

FOREIGN ANALYSIS

SUMMER 2025

THE EFFECT OF TRUMP 2.0

Trump's Redefinition of
American Global Leadership

PATRICK SLOWINSKI

Sustainability Crisis of
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STEVEN E. HENDRIX

Trump's America

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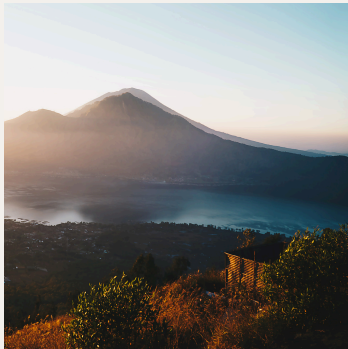
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Trump's Redefinition of American Global Leadership

No More Free Rides in a Transactional World

PATRICK SLOWINSKI

President Donald Trump's remarkable return to the U.S. presidency in a Grover Cleveland redux, not seen since 1892, has generated significant domestic and foreign policy ripples, as well as the predictable waves of angst from those abhorred by anything Trump says, does, posts, or fails to say or do. At the same time, his phoenix-like resurrection has produced embers to rekindle the hopes of many Americans who voted for him and/or his policies, which those voters assert finally place the interests of American citizens in pole position.

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Ultimately, most Americans voted decisively and endorsed Trump to “Make America Great Again,” and to put “America First.” In November 2024, against conventional wisdom, Trump prevailed in the face of accusations that he was a “dangerous dictator” who only cared about himself. His first executive orders, however, represented Trump’s intentions to fulfill campaign promises despite the swift criticism he would receive. His second victory begs the question: What did 77 million Americans see in 2024, when so many around them predicted the end of democracy in our Constitutional Republic should Trump win again?

As a former diplomat and a student and teacher of psychology, the answer need not be complicated: respect. Many Americans wanted to be respected (or at least left alone) first by their fellow citizens, many of whom have called them fascists, Nazis, racists, white supremacists, and a myriad of pejorative tropes with the suffix -phobe, nonstop, for nearly a decade now. Trump was not just a talisman for this respect, but more like a lightning rod, attracting negativity at every step but continuing onward.

Relatedly, Americans generally want respect from the rest of the world in terms of trade and military cooperation and just plain equal treatment for starters—no more dependence on the U.S. to spend its wealth and send its military into harm’s way in other countries, especially when America receives few tangible benefits for those sacrifices. At least with Trump, these disenchanted and disenfranchised Americans had little doubt that he would “fight, fight, fight” for them, echoing his words and bringing forth the image of the historic defiant photo in rural Butler, Pennsylvania, on July 13, 2024, when a would-be assassin on a rooftop came millimeters from ending Trump’s life.

AMERICA FIRST, AGAIN

What’s more, Trump’s detractors at home and abroad remain legion, especially in the struggling mainstream media, where they pounce on any perceived Trump or Trump official misstep to rehearse the same tired slogans and divisive slurs, often in unison—a feat that would give even the most fervent Trekkie Borg enthusiasts pause to review the quality of such choreographed groupthink. Another byproduct of Trump’s 2024 victory versus his win in 2016 is that there are now confirmed U.S. citizens (although only a few to date) connected to the entertainment business who actually “fled” the U.S. when Trump won again in 2024 (e.g., Ellen DeGeneres and Portia de Rossi [to the U.K.], Rosie O’Donnell [to Ireland], and Courtney Love [to the U.K.]).

To date, the list of Trump-affected expats is incomplete, and I did not include alleged “celebrities” unknown to me. Finally, there are signs that some sufferers of what many conservatives call Trump Derangement Syndrome (TDS) have started to admit that hating Trump and half the country as one’s primary political platform did not lead to victory in 2024, nor is it likely that this overused plan to attack Trump and his “deplorables” will lead to political wins against a growing conservative electorate. Astonishingly, some Americans and U.S. international partners seem to have selective amnesia when it comes to the public questioning of Trump’s election victories by the media and Democrats nonstop for Trump’s entire first term—a sin Democrats cynically considered a mortal one for Republicans in 2020, when 45 and many of his supporters questioned Biden’s 81 million votes (and some still do).

The Guardian, no friend to Trump, found in January 2024 that 39 percent of U.S. adults still dispute that the 2020 presidential election was fair. Furthermore, the mainstream media only “bravely” acknowledged that the 46th president was “diminished” (*non compos mentis*) only after a decisive and uncontested November 5 Trump victory. For much of the 2024 campaign season, the mainstream media were either duplicitously lauding Biden’s “cognitive and physical prowess,” often referring to him as “sharp as a tack,” or feigning ignorance toward Biden’s decline. The media also took great pains to ignore Vice President Harris’s word salads, second-hand embarrassment-inducing interviews, vapid answers to questions on the economy, immigration, slights toward the forgotten American in the middle of two elitist coasts, and her repeated failure to explain how a Harris presidency would be different from Biden’s first and only term.

Trump’s sworn enemies in the media devoted, instead, more of their “reporting” to any potential threats a second Trump presidency (even referring to him as a fascist or an outright Nazi) would hold for America, showing little intellectual integrity, objectivity, or remorse for allowing their political biases to influence voters. Conversely, they painted a false picture that the 46th Commander in Chief was not only capable of calling the shots, but that his presidential acumen was above par. Biden’s public decline and his June 27, 2024, debate debacle (discussed mostly on conservative-leaning outlets in the U.S.) created a situation in which the Democrat National Committee (DNC) selected/appointed Vice President Kamala Harris as the party’s presidential candidate, kicking Biden to the proverbial curb 107 days before the election after Biden had received over 14 million primary votes.

Democrats and the media implored the country to stop asking who was

leading our nation while President Biden was struggling to speak coherently in public, forgetting names and faces of people close to him, even calling out to a deceased Congresswoman at the pulpit during a public event. The world watched as walking up aircraft stairs or across a stage without falling was challenging for arguably the most powerful man in the world. Putting the Democrat and media cognitive dissonance aside, Trump has less than four years to enact paradigm-shifting and arguably risky economic and foreign-policy changes that will have implications for the United States and the world long after the 47th U.S. President leaves office, for the second time, in January 2029.

In the days of instantaneous news (biased or otherwise), hot takes, memes, clips, videos, social media, and podcasts, it is too soon to predict the consequences of Trump's second term. But before pandits and pundits alike continue their collective pearl-clutching, hand-wringing, and teeth-gnashing, it is prudent to review objectively why MAGA and America First have evolved from mere campaign slogans into policies. Trump's unconventional and arguably historically rocky first term—and how, against formidable odds, he earned a second term, even winning the popular vote, a feat no Republican President had accomplished since George W. Bush in 2004—deserve closer scrutiny.



Supporters await the arrival of President Donald Trump at a campaign rally at the Atrium Health Amphitheater on November 03, 2024 in Macon, Georgia. With only two days until the election, Trump is campaigning for re-election on Sunday in the battleground states of Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Georgia. (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

STILL STANDING

So how did a non-career politician, with a reputation for brashness, overcome two impeachments, 34 convictions in a New York State court (misdemeanor bookkeeping charges escalated to felony charges for the first time in such a case), accusations of spearheading or enabling an insurrection on January 6, 2021, and two assassination attempts, decidedly convince Americans he still deserved their vote and a historical second term? Although President Trump and his team rarely shy away from the spotlight or credit for accomplishments, the current shift in U.S. domestic and foreign policy is not all Trump's doing, although many in the media like to paint a picture to that effect.

Whether it is fashionable to acknowledge it or not, many Americans agree with Trump that America must take care of its homeland first—to be able to support other countries financially and militarily, one's own house must be in order, and the country must be internally stronger to be great again. It is this rising ground support among more and more Americans for a return to a more conservative normalcy, and not a “normalcy” where everything seemed to be turned upside down (e.g., trans women competing in women's sports, late-term abortions, a massive increase of illegal aliens in the country, employees hired or rejected based on race and gender camouflaged as DEI, taxpayer-funded sex change operations, mass lawfare against one's political opponent, their families, and supporters, and what many saw as two very different legal systems).

There was one lenient system where woke liberals faced few to no consequences, and a second where the proverbial book could be thrown at any conservative at any time. According to consistent polling, most Americans want their country's borders to be better secured, immigration laws consistently enforced, while pressing for illegal aliens (especially those with criminal records in their home countries, or worse, in the United States) to be deported expeditiously. Additionally, conservative pundits like CNN's Scott Jennings noted that President Trump has a talent for finding an 80/20 issue, getting on the 80 percent issue, and letting the Democrats publicly support the 20 percent issue just because it is in opposition to Trump.

Many Americans also want the government to stop foolishly spending their tax dollars (especially on programs in other countries with no tangible benefits for U.S. citizens) and get the nation's debt-laden checkbook balanced. Moreover, Americans view cost-savings initiatives such as the Department of Government Efficiency not only as a good idea, but

something that should have been set up and maintained decades ago. Trump's current approval ratings are below water following his tariffs rollout, but previously, he had reached more than 50 percent approval in more liberal polls for the first time. Finally, more than half the country consistently supports deporting all illegal aliens in the United States, spending much-needed resources on U.S. citizens.

THE MAN OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM

I propose that the ongoing American paradigm shift on economic and foreign affairs has been brewing for some time, with its initial kickstart in 2017, resulting in Trump's attention to better trade deals, less regulation, tax cuts, and opportunities and assistance, when needed, for the American citizen—not for illegal aliens. Above all, Trump is an effective and proven cheerleader for putting the needs of the United States first (particularly for the working class), creating an inward turn from a decades-long, more globalist approach to U.S. domestic and foreign policy. This Kuhnian shift would be radical under any president.

Trump is an effective and proven cheerleader for putting the needs of the United States first.

Still, for Donald Trump, who maintains he is not beholden to special interests or donors like most politicians, this shift is arguably moving at a hypersonic pace in terms of enacting executive orders (EOs) and taking other actions to put America first.

Moreover, President Trump's status as a longstanding cultural and iconoclastic figure in Americana, and his direct approach in 2025, make him the ideal punching bag for any outcomes the liberal opposition dislikes. Be prepared for a myriad of left-leaning polls prophesying Trump's "historic drops in the polls" and his imminent demise. In retrospect, Trump's ascension to the nation's top job in 2016 was the result of many variables, with some conflating and confounding ones in the mix.

Mainly, he had vicariously lived in the realm of politics without having ever run for office or been elected, but he knew how politics worked or didn't, and had donated accordingly for years to candidates that he thought might be useful to him and his businesses—something he stated openly on the debate stage with Hillary Clinton in 2016. Acknowledging that he had benefited from a less-than-transparent political system, he boasted that he was the one with the experience needed to fix it. For Americans devastated by inflation, lower wages, higher costs of living, and bleaker opportunities to finance a home, Trump was their guy in 2016, and for many, he remains so in 2025.

BEYOND GLOBALISM: TRUMP'S WAY

Fast forward to 2025, and Trump's second term is arguably a hyperextension of his America First policy, conceived in 2016, a policy often described as isolationist and nationalistic. To his core, Trump is a capitalist who views himself as a patriot—he wants all American citizens to become prosperous, while he publicly bemoans the perception that America has been the world's piggybank and patsy for decades, having been taken advantage of by unfair trade tactics and tariffs, often by our closest allies, and having little but close to \$40 trillion in debt to show for this apparent ill-conceived generosity.

As a former diplomat and someone who participated in trade negotiations at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, I remember asking, as I perused the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which was first signed in 1947 and last updated in 1994, about the disparity among tariffs and additional penalties such as value-added taxes on U.S. goods. I was told by senior trade officers that discrepancies in trade balances and tariffs were the United States' soft power that could be later leveraged with countries when needed.

For Trump and many of his supporters, the short- and long-term costs for that soft power were too great, leading only to a weaker United States. During the 2024 campaign, as interest rates skyrocketed, along with food, rent, energy, and credit card interest, down payments on a home seemed like impossible dreams, and talk of "soft power" reminded many voters of a phrase Trump repeated on the campaign trail and now at press conferences: "Other countries have been ripping us off for decades."



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks to supporters at a rally at Erie Insurance Arena on August 12, 2016 in Erie, Pennsylvania. Trump continues to campaign for his run for president of the United States. (Photo by Jeff Swensen/Getty Images)

At the same time, a tariff war will likely bring higher prices and perhaps a dearth of beloved goods to Americans (arguably addicted to cheaper goods made offshore) if an actual trade war persists beyond attempts to leverage reciprocal tariffs for creating more trading equality for American producers and consumers. In other words, Trump's public statements indicate that he views other countries as potential economic and commercial rivals until they prove otherwise by treating the United States equally—not equitably, *per se*.

This distinction is key, as Trump's critics on reciprocal tariffs are quick to point out inequity between developing economies and the United States, all the while buying into the canard that China is a developing economy. For Trump, talk is cheap, and reciprocal tariffs could be the catalyst needed to equalize the world's trading system, allowing American companies to compete against an ever-looming China—or, better, foreign companies could relocate to the United States, hire Americans, and avoid tariffs altogether.

Clearly, Trump stands at odds with modern monetary theory, fearing that the nation's increased debt will mark the end of American dominance and excellence, leading to a recession and a likely depression. Trump would much rather increase the size of the proverbial pie so everyone benefits, but the critical caveat for Trump is that America must get the biggest piece—and after years of American generosity with no return on investment, many Americans agree with his policies on trade and military action.

Not only is this paradigm something one would expect from a successful New York real estate mogul and TV personality, but it is another reason Americans voted for him—he was not a career politician, nor does he necessarily speak or act like one—a prime component of his charisma. Most importantly, Trump is the analogous wrecking ball to years of globalist flirtations with open borders, socialism, and communism that have made their way across the ocean from Europe to North America and arguably have already infiltrated Canada for decades.

NO MORE WARS

Decades of involvement and support for foreign wars and conflicts, along with financial aid, have taken their toll on the United States, a nation of 340 million and a growing debt of over \$36 trillion. Billions on international development have been scaled back, and USAID offices have been shuttered. As someone who has only served in a civilian role in

Afghanistan, I, along with millions of Americans, support President Trump's efforts to maintain peace, even if pundits and his critics focus on the "perceived unorthodoxy" of his methods. Most Americans do not want or support any more wars.

Trump's promises to immediately end the more than three-year war between Russia and Ukraine were obvious hyperbole, but also a reflection of Trump's genuine intentions to attempt to stop innocent people from dying in a senseless war, which he continuously blames Presidents Obama and Biden for failing to prevent. I have served as a U.S. diplomat in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia and maintain contact with people in the know in each country. All of them hope a solution will be found soon and feel Trump's strong personality and iron will are exactly what is needed to catalyze much-needed peace between Ukraine and Russia, while addressing the well-founded security fears of those in the neighborhood, such as Poland, the Baltic states, and Finland.

Trump continues to support Israel and its ongoing war with Hamas and other Iranian-backed proxies, Hezbollah and the Houthis. Trump's loyalty to Israel is not one-sided, however. Israel has made every effort to even the trade balance and tariff differentials with the United States. His offer to develop Gaza has led to more out-of-the-box discussions to perhaps mitigate decades of conflict and death. The liberal media, however, chalk up any successes to Trump's hubris and not to his real disdain for frenetic conflict and his desire that no one in the world has to experience war. In 100 days, Trump has called Iran and China to task and even openly criticized Putin, calling him Vladimir, following additional Russian attacks on Kyiv. Biden famously told Iran and its proxies "don't," while letting Mexican cartels wreak havoc on the U.S. southern border. In contrast, Trump and his homeland security team have secured the border, decreasing illegal crossings by 99%.

YOU PAY, YOU STAY

Trump's ability to frustrate and anger other countries is nothing new. But what the media often fails to see and report, purposely or not, is that Trump is defending his fellow citizens from previous agreements or expectations that benefit America's allies, often to the country's detriment. Trump has redefined previous notions of what it means to be an ally to include the attribute of treating the U.S. reciprocally when it comes to tariffs and working on means to reduce trade imbalances with the United States.

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Our northern neighbor, Canada, for example, has enjoyed decades of access to the U.S. market, while blocking many U.S. exports, making no real efforts to meet the minimum NATO two percent of GDP contributions, betting that “the Americans will save Canada if someone ever attacked North America.” As painful as it might be for Canadians to hear it, they can present as ungrateful neighbors who rest on their geographical fortune of being adjacent to the U.S., all the while mocking their southern neighbors at every turn, even booing the U.S. national anthem at sporting events.

Trump’s tariffs on Canada showed that the days of the United States subsidizing the Canadian economy out of kindness and the proximity principle are finally under public scrutiny. Trump is admittedly transactional, and he intends to get better trade deals with Canada while pressing Canada to also live up to its NATO commitments and rid itself of the deadbeat NATO member title (ranked 27 out of 32 NATO countries in percentage of GDP paid to NATO), which, to many Americans, is shameful. Eventually, Trump will strike a fairer trade deal with Canada and any country willing to shake themselves of old traditions where America bankrolls virtually all other countries and only collects trillions in debt for its own citizens and their posterity.

EUROPE, YOU’RE WELCOME

Of particular interest to the readers of this publication is the state of the U.S.–Europe relationship in Trump’s second term. What few Europeans understand about Americans in the days of YouTube, Spotify, Instagram, Rumble, X, and Facebook is that Americans are finally understanding how many Western, Old-World Europeans (not all Europeans) despise Americans and U.S. culture, forgetting the sacrifices the United States has made for decades to keep Europe safe and prosperous. Translated clips of Europeans brutally mocking Americans, including Trump—but not limited to him—are myriad, and Europe no longer receives almost automatic respect from the number of Americans it used to enjoy.

Trump doesn’t seek conflict, but he refuses to let allies take advantage of America’s goodwill.

In fact, Europe’s flirtations with socialism, communism, censorship, and unfair tariff and trade policies are proverbially coming home to roost. Trump has been extremely critical of the EU’s lopsided, protectionist tariffs against U.S. goods and other trade barriers that allow Europeans to benefit from America’s largess and generosity while attacking at least half of the United States on a regular basis without any fear of repercussions. With Trump, real U.S. allies are loyal, and if they show continuous disdain for the United States, he eventually tends to believe them. The grandest example

of European cognitive dissonance that irked Trump and many Americans was Germany's ill-conceived plans for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline with Russia, while at the same time balking at paying more to NATO, when the United States was paying the lion's share in NATO to protect Europe from Russia.

LEADERSHIP ON HIS TERMS

A majority of voting Americans chose Donald Trump in 2024, and he recently surpassed the first 100 days of his historic second and nonconsecutive term. For Americans, we have become accustomed to voting our discontent every two, four, and six years, and I do agree that some of Trump's presidential actions and executive orders are likely to hurt his approval ratings, but mostly among those who disliked him or even hated him previously. It is unclear how a Trump second term will affect Americans at home and whether voters will vote their displeasure in 2026 during the midterm elections.

Should the Democrats win, they will likely spend time and resources impeaching Trump for a third time. The truth is, America under Biden was a disaster—politically, judicially, socially, economically, at the border, and in terms of national security. Given that backdrop, it should not be incredulous that America selected someone willing to fight for her and her people, no matter what. If the media had not covered for Biden and then Harris, Trump's second victory would have been even more resounding.

For America's global partners, it is important to know that decades of U.S. governmental neglect for certain parts of the population and ludicrous spending and debt have caused American voters—and the man they voted for—to look inward and not simply manage the superficial symptoms of a growing disease. At his center, Trump is a businessman who wants to make deals and build mutually beneficial relationships. The converse is also true: if Trump believes American taxpayers are being taken advantage of, he will fight, often brashly—and to the chagrin of his critics.

Trump envisions a more prosperous world at peace, with the United States involving itself when the interests of the United States are at stake. Some of Trump's staunchest American hecklers have made efforts to meet with Trump and/or his officials to get things done and to see another side of the 47th President—something biased media are loath to attempt. Many world leaders should respect Trump's intransigence in putting Americans first, which is something America's sitting president expects from leaders of their respective countries. It is that stalwart dedication to the best interest of one's citizens that endears Trump to so many Americans.

Sustainability Crisis of American Foreign Policy

Trump's America and the End of Global Trust

STEVEN E. HENDRIX

The United States remains the most powerful actor on the global stage. Its economy is unmatched, its cultural reach unrivaled, and its military capabilities exceed those of its nearest rivals combined. America's greatness, ultimately, rests on the foundation of a dynamic economy—one that fuels innovation, underwrites global influence, and supports the tools of diplomacy and defense alike. But strength is not the same as sustainability. Recent years have revealed the extent to which American foreign policy is vulnerable not to external adversaries, but to internal disruption. The return of Donald Trump to the center of Republican politics—and the ideological volatility his movement has introduced—has shaken assumptions about the reliability of U.S. global engagement.

STEVEN E. HENDRIX, served in senior foreign policy positions in the Biden, Trump, Obama and Bush administrations. As a senior career diplomat, he served in Ghana, Nigeria, Paraguay, Iraq, Paraguay, the Eastern Caribbean, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Guatemala.



Allies now hedge, adversaries probe, and diplomats are forced to navigate a strategic environment shaped more by electoral swings than enduring doctrine. This is not a story of collapse. Democracies have the right to choose badly. Britain did it with Boris Johnson, Italy with Silvio Berlusconi, Russia with Boris Yeltsin. They survived. America is no exception. The sun will rise tomorrow. Institutions endure. But resilience is not automatic. It requires tending. And the greatest threat to American global leadership may come not from Beijing or Moscow, but from Washington's own habit of unforced errors. Trumpism, as a governing approach, challenges the postwar norms that once gave American foreign policy its strategic clarity: multilateralism, institutional continuity, and the idea that U.S. leadership serves more than narrow self-interest. Whether at the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whether negotiating trade or shaping climate policy, America has become more difficult to predict and harder to trust.

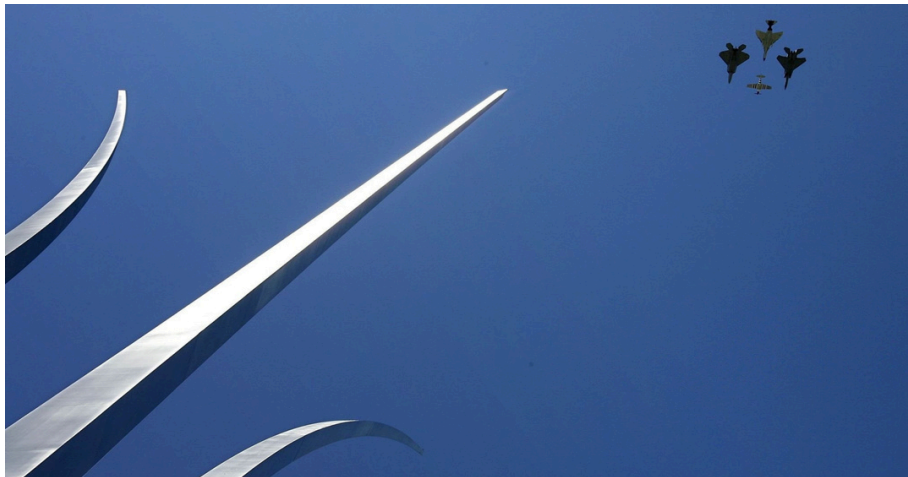
I have felt this shift firsthand—in conversations with foreign officials, partners, and civil society leaders from Paraguay to Ghana to Australia. Increasingly, they do not ask what America believes, but which America they are dealing with—and for how long. This article explores whether a sustainable American foreign policy is still possible in an era when domestic politics overshadow strategic consensus. It argues that continuity in foreign policy depends on political stability at home—and that the erosion of that stability is a self-inflicted risk. American greatness is rooted in economic vitality and democratic legitimacy. When those are threatened from within, it is not only the domestic agenda that suffers—but the credibility of the U.S. as a global leader.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF AMERICAN ORDER

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States consciously designed a global order rooted in collective security, open markets, and the rule of law. Institutions like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank were not just mechanisms of influence—they were expressions of a belief that American prosperity and global stability were linked. The geopolitical landscape of the late 1940s demanded innovation and vision. American policymakers understood that retreat into isolationism, as after World War I, would invite instability and allow rivals to shape the global order. Instead, leaders like George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and Harry Truman articulated a vision of U.S. leadership anchored in principles of cooperation and institutional strength. The Marshall Plan was more than economic aid—it was a political statement of solidarity with democratic Europe.

