

FOREIGN ANALYSIS

THE 2025 SPECIAL EDITION



THE WORLD OF AUTOCRATS

IS THIS THE END OF DEMOCRACY AS WE KNOW IT?

A Heart Unheard

A movie by Lorna Alvarado

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of solitude,*

*a heart speaks
volumes...."*

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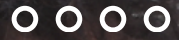
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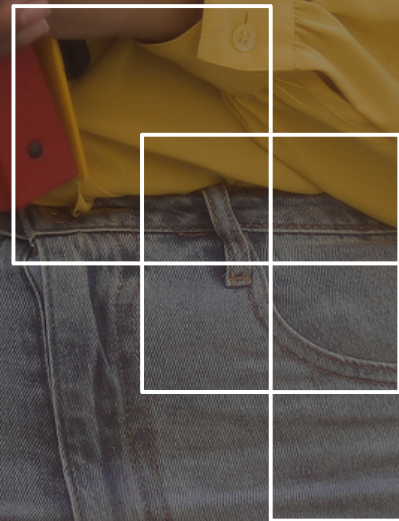


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It Might Seem Like Democracy is Dying

However it Can Be Saved

CHASE JOHNSON

Democracy is like owning a house. It requires maintenance, updating, upgrading, and near-constant care. One might bemoan these seemingly mundane tasks, such as fixing a leaky pipe or applying a new coat of paint. However, without this maintenance, the house will soon fall into disrepair and potentially become unlivable. Democracy is not easy to maintain and can similarly start to fail, but I would like to argue that maintaining its foundations and components daily is a necessary task for all people who enjoy its freedoms. Put simply, this just means being involved in one's local community and caring for each other.

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Without the legal structures, social programs, and guaranteed freedoms of democracy, life can be uncomfortable, complicated, and outright violent for its citizens. Democracy is not a binary state. A country cannot simply declare itself a democracy and be one. For example, North Korea calls itself the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—a laughable presumption considering its deep and systemic oppression of its people. Hence, when a country calls itself a democracy, it is an important exercise to determine whether or not they are upholding democratic ideals. Still, taking this exercise one step further, it is essential to assess whether or not democracy's citizens are doing the day-to-day maintenance of the democratic institutions and processes that support them and their freedoms.

Presently, autocracy is on the rise around the world, and ironically, it is democracy that is responsible for it. In 1917, the Bolsheviks in Imperial Russia rose to power by building a shadow government and seizing institutional and resource nodes through violent insurrection. Similarly, Nazi Germany came to fruition through intimidation and violence. However, in today's modern world, autocrats are duly elected through sound institutions and universal voting suffrage. It makes me wonder if a metaphor for democracy in the 21st century is like Anakin Skywalker's fall to the dark side in Star Wars—becoming that which it was meant to destroy.

Why do democracies elect leaders who do not follow the core fundamentals of freedom and the rule of law? I believe this is because many countries do not provide their youth with proper civics education or the skills to evaluate the ideas presented by their leaders effectively. Autocrats are running for and legitimately winning elections around the world. As I go about my life here in the United Kingdom, it is astonishing to me just how popular autocrats are among everyday people—Uber drivers, my veterinarian, the bartender at the pub—all hear my American accent and tell me how wonderful it must be to have Donald Trump as my President because I am “getting my money back” or because this administration is “taking the country back.”

It has made me realize that these vague and undefined terms appeal to those who yearn for disengagement with democracy. It is easier to say “take our country back” than it is to deliver a message to voters such as: “Immigration is a complicated issue, but the free flow of labor makes our economy stronger, and diversity of culture and experience makes us all more understanding and compassionate.” Therefore, I do not want to spend this article solely discussing the dangers of autocracy in practice. I would also like to comment on the risks of cultural zeitgeists that enable autocrats to take power through democratic processes.

Thus, I have two appeals: First, citizens should identify and support politicians, no matter the party, who actively promote and protect democracy in their service in elected office. Second, there are small things citizens can do in their everyday lives to encourage and enhance democracy in their communities. Democracy is not won and lost in a presidential election, but in small efforts such as attending city council meetings or being involved with local schools. First, one must examine how modern liberal democracy came into practice and how it backslides into autocracy.

TRUE DEMOCRACY IS VERY YOUNG

I am an American citizen. And my countrymen often speak poetically of inventing liberal democracy in our fight for independence from Great Britain. However, the United States was not a liberal democracy at its founding—definitionally antithetical to democracy's core principles. Women and people of color could not vote. American democracy is not 250 years old, but it is a mere 60 years old. Only when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, in my intellectual opinion, did the United States truly begin its promise of a democratic experiment.

To consider the question of pure democracy fully, it is essential to strip the question down to its fundamentals. In his seminal article, "Dictatorship, Development, and Democracy," Mancur Olson talks about government as bandits. In essence, governments are bandits. They have to take something from their subjects to maintain safety and security, as well as their stability of power. Olson distinguishes between two kinds of bandits: roving and stationary. Roving bandits move from community to community, taking what they want and then moving on. Stationary bandits, however, have a different calculus.

