if the era of state-sanctioned bulldozer justice is over, though, the deep social scars it has produced are likely irreversible. The bulldozer will remain indelibly imprinted in the collective memory of Hindus and Muslims alike. ■

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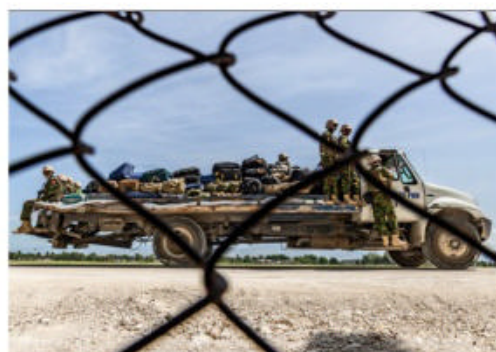
# What in the World?

By Syd Kuntz

The following is adapted from recent editions of FP's weekly online news quiz.  
Test yourself every week at ForeignPolicy.com.

**1. Which leader visited Haiti in September to assess the progress of the multinational security support mission there?**

- a. U.S. President Joe Biden
- b. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva
- c. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres
- d. Kenyan President William Ruto



**2. On Sept. 25, China test-launched an intercontinental ballistic missile into the Pacific Ocean for the first time since what year?**

- a. 1980
- b. 1990
- c. 2000
- d. 2010



**3. The United Kingdom announced on Oct. 3 that it would transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to what nation?**

- a. Sri Lanka
- b. Madagascar
- c. Mauritius
- d. The Maldives

**4. In early October, Brazil's Supreme Court lifted a short-lived nationwide ban on which social media website?**

- a. Facebook
- b. TikTok
- c. X
- d. Instagram

**5. In which Russian city did representatives from more than 30 countries meet in late October for a summit of the BRICS bloc?**

- a. Yekaterinburg
- b. Kazan
- c. Nizhny Novgorod
- d. Samara



**6. The U.S. presidential election dominated headlines on Nov. 5—but which other country also held a vote that day?**

- a. Palau
- b. Romania
- c. Uruguay
- d. Guinea-Bissau

**7. In November, Narendra Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Guyana since which year?**

- a. 1957
- b. 1968
- c. 1975
- d. 1983



**8. Roughly what percentage of Gabonese voters approved a new constitution in a Nov. 16 referendum?**

- a. 54 percent
- b. 67 percent
- c. 81 percent
- d. 92 percent



**9. In November, two undersea telecommunications cables were severed in which body of water?**

- a. Mediterranean Sea
- b. Persian Gulf
- c. Baltic Sea
- d. Bay of Bengal

**10. Which European landmark reopened to the public on Dec. 8 after several years of renovations?**

- a. The Colosseum
- b. Belém Tower
- c. Notre Dame
- d. Bran Castle

ANSWERS: 1. d; 2. a; 3. c; 4. c; 5. b; 6. a; 7. b; 8. d; 9. c; 10. c



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