The creation of NATO in 1949 further cemented the idea that American security was inseparable from the security of its allies. This forward-leaning posture was not uncontested at home, but it gained broad bipartisan support. The ensuing decades saw the growth of international legal norms, free trade regimes under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the embedding of U.S. leadership in global governance structures. The American-led order was not without flaws or contradictions, but it provided relative peace, prosperity, and predictability in an otherwise volatile century. Strategic doctrines emerged to translate American values into action: the Truman Doctrine to contain Soviet expansion, the Reagan Doctrine to confront authoritarianism, and the Clinton Doctrine to defend human rights in a globalizing world.

Behind these doctrines stood institutions that provided ballast: a professional and non-partisan career diplomatic corps, a career military establishment, and a web of alliances forged through NATO and beyond. In my own experience, I often saw how the credibility of U.S. diplomats abroad stemmed less from their charisma than from the perception that they spoke for a system larger than themselves. That system—rooted in predictability and principle—was the real source of American soft power. Nowhere was continuity more evident than within the Republican foreign policy establishment. From Dwight Eisenhower through George H.W. Bush, the GOP (short for the "Grand Old Party," as the Republican Party is commonly known in U.S. politics) embraced a vision of international engagement grounded in deterrence, order, and alliance management. The Cold War did not eliminate debate—realists and idealists vied for influence—but the boundaries of disagreement were clear.



U.S. Air Force planes from four generations, including an F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, an F-15 Eagle, an F-4 Phantom and a P-51 Mustang fly in formation while rehearsing a flyover of the new U.S. Air Force Memorial in preparation for the its dedication October 13, 2006 near the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. An "aerial parade" of 14 Air Force aircraft from different time periods will be part of the dedication. (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

Even neoconservatism, at its height in the early 2000s, still operated within the presumption that America had a role to play in shaping the international order, however misguided the means. This was a party that believed in expertise. National security decisions were not made on cable television but in Situation Rooms and secure briefings. Foreign assistance, military deployments, and arms control agreements were debated with an eye toward long-term impact. Whether one agreed with the policy was beside the point—the process conferred legitimacy. It made America a reliable actor in a world that depended on reliability. That consensus no longer holds.

DIPLOMACY DERAILED

The ideological foundation of Trump's foreign policy can be traced to his 2016 campaign and his first term in office. "America First" was not simply a slogan; it was a repudiation of the internationalist consensus that had defined U.S. strategy for generations. Defined largely by Trump himself, it favored unilateralism, nationalism, and the reduction of global commitments in favor of transactional relationships. Critics described it as isolationist; supporters called it realist. What was clear was that the traditional guardrails of U.S. diplomacy—stability, credibility, and alliances—were sidelined. The "America First" doctrine reversed decades of U.S. leadership strategy. Agreements were discarded, alliances disparaged, and international obligations recast as burdens.

From the Paris Agreement on climate change to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, Trump's tenure was marked by an unraveling of previous commitments without clear alternatives. At the institutional level, the damage was both symbolic and operational. The Department of State was sidelined, foreign assistance politicized, and national security briefings replaced by public pronouncements on social media. Career foreign service officers—once seen as custodians of continuity—were marginalized or driven out. The cost was not only internal morale but external confidence. Allies accustomed to steady engagement were forced to reckon with unpredictability as the new norm. Trump's ascent also reshaped the Republican Party's internal dynamics. What was once a coalition of realists, internationalists, and neoconservatives became an uneasy mix of nationalists, isolationists, and populist skeptics of foreign engagement.

The "America First" doctrine reversed decades of U.S. leadership strategy.

Strategic doctrine gave way to soundbites. Grand strategy was displaced by grievance politics. This fragmentation has left the GOP without a coherent foreign policy vision. One wing calls for restraint and retrenchment. Another

SWING STATECRAFT

In theory, strategy provides the connective tissue between administrations. In practice, U.S. foreign policy has begun to resemble a pendulum. The pivot from George W. Bush to Barack Obama, then to Donald Trump and back to Joe Biden, created whiplash on everything from climate commitments to trade policy to Middle East diplomacy. Now, with Trump's return, the swing could again be extreme. For allies, this churn erodes confidence. NATO partners wonder whether the United States will honor collective defense obligations. In the Indo-Pacific, countries recalibrate their hedging strategies. And across multilateral institutions, the specter of American retreat looms over every agreement. Those who gain from the chaos are watching. Russia thrives in the vacuum left by Western ambivalence. China uses diplomatic inconsistency to build its own credibility as a partner. The Belt and Road Initiative did not emerge in a vacuum—it stepped into a gap created by American distraction.

Foreign policy is, at its core, a long game. Treaties, alliances, and military basing agreements are made not for one term, but for generations. When those arrangements are reinterpreted—or threatened—with each electoral cycle, the result is instability. Recent actions of the Trump Administration further compound these concerns. A return to aggressive tariff policy has already introduced renewed instability into global markets. Tariffs have been imposed not only on China but also threatened against Mexico, India, and the European Union. The international financial institutions have adjusted world growth forecasts downward in response to these trade tensions. The resulting uncertainty increases the cost of capital, discourages investment, and may drive up inflation in the U.S. itself.

Separately, mass deportations of undocumented migrants and the non-renewal of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for many groups under U.S. protection send chilling signals about American reliability. In recent months, TPS protections have not been extended for citizens of El Salvador, Honduras, Nepal, and Nicaragua. At the same time, new travel bans have been imposed on citizens from Iran, Syria, Somalia, and Venezuela. These are not merely administrative decisions—they are geopolitical messages. Trust, once lost, is hard to regain. Intelligence sharing requires confidence in discretion. Joint military exercises require predictability. Trade agreements depend on regulatory consistency. When those are absent, partners hedge, adversaries test, and global norms fray. I've seen firsthand how partners in Africa and Latin America now embed contingencies for a possible policy reversal in their cooperation with the United States. The message is clear: America is no longer presumed to be steady. And in geopolitics, perception is power.

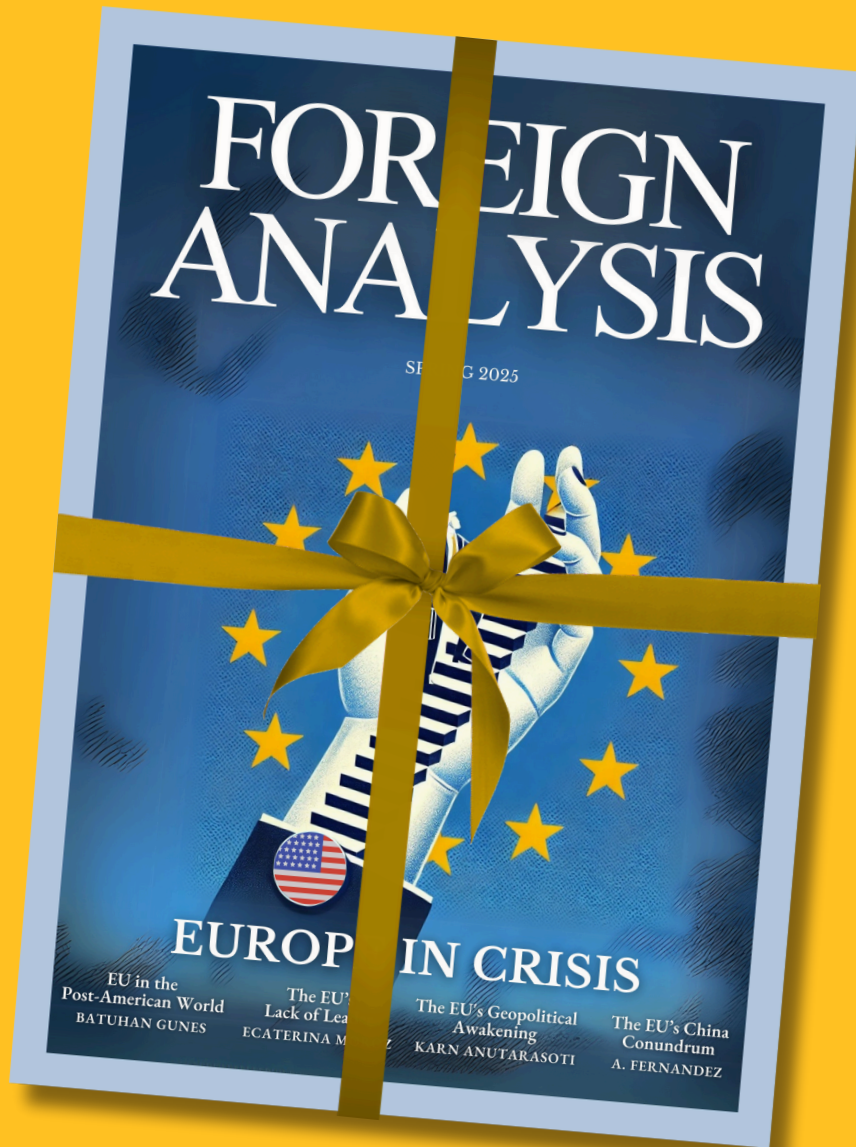
BEYOND TRUMP

The immediate question is how far Trumpism will extend during his current term in office. The deeper one is whether his foreign policy orientation will outlast him. The movement he leads is not simply electoral—it is ideological. Its distrust of institutions, disdain for diplomacy, and embrace of zero-sum nationalism have reshaped the Republican worldview. But I believe Trump is now at the apogee of his political power. He cannot run for a third term. The Supreme Court may act as a check on his expansive use of executive power. And if history repeats itself, he may lose the House of Representatives in the 2026 midterms—just as he did in 2018. If that happens, his ability to legislate without compromise will evaporate. Worse, the House could tie up his administration in investigations and hearings. In his first term, he was impeached twice.

Even if a different leader emerges, the gravitational pull of Trumpism may persist. The party's realignment has marginalized its internationalist wing. That leaves open the possibility of further unpredictability in the years ahead, regardless of who occupies the Oval Office. Restoring a sustainable foreign policy requires more than waiting out a single political cycle. It demands structural reform: insulating core institutions from political swings, restoring bipartisan guardrails, and reaffirming America's role in the world not as burden, but as opportunity. This also requires rebuilding public trust. Americans must understand why foreign policy matters—and how it connects to their daily lives. Diplomacy is not a luxury. It is an extension of national interest, security, and economic strength. And above all, sustainability requires coherence. Without a unifying vision of America's role in the world, the pendulum will continue to swing—until the system itself begins to break. America's foreign policy has long benefited from its economic strength, military reach, and cultural appeal.

But its true power lies in its ability to lead—not just through force, but through example. That leadership now stands at risk. The United States is not in decline. But it is at a crossroads. If it is to remain a cornerstone of global order, it must first restore order at home—through political stability, institutional integrity, and a renewed sense of purpose. America is great because of its economy. But the greatest threat to that greatness is not a foreign adversary—it is internal dysfunction. China and Russia are watching, but so are allies, neutral states, and swing nations. From Southeast Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa, governments are recalibrating their policies and partnerships in light of American unpredictability. Power without purpose breeds exhaustion. And exhaustion, if left unchecked, becomes abdication. The world will not wait for America to get its act together. It will simply adjust.

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Trump's America

How the United States Became the World's Most Dangerous Example?

COLE MCELDFOWNEY

Democracies are inherently fragile; they depend on a healthy body politic, and corruption is the cancer that turns it malignant. Although often taken for granted as the world's only broadly legitimate form of government, with nearly all countries claiming to be some form of democracy, its global prevalence is a relatively recent development. The second and third waves of democratization after World War II were not the result of the inevitable march of human progress, but rather the direct product of U.S. influence and intervention.

COLE MCELDFOWNEY, is a researcher and policy analyst specializing in environmental security, financial crime, and East Asian affairs. He holds a Master's in International Relations from American University and has worked in the U.S. Senate with a focus on environmental policy, trade, sanctions, and democratic backsliding.



For the past 80 years, American foreign policy has positioned itself at the center of a new world order—one that champions multilateral cooperation, free-market capitalism, and liberal democracy. From the postwar reconstruction of Europe and Japan to the creation of intergovernmental organizations and global financial institutions, the past century has been defined by massive U.S. investment in shaping the rules of trade, diplomacy, and conflict resolution around its own interests. However, while these developments often supported liberal democracy, in nearly every case where the U.S. had to choose between a nation's self-determination and its own strategic interests, it chose the latter.

During the height of the Cold War, the liberal world order still gave way to military coups, proxy wars, and sponsorship of authoritarian regimes wherever American leadership believed such actions maintained global stability. In countries as far-flung as Chile, the Congo, Iran, and Vietnam, an expanding security state within the executive branch toppled governments in pursuit of global dominance by any means necessary—even at the cost of democratic freedoms and significant loss of life among local populations. As global hegemon and with the need to react quickly to international crises—something Congress is structurally unable to do—the presidency gradually consolidated power with dwindling constraints from the legislative or judicial branches.

While the foundation for these changes was laid during the Cold War and capitalized upon immensely during the Global War on Terror, the consequences of an increasingly imperial presidency have culminated under the Trump administration: a presidency marked by rampant corruption, repudiation of democratic norms and processes, and a mission to brutally punish political opposition. President Trump's style of governance marks a sharp break from long-standing democratic norms and from the United States' role—however flawed—as a global example of democracy. His efforts to subvert institutional checks and balances, combined with the corruption endemic to his administration, carry consequences that extend far beyond U.S. borders. Experts and allies alike must confront a critical question: what does an illiberal America project onto the world in place of democracy?

THE BUSINESS OF POWER

Criticisms of the structural contradictions between liberal democracies and the coercive security states they deploy are nothing new; nor is corruption without precedent in American political history. Moreover, Trump's zanier schemes often garnering the most publicity—such as throwing a military parade on his birthday, threatening Canada with annexation, or tossing around the idea of putting his face on Mount Rushmore, in true autocrat

fashion—these theatrics, though bizarre and unfit for a modern U.S. president, are not ultimately what will have the longest lasting impact on the United States or the world.

What distinguishes the first six months of Donald Trump's second term from past administrations is the unprecedented scope and speed with which he has dismantled institutional guardrails, not merely to enrich himself but to inflict lasting damage on a system that may prove difficult to repair. It is worth noting that corruption for private gain has been so rampant in this presidency that comparisons to the Gilded Age are not only becoming common but increasingly justified. In addition to receiving a Boeing 747 from the Qatari government, a move many experts argue directly violates the Foreign Emoluments Clause, the president has repeatedly used his office to advance his own business interests and those of his close allies.

Donald Trump's cryptocurrency (\$TRUMP) and "Make America Great Again" merchandise have more than doubled his fortune to an estimated \$5.1 billion—an arrangement the White House maintains does not constitute a conflict of interest. Meanwhile, Elon Musk, as the richest man on Earth, was permitted to use the White House lawn to showcase new Tesla models, as the president gave a glowing endorsement from behind the wheel. However, behind these headline-grabbing stunts is a deliberate strategy to tear down safeguards against abuse.

On day one of President Trump's second term, agencies across the executive branch began to be gutted, led either by Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) or by the newly confirmed heads of agencies hand-picked for their loyalty to the new administration. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was dismantled entirely. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) was shut down. But nowhere was this more evident than in the systematic dismantling of anti-corruption institutions, the rollback of financial regulations, and the suspension of transparency laws.

LEGALIZED LAWLESSNESS

Under the pretense of easing burdens on corporations and business owners, the new administration launched a sweeping assault on the regulatory frameworks and oversight institutions essential to combating corruption. Among the earliest casualties were Task Force KleptoCapture, the Justice Department's Kleptocracy Team, and the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative, specialized units within the Justice Department tasked with investigating high-level financial crimes with global implications.

These teams handled cases ranging from sanction evasion by Russian oligarchs bankrolling the invasion of Ukraine to billion-dollar corruption

schemes, often working to recover stolen assets and return them to victims around the world. Disbanding these teams not only abandoned critical commitments to U.S. partner nations and shelved cases with national security implications, but also dismantled expert networks that had taken decades to develop.



A sign marks the location of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) headquarters building on April 30, 2025, in Washington, DC. (Photo by J. David Ake/Getty Images)

Meanwhile, the same Justice Department froze enforcement on cornerstone anti-bribery laws such as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA). Once considered the gold standard for international anti-bribery enforcement, the regulation was paused under the newly appointed U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi. Her career with President Donald Trump began in his first term and has been defined by her unwavering support, going as far as attempting to overturn the results of President Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory in Pennsylvania and perpetuating the conspiracy theory that the election was fraudulent.

Prosecutions have slowed to a near halt, and large cases against multinationals were quietly abandoned. Foreign influence in U.S. politics, already a growing concern, now faces even fewer barriers. Earlier this month, one of the most significant targets has been the Corporate Transparency Act (CTA), a 2021 law passed with bipartisan support that required companies to disclose beneficial ownership to deter money laundering, tax evasion, and illicit finance. The Treasury Department, then headed by a close family friend to the president, Scott Bessent, would eventually issue a new rule exempting domestic entities from reporting obligations and changing the definition of what a "reporting company" is to only include entities formed under foreign law.

In other words, American companies and beneficial owners do not need to follow the law; the law only applies to foreigners. The CTA represented a culmination of over a decade of work on the part of experts, activists, and representatives in Congress, in addition to pressure from international organizations like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), to combat the flow of criminal funds. Consequently, the rule change drew ire from both Republican and Democratic senators, claiming it violated congressional intent, with a joint statement requesting it be reversed.

The same Justice Department froze enforcement on cornerstone anti-bribery laws such as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA).

But by delaying implementation deadlines, narrowing the definition of reportable entities, and stripping key agencies like Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) of necessary funding and authority to act, the Trump administration effectively defanged one of the most significant anti-corruption laws in a generation. One of the most alarming trends

of the past six months is the extent to which the administration's second-term agenda is being carried out by loyalists with direct personal or political ties to the president.

Nearly every cabinet member fits this mold—either close family and friends (Bessent, Lutnick), former politicians who have aligned themselves with the MAGA movement (Gabbard, Ratcliffe, Zeldin), or fringe figures pushing its more extreme elements (RFK Jr., Noem). This prioritization of loyalty over competence often results in what is known as a kakistocracy—government by the least qualified—which can have devastating long-term effects on public administration.

More concerning still, the executive appears intent on embedding this model throughout the federal bureaucracy and civil society. Agencies that historically operated with degrees of independence—like the Department of Justice, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Securities and Exchange Commission—have seen senior staff replaced with ideologically aligned loyalists, a key aspect of democracies that succumb to authoritarianism. Investigations into politically sensitive topics have been quashed or redirected, and legal memos have been rewritten to justify previously untenable interpretations of executive authority.

And while personal grift may grab headlines, the long-term impact of regulatory and institutional erosion is far more profound. These systems exist not only to prevent corruption, but to ensure the U.S. government functions with legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and global partners. When those systems are eliminated or weaponized against political opponents, the legitimacy built by architects of American foreign policy for the past several decades shatters. When the world's most powerful

democracy abandons its own guardrails, it reshapes the norms and expectations of the global order itself.

GLOBAL DEMOCRACY ABANDONED

The strategy employed by Donald Trump in the United States mirrors patterns seen in countries undergoing autocratic takeovers. In Türkiye, following a failed coup attempt in 2016, President Erdoğan purged tens of thousands from the civil service, replacing judges, bureaucrats, and military leaders with party loyalists. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán consolidated power by stacking the judiciary, media, and universities with political allies, turning once-independent institutions into instruments of partisan control.

And in Russia, Putin built an oligarchic system by elevating loyalists from the security services and inner circle, sacrificing expertise for loyalty at every level. But on day one of Trump's second term, the United States crossed into unprecedented territory: nowhere in world history has the preeminent global power willingly descended into kleptocracy. The international consequences of America's democratic backslide are immediate and profound. For decades, U.S. support, whether rhetorical, financial, or diplomatic, played a critical role in bolstering anti-corruption efforts, empowering civil society, and legitimizing democratic reformers across the globe.

That credibility has been terminally damaged. As the U.S. dismantles transparency laws and weakens institutional oversight from the Oval Office, autocrats and skeptics alike gain a powerful new talking point: if this is the best the world's leading democracy can offer, then democracy isn't worth it. Moreover, Trump's approach to foreign policy—transactional, indifferent to human rights, and deeply hostile to multilateralism—further isolates democratic movements. From Belarus to Burma, activists who once looked to Washington for moral support and strategic leverage now find themselves abandoned.

In their place, autocrats court alliances with China and Russia, whose assistance comes with no expectation of reform. The long-term risk is not just reputational, but systemic. As leadership collapses, global efforts to curb kleptocracy and authoritarianism crumble with it. The result is a rising tide of impunity: regimes emboldened, opposition movements stifled, and the international order reshaped in the image of those who rule without constraint.

America in a Changing World

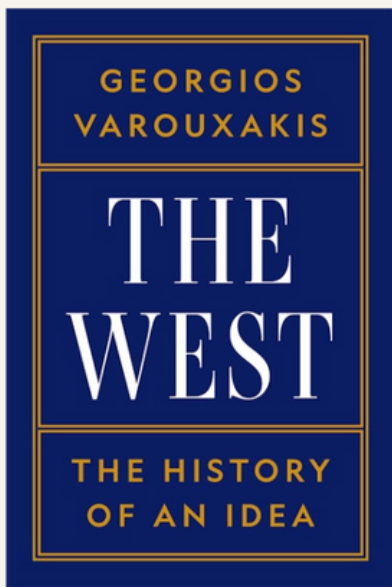
What is the Ideal American Foreign Policy in the Multipolar World?

ROBERT F. CEKUTA

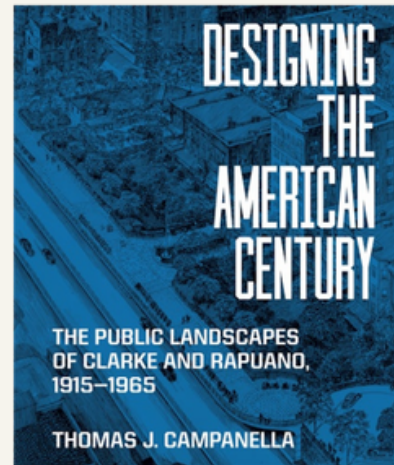
As President Trump seeks to implement a new America First foreign policy, more is underway than just changes in priorities, areas of emphasis, or tone. Global actors are changing how they see their futures and how each interacts with one another to realize their own national security/foreign policy objectives. Thus, while the argument is often made that “America First should not mean America Alone,” this point has to be integrated into any changes Washington pursues. The U.S. cannot operate with complete disregard of others in pursuing American objectives. Like it or not, the U.S. has been, and will continue to operate in a multipolar world, and Administration policymakers need to take this reality into account.

ROBERT F. CEKUTA, high-level positions in Washington and overseas in a four held numerous decades career in the U.S. Foreign Service, including as U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan. He currently teaches at American University in Washington D.C.

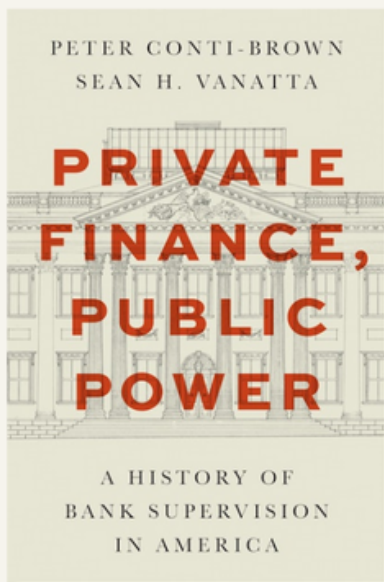




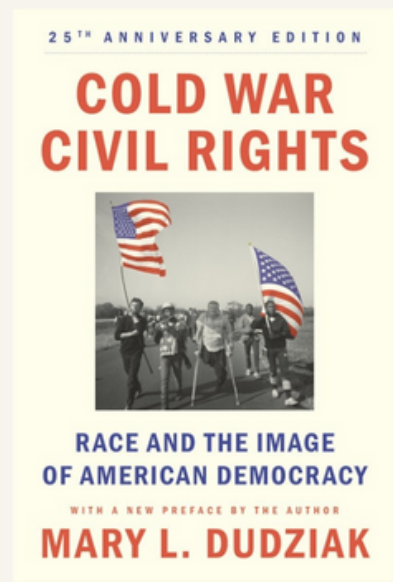
"Georgios Varouxakis's rich tapestry of a book draws on a vast array of thinkers—including Greeks, Russians and African Americans—to show that even since the 1820s, the concept of 'the West' has never been stable. From policymakers to teachers of 'Western civ,' anyone tempted to use this term ought to read this beautifully-written and remarkably learned volume."—Suzanne Marchand, author of *Porcelain: A History from the Heart of Europe*



"Despite often being associated only with green places and parks, landscape architecture firms such as Clarke and Rapuano's designed much of the core infrastructure—expressways, housing projects, and civic spaces—that comprise the American city. This book urges us to more fully interrogate how landscape architects have shaped the contemporary city."—Thaïsa Way, author of *Unbounded Practice: Women and Landscape Architecture in the Early Twentieth Century*



"Conti-Brown and Vanatta, through deep historical research and tales of key individuals, chart the U.S.'s bank supervisory pendulum from the Constitution through the 1970s. It's a story of competing theories of capitalism, banking and risk management that is essential reading for the modern moment."—Steven Kelly, *American Banker*



"Mary Dudziak's sophisticated account of race, reform, and international relations in post-World War II America is an outstanding work that should help historians rethink the early Cold War era."—David Farber, *H-Net Reviews*



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

President Trump has pursued tactics of surprise and disruption in U.S. foreign policy as well as in domestic affairs since the start of his second Administration. Among the ongoing themes is the belief that the international order has disadvantaged Americans and therefore urgent action is needed to reverse this situation to make Americans safer, more secure, and more prosperous.