They have an interest in public welfare. They want the population to grow in wealth and health because that means that they can take more in the future. This is a clever way of saying that a wealthier and more productive population pays more in taxes and generates more in commerce and trade. It is therefore in the interest of a bandit (the government) to care for the freedoms and welfare of their populations because, as their wealth and prosperity grow, so does the ability of the bandit to do more with their power. I contend that autocrats are roving bandits. To look at a modern example, Vladimir Putin in Russia has accumulated massive amounts of personal wealth for himself and his allies.

Russia is a modern industrialized state with nuclear weapons and a highly advanced industry. And yet, it ranks 63rd globally in the UNDP's Human Development Index. Russia's inequality in wealth and standard of living is a direct result of its autocracy. Vladimir Putin is a roving bandit who only cares for the elite, not the populace. Modern Russia is the embodiment of

often-cited quote, “For my friends, anything; and for my enemies, the law.” Therefore, it is important to look at the playbook of autocrats and how they use the very democratic institutions, crafted to protect freedoms, to undermine them.

THE AUTOCRAT’S BLUEPRINT

Media, courts, and constitutions. That is how any would-be autocrat ends their country’s democracy. This is how autocracy can take hold democratically and legally, slowly and without physical violence. For the sake of argument, I will focus on countries such as Russia, Hungary, and the United States—all of which are at various stages of democratic backsliding. In these countries, autocracy does not come overnight. It comes as a slow-creeping march, chipping away at institutions until nothing can check the power of leaders.



TURKISH RIOT POLICE OFFICERS USE PEPPER SPRAY TO DISPERSE PROTESTERS IN ISTANBUL ON MARCH 23 DURING A DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE JAILING OF ISTANBUL MAYOR EKREM IMAMOGLU. YASIN AKGÜL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The first step in this process is to control the media. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has slowly consolidated media entities so that they are owned by his friends and those sympathetic to his autocratic style of rule. Further down the path of backsliding is Russia, where all independent media have been eliminated under the rule of Vladimir Putin. Presently, in the United States, Donald Trump has launched a crusade against fake news that writes critical stories about him. He has sued The Wall Street Journal and used his executive power to cut funding to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which oversees media outlets like National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service.

By controlling the media narrative, autocrats can control what low-information voters see. I would imagine anyone reading this magazine is already a high-information voter, but imagine your relatives on Facebook and Instagram who are not so engaged with politics. How do they make their voting decisions? It is likely, though, a mere thirty-second analysis of what they see in a media outlet. If an autocrat controls those outlets, then they do not get a well-informed and critical analysis of the consequences of their leadership.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election was the first in history where the majority of voters obtained their information from social media rather than reputable institutions such as The New York Times or primary cable channels' nightly news reports. Since then, information consumption has dramatically shifted to alternative sources such as podcasts and social media. Our intellectuals and talking heads speak of this trend as if it is something that can be reversed—as if our youth can switch from TikTok to the BBC with the right persuasion. Autocrats are winning the algorithms in new media. For example, the largest YouTube channels that are categorized as “news” are all far-right populist polemicists.

Information control is critical to a would-be autocrat. Journalism is the informal fourth branch of government that has a vital mission to uphold democracy, transparency, and accountability. When U.S. President Richard Nixon abused his power, sending operatives to break into the opposition party headquarters to steal proprietary information, it was two journalists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of The Washington Post, who worked tirelessly to break the story. Investigative journalism is the autocrat's worst enemy because they expose attempts to subvert the law. In Russia, Anna Politkovskaya worked to expose crime and corruption in the early days of the regime of Vladimir Putin.

Politkovskaya worked at a time before Russia criminalized speaking against the regime or declared media organizations “undesirables” or “foreign agents.” Her writing stands as perhaps the most critical work exposing Russian democratic backsliding. Anna Politkovskaya was murdered near her apartment building on

7 October 2007. Her killer was never found, but the bullet used to murder her was only used in Russian police weapons. I primarily focus on the media because it is the institution that has most shaped the narrative by which people cast their votes. But step two in the autocrat's blueprint is control of the courts. As these leaders slowly undermine democratic norms, they need the backing of the judiciary to uphold challenges to their decisions.

**By controlling the
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see.**

All three example countries in our autocrats' blueprint have used the courts to their advantage to various degrees. The American populist right has focused on the courts for decades. The Federalist Society identifies young legal talent that is sympathetic to their causes and assists them in advancing their careers. Furthermore, they are assisted by political powers in the legislature to ensure that only judges sympathetic to autocratic regimes are appointed to courts. The primary example is how Senator Mitch McConnell blocked the Obama administration's appointment of a centrist judge with impeccable bona fides to the U.S. Supreme Court and fast-tracked three Trump administration appointments to the same body just years later. With an autocratic-sympathetic majority, the Supreme Court struck down the *Roe v. Wade* decision that gave women in the United States autonomy over their reproductive care.