Certainly, there are many facts arguing against this belief, but for purposes of this article it is best to accept that the President and his Administration are convinced of this assertion and will operate accordingly. This perception, however, runs into an ongoing reality, i.e., that the U.S. is one actor, certainly an extremely powerful actor, but still one actor among close to 200 countries and in a world in which non-state actors also play important, and sometimes even critical, roles.

LIKE IT OR NOT, IT'S A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Today's multipolar world includes powers such as European countries, Australia, NATO members, and Japan that remain supportive of the rules-based international system that brought peace and prosperity to many. It also includes powers such as Russia and China that feel constrained or disadvantaged by the current global system. Critically, the evolving multipolar world includes others on all continents desiring a bigger voice and more prominent international roles. Some have described the post-Cold War world as unipolar, overly advantageous to and dominated by the U.S.

American military and other defense capabilities have been a key factor in this perception of unipolarity. Reality, however, is that even in the defense/military sphere the U.S. for years has had to operate and seek to manage and to achieve its national security goals in a multipolar global environment. Post-Cold War U.S. military superiority is a primary factor for perceptions of unipolarity. Immense domestic outlays on U.S. defense, the American military's unique capabilities, the country's intelligence capacity, innovation in American weapons systems and military doctrine, the prevailing idea within the U.S. administrations and Congress that U.S. forces must be capable of defending U.S. interests anywhere, at any moment, in any situation, in any clime all meant that the country's military remained the world's best.

Best, however, does not always mean invincible. The U.S. saw numerous military successes, for example in Kuwait, the Balkans, and defeating ISIS,

but Afghanistan showed the problems even the strongest military faces in asymmetric warfare. Difficulties with the Houthis and piracy off the Horn of Africa reinforce this point. Moreover, the U.S. made a point of maintaining NATO and other alliances, e.g., with Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, and developing wider sets of international security partnerships, for example with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to address international security challenges more effectively.

At the same time, the U.S. and the status quo identified with American security and prosperity face challenges from other powers. Among the challenges are China's attempts over the past two decades to supplant the status quo in East and Southeast Asia. Similarly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine beginning in 2014, along with Moscow's cyber attacks, efforts to preclude countries from choosing to join NATO, use of information warfare, and additional aggressive actions against other European states further demonstrated peer-country willingness to challenge the U.S. despite tremendous U.S. nuclear and other military capabilities.

Disruptive technologies also undercut the notion of unipolarity in military affairs, even in areas where there has been an ongoing U.S. lead. Azerbaijan's use of drones during President Trump's first Administration to recapture its territory in Karabakh showed how drones could change warfare and that American drone technology was not the only game in town. Subsequently, Ukraine's successful use of drones, including against Russia's navy and distant strategic air assets, eliminated any remaining doubt about their transformative impact.



Iranian drone 'Mohajer 10' being exhibited during the Defense Industry Fair in Tehran, Iran on August 23, 2023. (Photo by Fatemeh Bahrami/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Iran's reported supply of drones to Russia has additional implications, i.e., the innovative capabilities non-peer powers can draw upon to challenge U.S. military capabilities. Artificial intelligence (AI), despite U.S. leads, is affecting defense strategies and capabilities globally. China and the U.S. each seek to develop and apply AI in the military and other spheres. However, other countries — and non-state actors — are also exploring and developing AI and how it might be applied in various fields, including defense.

Even if they are behind U.S. or Chinese AI capabilities, these other actors might produce important advances. Significant changes are certainly coming even as the capabilities, benefits, and dangers of AI in defense — as in other areas — are under debate. Multipolarity in global economic relations is also a reality. In fact, it might be the norm, and how the U.S. and others have navigated multipolarity in the economic sphere is instructive as to how multipolarity might work in other areas.

The U.S. economy has been the world's largest for decades: innovative, dynamic, and characterized by top levels of productivity. Still, Americans have had to compete with peers — not with near-peers, but peers — for markets and to increase prosperity at home. The EU's GDP is larger than that of the U.S. Moreover, a number of the European Union's members had — and have — their own individual clout and interests that sometimes conflict with those of the U.S., and so confound American businesses and policymakers. Japan, despite slower growth since the 90s, is still one of the world's largest.

Moreover, Japan is the largest holder of U.S. government bonds, currently holding over one trillion dollars in U.S. government debt. Tokyo has often followed policies Washington did not like, at times slow-rolling or even rejecting market-opening or other initiatives Washington advocated. China, the Asian Tigers, and now India are other dynamic global economic actors with their own objectives and strategies that are not always in agreement with Washington. In this multipolar global economic reality, the U.S. has had to exercise diplomacy, seek to understand others' policies and the reasons behind them, and build and utilize effective international coalitions.

In its economic diplomacy, the U.S. would sometimes strong-arm and at other times cajole and/or lead by example. There were certainly instances where the U.S. had to recognize it could not always do what it wanted, and so try to manage rather than solve a dispute, e.g., with the EU over its agricultural policies. However, Washington has also proven innovative and

resourceful, for example utilizing the G-20 and multipolarity so that China and other emerging market economies would help address the 2008 Financial Crisis — a move that benefited Americans as much as any other nation.

The aphorism that countries have interests and these interests take precedence over friendship remains true.

At the same time, the President is entering into and influenced by questions within the American public over the degree to which the U.S. should even be involved in international affairs. Overextension seems highly unlikely given Administration statements and actions such as the closure of the

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and plans to cut dramatically State Department offices and staff. Rather, the concern is the Administration might pull back too far and precipitate unnecessary problems and hamper its ability to act as needed. It seems worth considering two other possibilities as to where the Administration's policies might be headed — retrenchment and what might be termed strategic adaptation.

Public statements by President Trump and Vice President Vance suggest retrenchment is a preferred option even as the President says he wants to end conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Realizing increased defense spending by NATO members to increase European members' military capacities and lessen their reliance on the U.S. also fits with the retrenchment scenario. Key too are points President Trump made in his May 2025 speech in Riyadh, i.e., the leading role of the people of Saudi Arabia and other Peninsula states played in creating the modern Middle East — “developing your own sovereign countries, pursuing your own unique visions, and charting your own destinies in your own way.”

The President in Riyadh also explicitly rejected the nation-building programs previous administrations pursued, even in the context of fighting terrorism. The new Administration also seems to want to deal with issues on a bilateral, country-by-country basis and downplay, if not reject, multilateral approaches to transnational problems — most famously that of climate change. On top of all of this is the President's strong belief in personal diplomacy and in his ability to wring out concessions that have eluded others. Retrenchment is not synonymous with isolation. President Trump has pursued diplomacy with Russia and Ukraine to end that war.

He sought to engage Iran to end its destabilizing development of a nuclear weapon prior to the June hostilities. He has imposed tariffs and pursued tens of new bilateral trade agreements and sought increased foreign investment in the U.S. At the same time, the Administration is not afraid to

say it is not in U.S. interests to engage in particular international developments, even if previous administrations and segments of the American public had called for and supported them. The second Trump Administration has pulled back from any engagement in issues like Sudan's civil war and its regional implications or Haiti's domestic unrest and political crisis.

Proposed or already enacted budget and personnel cuts mean lost resources for addressing potential famines, disease outbreaks, or other transnational problems — cuts made despite arguments they could directly endanger or otherwise concern Americans in the foreseeable future, if not now. To date, the Administration's retrenchment does not seem to proceed on a strategic basis or take into account second- and third-level consequences, even if some directions, such as addressing competition with China or preferring bilateral over multilateral approaches, are recognizable from the President's first term.

What Americans saw with DOGE, the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, is suggestive of the Administration's current approach to foreign policy: an approach where cuts can be ad hoc, done seemingly without full consideration of strategic policy objectives or of an entity's purpose and capabilities. Aside from questions domestically about the direction of policy, foreign partners as well as opponents can be confused — and confusion in foreign policy can often be dangerous and lead to inadvertent, unnecessary problems if not outright crises.

Something else that is important: even as the Administration scraps chunks of the U.S. State Department and other foreign policy/national security institutions, the issues they have dealt with remain on the international agenda. The President may wish to ignore them, but these issues will remain and how they are addressed will affect Americans whether the U.S. is in the room or not. Moreover, some of the states/countries remaining in the room and affecting the global decisions on how those issues are addressed may be pursuing initiatives and policies inimical to Americans' interests.

SUGGESTING A WAY FORWARD

A better approach, including in following through on any vision of retrenching and re-ordering U.S. foreign policy and the institutions needed to execute it, would be for the Administration to develop and articulate a strategic approach, one that clearly sets out the President's foreign policy

vision and objectives. Such a written strategic policy framework does not need to include every eventuality, but it should spell out what the President most wants to achieve and how, as well as any redlines. It need not address every issue or U.S. policy towards every country.

The President may wish to ignore them, but these issues will remain and how they are addressed will affect Americans whether the U.S. is in the room or not.

However, it should provide adequate guidance and leave room for the State Department and other national security agencies to address matters that do not need to be on the President's personal radar screen, as well as to raise and suggest approaches to handle new problems as they arise. After all, unexpected foreign crises or other developments

abroad are realities that again and again have affected presidents' plans and forced presidential actions. Moreover, even if the President wishes to ignore a particular issue, such an approach might be termed strategic adaptation. It would take into account changes the President wants to pursue in U.S. foreign policy as well as ongoing, long-standing U.S. national security interests.

Its articulation would provide allies and partners with a needed sense of where the U.S. is heading as well as a needed roadmap for cooperating with the U.S. It should warn adversaries against actions inimical to American interests. It should include Administration economic objectives, whether reducing trade imbalances, addressing an over-reliance on China for critical minerals, or advancing cybersecurity. It should recognize the need for a diplomatic/foreign policy apparatus that monitors and understands developments globally and can develop sound proposals, sometimes at a moment's notice, for policymakers. It should recognize other countries can play significant beneficial roles such as Oman or Qatar facilitating U.S. diplomacy with Iran or between Israel and Hamas. It should include thinking about the negatives as well as expected positives of emerging AI technologies and their application.

It should provide a vision for the world commensurate with the role the President, Congress, the American people, and others around the world expect and count on the U.S. to play. The coming years will certainly see difficult and possibly dangerous competition from China and Russia, and probably additional destabilizing surprises in the Middle East and elsewhere. There will be pushes by others with significant clout and capabilities, such as Türkiye, the EU and its members, India, or Saudi Arabia, for renewed or increased international prominence. Reality is the U.S. will continue to play — and be expected to play — a strong international role.

The U.S. does not need to be involved everywhere or in every issue. Instead, it needs to identify which issues are important to U.S. interests of stability, prosperity, security, and peace, and pursue them while evaluating how and when to engage others in that pursuit. In this multipolar environment, it will be crucial to pay attention to other countries' concerns and visions, to be respectful of what others can and want to bring to addressing issues, and to communicate effectively American thinking and concerns. Respectful communication and engagement with others is not only good diplomacy, it will help set the tone needed to address existing and emerging problems, counter a “law of the jungle” approach to international relations, and reset a system that benefits the U.S. and others.

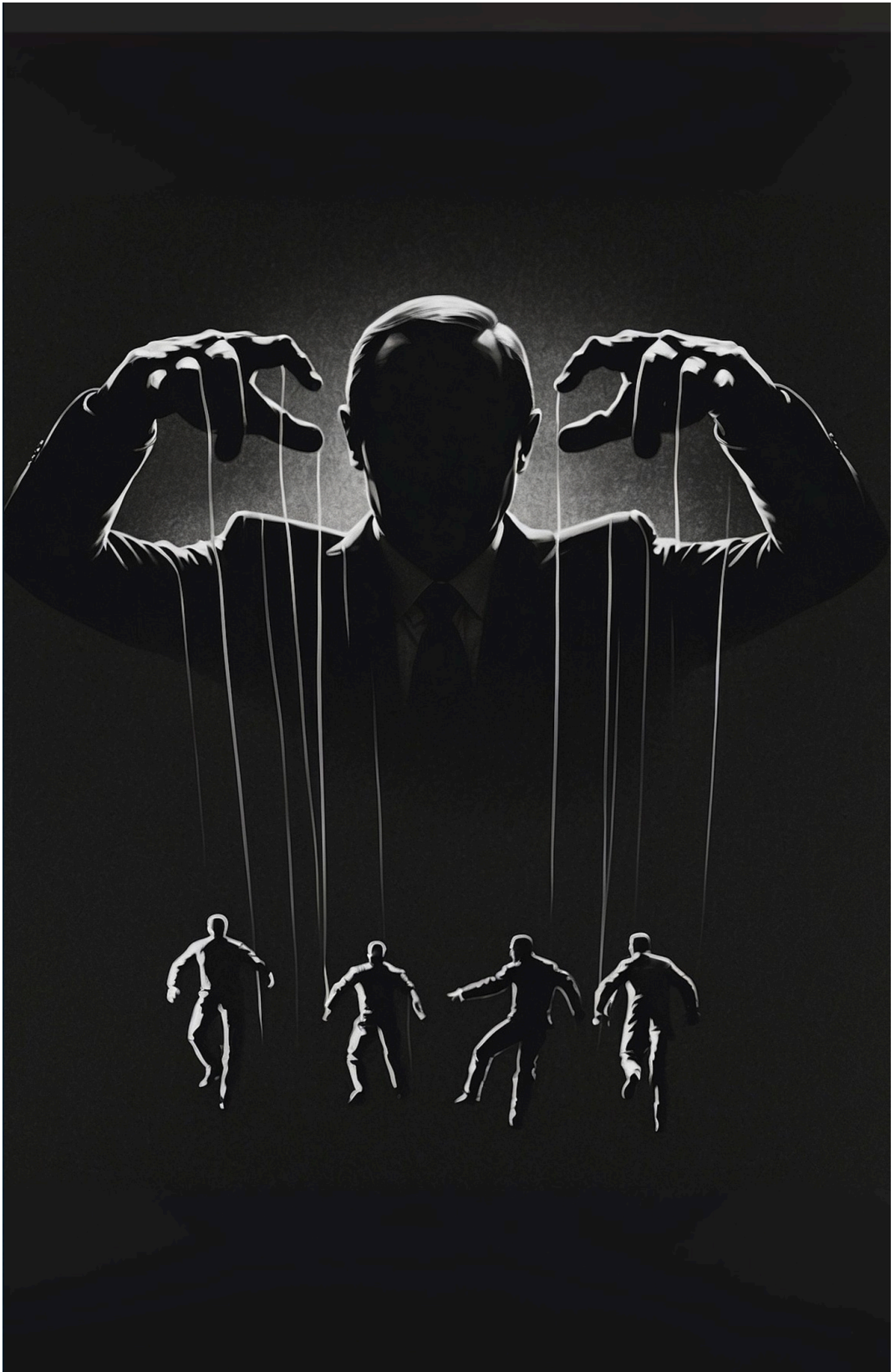
Putin's Oligarchs

The Machinery of Wealth and Obedience

SAM PEACH

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the symbiotic relationship between Russia's oligarchs and its executive branch has become central to Western strategies aimed at weakening the country's wartime economy. The U.S. Global Magnitsky Act of 2016, and the subsequent legislation it inspired across the West, established a framework for targeting the assets of individuals and entities linked to human rights abuses and corruption. These measures include asset freezes, travel bans, and similar tools.

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Special attention has been paid in the media to Russia's oligarchs. While the West was able to freeze around \$300 billion USD of the Russian Central Bank's foreign reserves with relative ease, tracing the wealth of oligarchs is far more complex. Their use of offshore finance, facilitated by opaque ownership structures and complicit Western service providers, has made it difficult to identify beneficial owners and seize assets. Nonetheless, Western authorities have achieved some success in targeting Russia's offshore empire; the figure most often cited for frozen oligarch-linked assets in the West sits at around \$30 billion USD.

Targeting the wealth of these individuals has been deemed particularly important given the relationship Vladimir Putin has cultivated with them since coming to power a quarter century ago. In contrast to the more laissez-faire approach of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin built a system in which political loyalty is exchanged for economic privilege, ensuring that Russia's most powerful business figures remain bound to the presidency.

Oligarchy has been widely discussed in relation to state capture in the new states of the former Soviet Union; Ukraine, for instance, has experienced the rise and fall of more than one oligarchic group since independence. However, oligarchies in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Russia, and elsewhere have taken varying forms, each possessing idiosyncrasies that complicate direct comparison. Understanding how power functions in contemporary Russia requires a close examination of the relationship Putin has constructed with the oligarchs, how it serves both sides, and how it diverges from the arrangement under his predecessor.

THE NEW TSARS OF CAPITAL

Before diving into Russia's economic transformation in the 1990s, some terms require clarification. "Liberalisation" refers to the removal of price controls and reforms designed to open the economy to competition, transitioning from a closed autarkic system to a free market. "Privatisation" means transferring state-owned enterprises into private hands. Central to this period was the "Semibankirshina," the group of seven oligarchs—Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Mikhail Fridman, Pyotr Aven, Vladimir Gusinsky, Alexander Smolensky, and Vladimir Potanin—who emerged as the dominant beneficiaries of the 1996 loans-for-shares scheme.

According to Berezovsky in a 1996 interview, these seven men controlled about half of the Russian economy. The term itself echoes the "Semiboyarshina," the seven aristocrats who wielded power during Russia's 17th-century Time of Troubles, a historical analogy underscoring their outsized influence. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left Russia and fourteen other new states grappling with the challenges of economic

integration into global capitalism. For Russians, private property was a novel concept after decades of socialism, and the nascent legal system struggled to keep pace. Liberalisation was uneven; while rampant arbitrage—buying goods at controlled low prices and selling them higher—was less prevalent in Russia than in some neighbours, it opened pathways for sharp businessmen to accumulate capital.

Privatisation unfolded through various mechanisms: voucher programmes, private sales, and management-employee buyouts, all vulnerable to corruption. Yet it was the loans-for-shares scheme that proved decisive in reshaping Russia's economic landscape. In 1995–96, the government, desperate for funds, accepted loans from a consortium of banks and businessmen in exchange for stakes in valuable state enterprises as collateral. When the government defaulted, these shares were sold off at drastically undervalued prices, consolidating immense wealth within a small circle of insiders.

This elite group's rise was inseparable from Boris Yeltsin's political struggles. His increasingly fragile hold on power made him reliant on the oligarchs' financial muscle and media influence. The Semibankirshina's backing was pivotal in the 1996 presidential election, where they campaigned vigorously against Communist candidate Gennady Zyuganov to secure Yeltsin's victory. This symbiosis of wealth and political power characterised Russia's 1990s oligarchy: private economic actors pulled the strings. While other groups profited from transition-era opportunities, such as the so-called "Red Directors" who gained through management buyouts, the Semibankirshina's domination of media, finance, and industry set them apart, effectively crowning them as Russia's new ruling class.

Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Potanin symbolize two distinct but equally powerful paths through which Russia's oligarchs amassed vast wealth during the tumultuous 1990s. Berezovsky built his fortune by exploiting market arbitrage opportunities in the late Soviet period before expanding aggressively into media, banking, and energy, using his close ties to President Yeltsin and the presidential family to consolidate influence. His media empire was instrumental in shaping public opinion during Yeltsin's 1996 re-election, while he also helped elevate Roman Abramovich through the loans-for-shares acquisition of Sibneft, embedding oligarchic power deeply within the state apparatus.

Potanin's ascent was rooted in insider knowledge gained from his Soviet-era role in the Ministry of Foreign Trade, where he understood the immense value of state assets like Norilsk Nickel. Before the loans-for-shares scheme was finalised, Potanin secured a critical meeting with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin in 1995, persuading him of its merits and influencing which assets would be used as collateral. When the

government defaulted, Potanin's investment company ONEXIM acquired a significant stake in Norilsk Nickel. After playing a key role in Yeltsin's re-election campaign, Potanin was appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs. His wealth, largely tied to Norilsk Nickel, has kept him among Russia's richest individuals as of 2025.

Throughout the decade, these oligarchs acted with near impunity. The Yeltsin administration was weak and financially unstable, yet oligarchic power shielded the elite even amid crises. In 1998, when the Russian economy was approaching default on sizable loans from the IMF, the oligarchs mobilised to protect their empires. They successfully lobbied Yeltsin for the dismissal of Prime Minister Sergey Kiriyenko's government, halting reforms and state intervention that threatened their fiscal interests. While ordinary Russians suffered in the '98 financial crisis, the oligarchs' grip tightened, and by 1999, popular disillusionment with both the president and the first class of businessmen had paved the way for Vladimir Putin's rise.

THE STATE HAS A CUDGEL

At the turn of the millennium, on New Year's Eve 1999, Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation. Yeltsin's health had been ailing for some time, sped up by his notorious alcoholism. Yeltsin's apologetic speech recognised the need of the state for new faces as the country entered the new millennium. Following the address, Vladimir Putin, who had only recently been appointed as Prime Minister, was made acting President until his electoral success three months later officially secured him the position. The understanding in the ranks of the Semibankirshina was that, as Yeltsin had immunity, and the likes of Berezovsky had assisted with Putin's selection as successor, it would be business as usual. However, Vladimir Putin was not a puppet, and he was not entering the Kremlin alone.

Putin was quick to centralise the power of the president. His government brought in constitutional reform, allowing the president to dismiss local governors, addressing an issue that had arisen late in Yeltsin's tenure when some had refused to pay their tax intake to the federal government. To smooth the transition and placate the old guard, Putin's cabinet was a combination of familiar faces in politics, like Prime Minister Kasyanov, and the new faces of the Siloviki, like Igor Sechin and Nikolai Patrushev. Siloviki is a term used to refer to the group of men who came from a security or military background—predominantly, in the case of Putin's associates, former KGB officials. Many members of this nascent political force despised the oligarchs, believing they had weakened Russia. Ardent nationalists like Patrushev wanted to see Russia restored to its great power status and saw the oligarchs as an obstacle to this.



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks during his meeting on economic development of territories of annexed Ukrainian regions with representatives of his administration, ministers and governors, at the Senate Palace of the Kremlin on July 24, 2024, in Moscow, Russia. (Photo by Contributor/Getty Images)

There was slight uneasiness in the oligarch camp. They had thrived during the years of a weak presidency that had seen political and economic power divided amongst multiple actors. Putin had campaigned on breaking the oligarch class and their influence, a sentiment that had a lot of traction with the Russian public. In an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, amidst a media storm largely drummed up by Berezovsky, he explained, “the state has a cudgel in its hands that you use to hit just once, but on the head. We haven't used this cudgel yet. We've just brandished it. ... [But] the day we get really angry, we won't hesitate to use it.” Nonetheless, Berezovsky and others still ran on the assumption that it was their man in the Kremlin—after all, they had put him there. Over the course of his first term, Putin would bring the oligarchs to heel, using the state’s “cudgel” to drive two of the Semibankirshina into exile and imprison one in Siberia.

Early in Putin’s first term, Berezovsky used his network ORT to drum up discontent following the Kursk submarine disaster, interviewing the wives and relatives of the ship’s crew and calling out the Kremlin for its inefficacy in launching a rescue/recovery mission. Berezovsky had long enjoyed the independence ORT gave him, making it a voice of protest during the main phase of Russia’s second war in Chechnya in 1999–2000. Berezovsky was slow on the uptake that this sort of dissent would not be tolerated under Putin; his associate Vladimir Gusinsky had already fallen afoul of Putin’s media crackdown. Gusinsky’s network had its offices stormed shortly after Putin’s inauguration.

They had also been critical of the Russian military action in Chechnya, running stories on potential FSB involvement in the Moscow apartment bombings. Gusinsky was held, charged with the embezzlement of millions, and eventually forced to sell his media empire to Gazprom. Berezovsky continued to antagonise Putin, writing him an open letter calling out his dictatorial tendencies and lambasting the presence of all these former KGB associates in the Kremlin. Suddenly, Berezovsky came under massive scrutiny; his car dealership AvtoVaz was investigated for tax avoidance, whilst another case was opened into embezzlement at Aeroflot, in which he was a shareholder.

He was pushed into the same corner as Gusinsky. After being called in for questioning, he fled the country, quickly sold his ORT shares to Roman Abramovich, and was sentenced in absentia. Russia's new president had shown that he was unwilling to tolerate independent media voices subject to powerful controlling interests that would criticise the Kremlin. Amidst all this, Putin arranged a meeting with Russia's 21 most powerful tycoons in the Kremlin's Ekaterinovskiy Hall. His dressing down of the oligarchs was televised, and after film crews left, he ordered the oligarchs to stay out of politics.

Building on his efforts to reassert state authority over Russia's oligarchs, in February 2003, a seminal confrontation took place in the same Ekaterinovskiy Hall between Putin and Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Like others in the Semibankirshina, Khodorkovsky had built his fortune largely through the loans-for-shares scheme of the 1990s. As head of Yukos, which would merge with Sibneft later that year to become one of the world's largest oil producers, Khodorkovsky wielded considerable influence.

At the Kremlin meeting, he openly criticised the extent of corruption under Putin's administration, notably questioning why many talented young professionals were drawn to the tax ministry—implying the use of bureaucratic power to pressure businesses. This breach of the unwritten rule that oligarchs should avoid political interference marked a turning point. Khodorkovsky was arrested later that year on charges of fraud and tax evasion, his shares in Yukos seized, and he was sentenced to prison.

Russia's new president had shown that he was unwilling to tolerate independent media voices subject to powerful controlling interests that would criticise the Kremlin.

More broadly, the Kremlin's actions reflected a strategic imperative to regain greater control over the energy sector, a cornerstone of Russia's economic strength. While the Soviet Union had maintained a gas monopoly through Gazprom, the oil industry had become fragmented during the 1990s, with Rosneft as the largest state-owned company

controlling only a small portion. The state had already exerted pressure on other private companies, such as Lukoil, to ensure alignment with government interests. After Yukos was dismantled, its key assets were absorbed by Rosneft, increasing state control to over half of the country's oil production—reversing much of the privatisation seen just a few years earlier.

If the sources of power had been ambiguous in the late 1990s and early 2000s, no ambiguity remained. The message from the president was clear: the oligarchs keep their wealth at his behest. In some oligarchies, factionalism has seen warring parties drawing in their resources to counteract one another. This would not be tolerated in Putin's Russia. All wealth is ultimately controlled by the state, and dissent is grounds to have it stripped away.

PUTIN-STYLE FEUDALISM

Following the defeat of the most troublesome oligarchs of the Yeltsin era, Putin shifted focus from confrontation to consolidation, building a new system in which economic privilege was tightly bound to personal loyalty. Those who survived the early 2000s crackdown quickly understood that deference to the Kremlin was essential for survival. While the outward appearance of a technocratic government persisted during Putin's first term, supported by figures like Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, this façade soon gave way to a new elite drawn from Putin's inner circle, many of whom had served with him in the KGB or alongside him in St Petersburg.

Although these individuals amassed great wealth and influence, they differed fundamentally from the 1990s oligarchs. The earlier oligarchs had often acted as autonomous power players, occasionally rivalling the state; in contrast, Putin's oligarchs and so-called minigarchs—new private businessmen and government officials with less wealth—derived their positions entirely from his favour. In this system, power depended on loyalty rather than preceding it.

After consolidating political control, Putin moved swiftly to reclaim control over key sectors of the economy by appointing trusted *Siloviki* to oversee major state enterprises. Igor Sechin, Putin's longtime aide and former KGB colleague, was central to this effort. He played a leading role in orchestrating the downfall of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, ensuring the judiciary delivered a verdict favourable to the Kremlin. Sechin then helped Rosneft, the state oil company, absorb Yukos' most valuable asset, Yuganskneftegaz. Appointed chairman of Rosneft in 2004 and later CEO, Sechin exemplified the new elite—politically loyal, personally connected, and embedded within state structures.

This model was repeated across other major sectors: Russian Railways was handed to Vladimir Yakunin, while Gazprom expanded by acquiring Roman Abramovich's Sibneft in 2005. Control over energy was not simply about revenue; it was central to reasserting Kremlin authority and geopolitical influence, and Putin ensured it remained in the hands of those whose loyalty was absolute. Alongside these powerful oligarchs, a new class of private businessmen and government officials, sometimes referred to as minigarchs, rose to prominence. Figures like Arkady and Boris Rotenberg, Putin's childhood judo partners and close allies, expanded their fortunes through state-backed contracts and coercion. Their rise demonstrated how wealth accumulation under Putin remained tightly linked to the president's patronage.

Endemic corruption within government ministries, where control over procurement in sectors such as healthcare and defence encouraged cronyism and bribery, enabled officials to enjoy lifestyles far beyond their official salaries. Putin's tolerance of this corruption served a strategic purpose: by turning a blind eye, he ensured that those within the system accumulated compromising information on themselves and each other. This web of mutual vulnerability created powerful leverage for Putin to enforce loyalty and swiftly neutralise anyone threatening the regime. Thus, economic privilege was maintained not only through patronage but also through implicit control and blackmail.

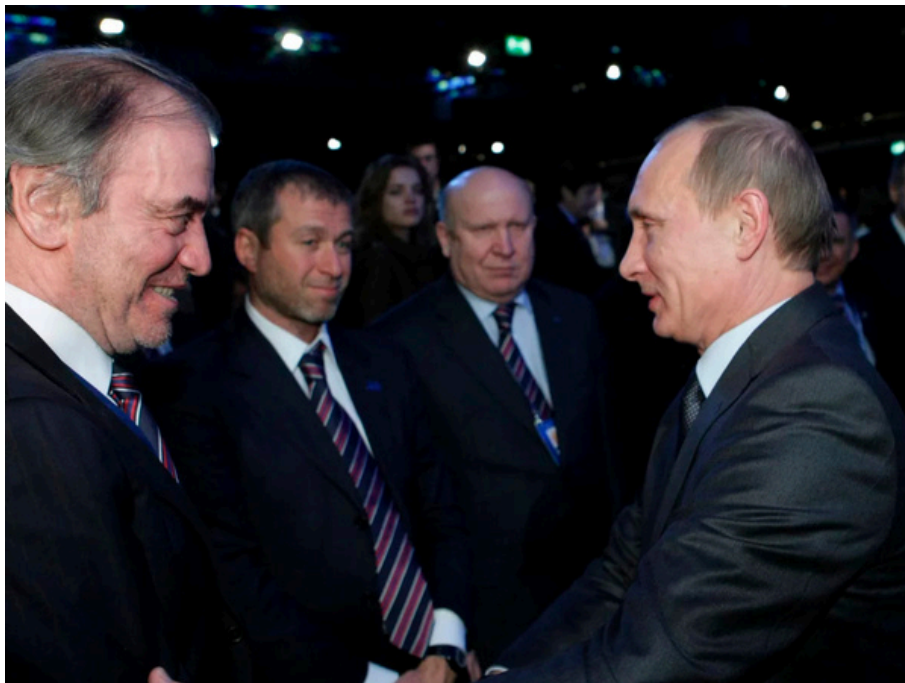
This reordering of Russia's economy rested on formal appointments and business takeovers but also on an informal, deeply personal system of power and protection, akin to the criminal concept of *krisha* (roof) that emerged during the chaotic 1990s. *Krisha* referred to the protection offered to businesses in a criminal racket. In Putin's Russia, the presidency itself became a national *krisha*, offering security and privilege to those who pledged absolute fealty. Investigative journalism and whistleblower accounts have exposed how this informal system enriched Putin personally. Revelations tied top Kremlin officials to Bank Rossiya, widely believed to function as a slush fund, and uncovered the construction of Putin's lavish Black Sea palace, funded by opaque donations from oligarchs such as Roman Abramovich.

These findings reveal a system where power, loyalty, and wealth are so intertwined that the distinction between state and personal property becomes meaningless. It has been widely speculated that Putin is the richest man in the world, and whilst it is difficult to dispute given the wealth he has access to, understanding wealth as the focal point of Putin's system is somewhat reductive. Control of wealth is vital but, as Mark Galeotti pointed out in his profile on the Russian president, money is a means and not an end. Having his roots in every facet of the Russian economy allows him to be the ultimate patron, doling out economic privilege to loyalists as dividends for continued allegiance.

RUSSIA'S COSMOPOLITAN ELITE

Before tensions with the West escalated, Russia's new class of ultra-wealthy businessmen served as informal ambassadors for the Kremlin, helping legitimise Putin's regime abroad. Up until 2014, weak money laundering regulations and thriving Western service sectors—especially in the UK and its overseas territories—enabled Putin's oligarchs to embed themselves in the West, protecting their wealth and laundering their reputations. The offshore infrastructure inherited from the British Empire facilitated the discreet movement of capital, while London's luxury property market, Tier 1 investor visas, and receptive financial environment made integration seamless, all while avoiding scrutiny by capitalising on English jurisprudence.

Wealth protection for Putin and his oligarchs has been made possible by the fluid and secretive world of offshore finance. Authors such as Nicholas Shaxson and Oliver Bullough have documented how the British Empire's offshore legacy evolved into a network of tax havens, including the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, and the Cayman Islands. These jurisdictions offer opaque corporate structures that allow elites to hide wealth from both domestic authorities and international regulators.



Russian President Vladimir Putin in a meeting with Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich (on the left, in the center) in 2010. Alexei Nikolsky/AP

Using shell companies and complex ownership webs, Russian oligarchs have disguised acquisitions ranging from corporate assets to yachts and London mansions. The 2016 Panama Papers leak exposed the scale of

Russian offshore wealth. These systems not only insulate Putin's network from scrutiny but also enable capital to flow into the West in ways that legitimise and embed Kremlin-linked fortunes. While it's true that some elites use these mechanisms as a hedge against falling out of favour with Putin, their continued use reinforces the broader system of loyalty and mutual interest that sustains his rule.

Thanks to weak regulation and a culture of both witting and unwitting noncompliance, London became a vital platform through which Kremlin-aligned oligarchs laundered their reputations and wealth, acting as informal ambassadors of Putin's Russia in the process. It is now well documented how popular the London property market has been over the last three decades as a destination for Russian money. In 2015, a Channel 4 documentary, *From Russia With Cash*, saw undercover reporters pose as a corrupt Russian official and his girlfriend seeking to buy a property in London. Despite clearly identifying as a politically exposed person, the fictional buyer was met with little resistance from estate agents, some of whom encouraged discretion rather than due diligence.

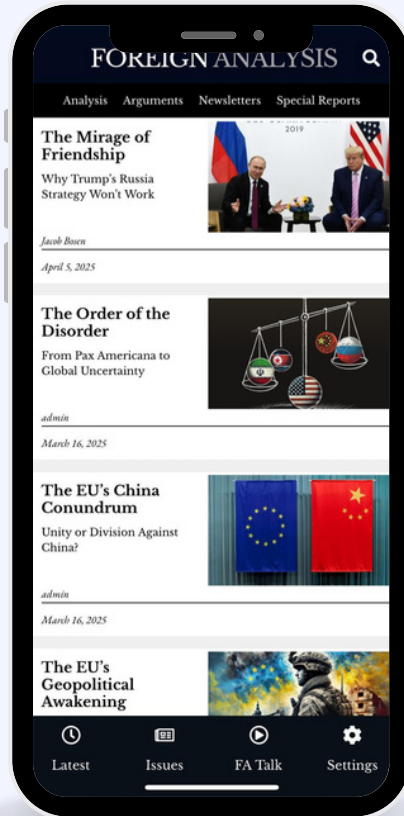
This lax environment helped facilitate the embedding of oligarchs like Roman Abramovich and Oleg Deripaska in elite London society. Deripaska, for instance, is a close associate of former British energy minister Greg Barker, who served as chair on the board of his energy company En+. Alongside real estate, the UK's Tier 1 Investor Visa scheme served as a legal pathway for wealthy Russians to gain residency. During the scheme's so-called "blind faith" period between 2008 and 2015, over 700 visas were granted to Russian nationals. These visas offered not just access to the UK but also a veneer of legitimacy and stability for Kremlin-linked businessmen looking to establish themselves in the West.

Meanwhile, London's financial markets offered an even more powerful form of international validation. In 2006, Rosneft, under the direction of Putin loyalist Igor Sechin, was listed on the London Stock Exchange, not long after acquiring some of the key assets of Yukos through a murky, politically driven process. Despite the controversy surrounding its formation, Rosneft's IPO was backed by major Western banks, giving it—and by extension, the Kremlin—a commercial seal of approval. Together, these avenues didn't merely protect private wealth; they helped present Russia as a legitimate, investor-friendly economy while obscuring the extent to which Putin had reasserted control over its key industries.

Oligarch utilisation of English jurisprudence has served as a shield for Putin's mission to legitimise his regime in the West. The legal traditions of England and Wales have attracted clients from across the globe, including many Russian and post-Soviet oligarchs. Business disputes involving these figures are frequently resolved in English courts, with some of the world's top lawyers engaged in their cases. By the early 2010s, British media outlets

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such as The Times noted that Russians comprised the largest group of foreign litigants in the English Commercial Courts. Russian oligarchs' use of English common law in libel cases has effectively shielded Putin's inner circle from damaging scrutiny in Western media.

English libel laws, often criticised for favouring plaintiffs, have facilitated "libel tourism," allowing wealthy litigants to suppress critical reporting. In 2021, Catherine Belton, author of *Putin's People*, faced a lawsuit from prominent Kremlin-linked figures including Roman Abramovich, Mikhail Fridman, Petr Aven, and the seemingly ubiquitous state oil giant Rosneft. With the immense financial resources available to these oligarchs, publishers and newspapers often hesitate to release investigative material that might expose Russia's business elite. Oliver Bullough, a leading journalist on corruption and money laundering, has recounted how editors refused to publish his research on a powerful oligarch out of fear of costly legal repercussions. This dynamic reveals how Putin's network leverages English jurisprudence not only to confer legitimacy on their affairs but also to protect the regime's carefully managed image abroad.

PUTIN'S INNER CIRCLE

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Western sanctions began to target Putin's elite, but their early impact was limited. At that stage, Western governments still underestimated how deeply oligarchs' wealth was bound up with the Kremlin. In March 2014, the U.S. imposed modest sanctions against select regime figures—military-intelligence chiefs like Igor Sergun, pro-war politicians like Senator Nikolai Ryzhkov, and businessmen such as the Rotenberg brothers and Gennady Timchenko. This level of response proved ineffective.

Some sanctioned oligarchs, including Oleg Deripaska, continued to operate in the West through their networks, softening economic pressure on both themselves and, indirectly, on Russia's broader economy. When sanctions later intensified after the 2022 invasion, banning figures like Roman Abramovich from the UK, it became clear: the oligarchy had no coercive power to challenge Putin. Indeed, Putin has made that clear domestically. Recent elite purges in Russian ministries deliver two messages: loyalty is mandatory, and no one is above the state.

The embeddedness of many Russian oligarchs and their businesses in Western financial systems allowed them to circumvent sanctions following the annexation of Crimea. Oleg Deripaska, once Russia's richest man, exemplifies this dynamic. Deripaska controlled En+, an energy company, as well as Rusal, the world's second-largest aluminium producer. Both he and his businesses were sanctioned by the U.S. government in 2018 due to

their Kremlin ties in light of Russia's ongoing support of separatist forces in Ukraine.

However, Deripaska maintained deep connections within the British political establishment, having attended parties with figures like George Osborne and Lord Mandelson, the current British Ambassador to the U.S., and enjoying a close association with Greg Barker, a former British Energy Minister who served as Chairman of En+'s board. In 2019, Lord Barker successfully negotiated with the U.S. government to lift sanctions on En+ through a restructuring of ownership and voting rights.

The presidency itself became a national krisha, offering security and privilege to those who pledged absolute fealty.

In the process, Barker received a \$5.9 million bonus alongside his \$1.9 million salary. While Deripaska was forced to relinquish some control, the deal likely pleased Putin, as it enabled continued trade for a major Russian company. The Deripaska case reflects a broader pattern in which Western political and commercial networks, driven by personal ties and financial interests, have at times undermined the political establishment's sanction efforts. This problematic dynamic has allowed the Kremlin's elite to sustain their wealth and influence despite international attempts to isolate them.

In 2022, this dynamic shifted. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine intensified and broadened sanctions regimes across the West. Oligarchs who had long evaded scrutiny were suddenly targeted. Lord Barker resigned as Chair of En+, recognising that the optics of maintaining leadership of a major Russian company had become untenable. Roman Abramovich, after successfully laundering his reputation in the UK for two decades, was finally sanctioned by the UK government. Across Europe, individuals like Igor Sechin, head of Rosneft, had luxury properties seized. Media discussions soon turned to whether financial pressure on Russia's elite could translate into political pressure on Putin himself. However, this demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of how Putin's Russia operates.

Loyalty is the true currency in Putin's system, and expecting oligarchs who owe their success to Kremlin patronage to turn against him is naïve. Sanctions have arguably increased these individuals' dependence on the regime, as Western safe havens close off. While a few, such as Oleg Tinkov, who renounced his Russian citizenship and denounced Putin in 2022, have distanced themselves, they remain exceptions. For most, there is little incentive to break loyalty, especially when vast wealth is protected offshore with the aid of compliant intermediaries. For example, Roman Abramovich transferred majority stakes in trusts worth approximately \$4 billion to family members in Jersey and Cyprus, shielding his assets from

sanctions. As a result, despite the intensified Western measures, the impact on Russia's wartime economy appears limited.

The arrest of Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov and the dismissal of Sergei Shoigu underscored a deeper truth of Putin's system: loyalty alone does not ensure survival—continued usefulness is equally vital. By 2024, Russia's Ministry of Defense had become a lightning rod for criticism, with growing discontent over the country's stalled progress on the Ukrainian front. Prominent voices within Russia's war machine, including the late Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, had openly condemned the ministry's inefficiency and strategic failures.

This mounting pressure made the Defence Ministry an obvious target for a high-profile purge. Ivanov became the face of this purge. In April 2024, he was arrested on charges of embezzling approximately \$49 million. In July 2025, he was sentenced to 13 years in a penal colony, with \$32 million in assets seized. His fate delivered a clear message to the elite: proximity to power doesn't offer protection if one becomes expendable. Whether due to incompetence, scandal, or simply bad optics, Putin's system ensures that even loyal insiders can be discarded to preserve the regime's strength. Putin's wartime regime has ensured that external attempts to destabilise it through economic sanctions are tempered by an elite structure built on absolute authority, conditional privilege, and a cutthroat calculus of utility.

INERTIA AS STRATEGY?

Vladimir Putin has fundamentally remoulded Russia's oligarchy to serve the presidency. He inverted the 1990s system, using state power to dominate wealth rather than being dominated by it. This transformation entrenched his regime domestically and extended Russian influence abroad, at least until geopolitical isolation set in. Western hopes that sanctions might pressure Putin through his elite have largely faded. Such a strategy might have worked under Yeltsin, but Putin's crackdown on the Semibankirshina and his consolidation of power stripped oligarchs of autonomy, making their fortunes contingent on loyalty, not leverage.

Looking ahead, Putin's successor will inherit a highly centralised, deeply personalist system—one where political survival and economic privilege are inseparable. Whether they preserve this model, reworking it for their own ends with the presidency continuing to function as the source of patronage, or take on the hierarchy Putin has built will determine the future shape of Russian power and, subsequently, Russian foreign policy.

The Illusion of Stability

Xi's China Beneath the Surface

SHIJIE WANG

The return of Donald Trump to the White House marks a new and volatile chapter in U.S.-China relations. Unlike in 2017, Beijing this time faces a familiar adversary with heightened strategic awareness and sharpened tools of statecraft. Chinese President Xi Jinping now presents himself as the “adult in the room,” projecting confidence rooted in China’s advancements in artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and critical minerals. These technological gains—aligned with the objectives of “Made in China 2025”—are seen as symbols of national resilience, especially when contrasted with what Xi views as an irreversibly fractured American political system. In Beijing’s eyes, the United States under Trump is a declining hegemon mired in internal discord, while China stands firm with strategic coherence and a broader global vision.

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This framing is not merely rhetorical. During the trade conflict before Geneva, China has responded to Trump's aggressive economic measures, including his announcement of 145% tariffs on Chinese goods, with what it calls "disciplined retaliation." Beyond reciprocal tariffs, Beijing escalated asymmetrically by targeting U.S. firms like PVH Corp. and Illumina, while also reimposing restrictions on rare earth exports vital to U.S. defense and semiconductor sectors. Rather than playing into Trump's performative tariff brinkmanship, China aims to force the U.S. to initiate future negotiations—on Beijing's terms. As bilateral tensions deepen, Xi's China is signaling that it will respond selectively, escalate strategically, and refuse to follow Washington's script.

China's response to Trump's second term is not a reactive pivot, but a continuation of long-maturing strategic patterns in its foreign policy. Convinced that the geopolitical balance is tilting in its favor, Beijing has moved to consolidate structural leverage while projecting calm amid Washington's escalations. This posture is grounded in a broader shift: away from tactical maneuvering and toward what Chinese policymakers frame as "strategic endurance."

In the wake of renewed tariff confrontations and mounting restrictions on advanced technology exports, China has pursued a calibrated blend of retaliatory and preemptive actions. These include launching antitrust investigations into American tech firms, selectively targeting U.S. companies with real business stakes in China, and reinstating export controls on rare earths. While these moves serve as immediate deterrents, they also signal a larger strategic doctrine: Beijing is willing to incur costs to assert long-term economic sovereignty and strategic deterrence. Unlike its earlier, more cautious posture during Trump's first term, China now responds with both symmetry and escalation—asymmetric enough to inflict pain but measured enough to avoid uncontrolled spirals.

At the same time, Beijing's strategy fits squarely within its global vision under Xi Jinping: to reshape the international order away from U.S.-led dominance. This vision includes tighter alignment with Russia, Iran, and North Korea on security issues, growing activism in multilateral institutions, and deeper engagement with countries in the Global South through platforms like the Belt and Road Initiative. Trump's renewed unilateralism and confrontational trade practices only strengthen Beijing's case as an alternative pole of global stability—at least in the narratives it sells abroad.

Further reinforcing this shift is China's continued investment in strategic industries—particularly dual-use technologies such as AI, quantum computing, and autonomous systems—ensuring that advances in these areas feed directly into military modernization. Its aggressive shipbuilding pace and increasing capabilities in deep-sea mineral extraction suggest a

long-term strategy of shaping both physical and normative domains—be it in contested waters or critical resource governance.

In short, Trump's return has not fundamentally altered Beijing's direction—it has sharpened it. China's foreign policy apparatus is now more confident, better coordinated, and more structurally assertive. Whether this confidence is sustainable amid mounting domestic vulnerabilities remains an open question, but for now, Beijing is signaling that it no longer plays defense in U.S.-China relations—it plays for position.

Yet behind Beijing's confident posture and strategic coordination lies a set of internal challenges that could constrain its ability to sustain long-term competition with the United States. While Xi Jinping has sought to project strength in the face of renewed U.S. pressure—leveraging industrial policy, diplomatic outreach, and asymmetric retaliation—China's domestic vulnerabilities remain a critical variable in the trajectory of U.S.-China competition. From economic imbalances to demographic pressures, these underlying issues complicate Beijing's attempt to position itself as a stable counterweight to American volatility. Understanding these challenges is essential to assessing the credibility and sustainability of China's external assertiveness.