There are several other examples of the manipulation of courts by autocrats from around the world. Hungary is an example of what the United States could be ten years from now. The Orbán administration has consistently utilized its executive power to impose term limits on judges deemed unfriendly to its agenda and to appoint judges from its ranks to fill these positions. Legal backstopping is critical to this theme of autocrats using democratic institutions to impose their anti-democratic will. Recall the previous quote once more: "For my friends, anything; for my enemies, the law." The final step in the autocrat's blueprint is gaming the electoral system. This does not require a long discussion because once the media and the courts are sympathetic to the cause, it is quite easy to ensure that the legislature will fall in line with their will.

The most prescient example is the current effort by Governor Greg Abbott of Texas to redraw the state's electoral map to all but guarantee more Republican seats in the legislature that will blindly rubber-stamp an autocrat's agenda. In my home state of Idaho, one of the most Republican-friendly states in the Union, the legislative district splits right between the capital city of Boise. Otherwise, Idaho might elect a centrist or left-of-center representative. The result is a race to the bottom, so to speak, among members of the Republican Party who will bootlick an autocratic agenda so that they can hold office. But herein comes the second charge of this article: believers in democracy must find the people who hold elected office and are willing to fight for democratic values, no matter their party or political ideology. So I would like to introduce a case study of my political hero: Senator Frank Church.

LOOK FOR THE HEROES

In the maintenance of democracy, one must look to the unsung heroes. Oftentimes, these are politicians who might not be household names but

do the important work to buttress the democratic institutions of their countries. Perhaps no better example of such an elected official is Senator Frank Church from the United States. It is crucial for readers to look for such politicians in their own countries—those that do not seek the spotlight and fame of higher office but do the hard and litigious work to preserve, protect, and enhance democracy.

Frank Church served in the United States Senate from 1957 to 1981. He is not a figurehead of a movement or a very well-known name in the United States the way that Donald Trump or Barack Obama is. Still, he might be one of the most consequential politicians of the 20th century because his efforts and legislation had the foresight to prevent democratic backsliding in the United States. Frank Church was the man who predicted a future attempt at establishing autocracy in the United States and wrote the laws to prevent it. Here is a brief tour of that legislative work. Church is best known for his work investigating the U.S. security state. His investigation of the CIA and FBI in 1975 established the modern standard of oversight and accountability over intelligence agencies. At the time, the CIA was conducting assassinations and overthrowing foreign governments.

The FBI was spying on the U.S. Civil Rights movement—actions that were antithetical to democratic values and more akin to the work of secret police of contemporary dictatorships. Today, Frank Church is popular among government skeptics, investigative journalists, and those such as U.S. Congressman Jim Jordan who believe that the “Deep State” is out to malign a president’s political enemies. However, that is not the Frank Church that I have studied. In my work with his papers and the Frank Church Institute at Boise State University, I have come to understand Frank Church as an ardent believer in the institutions of democracy. His investigation into U.S. intelligence agencies pivoted their work away from superfluous domestic concerns and back towards U.S. enemies abroad. Church did not hate the security state. He wanted it to work for democracy and not in spite of it.

Although Church is best known for his work investigating intelligence agencies, as stated in his biography *Fighting the Odds*, Senator Church said the accomplishment he was most proud of was his work on the National Emergencies Act of 1976. At the time, there were well over a hundred declared “emergencies” in the United States. These declarations gave the President enhanced powers to work without the typical due process of checks and balances. The NEA came to fruition in 2019 when President Trump declared a national emergency to requisition the funding for a wall on the U.S. border with Mexico. This piece of legislation might not make news, but it has prevented the American executive from abusing the power of their office for undemocratic means. Had Senator Church not given such attention to this issue decades ago, there might be a very different political reality in the United States today.

Typically, sovereign law stops at one's border. In our university classes, we are always taught that the international system is an "anarchy" at the state level. I disagree. Another hallmark of Frank Church's legislative work is the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. The FCPA ensured that American businesses and politicians were held liable not only for corrupt acts on American soil but also abroad. This is a critical component of this discussion of democracy and its promotion. If a country's values stop at its borders, then it is worth nothing.

This extended tour of a single politician is necessary because it is important to remember that there are strong public servants who uphold liberalism and democracy in their purest forms, even if they do not get their likeness cast in bronze and displayed in their nation's capitals. It is important to find modern-day heroes of democracy today and support them and their work. In countries that have fallen to populism and autocracy, some of these people pay with their lives. Consider the work of Russian heroes such as Anna Politkovskaya, Boris Nemtsov, and Aleksei Navalny—all of whom stood against Russian autocracy and were killed by the state for it. For countries like Russia, it is already too late, but in the West, it is not.

Frank Church passed many decades ago, but there are heroes doing important work today who deserve the support of the citizenry. Chris Murphy, U.S. Senator from Connecticut, is one name that comes to mind. He is a cogent mind on foreign policy, an ardent believer in the rule of law and coequal branches of government, and he has done important work on curbing gun violence in the U.S. However, he is not exactly a household name. I am certain that there are Churches and Murphys doing the important work in every democratic government around the world.

THE FAILING APPEAL OF DEMOCRACY

Is democracy beneficial? This is the most critical question for this tour of autocracy. Populism and anti-democratic sentiment are waning in the Western world. This brings me to my second charge of this article: it is incumbent on everyday citizens to do the day-to-day upkeep to maintain the promise and benefits that liberal democracy gives. There are several reasons why autocracy has a genuine appeal among a large portion of the population. When I teach university courses on Russian politics, I have my students read a chapter from Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The chapter is called *The Grand Inquisitor*. To briefly summarize, it is a hypothetical debate between Christ and a church official during the Spanish Inquisition. The debate centers around human nature and free will. It is essential to answer the question: should we have the freedom from, or the freedom to?

I contend that believers in democracy fall into the freedom to camp. The freedom to pursue education without crushing debt. The freedom to vote in elections without discrimination because of sex or gender. The freedom to marry the person they love, even if that person is of the same gender. Autocrats believe in the freedom from. Freedom from the chaos of the mob, for example. Freedom from the pendulum swing of free and fair elections that swing right and left—the politics of eternity, where a man like Vladimir Putin rules until death. Freedom from the “other,” for example, Donald Trump’s vilification of immigration, when economic research clearly shows that free movement of labor is beneficial for all economies.

I firmly believe in the freedom to camp because, in my experience, when people have the freedom to be themselves, to be healthy, productive, and educated, society benefits as a whole. Protecting society from something “other” is a slippery slope to a loss of freedoms. If we take the freedoms of immigrants, sexual minorities, or women

It is important to
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today, even if it does not affect a specific individual, they may very well lose their freedoms sometime in the near future. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “None are free while others are oppressed.” This is why it is incumbent on citizens to do the work to maintain democracy, not just in a vote for a chief executive every four years but in small acts every day.

LESS TALKING, MORE DOING

It is safe to assume the readers of this magazine are in like-minded company—believers in liberal democracy and opponents of autocracy. There is nothing I can write on these pages to offer sage philosophical advice on why this system of government is the most beneficial for everyone—it has to be felt and experienced through the benefits of living in a diverse community of thought and experience. But I will reiterate what I began with: democracy is like a house. It must be well-built and intentionally maintained. It takes different people with different skills and backgrounds to maintain a house, and the same goes for a democracy.

Democracy exists day-to-day, and it is up to the people who care for it to do the little chores that maintain it. This means testifying at local community meetings or running for a small local elected office, such as your school board or your community planning board. Personally, my day-to-day chore to maintain democracy is done in my classroom—not by “indoctrinating,” as the far-right has accused me of doing, but by cultivating an engaging learning space where my students may explore



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difficult questions and challenge each other while they shape their worldviews. While I teach international relations and geopolitics, which deal in politics on a global scale, I believe that democracy is best cultivated at a local level. Voting for your local school board member is the most important act one can take to maintain democracy.

But maintaining democracy can be as simple as donating clothing to a shelter or picking up trash in a park. It takes a village to ensure everyone is safe and free. In this issue, you will take a tour of different autocrats who have all used a similar playbook, as I mentioned above, to threaten or altogether kill liberal democracy in their countries. As readers take this tour, they should consider the day-to-day activities they can undertake in their communities to enhance and embrace liberal democracy. Autocracy thrives in complacency, and being informed of news and political science research is not enough to keep it at bay. After reading the stories of these autocrats, observe the happenings in your community and identify how you can support and uphold liberal democracy on a day-to-day basis.