THE QUIET COLLAPSE

One of the most immediate and tangible challenges facing China today is youth unemployment—a reality that many young people experience firsthand. Although the National Bureau of Statistics stopped publishing unemployment data some years ago, the atmosphere on Chinese social media platforms tells a more honest story: widespread pessimism. College graduates speak of “unemployment upon graduation,” mourn a once-vibrant job market, and express resentment at a system they feel has failed to reward their efforts. Official media, attempting to maintain appearances by citing vague employment figures and questionable salary data, often find themselves met with public ridicule and anger.

The consequences of widespread youth unemployment are multifaceted. The first alarming outcome is the potential resurgence of violent crime in Chinese cities. In the 1980s and 1990s, China struggled with gang violence, robbery, sexual assault, and drug-related crimes to such an extent that the central government launched two “strike hard” campaigns. These campaigns drastically lowered the threshold for death penalty convictions in an effort to deter crime—largely to little effect. It was not until China emerged as the “world's factory” in the 21st century, creating millions of jobs, that violent crime began to decline.

This drop in crime later became a key contrast Beijing highlighted in comparing its governance favorably to the West, especially amid America's

racial tensions and opioid crisis. However, the decline was less a result of policy success and more due to the job opportunities created by rapid economic growth. Now, with a new generation of unemployed youth reminiscent of the 1980s and 1990s, a similar wave of violent crime appears to be resurfacing.

While the Ministry of Public Security insists that crime rates are still falling overall, public perception suggests otherwise. The phrase “Xianzhong”—a reference to the 17th-century warlord Zhang Xianzhong—is now a widely circulated meme on Chinese social media, used to describe a surge in brutal crimes involving multiple victims. Zhang, infamous for his reign of terror and massacres during the Ming-Qing transition, left Sichuan Province with a population 75% lower than before his rule. Today, invoking his name reflects growing public anxiety about rising violence.



Volunteers hold hands as they form a human chain to control pedestrian traffic at a crossroad during 5-day May Day holiday on May 1, 2024 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province of China. (Photo by VCG/VCG via Getty Images)

Admittedly, China today is not the same as it was in the 1990s. Parents are now more financially capable of supporting unemployed children, and the internet offers an endless stream of entertainment to pacify idle youth. However, these buffers may only change the nature of the violence, not prevent it. Financial motives may give way to ideologically or emotionally driven violence, such as incel-inspired attacks on women or rage-fueled conflicts between people of different social classes—say, between security guards and residents, or food delivery workers and customers.

Ultimately, rising violence could force local governments to dramatically increase public security spending, placing additional strain on already precarious municipal budgets. As public trust in the government’s ability to

maintain order erodes, these local crises could reverberate upward, weakening Beijing's domestic legitimacy and undermining its competitive standing on the international stage. The second major consequence of China's rising youth unemployment is a further decline in marriage and fertility rates—an issue that already troubles Beijing deeply.

Joblessness has left many young people disillusioned with the present and pessimistic about the future. In an environment with limited channels for political or social expression, this anxiety has often manifested in the form of passive resistance—most notably, the now widely discussed “lying flat” phenomenon. This refers to a conscious withdrawal from ambition and conventional societal expectations: refusing to work, consume, socialize, and marry.

Online forums and group chats dedicated to “lying flat” share tactics on how to minimize spending while maximizing leisure and time off the grid. The spread of this ethos has alarmed Beijing, prompting a wave of state media campaigns that attempt to glorify diligence and hard work. Yet these efforts have largely backfired, fueling further cynicism and reinforcing the appeal of passive disengagement. At the other extreme lies the phenomenon of “involution,” a term borrowed from anthropology that has taken on new meaning among Chinese youth.

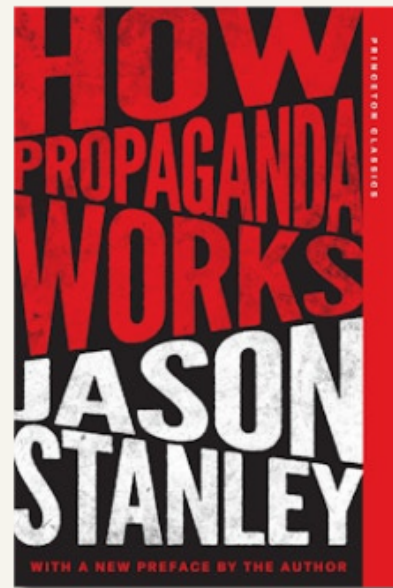
In today's context, it describes a hypercompetitive environment in which young people sacrifice their personal lives and well-being for diminishing returns—spending excessive time preparing for exams, working overtime, or engaging in relentless career advancement. These individuals are, by definition, too overwhelmed to consider marriage or family life. Ironically, while state media denounces “lying flat,” it has also criticized the social consequences of involution, again with little effect.

Both trends—lying flat and involution—are symptomatic responses to China's youth unemployment crisis. More alarmingly, they are becoming ingrained in the cultural psyche of this generation. Even if Beijing succeeds in reversing the jobs crisis, many young people may carry forward deeply internalized norms that devalue marriage and parenthood. In such a scenario, China faces not only a shrinking demographic dividend but also mounting social welfare costs in an aging society, both of which could seriously undermine its long-term economic competitiveness.

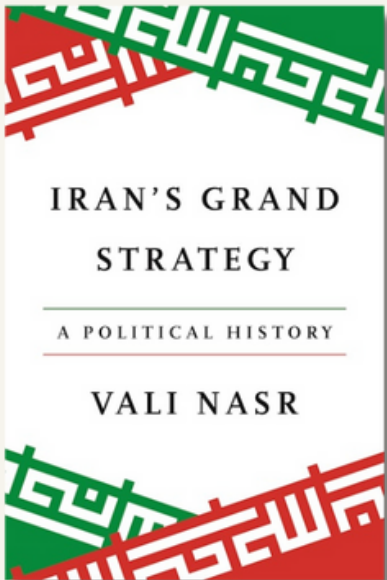
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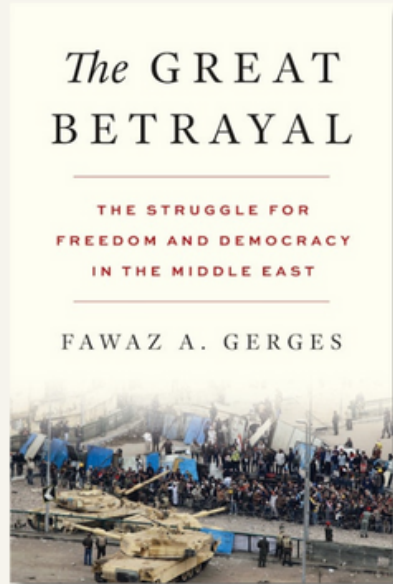
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"Stanley tracks propaganda's history across continents and through decades, illuminating its power to make people vote against their own best interests. And what he has found is [that] the words being used may be as important as the politics behind them."—Nick Osborne, *Boston Globe*



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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

RISK OF NATIONALISM

Since Xi Jinping consolidated power, nationalism has become the dominant theme in China's domestic propaganda. From the doctrine of the "Three Confidences" to the state-sponsored narrative of a great power resurgence, nationalist discourse has permeated every facet of how the Chinese public understands both domestic and international politics. Dissenting voices that challenge this ideological framework have been systematically suppressed. On the surface, this surge of nationalism has served to unify Chinese society and catalyze achievements—such as technological breakthroughs by young scientists and engineers eager to challenge Western monopolies in advanced sectors. However, as the traditional Chinese philosophy of moderation cautions, extremes eventually invite reversal. Nationalist fervor, having reached its peak in utility, is beginning to produce adverse effects on China's strategic judgment and global competitiveness.

One of the most significant risks is the distortion of foreign policy decision-making. While some analysts might assume a disconnect between a manipulated public and a calculating elite, this dichotomy does not fully apply to contemporary China. Years of intense nationalist propaganda, reinforced by social media algorithms, have rendered nationalist messaging ubiquitous—even among political elites. Chinese officials, many of whom are not fundamentally different in cognitive disposition from ordinary citizens, are often equally exposed to the relentless tide of hyper-nationalist content. The rise of "wolf warrior" diplomacy illustrates this phenomenon well, where emotional grandstanding has often replaced strategic pragmatism.

Unlike the structured nationalism of the 19th century, today's version—amplified through social media—is entangled with disinformation, conspiracy theories, and alt-facts that encourage hostility toward external adversaries and breed a false sense of domestic security. This has tangible consequences. For instance, Zhao Lijian, a prominent face of China's wolf warrior diplomacy and now a senior official in the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs, publicly promoted the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 originated from a U.S. biolab. When political elites themselves subscribe to such beliefs, the effects cascade—junior officials may reflect them in policy memos, while senior leaders might allow them to shape diplomatic strategies.

Though China has so far avoided catastrophic miscalculations, the persistent dominance of nationalism as a governing ideology sustains the risk of strategic blunders. A single major error, stemming from disinformation-laced decision-making, could severely damage Beijing's international credibility and undercut the very competitiveness that its nationalist rhetoric seeks to bolster.

Another significant risk posed by nationalist fervor is its potential to rigidify China's foreign policy, limiting Beijing's ability to respond with the necessary flexibility to a changing global landscape. It is often assumed that in a highly centralized authoritarian system like Xi Jinping's China, public opinion plays little role in policy decisions. But this assumption is overly simplistic. Even in an autocracy, public opinion—particularly in the form of mass sentiment—is a factor the leadership cannot ignore, as maintaining social stability is paramount to regime survival.

Beijing's initial deployment of nationalism aimed to harness its emotional appeal for domestic mobilization. Yet, as history repeatedly shows, nationalism is a volatile force that can turn against its architects. Once released, this political Pandora's box often escapes the control of propaganda and ideological departments. Mild, state-guided patriotism, once fed through the algorithmic echo chambers of Chinese social media, quickly evolves into a louder and more extreme form of nationalism. And in the age of virality, the loudest voices—however fringe—often dominate the public discourse.

This dynamic presents a real danger: in a future diplomatic crisis, Beijing may feel compelled to escalate rather than de-escalate, not out of strategic calculation, but out of fear of appearing weak in the face of seemingly overwhelming nationalist sentiment. In such cases, even officials and elites may internalize and amplify extremist narratives. The result is a foreign policy that becomes overly aggressive, predictable, and ultimately isolating. If nationalist outrage drives Beijing to repeatedly escalate diplomatic conflicts, it risks alienating allies and undermining China's long-term strategic flexibility.

THE EMPIRE OF EMPTY LABS

China's campaign for indigenous innovation in semiconductors, biotechnology, quantum computing, and other advanced fields has unleashed a wave of duplicative investment and wasteful spending that threatens to undercut its competitiveness. Observers have even dubbed Beijing's chip push a "Great Semiconductor Leap Forward"—a telling reference to Mao-era excess—as thousands of ventures have sprung up in response to top-down exhortations. Local governments, eager to answer Xi Jinping's call for tech self-sufficiency, have "piled in with duplicative and inefficient projects," leading to "profound waste" and rife misallocation of funds.

In 2021 alone, more than 4,350 new semiconductor companies were registered in a frenzy, and by 2022 some "large-scale wastage and corruption" had become evident—with many of the new firms suspected of outright fraud. This pattern isn't confined to chips: after the central

government designated life sciences as strategic, nearly every province raced to build its own biotech research park, resulting in parallel, overlapping efforts in almost every major city. Such campaign-style development, reminiscent of past overzealous state drives, has created bubbles of investment without corresponding breakthroughs.

Chinese commentators and investigators have highlighted the pitfalls. Caixin—a leading Chinese business outlet—exposed the collapse of Wuhan’s Hongxin Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp (HSMC) as a cautionary tale. HSMC, a would-be chip champion backed by ¥128 billion (\$18.5 billion) from the Wuhan government, “grossly exaggerated its technological capacity” to win funding and then failed spectacularly. The startup had no prior semiconductor experience, promised impossible feats (from 90nm down to 7nm manufacturing in one leap), and ultimately produced nothing but an unfinished factory—essentially a multi-billion dollar con job playing off officials’ desperation for a local tech success.

This debacle underscores how poor oversight and pressure to meet self-reliance targets can funnel resources into dubious projects. Even Chinese authorities have begun acknowledging the problem: in 2022, Beijing launched an anti-graft crackdown on its semiconductor “Big Fund” and related agencies after huge state investments led to “disorderly capital expansion” and more scandals. All told, the excesses of the self-reliance drive have led to inefficient capital use—money sunk into redundant facilities, scams, and “empty” projects—rather than productive innovation, undermining China’s ability to compete globally on quality and ROI.

Beyond wasted resources, China’s state-led tech strategy risks creating a fragile innovation ecosystem that could erode its long-term competitive edge. The “new type of whole-of-nation” approach championed by Xi—basically throwing massive state support behind all strategic tech sectors at once—echoes the Great Leap Forward’s overreach and can yield a brittle system. Political mandates and hype are sometimes displacing market discipline and honest evaluation, which may mask serious weaknesses until crisis hits. For example, China’s Ministry of Industry and IT has touted supposed breakthroughs (like a homegrown DUV lithography machine) as victories for self-reliance, yet experts note the showcased tools still “lag significantly behind” world leaders like ASML in precision and yield, with low output and high costs plaguing local efforts.

Such overstatements of progress create a false sense of security and divert attention from the underlying gaps. Meanwhile, tight Party oversight and centralized control can stifle the very innovation Beijing seeks. Even Chinese observers admit that higher levels of political control “may hinder innovation” in private firms. China’s tech drive often favors state-aligned “champions” and military-linked labs, potentially crowding

out the bottom-up creativity and competition that spur true breakthroughs. Top-down directives to meet ambitious goals can also pressure companies and officials to avoid acknowledging setbacks, leading to groupthink or skewed R&D priorities—a systemic fragility if the chosen path proves wrong.

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Moreover, the expansive self-reliance agenda has introduced structural inefficiencies that sap China's innovative momentum. By aiming for self-sufficiency in every critical technology simultaneously, Beijing is spreading resources thin and incurring huge opportunity costs. As one analysis notes, China is effectively “splitting resources trying to invest in both” incremental upgrades and next-generation leaps, a dual track that is difficult to sustain given the capital and talent required. The result so far has been a lot of output, but not commensurate productivity gains.

In fact, after years of heavy-handed industrial campaigns, China's total factor productivity has stagnated, and overall economic growth has slowed. Overcapacity is a major culprit—protected domestic industries have scaled up quickly behind subsidies, but many now face gluts and price wars that “hurt the ability of Chinese companies to invest in innovation and product development.” In other words, the state-driven rush to dominate sectors has led to glutted markets (from solar panels to chips), eroding profit margins and leaving firms with less incentive or cash to push the technological frontier.

This undermines China's international competitiveness: companies burdened with inefficiencies and razor-thin margins struggle to match global leaders in cutting-edge R&D. Even the much-touted “innovation dividend” of China's rise has been largely sacrificed in pursuit of tech autarky—resources that could have lifted productivity if deployed in areas of comparative advantage were instead poured into duplicating capabilities at home. Beijing's insistence on replacing foreign inputs at all costs has, in many cases, delayed access to the best technologies and know-how, effectively slowing innovation diffusion.

The tolerance for inefficiency carries the risk of systemic fragility: should economic conditions tighten or political winds shift, the vast web of subsidized labs and firms could face a reckoning. In short, China's aggressive self-reliance drive—while yielding some short-term wins—has sown inefficiency, misallocation, and structural risks into its tech sector. Unless corrected, these excesses may undercut China's ability to lead in the very industries it is targeting, leaving it vulnerable to falling behind more nimble and efficient global competitors.

SUCCESSION UNCERTAINTY

Perhaps the most fundamental vulnerability facing Beijing today is the unresolved question of succession. Since consolidating power in 2012, Xi Jinping has yet to formally designate—or even hint at—a successor who would eventually assume the posts of President, Party General Secretary, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. This is a sharp break from the precedent established after Deng Xiaoping institutionalized leadership transitions: successors were typically elevated to the Politburo Standing Committee by the end of a sitting leader’s first term and informally acknowledged as heirs apparent, often selected by the previous top leader in a model of “designated succession.”

This system functioned—albeit imperfectly—through the transitions from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, and then from Hu to Xi. But it was effectively dismantled in 2017 when Xi abolished term limits for the presidency and removed one of Hu Jintao’s presumed successors, Sun Zhengcai, via a sweeping purge. Since then, Xi has promoted loyalists from his Fujian and Zhejiang networks into key positions but has shown no interest in grooming any one of them as a future successor. Xi is now 72 years old. Statistically, members of the Politburo Standing Committee have an average life expectancy of around 90, suggesting that a decision on succession will likely be necessary within the next decade.

However, appointing a successor risks creating a competing center of power, as ambitious elites begin to coalesce around the heir apparent, planning for a post-Xi era. For a leader as deeply invested in personal control as Xi, this is an undesirable scenario—one that could easily spiral into factional struggles reminiscent of imperial Chinese courts, where emperors often clashed with their designated heirs in their twilight years.

Yet the alternative is equally perilous. If Xi refuses to appoint a successor and dies unexpectedly, the result could be a brutal elite power struggle, as various factions scramble to inherit the vast and personalized authority he has accumulated. The eventual winner of such a contest would likely face a severe legitimacy deficit, having ascended without Xi’s blessing. To consolidate power, they may feel compelled to launch another round of purges to eliminate rivals—an effort that would require overwhelming control over China’s security and military apparatus like Xi, something not easily replicated.

In short, whether Xi names a successor or not, China faces what might be called the “succession paradox”: highly centralized power is inherently difficult to transfer without destabilizing consequences. If an aging Xi—surrounded by sycophants and dulled by cognitive decline—fails to manage this transition effectively, the result could be a domestic political crisis that dramatically weakens China’s position in its strategic competition with the United States.

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In sum, while Beijing's external posture under Xi Jinping projects strategic composure and calibrated assertiveness in the face of Trump's renewed pressure, its long-term competitiveness remains vulnerable to internal contradictions. The combination of surging youth unemployment, rigidified nationalism, inefficient techno-industrial policy, and unresolved succession risks creates a fragile foundation beneath the image of a resilient superpower.

These challenges not only threaten China's domestic stability but also undermine the very confidence that fuels its assertive foreign policy. As the U.S.-China rivalry intensifies in Trump's second term, people must not only assess China's strengths, but also understand the liabilities Beijing cannot fully admit. In the end, the true contest may not lie in who escalates more quickly—but in who can better withstand the consequences of their own contradictions.

The Cultural Death of Europe

Is a Common European Identity Still Possible?

PATRICK J. DEVLIN

In the post-WWII era, the continent of Europe remained in a relatively stable state of peace and cohesion, much stronger than the centuries of war and conquest that preceded it. The creation of the European Union and its numerous bureaucratic institutions has allowed its member states to govern together harmoniously and democratically. That very structure and cohesion of all Europeans, whether they are E.U. member states or not, has grown much weaker in recent years due to a plethora of factors. The very idea of “Europeanness” is something that is intended to be all-encompassing of European countries, cultures, and citizens.

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However, it is difficult for one of the most divided and diverse continents to come to a complete synopsis of what that idea looks like. Not only are there major geographical differences throughout Europe, but the societal norms and historical context vary greatly from country to country. The sheer fact that nearly every country in Europe has gone to war with one another demonstrates just how divided the continent is overall. While the political institutions and governments have formally forgiven each other, can the citizens ever get along? Does France not resent Germany for WWII? Will Ireland ever become friendly with the United Kingdom?

Additionally, is it possible for the citizens of each country to relate to their fellow Europeans? Aside from being European Union citizens, what do someone from Finland and someone from Malta have in common? Each of these questions has been revolving around Europe since the creation of the European Union. However, there are a few factors that have been used to hold Europeans together, such as economic cohesion and reliance on one another, and the fact that they have a common threat within Europe of Russia, and in some cases, Serbia (referred to as little Russia). Also, the establishment of democratic values and institutions since the fall of the monarchs that once ruled Europe, upholding the validity of Democratic Peace Theory, has established like-minded governments to work together.

However, these institutions and their values have grown weaker throughout Europe, and the world, with countries such as Türkiye, Hungary, and to a lesser extent Poland, demonstrating democratic backsliding during the 21st century. That being said, is it possible for Europe as a whole to have the shared identity it needs to be a global leader in the 21st century, or will the differences in people, ideology, alliances, economic status, and other causes force the continent to a status of division and gridlock?

THE LIMITS OF UNITY

After the atrocities that occurred during World War II, the democratic powers of Europe understood that there was a need for unity across Europe and created the European Union in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, after a plethora of treaties that paved the way for the official union. The founding members of the E.U. that signed the treaty were Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. These nations knew there was a much-needed connection across the continent on a diplomatic, economic, and societal scale to ensure the events of WWII were never repeated.

The E.U. was founded on the ideas of democracy, with the creation of its supranational branches of government with the European Parliament as the populous, the European Commission as the executive, the Council of

the European Union as the representative legislature, and the Court of Justice of the European Union as the judicial. These entities, along with the other agencies within the E.U. bureaucracy, ensure that democratic values are upheld and human rights are established throughout all member states and are promoted in aspiring member states.

While the connection between European countries on a diplomatic level is vastly important, the need for economic continuity is equally vital to ensuring peace and prosperity throughout the continent. We saw this from the very beginning via the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) through the Treaty of Rome in 1957. This establishment and its continuation have allowed continued harmony in the European economy and encouraged cross-border investment and trade, further aligning the countries' interests. The main idea behind the EEC was the establishment of free movement among the entire community, with an emphasis on the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital.

This allows as much free trade as possible for the benefit of the European economy as a whole. One of the best examples of these ideals is the creation of the Schengen Area in Europe. With 29 total countries, including non-E.U. member states, the Schengen Area allows the free movement of people for both European Union citizens and tourists alike. Another aspect that has completely evolved the European economy and movement of capital is the creation of a common currency. The Euro was introduced as the common currency in Europe in January 1999 and currently has 19 E.U. member states that utilize the Euro, along with other non-E.U. countries. Countries such as Vatican City, Andorra, San Marino, and Monaco all have agreements with the E.U. to become part of the Eurozone.

However, in 2008, the Euro faced significant pressure and threats of failure due to Greece abusing loan practices from both the European Union and other foreign currency agents. Due to the massive amount of debt Greece had racked up, the Euro's value took a significant hit and nearly fell as trust in the currency declined drastically. Eventually, the crisis was averted via the more established economies within the E.U., along with Greece, creating a bailout package that allowed Greece to bounce back. This crisis highlighted the need to hold more accountability and oversight within the Eurozone. A final example of the free movement that Europe believes in is the creation of the Erasmus program.

It is a foreign exchange student program that allows students from all over Europe to travel and study in different countries as a way to widen cultural knowledge and increase the understanding of how Europeans are different but share similar values. Yet while these institutions have fostered cooperation among governments, they have not necessarily fostered solidarity among peoples. The persistence of linguistic barriers, historical resentments, and regional disparities suggests that institutional integration has outpaced cultural integration.



Meeting of Erasmus students in Poland. Photo Erasmus Network

Despite the efforts and innovations that the European Union has established and upheld during its tenure, there are numerous underlying factors that it will likely never be able to escape. The most noticeable factor that remains a wedge in the concept of “Europeanness” is the significant language barrier between countries. At present, there are 24 languages that are recognized as official E.U. languages, with the original four in 1957 being Italian, German, Dutch, and French, and with the newest language being Croatian in 2013. While languages such as English, German, and French remain dominant in most of the original E.U. member states, there remains a significant disconnect from the lesser spoken languages, specifically those of less tenured member states and former members of the Iron Curtain.

The E.U. has attempted to instill multilingualism as a core principle of its cultural cohesion, but it remains a significant division between member states. Another challenge that the E.U. constantly faces is the underlying historical context of wars and predatory practices of former imperial powers and monarchical powers. The scars from both World Wars remain very prevalent throughout member states, especially when taking into account the volume of human rights abuses and vast destruction that took place across the continent. France and Germany remain rivals in just about everything.

There are extreme disconnects between Western Europe and former Eastern Bloc countries. The climate needs of the northern countries of Sweden and Finland vary drastically from those in the south, such as Italy, Spain, and Greece. Additionally, the finalization of Brexit removed a historically global actor in the United Kingdom from a majority of

E.U.-focused diplomatic and policy decisions. Overall, there are numerous areas where the European Union can promote continuity and unity but must overcome the underlying cleavages that influence individual member state actions.