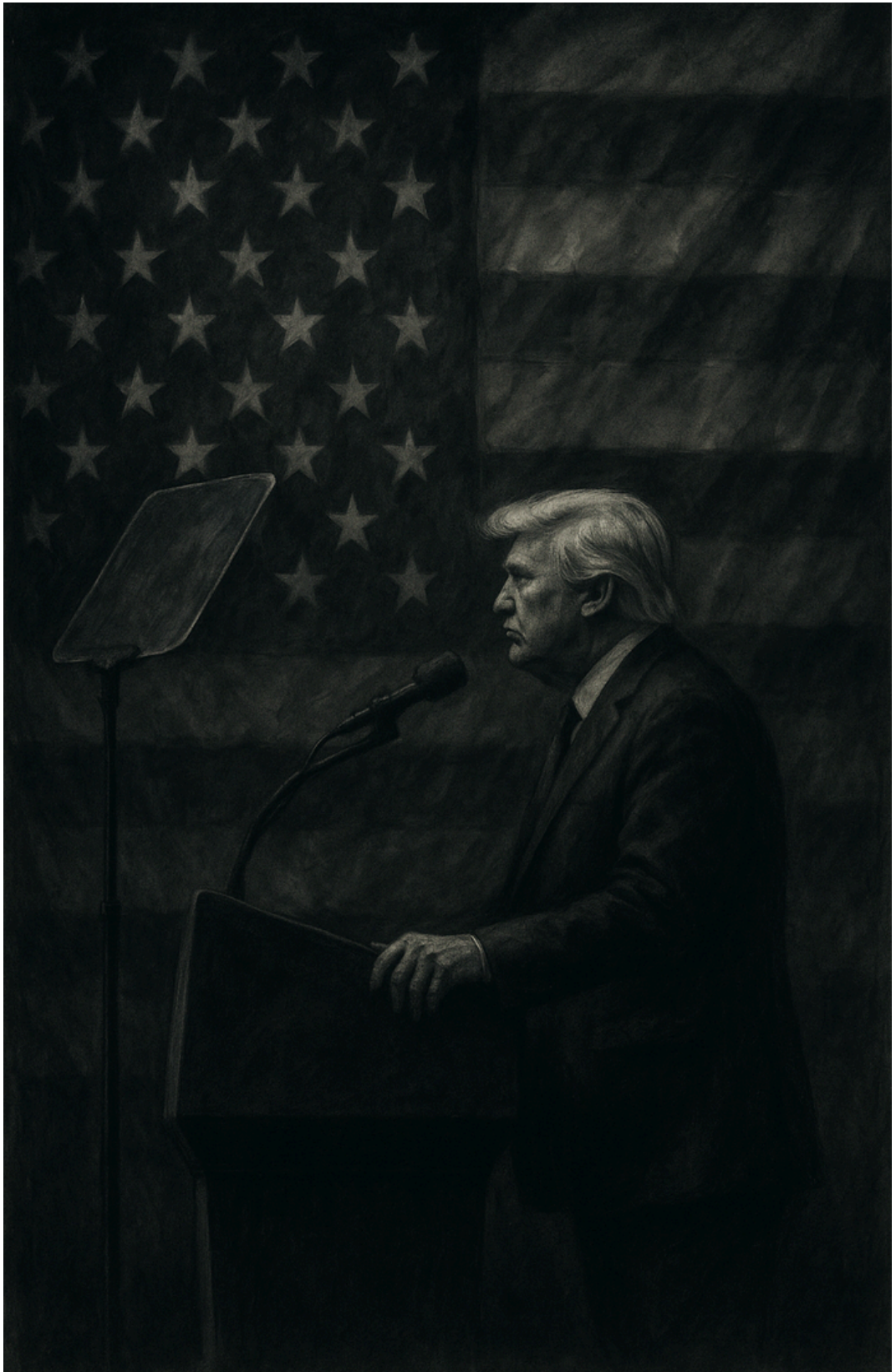
Authoritarian Playbook, American Edition

Trump's War on Norms

CALEB ANDERSON

President Trump has been very successful in steamrolling institutional norms for his own interests. Many wonder why and how Trump has been successful in this and how American democracy as it is known can continue to function. Trump has been very successful in the past 10 years despite scandals that grow larger and larger. He has successfully challenged “the establishment” with populist rhetoric, all but buried the old Republican Party, and has continued to be successful with broadening the MAGA coalition with anti-institution messaging. His messaging, while often untruthful, is compelling to many American voters.

CALEB ANDERSON holds his Master's degree at American University School of International Service. His areas of expertise include U.S. Foreign Policy & National Security and International Affairs.



This is especially true post-COVID. In particular, he has been successful in pulling in low-propensity voters — people who have historically voted at lower rates. In the 2024 election, he improved his performance in every state besides Washington State and Washington, D.C. His performance with minority groups has improved substantially compared to 2016 or 2020 — he won more Black voters than any Republican in almost 5 decades. He also came very close to winning a majority of Latino voters compared to 2016, when he only won 28% of the Latino vote. These facts and polling are not news; however, they must be included in this article to understand the United States today and how Trump has exposed fragilities in the constitutional system.

The fact is that Trump won every swing state and a plurality of voters; he did not take power in a coup or ascend from vice president. While some Americans may regret their vote like after any election, the electorate voted for this. Trump reflects what the median American voter desires, and that includes his myriad policies and their stated outcomes. While an individual's reasons for voting for Trump will vary, a distrust of institutions and government is a common thread for most. Distrust in institutions, while more common on the right, is not isolated to the right by any means. In 2024, only 22% of Americans said they trust the federal government “to do the right thing.”

Trump running roughshod through the federal government may be concerning to many, but for much of the electorate any pro-institution messaging is likely to fall flat. In short, it is hard to get Americans to care about the strength of institutions when the vast majority have at least some distrust for them. Sadly, breaking down institutions will make them even less effective, likely deepening distrust further. The lesson from this is that authoritarianism can absolutely exist within a democratic structure. While guardrails are in place and will likely hold out in the end, a democratic government is only effective if voters have at least some confidence in it.

Trump defying institutional constraints is a feature, not a bug, of MAGA. Given Americans' deep distrust of institutions, it is easier to get support or at least tacit acceptance for executive actions that disregard existing processes. Trump's campaigns have largely focused on the idea that elites and institutions are corrupt and in the way of true progress. Often, institutions are directly blamed. When they aren't, they are indirectly blamed when others take priority. For instance, immigrants are blamed first for taking jobs, but cities and states also take blame for being “sanctuary jurisdictions.”

While Trump contributed to distrust in institutions during his first term, that distrust began well before his campaign in 2015. COVID accelerated distrust in a substantial way as well and occurred under both the Trump

Biden administrations. The distrust in government and institutions is likely to deepen under this administration, not improve. Institutional distrust in the U.S. is an issue that deserves its own article (or book), but it is a crucial aspect of understanding Trumpism, especially today.

THE STRONGMAN PRESIDENT

What has largely remained strong in the U.S. is its Constitution; however, norms from the executive branch have largely gone the way of the Dodo. If there is ambiguity in a law, and sometimes even clear mandates, Trump has demonstrated an ability to “just do things” and force changes with executive power. One clear-cut example from the spring was the effective destruction of USAID and its subsequent absorption into the Department of State. This occurred with minimal substantive pushback. Mass firings, drastic and conflicting agency changes, and seemingly random 180s on policy defined the late winter and spring of this year. Some of this was by design, while some was largely the result of DOGE and not Trump directly, despite his obvious responsibility as president.



TRUMP SUPPORTERS CLASH WITH POLICE AND SECURITY FORCES AS THEY STORM THE US CAPITOL IN WASHINGTON, DC ON JANUARY 6, 2021. - DEMONSTRATORS BREACHED SECURITY AND ENTERED THE CAPITOL AS CONGRESS DEBATED THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ELECTORAL VOTE CERTIFICATION. (PHOTO BY ROBERTO SCHMIDT / AFP) (PHOTO BY ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

The pace this reorganization occurred was in part to reduce the ability of courts, Democrats, the media, and the public to keep up in any meaningful way. Many employees were fired or otherwise left their agencies in a short period of time. Even among the employees lucky enough to be asked back, many declined to jump back into the circus — a logical and reasonable

position. Given all this, even once Trump's actions got into courtrooms, the damage was done. Trump has likely been emboldened by *Trump v. United States*, which gives criminal immunity for any "official acts" the president takes. His recent actions — as destabilizing as they may be — are official acts.

Acts taken by DOGE are more legally questionable, but the judiciary overall is friendlier towards Trump compared to his first term. Additionally, DOGE employees getting thrown under the bus likely doesn't faze Trump either. That ignores that Trump's DOJ won't pursue charges against them for conduct that was approved by the White House. In whole, Trump is following aspects of the "unitary executive" theory. This theory posits that the Constitution grants the president complete control over the executive branch. While the Supreme Court has not directly imposed this concept, *Trump v. United States* and other cases have emboldened Trump to act as though the theory is accepted practice.

Some of Trump's actions will not hold up in court, yet he pushes ahead regardless. Just recently, he signed an executive order in an effort to criminalize the burning of American flags. *Texas v. Johnson* was a Supreme Court case that held that burning flags is constitutionally protected speech. The only obvious exceptions that apply are unrelated to speech or expression, such as burning someone else's property. The order is broad in wording and is an obvious attempt to work around *Texas v. Johnson*; it also directs the attorney general to pursue First Amendment litigation on the topic. As it stands, an American citizen is unlikely to face a conviction for flag burning and is even more likely to succeed on appeal.

However, this is a situation where the process is the punishment. Even if ultimately successful in court, an American could face arrest, court appearances, legal fees, etc. for burning a flag. This isn't even to mention that foreign nationals could face visa revocation, arrest, and deportation, meaning they will likely never be made legally whole. While the order ostensibly only covers what is permissible under existing First Amendment precedent, it serves as a chilling effect at protests to make participants question if the risk is worth the benefit. Regardless of one's views of flag burning, using the executive to chill speech in this way goes against both the letter and spirit of the First Amendment and is more reminiscent of what is seen in authoritarian countries.

Trump has also made it a point to appoint loyalists for cabinet positions and staff. While it is still early, there has been much less turnover in the White House compared to his first term. The DOGE firing blitz from earlier this year also served to put fear into the federal civil service. So while Trump may not be able to impact the federal workforce's opinion of him, the commonly held fear of being fired and sent into a poor job market is a useful tool for Trump to ensure the federal government moves forward with his policies.

Continuity in agency leadership compared to Trump's first term will also make the implementation of his agenda more consistent. Trump has been emboldened by recent Supreme Court decisions, lack of consequences from his legal battles and criminal convictions, and a more effective and loyal cabinet. For him there is no downside to pushing legal limits; either his policy goes forward or it is halted by the judiciary. Regardless, he cannot be held personally accountable and neither will his cabinet or staff. He is largely only limited by what the government is capable of doing rather than legal constraints.

MOVEMENTS LARGER THAN MEN

There has been an international right-wing wave since ~2015 that is not limited to Trump. Brexit's vote preceded Trump's election by ~5 months, for instance. Ideology itself can vary substantially while having common themes. For instance, Javier Milei of Argentina is a proponent of free trade as opposed to Trump, who regularly pans free trade and views the United States as being "ripped off." That said, Milei and Trump have both cast doubt on climate change, are "anti-woke," and have withdrawn their countries from the WHO.