WHO BELONGS IN EUROPE

The migration crisis has become a litmus test for the strength of European identity. The divergent responses among member states reveal not only policy disagreements but a deeper uncertainty about what it means to be European—and who belongs within that identity. Whether it is refugees from conflicts in Ukraine, individuals fleeing war and persecution from the Middle East, or climate refugees from all over Africa, each country in Europe has a different stance on how—and if—these migrants should be accepted. Typically, countries that have strong economic infrastructures and more influence within the European Union tend to be more accepting of these migrants and have an open-arm policy stance, in a general sense.

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For example, Germany has been the most vocal and accepting of refugees throughout the European Union, especially for those migrating from the conflicts and hardships in the Middle East. When Angela Merkel (Chancellor of Germany) created the open border policy for refugees from the Middle East in 2015, the number of individuals accepted by Germany increased from roughly 890,000 in 2016 to just over 3 million in 2024. Germany was also the leader in the E.U.-Türkiye refugee deal. This

deal, at brass tacks, was designed to move Syrian refugees from Greece to Türkiye, but to allow Syrian refugees within Türkiye already access to the E.U. This deal introduced the idea of a “safe third country” and designated Türkiye as said country.

However, due to increased humanitarian issues within Türkiye, deriving from the consolidation of power by Türkiye’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, E.U. academics and members from the E.U.’s judicial sector have called the deal “shameful” and criticize the executive branch of the E.U. for making such an ill-advised deal. Some argue that the haste and naivety within the creation of this deal has caused a massive humanitarian crisis within Türkiye, as well as forced refugees to remain in Greece under brutal living conditions. Germany has been the leader in migrant acceptance and continues to pursue an immigration policy that encourages Europe to accept more migrants.

Despite Germany, Europe's largest economy, having an open border policy, this is not synonymous with all European Union member states, as Viktor Orbán and Hungary have been staunchly against accepting refugees, no matter where their origin is from. From the years 2012 to 2023, Hungary ranked last out of all European Union member states in terms of first-time asylum applicants and total positive decisions. With a positive decision ratio of 1.44%, Hungary accepts significantly fewer asylum-seekers than its fellow E.U. members, 22 of whom have rates of over 20%, with Estonia (94.55%) and Germany (54.40%) coming in as the two highest acceptance rates. The other countries that fall below the 20% mark are Slovenia (3.68%), Croatia (4.74%), Poland (16.34%), and Romania (17.47%).

While these numbers reflect the overall attitudes towards migration into the European Union, the member states that enact the policies differ based on the variety of areas from which migrants are fleeing toward Europe for assistance. This is especially true when applied to individuals migrating from Africa across the Mediterranean Sea. For instance, the European Union has made numerous efforts to open dialogues on immigration, establish relationships with African countries, and prevent various international criminal organizations from profiting from immigration. However, Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy, has a very hard-line stance against illegal immigration.

Italy's situation with Africa is vastly different than that of Germany, as they are immensely closer to the migration routes and have been dealing with the issue much longer. Meloni has been open to creating migration channels and economic relationships with various North African countries, such as Tunisia, but there remains a large undertone from Meloni and her party to "blockade" irregular and illegal migrants. If this far-right policy were to become enforced, the differences between Italian and German immigration policy would be immense and would likely be represented in the E.U.'s institutions.

The reasoning and rationale used for anti-immigration policy align directly with the increased far-right politics in the European Union, and the increased concentration of power allows these regimes to act swiftly with little opposition. There are three major "threats" that scholars and government officials use to justify anti-immigration sentiment: economic, cultural, and security. This is evident in Hungary and Poland, which we know are rather hesitant to allow non-E.U. citizens to migrate. These regimes use the fear of losing their culture to foreign nationals to justify disallowing migrants, especially when the migrants derive from the Middle East and Muslim countries.

In addition to fear of losing a nation's culture, the security threats that legislators use highlight "potential terrorists," with the underlying sentiment of Islamophobia. Additionally, if there are violent crimes that

surface on social media or gain national attention, there is an immediate uptick in anti-migrant discussions throughout society and in government forums. While immigrants typically improve the economy of a certain country, some regimes use the cost of immigrants as a rationale for turning away migrants. This was seen in Austria from the Freedom Party of Austria, who claimed that additional migrants would cause too much economic strain.

Additionally, as seen in the United States and E.U. member states, employment competition is a large societal influence on attitudes toward immigrants. If there is a lack of national employment, governments can use migrants as an excuse, claiming that individuals are undercutting the natural citizens of the country. Immigration throughout the E.U. is very polarized, as each of the negative viewpoints is counteracted with a positive idea. For cultural threats, the opposite spin is increased cultural diversity. For security threats, the positive for immigration is giving individuals a path away from persecution and violence in their home country. For economic threat perceptions, the positive impacts of immigration include fulfilling the workforce and increasing the number of laborers, potentially in industries that the national population cannot meet, such as agriculture.

In response to the perceived erosion of European identity, a new form of symbolic boundary-making has emerged—what some call “cultural Christianity.” This is not a religious revival, but a political invocation of Christian heritage as a marker of belonging. Leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary and parties across Central Europe have framed Christianity as the civilizational core of Europe, using it to justify exclusionary policies on migration, gender, and education. While church attendance continues to decline across the continent, with the Christian share of Europe’s population dropping from 76% in 2010 to 67% in 2020, the language of Christian values has gained political traction. It functions less as a faith and more as a filter—distinguishing “native” Europeans from outsiders, particularly Muslims. This symbolic Christianity has become a cultural defense mechanism, invoked not to unify, but to draw lines.

ONE EUROPE, MANY FAULT LINES

Throughout the history of Europe, there have been significant geographical and regional divides across Europe. As the continent has evolved into a more unified state in the post-WWII era, some of these rivalries and differences remain politically significant. They remain influential dividing factors when it comes to unified E.U. positions in a plethora of areas. The differences between former Eastern Bloc countries and Western countries during the days of the Cold War remain largely impactful on the processes

and ideologies of the European Union. Additionally, the economic disparity between Northern and Southern member states causes the E.U. to remain in a state of perpetuity and fear that the economic system they were founded on could crumble in an instant.

Looking at the East and West relationships within the E.U., it is without a doubt that the lasting impacts of the Soviet Union, merged with the current status of Russia, heavily influence E.U. operations in the modern day. While a majority of E.U. member states have a hard-line stance of supporting Ukraine in the Russian war of aggression, it is worth mentioning that not all member states feel the same way. The most notable pro-Russian member state is Hungary, as their Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has been adamant about allowing Russia to remain as the E.U.'s major gas and oil provider and disapproves of the sanctions the Commission has placed on Russia.



In this pool photograph distributed by the Russian state agency Sputnik, Russia's President Vladimir Putin meets with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Kremlin in Moscow on July 5, 2024. (Photo by Valery SHARIFULIN / POOL / AFP) (Photo by VALERY SHARIFULIN/POOL/AFP via Getty Images)

In addition to Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria continue to have pro-Russian sentiment in their political discourse. In both countries, the general population would prefer a Russian victory as opposed to a Ukrainian one. Also, non-E.U. member states that support Russia (Belarus and Serbia) place an immense amount of pressure on others in the region, as they would not support their neighbors if Russia were to invade and may harbor various Russian proxy groups. While Slovakia has increased its willingness to send arms and military equipment to assist Ukraine, Bulgaria and Hungary remain against any arms assistance for the duration of the conflict.

In addition to differences in addressing regional conflicts, the economic differences between the East and West of the European Union remain significant and can be traced back to the policies introduced after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Under the Marshall Plan, countries with more democratic institutions and capitalistic values were typically more rewarded when it came to post-war relief. This allowed countries like the former West Germany and France to flourish, but left those still under relative communist rule to be left behind, such as Poland. Their respective GDPs reflected this disparity, as those under the Iron Curtain failed to meet consumer needs and lacked resources to invite investment and create new industries. This phenomenon sprouted resentment among the Eastern countries and fueled anti-democratic values as the West grew immensely.

The liberal cosmopolitanism that once animated the European project is showing signs of fatigue. Once hailed as a model of post-national integration, the E.U. is now viewed by many as an elite-driven enterprise, disconnected from local realities. In cities like Berlin, Amsterdam, and Paris, cosmopolitan ideals still flourish—but outside the urban core, skepticism is growing. A 2016 Pew survey found that 59% of Europeans believed immigrants were a burden, and only 32% thought immigration had improved their countries. In Italy and Greece, those numbers were even starker. The backlash is not just about policy—it is cultural. Multiculturalism, once seen as a solution, is now blamed for fragmented societies and alienated citizenries. The dream of a borderless Europe has given way to a politics of protection, where identity is no longer shared but defended.

These regional divides are more than economic or strategic—they are cultural. The lingering distrust between East and West, and the resentment between North and South, continue to fracture any sense of collective European belonging. Traditionally, member states in the North were much more economically prosperous, while the countries in the South did not develop nearly as fast or efficiently. While the origins can be traced back to Protestantism and Christianity across Europe, the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how the relationship has played out in the modern era.

In 2008, the larger economies of the North refrained from bailing out the more financially fragile due to their riskier practices and immense debt. In 2015, Southern member states again felt left behind as Northern countries made open-border policies but refrained from hosting the mass influx of migrants. Also, in 2020, Southern member states were impacted severely and much sooner than their Northern counterparts. They required immediate assistance via “coronabonds,” and while the initial assistance was slow, the E.U. managed to act in a much swifter manner than during the previous two crises.

Beneath the surface of institutional continuity, the E.U. is confronting a deeper rupture: the erosion of liberal democratic norms within its own ranks. The consensus that once bound member states around the rule of law, separation of powers, and individual rights is fracturing. In Hungary and Poland, illiberal democracies have taken root, consolidating executive power and undermining judicial independence. A 2025 study in European Political Science describes this as a “dissensus” over liberal democracy—no longer a fringe phenomenon, but a structural challenge. The E.U.’s internal cohesion is now threatened not only by external pressures, but by the normalization of authoritarian tendencies within. If shared norms no longer hold, can a shared identity survive?

The dream of a borderless Europe has given way to a politics of protection, where identity is no longer shared but defended.

CAN IDENTITY BE ENGINEERED?

The European Union has long stood as a symbol of postwar reconciliation, institutional innovation, and economic interdependence. Yet beneath the surface of treaties and trade lies a more elusive and fragile ambition: the cultivation of a shared European identity. While the E.U. has succeeded in creating a common market and a supranational legal order, it has not yet succeeded in forging a cultural consciousness that binds its citizens together beyond borders and bureaucracies. The fractures explored throughout this analysis—historical grievances, migration disputes, regional disparities, and democratic backsliding—are not merely policy disagreements. They are symptoms of a deeper identity crisis that continues to challenge the very foundation of the European project.

Despite decades of integration, the sense of “Europeanness” remains uneven and contested. In Western and Northern Europe, attachment to the E.U. is relatively strong, while in Southern and Eastern states, skepticism and ambivalence persist. In countries like Ireland and the Netherlands, over two-thirds of citizens express a strong connection to the Union, while in Greece and Bulgaria, fewer than half feel the same. These disparities reflect not only economic and political differences but also divergent historical experiences and cultural narratives. The legacy of the Iron Curtain, the uneven benefits of globalization, and the varied responses to migration have all contributed to a fragmented European identity. Yet the story is not one of inevitable decline. Among younger generations, particularly those who have participated in cross-border programs like Erasmus+, a more cohesive European identity is beginning to take shape.

FOREIGN ANALYSIS



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Over 80 percent of Erasmus participants report feeling more European after their exchange, and many go on to form transnational networks that transcend national boundaries. These experiences, though limited in scale, suggest that identity can be cultivated through shared experiences, mobility, and education. Even among younger Europeans, identity formation is increasingly polarized. The divide is no longer just between East and West, but between cosmopolitan and communitarian worldviews. Digital platforms have amplified this cleavage, turning cultural debates into ideological battlegrounds. A 2021 study in *European Journal of Futures Research* warns that the postwar consensus—on democracy, on Europe itself—is unraveling. What was once a shared project is now a contested space, with competing visions of what Europe is and who it is for. In this environment, building a common identity requires more than shared programs—it demands shared meaning.

Some argue that the E.U.'s diversity is not a liability but a strength—that unity need not require uniformity. The idea of a layered identity, where individuals see themselves as both national and European citizens, offers a more realistic and resilient model for the future. Rather than erasing cultural differences, the E.U. can embrace them within a framework of shared democratic values and mutual respect. This vision aligns with the concept of constitutional patriotism, where allegiance is rooted not in ethnicity or language but in common principles and institutions. To move toward this vision, the E.U. must invest in the cultural and civic dimensions of integration with the same seriousness it has applied to economic and political union.

To realize a more cohesive European identity, the E.U. must commit to deepening its cultural and civic integration with the same resolve it has shown in advancing economic and political unity. This effort demands a strategic investment in initiatives that bridge the growing identity gap among member states. A continent-wide civic education program should be introduced to teach European history, democratic norms, and the responsibilities of E.U. citizenship—instilling a shared understanding of the Union's purpose, particularly among younger generations.

In parallel, the Erasmus+ program ought to be significantly expanded to include not only university students but also vocational trainees, adult learners, and cultural workers, thereby making cross-border experiences more inclusive and widespread. Complementing these efforts, the establishment of pan-European media platforms—featuring multilingual news coverage and cultural content—would foster a common public sphere, counteract divisive nationalist narratives, and create space for democratic dialogue across borders.

The European Union was never meant to be merely a marketplace or a diplomatic forum. It was envisioned as a community of peoples, united not

by sameness but by solidarity. If Europe is to lead in the 21st century, it must rediscover that ambition—not only in its policies, but in its identity. Without a shared sense of who Europeans are and what they stand for, the Union risks becoming a hollow structure, vulnerable to division and irrelevance. The future of Europe depends not only on what it builds, but on what it believes.

Strategic Enemies

How Two Adversaries Legitimize Power Through Endless Confrontation?

AYAH ALGHANEM

The bitter and incendiary rivalry between Iran and Israel fuels both nations' military, diplomatic, and strategic capacities while inflicting damage upon one another and their proxies. The potential for the use of nuclear weapons is low because the governments of Iran and Israel themselves are proxies to the multipolar powers that ultimately do not support the use of nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Iran could, however, use its deterrence to amplify anti-American rhetoric, challenge Israel's control of Palestine, and reorient the Middle East away from Western influence.

AYAH ALGHANEM, holding a Master's degree in Middle Eastern Affairs from American University School of International Service.



The only route to lasting peace is if the Gulf states strategically unify with Iran to transcend the differences of ideologies and resolve regional problems without interference from or reliance on foreign powers, and for Israel to agree to remove illegal settlements and apartheid barriers from the Palestinian territories. This is extremely difficult because of the history of multipolar powers competing in the region. Moreover, Iran and Israel benefit from the hostility by strengthening their strategic partnerships with Russia, China, and the United States. Iran and Israel legitimize their own geopolitical influence and strategy, each competing for resources and manpower. Russia and Iran recently deepened their alliance by signing a 20-year strategic partnership treaty in January of 2025; however, this did not include military guarantees for Iran.

Iran has also recently been integrated into geopolitical blocs such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. While Israel has deepened its strategic relationship with the United States and some Arab countries through the Abraham Accords, the United Nations International Court of Justice (ICJ) continues to handle cases related to the obligations of Israel to the Presence and Activities of the United Nations and the application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (*South Africa v. Israel*).

The conflict with Israel strengthens Iran's revolutionary, anti-Western ideology. The Iranian regime leverages external threats to suppress internal opposition. In 2022, when Mahsa Amini was arrested by the Guidance Patrol and died in police custody for violating the mandatory hijab law, widespread anti-government demonstrations erupted. The government spent several months into early 2023 arresting tens of thousands of protesters, and then pardoning them. The Iranian government was able to demonstrate its tyrannical grip on its people, but the widespread discontent persisted, and the government lost much of its public perception of legitimate power, despite its heavy subsidies on oil and popular anti-Western sentiment, both of which have benefited the stability of the state since the 1979 Revolution.

Iran is ranked as the largest subsidized oil industry in the world; it is a rentier economy. Iran's key economic policy is rooted in the thought that by distributing the wealth of its oil resources back to its citizens, it can maintain social stability domestically through reduced taxation. However, this results in a lack of government accountability to its people. It is possible that Iran is enriching its uranium to diversify its economy away from the domination of one sector and avoid this side effect of a rentier economy, as it is blocked from investments by heavy sanctions from much of the world. Iran could use highly enriched uranium to create breeder reactors that recycle and consume all actinides. Breeder reactors have been in development in China, Russia, India, and Japan with support from the

U.S. Department of Energy and Bill Gates' nuclear reactor engineering company, TerraPower, without restrictive limits.

The Iranian nuclear proliferation threat provides Israel with a clear and unifying external enemy, which helps justify significant defense spending, military innovation, and aggressive security policies to the United States. It allows Israeli government officials to rally public support around their security and distract its population from the corruption cases brought against its leadership. The Iranian threat has catalyzed Israel's military modernization, which has been used to deepen its ties with the U.S., Gulf states, and expand its influence on the Middle East through escalating its genocide in Gaza and the West Bank and claiming territory in Syria and Lebanon.

Threats from Iran accelerate Israel's military advancement in high-tech defense systems such as the Iron Dome, Arrow Missiles, and cybersecurity investments. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) military system, David's Sling, was developed in 2017 by Rafael Advanced Defense Systems and Raytheon. Israel conducts air, land, sea, and cyber MABAM operations, also known as the "war-between-wars strategy." Israel works with the U.S. to blend cyber warfare, Mossad strikes, and air campaigns to tackle threats. In an operation targeting Iranian air defenses and missiles, Israel's Mossad sent their operatives to smuggle drone parts and munitions into central Iran in 2025.

The drones were activated and launched toward missile launchers at the Esfajabad base, and their airstrikes targeted top Iranian military officials and nuclear scientists. Iran's nuclear ambitions and proxy network—including Hezbollah, militias in Syria and Iraq, and Hamas—have prompted Israel to adopt a more assertive security posture. Syria is beginning to reform relationships with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but it is uncertain how strong a relationship the new government will forge with its neighbors.

By positioning itself as the principal challenger to Israel—especially in response to Israeli policies in Palestine—Iran has gained political and ideological legitimacy. Iran and Israel have both used the threats made by one another to take advantage of the "rally around the flag" effect, where the approval rate of a nation's leader temporarily surges during an emergency. This strategy unites a large portion of the population and legitimizes the use of unitary executive power, both domestically and internationally. In addition to legitimizing the use of unitary executive power, America prospers from its relationship with Israel through its military-industrial complex. China profits from a conflict-free Iran by securing Iranian oil for manufacturing; 90% of Iran's oil exports are currently going to China. China relies on Iran for 15% of its oil imports but imports significantly more oil from Russia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Iraq, and Oman.



Iranian air defense system fires shots aimed at Israeli drones in the sky over Tehran, Iran, on June 14, 2025. Iran's foreign minister said the country would respond "decisively and proportionally" to a wave of attacks that Israel launched beginning in the early hours of June 13. (Photo by Khoshiran / Middle East Images via AFP) (Photo by KHOSHIRAN/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images)

Russia benefits from securing Iran's alliance through its trade of hydrocarbons and investments in a wide market of goods. All three multipolar powers are able to expand their own military-industrial complexes and test their weapons in the proxy wars in the region, but their interest in the region is ultimately resource security. Geopolitically, the ongoing standoff supports Iran's pivot toward alternative global powers. As Western sanctions isolate it economically and diplomatically, Iran's confrontation with Israel helps justify closer ties with Russia and China, who benefit from challenging the U.S.-led order in the Middle East. Israel has gained legitimacy by strengthening its regional and international alliances through agreements such as the Abraham Accords and using the threat of Iran to solidify America's commitments to Israeli security.

The ironic desire to prevent nuclear proliferation has been one of the chief goals that led the United States to form a closer relationship with Israel for decades and dramatically increased Israel's military bargaining power. While the International Atomic Energy Agency stated that Iran violated its non-proliferation agreements, Israel has neither signed nor ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968. Israel sought an exemption to the rules of nuclear non-proliferation so that it could import atomic material into the country. Israel became a prime beneficiary of the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine, which was in strong opposition to Arab nationalism. Former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warned those at a closed-door Senate hearing that if America does not make its influence strong in the Middle East and North Africa, "it's 'curtains' for Israel."

In just a couple of months, the President, backed by Congress, used military force and up to \$200 million in economic aid to assist any Middle Eastern country threatened by direct or indirect aggression from any country controlled by international communism. Israel was seen as a “pro-Western bulwark against future Soviet gains in the Middle East,” and France helped Israel construct a secret nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev Desert. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) believed that when completed, the reactor could “produce eight to ten kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium per year, enough for one atomic bomb.” Neither Eisenhower nor Kennedy were confident in Israel’s intentions; during a briefing on December 6th, 1960, Kennedy told Eisenhower that he believed an atomic development in Israel is “highly distressing.” As of 2025, Israel does not officially acknowledge its nuclear status. This is consistent with its policy known as “nuclear opacity” or “strategic ambiguity,” despite the development of the Jericho III, an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of delivering a nuclear weapon, and the test-launch of the subsequent Jericho IV.

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Israel gains legitimacy from the conflict through domestic political strengthening. Israel’s top security officials regularly claim that Iran is extremely close to developing a nuclear weapon, and this narrative has reinforced nationalism and unity within Israel for years. However, predictions for their completion have been unreliable and questionable, seeing as Benjamin Netanyahu also called for regime change in Iraq in 2002 due to the assertion that Saddam was

working toward the development of nuclear weapons, and this claim was also unfounded. Security concerns can bolster government popularity and legitimacy, which is a prominent reason why Netanyahu has turned Israel’s attention to international conflicts rather than Israel’s government’s intelligence failures and personal corruption cases while in office.

Netanyahu has had to balance public opinion and recommendations for indictment by the police in 1997, 1999, and then again in 2018 for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. He was formally indicted on bribery and fraud charges and was charged in 2020. Before the trial was settled, he was sworn in for his fifth term as Prime Minister. Netanyahu ordered the dispersal of the demonstrations and protests against him at his residence by using COVID-19 special regulations, limiting them to 20 people and at a distance of 1,000 meters from their homes. In reaction to these regulations on the right of assembly, the demonstrations were enlarged and dispersed to over 1,000 centers, with over 100,000 protesters reportedly participating.

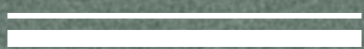
Netanyahu failed to form a stable governing coalition between 2019 and 2021, and many voters felt a sense of political paralysis due to the lack of integrity in his leadership. The Iranian nuclear narrative persisted, however, and on January 3rd, 2020, Qasem Soleimani was assassinated by a U.S. drone strike—one of the most high-profile extrajudicial killings of the decade—authorized by President Trump. By November 2020, an emboldened Israel assassinated Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, an Iranian nuclear scientist. In May of 2021, settler expansion and violence against Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah and Al-Aqsa led to more criticism over Netanyahu's failure to create a lasting solution. On June 13th, 2021, Netanyahu was ousted by the new coalition government led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid until the coalition collapsed in 2022.

Meanwhile, Iran and Russia signed a \$1.7 billion deal, after which Iran supplied drones to the Alabuga plant in the Tatarstan region. Netanyahu led a dramatic political comeback in 2022, marked by major controversial judicial reforms. These reforms reduced the power of the Supreme Court, giving the Executive branch control over judicial appointments, and widespread protests erupted as a consequence. Netanyahu used his anti-Palestinian and anti-Iranian national security concerns to overshadow domestic debates, which has proven somewhat successful in his push to coalesce with right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties despite a narrow margin. In another exhibition of military strength, Israel assassinated a commander in the IRGC, Hassan Sayyad Khodaei, in 2022—another high-profile killing.