In Brazil, many of Jair Bolsonaro's politics were aligned with Trump's. Bolsonaro and Brazil's right emulated many policies that are associated with the American right. One of Bolsonaro's policies was even making firearm ownership in Brazil easier.

While not inherently a right-wing policy, firearm rights are unique to only a handful of countries, with the United States being the most prominent (and generally most lax). During Bolsonaro's term, an NRA-like lobbying group called ProArmas was formed, which directly emulated America's NRA.

This form of pro-gun lobbying is much more culturally aligned with the United States compared to gun-friendly European countries like Switzerland or the Czech Republic. While the case of firearms is interesting due to its traditionally American nature, Bolsonaro has created a movement in Brazil that goes beyond just himself. While Lula da Silva is currently president of Brazil, Bolsonaro's politics are still a major force in Brazil. Many on Brazil's right even hoped for representation at Trump's second inauguration. While Bolsonaro is currently banned from running for office, this demonstrates that — like in the United States — their respective movements are bigger than themselves as politicians.

In whole, Trump is following aspects of the 'unitary executive' theory.

ALLIES IN DOUBT

In terms of foreign policy, Trump is relatively similar to his first term. He has threatened tariffs and proceeded with relatively limited military strikes — this time on Iran directly. Regarding tariffs, many only went into effect recently and were scaled back from what he threatened before. In the case of China, Trump recently extended (again) the trade truce for 90 days to work on a deal. This is not to say that the tariffs are not harmful. This is also not to say that disruptions will not occur; postal services in some countries are halting shipments to the U.S. based on Trump revoking the *de minimis* exemption.

However, these are the kinds of actions that most countries have been preparing for and are more reminiscent of Trump's first term. The most important ways that Trump's current term will differ from the first are on the Israel-Gaza and Russia-Ukraine conflicts. There are unlikely to be any departures from the firmly pro-Israel policy that he and his cabinet believe in. This will make Israeli-Arab normalization — a success of his first term — much more difficult than before the October 7 attacks. Ukraine will likely be the most substantial conflict that Trump addresses. To his credit, Trump has softened his prior stance and has kept providing aid to Ukraine (at the First Lady's insistence).

Should Trump continue supplying aid and manage to pull off a peace deal that is acceptable to Ukraine, he will demonstrate impressive resolve to U.S. allies and European partners in particular. However, his public support for Ukraine has been soft, to say the least. Midterm elections next fall could pressure Trump to back down, given that many Republicans voted for Trump based on halting or slowing Ukraine aid. Withdrawing aid or forcing a peace deal that is unacceptable to Ukraine would cause a crisis of confidence among most of America's allies. Any security guarantees that allies thought they had would begin to evaporate. U.S. adversaries like China could begin assessing options for military engagements.

Under American foreign policy norms, retracting aid to assist a country being invaded by an adversary of the U.S. would be untenable, but those norms are fading fast, and how Trump proceeds during this term will affect almost everyone. Regarding Ukraine, Trump has the opportunity to demonstrate that, despite rhetoric, America follows through on supporting its values like democracy and self-determination. Perhaps he will pull off an unexpected win that leaves the U.S., and more importantly Ukraine, satisfied (to the extent possible after the war). Whether he does so remains to be seen, but Trump's erosion of the norms of American governance and foreign policy leaves a lot of room for doubt. Overall, Trump has not demonstrated a change of heart in his second term as it relates to stable American leadership. Rather, it is similar to his last term at best, yet with higher stakes given the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

POWER BEYOND NORMS

Donald Trump has been very successful at challenging anything that slows him down. His 2015 campaign was not normal, his first term was not normal, and this term is not normal. Challenging norms is not inherently bad; a successful democracy mandates change. Regardless of party, most Americans agree that some form of fast and substantial change is needed. However, changing the norms that maintain the democracy should be done cautiously, involve the legislature, and be respectful of why those restraints are in place. Trump has shown disdain for any kind of institutional and even constitutional restraints.

This will have effects that reverberate into the future both domestically and outside the U.S. This term is different in that almost nobody is substantively in his way. While courts may block or delay some of his policies, he has almost total control over the executive branch and can shape it to his wishes at breakneck speed. Predicting what a post-Trump America looks like is likely as futile an effort as doing so in his first term would have been. Trump still has over 3 years left in his term, and his pace of governing shows no signs of slowing down.

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China's Authoritarian Vision for the 21st Century

How Xi Jinping Is Shaping China and the World?

RICCARDO NACHTIGAL

Xi Jinping's leadership is transforming modern China with a pace and intensity that have shocked the world. Since seizing power in 2012 as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and later in 2013 as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi has radically altered China's international posture. His predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, largely followed the path set by Deng Xiaoping, maintaining a low-profile foreign policy under the guiding motto *taoguang yanghui*: "hide your strength, bide your time." This strategy aimed to avoid direct confrontation with major powers while focusing on domestic development and expanding influence quietly.