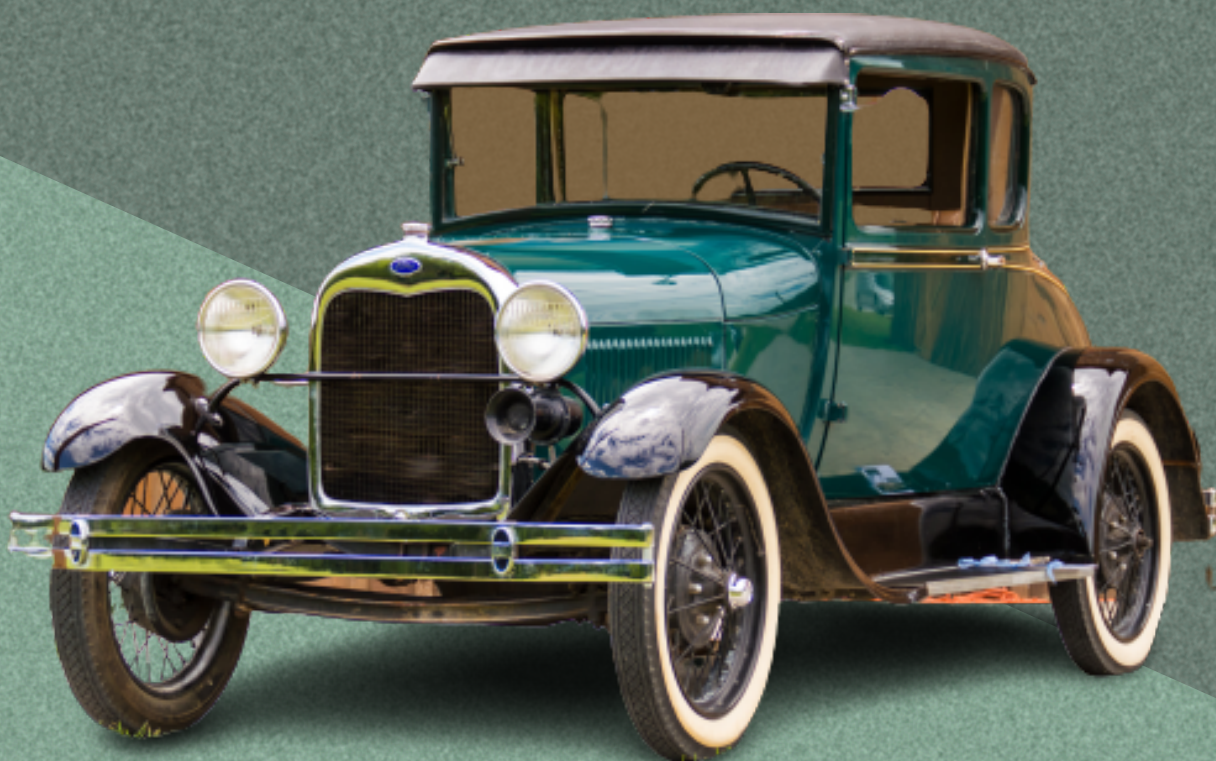
In early 2023, Netanyahu's government legalized the construction of a large number of settlements in the West Bank. In just a few months, Israel constructed over 10,000 housing units, dwarfing the number that were constructed in 2022 by nearly 300%. Decades of proxy war, revolution, and settler expansion led to the Iran-backed Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023. Netanyahu was criticized for presiding over Israel's biggest intelligence failure in decades after the Hamas attack on October 7th, 2023, and his government's failure to return all of the hostages. The majority of Israelis held Netanyahu responsible and believed he should resign. This genocide—a cost of the proxy war with Iran—also led to an Israeli airstrike killing several Iranian commanders in an Iranian Embassy building in Damascus, Syria, in April of 2024, after which Iran launched a drone and missile attack on Israel.

Israel, in turn, attacked an Iranian aircraft system that was close to a nuclear facility. Ismail Haniyeh, the former leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, was assassinated by Israel on July 31st, 2024, in Tehran. This took place just days after he met with Mahmoud al-Aloul, the deputy head of Fatah, which controls the Palestinian Authority and has some

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administrative control in the West Bank, in Beijing. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the opposing Palestinian party factions, including 12 other groups, signed an agreement he referred to as the “Beijing Declaration” to block Israeli control of Gaza after the war ends at that meeting. The assassination weakened Iran’s proxy organization, Hamas, and took negotiations further backward. A few months later, on November 21st, 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu, Yoav Gallant, and Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif for war crimes in Gaza.

Iran experienced increasing domestic instability when, in January of 2025, two senior Islamic judges in the Tehran Supreme Court, Ali Razini and Mohammad Moghiseh, were assassinated by an individual who could not be questioned for his motives, as he committed suicide shortly after. The 2025 Gaza war ceasefire ended on the night of March 18th when Israel launched an attack on Gaza. That same day, Netanyahu was scheduled to testify in his corruption trial, but as a result of the attacks, the legal proceedings were postponed until June 2025 after the Jerusalem District Court reviewed Netanyahu’s request.

On June 13th, 2025, Netanyahu authorized airstrikes against Iran, marking the beginning of the Iran-Israel war, further postponing any chance that the heads of state will face accountability for the violence. This time, Israel and America had the upper hand, with legitimacy coming from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) warning that Iran had reached 60% enrichment of 400 kg of uranium after the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA, which originally limited Iran’s production of uranium enriched over 3.67%. The IAEA has said that it had no credible evidence that Iran was building a weapon, but that Tehran was not complying with its nuclear non-proliferation obligations. The IAEA released these findings just one day before Israel launched its June 13th attack. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) have presented differing views on whether the Iranian nuclear sites were destroyed in the June 2025 attacks.

Likewise, they differed in their debates in 2003 on whether Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. This was the basis for the United States to pursue regime change in Iraq through a ground invasion. It is within the realm of possibility that a similar justification could be used to pursue a regime change in Iran within the next decade. On June 27th–29th, 2025, the Jerusalem District Court rejected Netanyahu’s petition for a full postponement of his cross-examination on the basis that there was no sufficient justification to indefinitely delay the hearings, even amid national security concerns with Iran. However, Netanyahu was granted a partial delay for the coming days, slowing the pace of the case by invoking national crises and U.S. political pressure.

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With the September 2024 assassination of the secretary-general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in Beirut, and the December 2024 dismantling of the Assad regime in Syria, Iran and its proxies have been severely depleted. Surprisingly, despite a long-standing rivalry with Iran, Saudi Arabia immediately condemned Israel's strikes on Iran. On July 13th, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia released a statement strongly condemning and denouncing the "blatant Israeli aggressions against the brotherly Islamic Republic of Iran, which undermine its sovereignty and security and constitute a clear violation of international laws and norms." Russia and China have not abandoned Iran in its weakened state. Iran has been welcomed into BRICS as a full member, and its Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, attended the 2025 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin were absent at this year's BRICS Summit, sending representatives and joining virtually.

Tehran received critical support and "strong and unequivocal condemnation" of the U.S. and Israeli airstrikes. A joint statement from BRICS said that the attacks constituted a "violation of international law and the Charter of the United Nations" and that the representatives "express grave concern over the subsequent escalation of the security situation in the Middle East." Trump has responded to the summit by claiming that the United States government will impose an additional 10% tariff on any countries aligning themselves with the "anti-American policies" of this BRICS group of developing nations.

According to the political scientist and former U.S.-Polish diplomat, Zbigniew Brzezinski, "control of the Eurasian landmass is the key to global domination and control of Central Asia is the key to control of the Eurasian landmass." This stems from the Heartland Theory, wherein the control of Eastern Europe, the Russian Steppes, and Central Asia was viewed as essential for the mission of conquering Eurasia, Africa, and then the world. The Heartland Theory was proposed by 20th-century British geographer Halford Mackinder in his 1904 paper and highlighted the region's rich oil, gas, and mineral resources, as well as its historical military significance across empires. Russia and China cooperated with Iran to counterbalance NATO and the influence of the United States in Central Asia, consistent with Brzezinski's and Mackinder's theories.

China may be persuaded to provide Tehran with new security assurances in the coming decade. Israel and Iran simultaneously harm and benefit from their rivalry, which has thus far resulted in an emboldened Israel

backed by U.S. arms but a relatively stable, though theocratic, Iranian Nezam bolstered by Russia and China. Their actions cause intended and unintended effects that make their way into the individual lives of those who are not engaged in the conflict. This includes citizens of the multipolar powers and casualties of the genocide in Gaza and the West Bank. This is not a zero-sum conflict but rather a dynamic rivalry in which each state's actions counter the other and amplify their own capacity, alliances, and legitimacy. Despite this, the dynamic is precarious. Escalation, miscalculation, and regional instability loom large if they are left unchecked over the next few decades.

Has Erdogan Won in Syria?

One Chapter Closed, A Harder One Begins

JEREMIE BENZAKEN

If we have to remember a date in the intricate world of geopolitics very recently, December 2024 could be the one. The sudden fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime following the resignation of the Butcher of Damascus on December 8th took many international observers, as well as Syrians themselves, by surprise. Indeed, for years, most specialists and media outlets analyzed the situation in Syria with great astonishment, observing the survival of the Assad regime despite the devastating civil war that had been ongoing since 2011. Most believed that the Syrian opposition and the West had missed their shot at overthrowing the “Lion” back in 2012. Most analysts expected the conflict to drag on for years, with the regime showing remarkable resilience against both internal and external opposition. Yet, here we are today, already beginning to describe Assad's surprising fall. The once Arab Spring survivor is now gone and was overthrown in only a few weeks after years of bloody resistance at the head of Syria.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (not in picture) attend the press conference following their meeting at Villa Doria Pamphilj, on April 29, 2025 in Rome, Italy. (Photo by Antonio Masiello/Getty Images)

The opposition forces, led by the Islamists of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), launched a well-coordinated offensive at the end of November 2024, seizing Aleppo on November 29th, followed by Hama on December 5th and Homs on December 8th, opening the way to Damascus. But was this sudden regime change a real surprise? Not really. In fact, it seems that many signs were indicating the regime's weakness, and moreover, the numerous changes in the regional context suggested that Assad's grip over Syria was at risk. For some context, we will now briefly examine some of the key factors that may have led to the downfall of five decades of Baath rule over Syria.

First, it is important to remember how Syria is ethnically and religiously split, often aligning with long-standing political divisions, adding to the very fractured nature of the country. Indeed, all of these divisions were exacerbated by years of civil war, territorial partitions, and a long economic crisis, which had profoundly weakened Assad's support base. The military, primarily composed of conscripts, also began to falter, with reports of soldiers fleeing their posts and abandoning the fight. This internal erosion was further compounded by a significant loss of public support, particularly among the Alawite community (making up most of the regime loyalist forces), which had traditionally been loyal to Assad.

On the other hand, the situation of the regime increasingly worsened with the rise of regional tensions, influenced by the war in Ukraine and the

October 7th event. Russia had been a prominent supporter of the regime, backing up its forces on the ground, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022 forced Moscow to considerably withdraw its forces from Syria and lighten its presence in the country. The events following October 7th also had a major impact on Syria. With the Israeli incursion in South Lebanon and the weakening of Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shia proxy, the Baath regime lost one of its major allies in controlling the Assad-ruled territory. All of these events had probably played a major role in weakening the regime, prophesying the fall of Damascus.

Finally, the mortal blow came with the offensive led by HTS and its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani), in November 2024. Their ability to mobilize and capitalize on Assad's military fatigue and the defection of regime forces truly played a crucial role in the rapid disintegration of Assad's control. Furthermore, the population's massive hatred towards the regime, now only supported by the Alawite minority, facilitated the rebels' successful offensive.

BEHIND ASSAD'S COLLAPSE

But another factor played a huge role in the fall of the Assad regime in Syria: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's unwavering support for the rebels, without which nothing could have happened. For some, such support did not come out of nowhere, with the hostility between Ankara and Damascus being ancient. However, things could have gone a different way, as Erdogan tried to reconcile with Bashar al-Assad many times in recent years, seeking to facilitate the repatriation of millions of Syrian refugees and to ease growing domestic discontent within Türkiye. Yet this attempt at reconciliation remained a dead letter, as Assad rejected all overtures and demanded a complete Turkish military withdrawal from northern Syria as a prerequisite for reconciliation. Probably frustrated at such a diplomatic deadlock, Erdogan finally decided to revert to the traditional Turkish hostility towards the Baath regime and thus intensified Türkiye's partnership with Syrian rebel factions, such as HTS.

In general, one should realize one thing: Türkiye has always been a key external player in the Syrian civil war from the very beginning, using its border proximity to provide material and logistical support to opposition groups seeking to topple Assad. Already accused by many external observers of hidden support to the so-called Islamic State, Türkiye has in reality always been a supporter of diverse rebel groups, such as the Free

Syrian Army, but also, to a lesser extent, HTS. Such support must be examined in the light of Ankara's long-standing goal in Syria: first, preventing the establishment of an autonomous entity in northern Syria under Kurdish authority, as Türkiye would perceive such an entity as an existential security threat; and second, to shape a post-Assad Syria in a manner that serves its strategic interests, notably by securing Türkiye's dominant role in the country's reconstruction. Thereby, the November offensive led by HTS and its allies provided Erdogan with an unprecedented opportunity to fulfill these objectives.

According to most observers and experts, it is very likely that Türkiye was at first planning on delaying HTS's offensive, only supporting an extension of the HTS-controlled area around Idlib. Indeed, it seems that Erdogan initially preferred a negotiated settlement with Assad. However, the initial loss of Turkish support to what was supposed to be a light offensive aiming at threatening Assad ended up with a power switch and the fall of Assad's rule over Syria. As explained above, Ankara ultimately allowed the group to proceed further when Moscow failed to restrain Assad's aggression in Idlib.

But is this regime switch in Damascus a "victory" for Erdogan? Could he frame this as a political or strategic win? At first glance, many would be tempted to respond to such a question affirmatively, as the collapse of Assad's regime appears to be a geopolitical victory for Türkiye in many aspects. In fact, Erdogan's years of support towards opposition factions look to have paid off, and Ankara now holds significant leverage in shaping Syria's political future. As proof, the fall of Assad has been celebrated by large segments of the Turkish population, particularly among the millions of Syrian refugees living in Türkiye and eager to return home. However, Erdogan's triumph is very far from being absolute. While it is true that the Turkish backing of opposition groups played a role in Assad's downfall, Türkiye did not entirely dictate the course of events, and HTS's unexpected level of success has probably introduced new uncertainties for Ankara.

Hence, the answer to the above question is certainly not as straightforward as people would think. Türkiye has certainly achieved key strategic objectives: the removal of Assad, the weakening of Kurdish forces, and an expanded role in Syria's future. Yet, Ankara has also inherited significant challenges. As this article will explore, Türkiye's position in post-Assad Syria is very complex and must be closely analyzed before concluding on Recep Tayyip Erdogan's absolute victory in Syria.

INFLUENCE, BUT NOT COMMAND

When it comes to Türkiye's position in the region, things seem to be going pretty well for Erdogan's diplomacy. In this new post-Assad era, Türkiye certainly holds a unique position to influence Syria's reconstruction and political future. Indeed, Ankara's proximity to the rebels and its long-standing support for opposition groups place it in a dominant role, with many specialists agreeing that HTS's success greatly depended on Erdogan's support, who likely gave the green light for the November offensive, which ultimately overthrew the "Butcher of Damascus." With the fall of the Assad dynasty, Türkiye's hands are now free to facilitate the return of millions of Syrian refugees and assert its control over the majority Kurdish regions in the north, notably by countering the influence of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and preventing the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous entity in Rojava.



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in full military combat uniform, waves from a helicopter as he visits Turkish troops at Ogulpinar border gate with Syria, near Reyhanli, Hatay, Turkey, Sunday, April 1 2018. (Kayhan Ozer/pool photo via AP)

Moreover, with Russia and Iran both experiencing significant setbacks in Syria, Türkiye seems to have emerged as the most influential foreign power in the post-Assad environment. Russia, distracted by its conflict in Ukraine and unable to intervene effectively in Syria's rapid power shift, and Iran, whose inability to provide decisive support to Assad led to his downfall, have both seen their influence wane. On the other hand, Türkiye, initially cautious about HTS's rise, has now managed to secure key advantages in Syria, positioning itself as a dominant actor moving forward, as pointed out by many experts. So, is Türkiye's influence in this new Syrian configuration

absolute? Things may not be as easy. Indeed, Türkiye's position in Syria remains fragile, as its influence could be tempered by the rising prominence of HTS, whose dependence on Erdogan's support has diminished since the Islamist group took control of Damascus.

As pointed out by the Council on Foreign Relations, HTS maintains rather pragmatic cooperation with Ankara, operating independently, and is not directly controlled by Türkiye, as are other rebel groups, such as the Syrian National Army (SNA), with HTS even manufacturing its own arms. Another obstacle is Türkiye's diplomatic ability to sustain its influence in a very fractured Syrian political landscape. HTS's role complicates Türkiye's ability to shape Syria's future, as it seeks a balance between engaging with the group led by Ahmed al-Sharaa and maintaining its broader goals. Furthermore, the potential emergence of a new, stronger Syrian government will likely challenge Türkiye's influence, especially if the new leadership becomes more independent or resistant to Turkish involvement, particularly regarding the future reconstruction and political restructuring of the country. As pointed out previously, HTS's dependence on Erdogan's support has diminished, and what used to be a rather marginalized group now enjoys broad popular support among Syrians as well as international benevolence.

FRIENDS TURNED FOES

But what about the other regional actors – and possibly competitors to Türkiye's influence? Very surprisingly, yesterday's friends have become today's enemies. Indeed, foreign powers who supported Assad's regime now find themselves on the other side of the Rubicon, namely, Russia and Iran. Continuing the long-lasting Soviet friendship with the Assads, Russia has been a key player in the Syrian civil war, saving the regime both politically—notably at the UN by hampering numerous UN peacekeeping missions—and, of course, militarily by sustaining Assad's power on the ground. Yet, the Kremlin, which used Syria as a strategic foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean, now faces the possibility of losing its military base in Tartous and its influence over the Syrian government.

Similarly, the Iranian godfather has also lost most of its influence in Syria since the fall of Assad. Syria had always been the masterpiece of the Iranian strategy in the Middle East as part of its Shia axis, Assad being used as an Iranian proxy to secure its influence in the Levant and serving as a corridor to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Leveraging its military power through Hezbollah, the Iranian alliance used to be crucial in maintaining Assad in power as



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well. However, the fall of the Assad regime and its replacement at the head of Syria by a Sunni Muslim group hostile to the Iranian presence has certainly annihilated Tehran's influence for good. Whatever their roles in Syrian contemporary history, neither Russia nor Iran intervened decisively as Assad's regime crumbled, signaling either a strategic retreat or an inability to support the Syrian government.

For the Western powers, things are less clear. The U.S. is in historical support of the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, notably backing up the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as part of its broader strategy against ISIS. With Assad's regime ousted, the U.S. and European powers will need to recalibrate their strategies. Although the U.S. remains committed to countering ISIS and its resurgence, the collapse of Assad's government could see a shift in U.S. foreign policy, with the choice of either supporting the new leadership in Damascus or focusing on stabilizing northern Syria. The future of the SDF will be crucial here, as the U.S. faces increased pressure from Türkiye to abandon support for Kurdish groups, which Ankara views as terrorist affiliates of the PKK. Much like Türkiye, some European countries such as Germany or Sweden have been hosting millions of Syrian refugees since 2012 and could then opt for a rapprochement with this new Syrian regime to facilitate their repatriation. Moreover, Europeans are generally interested in stabilizing the region and have always been fierce opponents of Assad, which could also foster a new dynamic in European-Syrian relations.

The role of Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, will be pivotal in shaping Syria's future. This is also true for the new government in Damascus, whose capacity to attract funds from Gulf countries will be crucial to finance the reconstruction of the country.

Saudi Arabia traditionally seeks to limit Iranian influence in the region and thus may align itself with Türkiye to fill the gap left by Tehran's declining influence in Syria. Likewise, Qatar's ideological proximity with the new power in Damascus and long-standing alliance with Erdogan might serve Doha's interests in Syria and facilitate the securing of Qatari funds for the new regime. Hence, it can be argued that the fall of Assad has dramatically reshaped the regional power balance, with Türkiye emerging as a key beneficiary. However, the complexities introduced by HTS's rise and the uncertain future of Syria's political landscape pose challenges for Ankara's long-term influence.

*Post-Assad Syria resembles
less a strategic playground
and more a political
minefield.*

A BORDER REDRAWN

In terms of gains, one should first observe the reduction—some would even speak about “elimination”—of the YPG threat. Türkiye has long viewed the Syrian Kurdish forces, and particularly the YPG, as an extension of the PKK, which Ankara labels as a terrorist organization and enemy number one of the Republic. For the new “Sultan” of Ankara, supporting rebel forces such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA) is seen as a very practical step to eliminate Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Indeed, some consider that with the fall of the regime, as well as the recent election of Donald Trump in Washington, Erdogan is now freer than ever to seize the opportunity of achieving a strategic victory by eliminating Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria and preventing the Kurds from making the junction between the sides of the Syrian/Turkish border.

Moreover, Erdogan believes that the fall of the Baathist regime set the conditions for the return of millions of Syrian refugees living in Türkiye since the civil war. In fact, the Turkish president has set the return of Syrian refugees currently residing in Türkiye as one of his primary goals, especially in view of the upcoming elections in 2028, as the subject remains an important preoccupation among the population. Hence, the fall of Assad gives Türkiye an opportunity to stabilize Syria and create the necessary conditions for these refugees to feel safe and hopeful enough about the future economic conditions in Syria to return home. Moreover, it is clear that many Syrians have already started to return home, while others are seriously considering doing the same, proving the Turkish president a little more right.

Finally, Türkiye may find it easier to establish security zones along its border and strengthen its control over northern Syria with an allied regime being in place in Damascus for the first time since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. These zones are expected to provide greater protection against insurgent groups and Kurdish fighters. Hence, the securitization of its southern border, rid of the presence of a hostile regime in Damascus, can be seen as one of the greatest achievements of this regime change for Türkiye, further contributing to its national security—something that the president can claim as a political benefit for Erdogan.

THE SYRIAN BILL

However, the picture is not entirely rosy either, and the fall of the Baathist regime in Damascus could lead to further destabilization of the country

after a few years of relative calm, thus negatively impacting Türkiye. In general, it would be wiser for Erdogan to also expect a downside behind this apparent victory. So, first, let us talk numbers—not the kind politicians throw around in press briefings, but the kind that quietly bleed through national budgets and haunt long-term strategy. Syria’s reconstruction is not going to come cheap. And guess who is footing part of the bill? Türkiye. Türkiye is not just a neighbor peering over the fence; it is hosting millions of Syrian refugees, and like it or not, that places it squarely in the reconstruction hot seat.

Ankara has already signaled a willingness to help rebuild its war-ravaged neighbor—cue Erdogan’s latest diplomatic overtures—but this is more than a goodwill gesture. It is a high-stakes balancing act. Supporting infrastructure, managing the logistics of refugee return, and fostering sustainable development in the volatile northern regions? That is not a weekend project—it is a generational one. And make no mistake, it will test both Türkiye’s wallet and its political stamina. Rebuilding Syria may also mean rebuilding trust. Or, more likely, bracing for a cold diplomatic standoff. Türkiye has played a long game in Syria, backing opposition forces and carving out influence zones, especially in Idlib. But the political terrain is shifting fast. HTS’s growing prominence, coupled with the emergence of a potentially less Türkiye-friendly government in Damascus, could spell trouble. A Syria that is more autonomous—and less receptive to Ankara’s military footprint or its alliances with rebel groups—could ignite diplomatic tensions that are anything but theoretical.

Let us not forget: Türkiye is not the only power eyeing a post-Assad Syria. The U.S. is still firmly in play, backing Kurdish forces in the north—forces Ankara sees as a threat wrapped in a flag. And the Gulf monarchies? They may have their own plans, their own checkbooks, and perhaps their own preferred partners in Damascus. If Riyadh or Doha start cozying up to the new Syrian leadership, Türkiye’s regional strategy could quickly feel more like a solo than a symphony. So, Türkiye may dream of a secure southern border, a weakened Kurdish push for autonomy, and a streamlined refugee return. But dreams come with invoices. Between the steep costs of reconstruction, rising friction with Damascus, and geopolitical elbowing from the U.S. and Gulf players, Ankara’s post-Assad playbook is anything but straightforward. This is not just a question of whether Türkiye can win influence in Syria, but whether it can afford the price tag.

ANKARA’S FRAGILE LEVERAGE

Now that the dust is settling in Damascus and HTS’s black-and-white

banners have been hastily swapped for tailored suits and diplomatic jargon, Ankara is finding itself in an increasingly ambiguous dance with Syria's new leadership. On paper, Erdogan should be basking in vindication—after all, Türkiye's long bet on the opposition has paid off. However, beneath the surface, the situation is far more complex. While Türkiye has undoubtedly been instrumental in shaping the post-Assad order, notably by supporting the rebel coalition that led the charge to Damascus, it does not fully control the monster it helped create.

HTS and its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa (who now presides over Syria's transition government), were once officially branded a terrorist group by Ankara itself. Now, a fragile, pragmatic cooperation binds the two: a relationship defined more by tactical alignment than ideological harmony. Still, Türkiye has not given up its ambitions to mold the new Syria. Turkish officials, including Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, have wasted no time swooping into Damascus with grand offers: military training, reconstruction funds, and even help building a new national army.

These overtures, however, come with clear strings attached—namely, the expectation that the new regime clamps down on Kurdish autonomy and keeps Ankara's interests front and center. Idlib remains a sticking point. Türkiye's military footprint there is not only symbolic but strategic. The area has long served as a buffer zone against Kurdish forces and Assad loyalists alike. But as the new Syrian leadership consolidates power, questions arise: Will Ankara's presence be tolerated as a necessary security umbrella or resented as foreign meddling? As *El País* reported, Türkiye's sprawling network of intelligence, police, and media in Syria's capital may feel more like occupation than cooperation to some within HTS's orbit.

And therein lies the rub: HTS is not the Syrian National Army. It is not built to be Türkiye's puppet. As Chatham House cautions, Ankara's newfound leverage comes with equally weighty responsibilities and potential blowback. HTS may grow increasingly assertive, its leaders emboldened by popular support and their newfound legitimacy. If the governance style in Damascus begins to diverge too far from Ankara's preferences—such as veering too Islamist or too independent—friction is inevitable. So, is Türkiye the new kingmaker in Syria? Perhaps. But if Erdogan hoped for a pliable ally in Damascus, he may find himself instead navigating a precarious alliance with a regime that owes him gratitude, but not obedience. And in Middle Eastern politics, that distinction makes all the difference.

ERDOGAN'S GRAND NARRATIVE

For Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the fall of Assad is more than a geopolitical trophy; it is a golden political script, handed to him just in time for the next domestic chapter. In classic Erdogan fashion, the narrative is already being spun: Türkiye stood firm, played the long game, and emerged with moral authority and regional leverage. And now? Now comes the payback at home. As Dareen Khalifa from *The Guardian* notes, Ankara is walking a “victory lap,” with Turkish officials promptly planting their flag over the reopened embassy in Damascus just days after Assad’s departure. This is why the Turkish intelligence chief, Ibrahim Kalin’s high-profile visit can be seen as the first signal that Erdogan intends to capitalize on the moment to its fullest extent.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a press conference in Istanbul ahead of travelling to New York on September 21, 2024. Photo: Turkish presidency.

This is no small matter. With over 3.2 million Syrian refugees inside Turkish borders, Erdogan is threading the needle between his image as a protector of the ummah and his nationalist allies’ less charitable view of displaced Syrians. Now, with Syria inching toward stability, Erdogan can claim the moral high ground while quietly facilitating returns. His strategy is plain and simple: turning a political liability into a triumph. In this context, Assad’s downfall gives Erdogan the opportunity to “bolster his brand” as the leader who both sheltered Syrians and orchestrated their dignified return. Such an outcome would likely soothe domestic tensions while polishing his legacy.

And indeed, public opinion is watching closely. As Chatham House points out, Turks remain divided. While some may be wary of repatriation

promises, others demand quicker returns amid economic woes. Erdogan understands this balancing act all too well. He is relying on the optics of diplomacy in Damascus and reconstruction in Syria to calm internal dissent, rally nationalist pride, and reinforce his message to voters. From his perspective, the strategy has succeeded against the odds: he played the regional game and won. But with every political win comes expectation. Now, he must deliver.

AT THE TABLE — OR ON IT?

Now that Assad is finally out of the picture, the international stage surrounding Syria is being re-scripted. In this new context, Türkiye is not just rewriting its role but vying for top billing. While other regional powers scramble to recalibrate, Ankara has made its position unmistakably clear: this post-Assad Syria will be navigated on Turkish terms—or at least under heavy Turkish influence. As prophesied by Erdogan, his allies would one day pray in the courtyards of the Umayyad Mosque after Assad's fall, and this vision now appears to be edging toward reality.

Kalin was recently spotted strolling through the streets of Damascus like a man surveying new real estate. Not particularly subtle, but certainly strategic. Türkiye's clout in Syria is no accident; it is the result of a long game—a mixture of ideological ambition, hard power, and cold pragmatism. With HTS consolidating control and forming a provisional government, Türkiye is not only the dominant external actor in Syria but can arguably be seen as the broker of what comes next. Through a careful dance of cooperation and containment, Ankara has turned HTS from a terrorist-designated entity into a *de facto* gatekeeper: helping curb drug trafficking, controlling ISIS infiltration, and detaining those Ankara wants removed.

In this new chapter, the central question is how Türkiye will maneuver its relationships with the real titans of geopolitics, such as the U.S., Russia, and Iran. Moscow and Tehran come first. Their influence was tethered to Assad's survival. With him gone, Ankara has seized the momentum. Russia, preoccupied and overstretched, is unlikely to reassert itself decisively in northern Syria. Iran, whose support for Damascus had always been more ideological than strategic, now finds itself sidelined—especially in Sunni-majority areas where Turkish-backed groups hold sway. And the United States? That relationship remains far more complicated.

Despite being NATO allies, Ankara and Washington remain deeply divided on the Kurdish question. The U.S. continues to support the SDF, whose

backbone, the YPG, is anathema to Türkiye. Erdogan's policy is unambiguous: dismantle any form of Kurdish autonomy near the southern border, with or without U.S. approval. With a planned U.S. withdrawal from Syria by 2026, Ankara senses opportunity. The departure of American forces may translate into increased Turkish influence—not just physically, but diplomatically, economically, and ideologically. In short, Syria's power vacuum has become Türkiye's geopolitical feast, and Erdogan is already carving out his preferred portions. Whether other global actors will find themselves at the table—or on the menu—remains to be seen.

NOT THE ENDGAME YET

So, has Recep Tayyip Erdogan truly won in Syria? That depends on how “victory” is defined—and whose scoreboard is being used. If success is measured purely in geopolitical terms, Türkiye has clearly advanced several key positions on the chessboard: Assad is out, HTS is in (with Ankara's tacit approval), and Turkish officials are already shaking hands in Damascus while planning border security zones. Not bad for a player once accused of overreach. However, if Erdogan was hoping for a pliable, pro-Türkiye government that would resolve the refugee crisis, eliminate Kurdish threats, and grant Ankara veto power over Syria's future, it may be premature to declare “mission accomplished.”

Fundamentally, Türkiye has made substantial progress on some of its long-standing objectives in Syria. According to the Alma Research and Education Center, Ankara's strategy has consistently revolved around three pillars: suppressing Kurdish autonomy in northern

Syria, enabling the return of millions of Syrian refugees, and shaping a Sunni-friendly post-Assad state. With HTS now seated in Damascus and the YPG's position weakened, two of these ambitions have taken tangible form. The Turkish military's persistent operations against the SDF and the symbolic display of Turkish flags across rebel-held zones have given Erdogan the aura of a kingmaker in Syria's emerging order. Still, Türkiye's influence, while significant, is far from absolute.

Türkiye's Syria campaign may be remembered not as a final checkmate, but as a high-stakes middle game.

As Chatham House aptly noted, Erdogan's victory is “vindicated but not guaranteed,” and his government now faces a delicate balancing act between exerting power and managing new responsibilities. One major concern is whether HTS, emboldened by its lightning-fast offensive and growing popular legitimacy among segments of the Syrian population, will continue to heed Ankara's guidance. The group's leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa

(also known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani), may owe tactical gratitude to Türkiye, but he does not take orders from it. As CEPA observes, “it is doubtful that Turkey was ever the HTS puppet-master in the first place,” and the militia may now drift further from Ankara’s orbit—particularly if Western powers begin to engage with it for the sake of regional stability. More critically, Türkiye may now be facing a paradox of its own making. While Erdogan’s inner circle celebrates a rare foreign policy achievement, his public posture has remained notably restrained.

Why the caution? Possibly because post-Assad Syria resembles less a strategic playground and more a political minefield. HTS’s Islamist foundations make it an uncomfortable partner for long-term cooperation—especially from the perspective of Türkiye’s Western allies. Moreover, Erdogan’s vision of an “AKP-style government in Damascus,” as described by CEPA, remains aspirational at best. Although the new leadership may share some ideological proximity with the Justice and Development Party, it does not imply a willingness to accept Turkish oversight. Then there is the refugee question. Turkish officials have already begun testing the waters for voluntary returns, and local media have reported a modest but growing flow of Syrians crossing back over the border. This is a development Erdogan is certain to highlight in the run-up to the 2028 elections.

Yet Chatham House tempers this optimism, noting that “conditions are still dire” in many parts of Syria, making mass returns improbable in the near future. A few thousand celebratory homecomings in Hatay province do not equate to the repatriation of 3.6 million people. Furthermore, the economic elephant in the room remains: reconstruction. Ankara may have re-entered Damascus in a black sedan, but it will not be long before it is expected to bring bulldozers and checkbooks. As HTS attempts to govern a fractured state, Türkiye will inevitably face pressure to support infrastructure, service delivery, and security—all while managing the perception risk of being seen not as a partner, but as an occupier. The Guardian notes that Türkiye’s initial reluctance to back the HTS offensive was driven in part by fears of precisely this outcome: a “catastrophic success” leaving Ankara responsible for a volatile post-war landscape.

Strategically, Erdogan has reasserted Türkiye’s influence in a region where Russia and Iran once held dominance. The Council on Foreign Relations accurately describes the current period as a “risky new chapter,” in which Ankara may find itself overstretched militarily, diplomatically, and financially. The international stage is closely observing: the U.S. remains entangled in the Kurdish question, Gulf states are eyeing Damascus for

their own leverage, and European powers are recalibrating how best to engage through the lens of refugee returns. Within this tangled web, Erdogan may be the loudest voice—but he is far from the only one. In the end, Türkiye’s Syria campaign may be remembered not as a final checkmate, but as a high-stakes middle game. Erdogan has positioned himself and Türkiye as the indispensable broker in post-Assad Syria. That alone constitutes a remarkable achievement. However, as any strategist will affirm, winning a battle is not the same as winning the peace. And in this war-torn theater where alliances shift like desert sand, the true test lies not in what Erdogan has conquered, but in what he can ultimately control.

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Netanyahu's Battle with American Left

How Progressive America Redefined Its Stance on Israel

BLAKE HERRERA

The U.S.-Israel alliance has long stood as a key pillar of U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. Leaders across the political spectrum have expressed an unwavering commitment to this “special relationship” rooted in Cold War geopolitics and mutual security interests. Democrats and Republicans alike have traditionally embraced Israel as a crucial ally bound closely to the U.S. by shared values—a liberal democracy amid authoritarianism in the region.

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Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu prepares to speak at the Computer History Museum on March 5, 2014 in Mountain View, California. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu joined California Gov. Jerry Brown to sign a historic agreement that expands California's partnership with Israel on economic development, research and trade. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

While the relationship has rested on bipartisan foundations for decades, recent years have witnessed a steady erosion of this consensus. At the heart of growing tensions is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. His political persona and governing philosophy—marked by ethno-religious nationalism, security maximalism, and populist defiance—have collided with the American Left's normative emphasis on human rights, liberal internationalism, and social justice. Progressive forces in U.S. politics, including segments of the Democratic Party, increasingly challenge the moral and strategic underpinnings of his policies.

Netanyahu has developed an image that is anathema to progressive politics. Many in the U.S.—particularly younger and more liberal audiences—no longer view Israel under his rule as a partner in democracy but as a regime that is pursuing expansionism and racial hierarchy. As the American Left mobilizes support, its rift with Israel's longest-serving prime minister widens into what may become a long-term strategic divergence that is indicative of a broader structural realignment.

NETANYAHU'S AMERICAN PLAYBOOK

Few world leaders have cultivated influence in the U.S. more deftly than Netanyahu. Educated at MIT and Harvard University, he gained a deep familiarity with U.S. politics early in his career. Then adopting the Americanized name Ben Nitay, he spent formative years in the country

forging bonds that served his own pursuit of power decades later. He built a network that turned prominent pro-Israel supporters in the Republican establishment into lifelong friends. After graduating from MIT, Netanyahu worked as a consultant at Boston Consulting Group from 1976 to 1978. During this time, he nurtured a relationship with then-colleague—and future governor of Massachusetts and Republican Party presidential candidate—Mitt Romney.

Netanyahu also has a long history of friendship with the Kushners who share personal and religious ties to Israel. In 2007, he considered billionaire real estate mogul Charles Kushner a top potential donor for political campaigns. The Kushners' family foundation has subsidized Netanyahu's expansionist agenda, donating tens of thousands of dollars to Israeli settlements, according to IRS filings from 2010 to 2014. Netanyahu has even stayed at their home in New Jersey—on one reported occasion, he slept in the bedroom of Charles' son and President Trump's son-in-law and former senior advisor, Jared Kushner.

Netanyahu's American-made background has allowed him to maintain relations with conservatives that empower him to brazenly confront Democratic leadership. This was especially the case with President Barack Obama as he took a new approach to U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. The Obama administration sought to engage with Israel in a way its predecessor had not done—talking tough, publicly and privately; however, it hindered efforts aimed at promoting regional stability and security.

The Obama-Netanyahu relationship was controversial from the start. In his first term, Obama travelled to over 30 countries, including Egypt, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia. Yet he did not visit Israel over concern about collapsing U.S.-led peace efforts, saying he wanted to go when “we are actually moving something forward.” Netanyahu's supporters in the Republican Party slammed Obama for not conveying an unconditional commitment to support Israel. Conservatives added fuel to the Obama administration's clash with Netanyahu, arguing its policy emboldened adversaries and put “daylight” between the U.S. and its closest ally in the region.

Hostilities escalated into dramatic foreign policy confrontations during Obama's second term. In 2015, Netanyahu accepted Republicans' invitation to deliver a speech on Iran before Congress without White House coordination, addressing his vehement opposition to the emerging nuclear deal brokered by the Obama administration. In 2016, the U.S.' abstention from voting on a U.N. Security Council resolution critical of Israel—an unusual decision—further strained an already tense relationship. Condemning settlements in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, the resolution's approval defied extraordinary pressure from Netanyahu and then-president-elect Trump. The Obama-era rupture was a watershed moment in the partisanization of U.S.-Israel relations.

Aligning himself with Republicans and openly resisting a sitting Democratic president, Netanyahu made a calculated bet: the future of Israel's U.S. support base hinges on conservatives. With a record high partisan gap in Americans' ratings of Israel today, largely attributable to polarization over President Trump, his gamble paid off—83 percent of Republicans have favorable opinions of Israel compared to 33 percent of Democrats, according to a Gallup poll.

Netanyahu's media strategy remains central to his American playbook. He has demonstrated fluency in the idioms of Trump-era U.S. political culture. He is skilled in the art of televised persuasion, making himself a familiar face and an eloquent defender of Israel in the U.S. media. Netanyahu's rise as a "star" of American television news offers him a platform to reach right-wing supporters in the U.S.

Netanyahu is adept at crafting narratives that appeal to conservatives and reposition Israel as a partisan cause in the U.S. He frames Israel as on the frontlines of defense against radical Islam—the "one proud pro-American democracy combating Iran and its terrorist proxies in the Middle East." He makes historical comparisons between the U.S. and Israel, such as equating the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023, to Pearl Harbor and 9/11. Netanyahu essentially portrays Israeli military action and occupation as defending Western civilization and emblematic of Western resilience. Yet this rhetoric rings hollow for progressive audiences more attuned to human rights abuses and power asymmetries.

LOSING THE LEFT

The American Left's evolving political conscience has recast how it views Israel, especially under Netanyahu's leadership. Frameworks of intersectionality, anti-colonialism, and social justice increasingly shaped the progressive worldview. This new moral lens places Israel's treatment of Palestinians within a broader critique of systemic oppression.

Key figures in U.S. politics have voiced growing opposition to Israeli policy, linking it to struggles for racial and indigenous justice. Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) denounced Israel as a U.S.-backed "apartheid regime" committing genocide against Palestinians. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) called for a cutoff of unconditional military aid to "Netanyahu's illegal and immoral war against the Palestinian people" but later settled for measures blocking specific weapons. Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) also joined over 50 colleagues in calling for conditional U.S. aid to protect civilians in Gaza.

Academic institutions and activist networks have played a pivotal role in amplifying critiques of Israel. Over 500 U.S. schools have experienced pro-Palestinian protest activity since October 7, 2023, including encampments at more than 130 of them, according to Harvard University's

Crowd Counting Consortium data. The Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement has gained visibility on campuses. Groups usually focused on issues such as climate change or labor are even regularly protesting against Israel.



Thousands of pro-Palestine protesters march toward the US Capitol on November 4, 2023. (Celal Gunes / Anadolu via Getty Images)

Crowd Counting Consortium data. The Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement has gained visibility on campuses. Groups usually focused on issues such as climate change or labor are even regularly protesting against Israel.

This progressive coalition has developed into a powerful force capable of influencing mainstream political debate, causing sympathy for Israel to plummet while support for Palestinians has become a defining issue of the American Left. Sixty percent of Democrats have an unfavorable opinion of Israel, the first time a majority of any partisan group has expressed that view, according to a recent Gallup poll. Democrats are also generally more sympathetic to Palestinians than Israelis and in favor of Palestinian statehood today. In response, Netanyahu has pursued a calculated counteroffensive to shape public opinion.

NETANYAHU'S AMERICAN BASE

Netanyahu has employed rhetorical strategies to neutralize and delegitimize opposition. He equates any criticism with antisemitism and violence, drawing on historical memory of the Holocaust and the enduring trauma of Jewish persecution. At the height of protests on U.S. campuses against the war in Gaza, Netanyahu castigated student demonstrators as

“antisemitic mobs [who] have taken over leading universities,” adding that they were “reminiscent of what happened in German universities in the 1930s”—a reference to pro-Nazi paramilitary student groups.

Netanyahu also reframes any deviation of support as an existential security threat to Israel in order to justify state actions. Netanyahu has defended Israeli military operations harming civilians in Gaza, stating that “You cannot say you support Israel’s right to defend itself and then oppose Israel when it exercises that right.” In this zero-sum view, anything other than absolute support is treated as betrayal and inherently hostile, collapsing distinctions between opposing Israeli policy and denying Israel’s national sovereignty.

You cannot say you support Israel’s right to defend itself and then oppose Israel when it exercises that right.

Netanyahu’s narratives have played particularly well amongst Republicans and White evangelicals who see the Jewish state not only as a strategic ally but as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. A Pew Research Center survey reveals that Republicans largely have confidence in Netanyahu to “do the right thing regarding world affairs,” and White evangelicals express more positive views of him than any other U.S. religious group, including Jewish Americans. Ultimately, Netanyahu has successfully shifted Israel’s image in the U.S. away from shared liberal values and toward ethno-religious nationalism and conservative identity politics.

SECURITY BY FORCE, JUSTICE BY LAW

The chasm between Netanyahu and the American Left is both political and philosophical. Netanyahu espouses a Hobbesian worldview in which sovereignty and military strength are the bedrocks of security. A state free from external control or limitations—especially over the use of force or the threat of it—is essential to order, peace, and the safety and well-being of citizens. Morality is then fundamentally tied to what is practically necessary for survival.

The American Left, by contrast, embraces a liberal cosmopolitanism rooted in universal citizenship, human rights, and norms. Every individual—regardless of national, cultural, or religious identity—is part of a single community. This perspective promotes global governance and a rules-based order in which states are bound by obligations that extend beyond national borders. Sovereignty entails a responsibility to protect all populations, prioritizing human dignity and human well-being over state interests. If a state fails to do so, the international community has a responsibility to intervene.

This divide plays out in debate over the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. To Netanyahu, the war in Gaza is a matter of survival, with security concerns justifying harsh measures. To the American Left, it is a case study in violating the principles of discrimination and proportionality. As Netanyahu appeals to realists who align with Hobbes' perspectives on self-preservation and sovereignty, he alienates idealists who advocate for moral universalism, international cooperation, and diplomacy.

THE LEFT BREAKS RANKS

The Biden administration embodies the dilemma of attempting to maintain a fragile balance between these competing worldviews. On the one hand, President Joe Biden reaffirmed "ironclad" support for the U.S.' principal ally in the Middle East. On the other, he faced intense pressure from progressives over his administration's policy toward Israel.

Key points of friction include Biden's muted approach to previous instances of escalated violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territory, his tepid response to Netanyahu's judicial overhaul threatening democratic checks and balances, and his authorization of billions of dollars in arms sales to Israel, adding to a record amount in military assistance. The Biden administration expressed disapproval of Netanyahu's agenda at times, such as calling settlement expansion in the occupied Palestinian Territory "inconsistent" with international law. Biden also privately criticized Netanyahu for his handling of, and he threatened to condition U.S. aid to Israel on, the protection of civilians in Gaza; however, his frustrations did not translate to a major shift in policy.

This contradictory approach—rhetorical distancing combined with material continuity—was a strategically pragmatic response to division that proved counterproductive. The Biden administration was wary of alienating pro-Israel voters and donors while also aware that traditional support for Israel was politically untenable. Yet, as progressives perceived public rebukes as enabling Netanyahu's impunity, the lack of substantial policy change fueled disunity within the Democratic base.

THE JEWISH-AMERICAN BREAKAWAY

Netanyahu's political realignment has also fractured the Jewish American community. Jewish Americans have widely differing views of Israeli policy, political leadership, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This divergence is largely along generational, partisan, and religious or denominational lines. Young Jewish Americans have distanced themselves from Israel since the current war in Gaza. Sixty-six point four percent of Jewish American teenagers sympathize with the Palestinian people and 36.7% sympathize

with Hamas, according to a survey by the Israeli Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism. A significant percentage—41.3%—also believe Israel is committing genocide in Gaza.

The trend continues amongst adults in the country. A Pew Research Center survey finds that younger Jewish adults express less favorable attitudes toward the Israeli people and more favorable views of the Palestinian people. It also shows that younger Jewish adults are more likely than their older counterparts to view: 1) Hamas' reasons for fighting Israel as valid; 2) Israel's reasons for fighting Hamas as not valid; and 3) Israel's conduct in the war as unacceptable. Even before the Hamas-led attack and subsequent Israeli military response, there was a distinct generational gap. According to a poll of Jewish American voters by the Jewish Electorate Institute in 2021, younger Jews are more likely than older Jews to say that "Israel is an apartheid state," "Israel's treatment of Palestinians is similar to racism in the U.S.," and "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians."

Jewish Americans are also split by party affiliation. A Pew Research Center survey finds that Jewish Republicans are more likely than Jewish Democrats to have a positive view of Israel and less favorable views of the Palestinian people. Jewish Republicans are also more likely than Jewish Democrats to have a favorable view of Netanyahu and to say the Israeli government is making a sincere effort at a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Partisan differences are reflected in religious identity, particularly Orthodox, Reform, and secular Jewish Americans.

Orthodox Jews largely describe their political views as conservative and favor the Republican Party, according to a Pew Research Center survey. Secular and Reform Jews, by contrast, generally describe themselves as liberal and identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party. These inclinations go hand-in-hand with views of Netanyahu's right-wing support base—Orthodox are overwhelmingly more likely than secular and Reform Jewish Americans to say that President Trump and the Republican Party are friendly toward Israel and Jews in the U.S.

As the majority of older, Orthodox, and Republican Jews remain supportive of Netanyahu and his allies, their conception of Jewish identity likely shapes their views. A Pew Research Center survey shows that these subgroups are more likely than others to: 1) feel a strong attachment to Israel; 2) describe caring about Israel as "essential" to what being Jewish means; and 3) say that they have a lot or some in common with Jews in Israel. This suggests a looming crisis of legitimacy that jeopardizes Israel's ability to retain the emotional and political allegiance of American Jews under Netanyahu's hardline rule.

Netanyahu's falling out with the American Left is a consequence of his deliberate repositioning within the U.S. political landscape. This

estrangement has profound implications for both U.S.-Israel relations and Israel's alliance architecture. As Netanyahu continues to pivot toward right-wing transnationalism, he may be making short-term political gains. Yet he risks further alienating, and compromising the moral legitimacy of, traditional allies amongst liberal democracies.

These developments reveal the fragility of democratic solidarity and the emergence of a new geopolitical reality: a transition away from Cold War-style alliances to fragmented networks of transactional politics. With Netanyahu's policies driving democratic backsliding in Israel, the final question is whether he has ensured security by any means necessary, or whether he has accelerated the decline of allies by abandoning the shared values that once held them together.



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