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It was a period marked by opening to the world: a friendlier foreign policy was paired with a somewhat looser grip on domestic affairs, designed to stimulate economic growth in line with the post–Cold War neoliberal atmosphere of the time, although always within the limits set by the Party. With Xi’s rise, this approach shifted dramatically. From the start, he pursued a more assertive foreign policy, determined to enhance China’s image as a modern superpower and signal to other major powers that the PRC would defend its geopolitical interests globally. As the ancient Chinese classic, the I Ching, counsels: “To cross the great river, all forces must harmonize and converge.” For China, such global ambitions require domestic unity.

In Xi’s political vision, harmony between state and society is built on the people’s belief in their government. In the Chinese political context, that belief is cultivated through centralized authority, ideological messaging, economic achievement, and subtle but pervasive control over information, made possible by advanced cyber-surveillance technologies. This hyper-centralized governance has been reinforced by sweeping political reforms: anti-corruption campaigns that doubled as purges of rivals, legal changes abolishing presidential term limits, and structural moves to consolidate power in Xi’s hands. While this centralization recalls Mao Zedong’s personalist rule, Xi wields tools Mao never had: modern digital technology, global economic integration, and real-time surveillance. Yet it would be a mistake to view Xi’s governance as entirely opposed to that of his predecessors. His approach is less a rejection than a reconfiguration, a different path to the same ultimate goal: elevating China to the status of a leading world superpower.

XI’S POWER GRAB

After the turbulence of Mao’s personalist rule, Deng Xiaoping and his allies designed guardrails to prevent another strongman. These included the two-term limit for the state presidency in the 1982 PRC constitution, power rotation and mandatory retirement ages for Party and military leaders, and collective leadership through the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), where authority was shared among seven to nine members, with the General Secretary “first among equals.” There was also, at least partially, a separation of top Party, state, and military posts. The goal was smooth succession, as seen in the Jiang-to-Hu transition in 2002 and Hu-to-Xi in 2012, reducing the risk of policy being driven by one man’s whims.

In short: power was to be spread like rice in a bowl: enough for everyone, never piled on one plate. Jiang Zemin (1989–2002), who rose during the Tiananmen crisis, relied on factional balancing through the Shanghai

clique, a network of top officials from the city that helped shape policy priorities. Jiang pursued taoguang yanghui abroad while letting technocrats and ministers manage their portfolios at home, making the PSC a true decision-making body. Hu Jintao (2002–2012) favored low-key, consensus-driven governance under the slogan of “scientific development.” Power was fragmented between the premier, vice premiers, and PSC members who oversaw separate policy areas.

State media saturates its coverage with Xi’s activities, speeches, and symbolic gestures, turning the daily news cycle into a constant reaffirmation of his leadership and vision. The cultivation of a personality cult around Xi is deliberate and highly organized. His portrait hangs in government buildings, classrooms, and rural village squares. Large-scale exhibitions and documentary series present him as the wise strategist behind China’s successes, while his writings, compiled in multi-volume sets such as *The Governance of China*, are published in multiple languages and distributed widely at home and abroad.

Public rituals further reinforce loyalty: officials take oaths in front of the Party flag, reciting pledges to uphold Xi’s thought as part of their duty to the nation. This phenomenon carries echoes of Mao’s cult of personality, though in a modernized form. Where Mao’s image was spread through mass rallies, revolutionary songs, and a pocket-sized “Little Red Book,” Xi’s image and ideas travel through broadcast television, curated online platforms, and big-data-driven propaganda. His cult is less about spontaneous mass fervor and more about a carefully managed, top-down strategy to ensure ideological conformity and personal loyalty.

By intertwining his personal authority with the Party’s official doctrine, Xi has positioned dissent not only as a political offense but as an ideological betrayal. In the CCP’s current political climate, to question Xi’s leadership is to question the Party’s legitimacy itself. This fusion of ideology and personality strengthens Xi’s grip on power, making him not just the chief executive of the state but the symbolic embodiment of China’s future. It also creates a political environment in which the boundaries between loyalty to the nation, loyalty to the Party, and loyalty to Xi Jinping have been deliberately blurred, and in which the leader stands firmly at the center of all three.

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

If Mao Zedong built his power through revolutionary fervor and mass mobilization, Xi Jinping has harnessed the quieter, more pervasive force of data. Under Xi’s leadership, China has developed a new model of governance that uses technology not only to deliver services and maintain public order but also to monitor, discipline, and shape the behavior of its

citizens. This is the essence of what many analysts call “digital authoritarianism”: a fusion of state power, Party control, and cutting-edge technology to achieve near-total information dominance. One of the most ambitious elements of this system is the Social Credit System (SCS).



PEOPLE SHINE THE LIGHTS OF THEIR SMARTPHONES AT A DEMONSTRATION IN HONG KONG ON JUNE 16, 2019, TO COMMEMORATE THE DEATH OF A FELLOW PROTESTER. (LAM YIK FEI/NEW YORK TIMES)

Beyond the SCS, Xi’s era has seen an unprecedented expansion of surveillance infrastructure. China now operates one of the world’s largest networks of CCTV cameras, many equipped with advanced facial recognition technology. These systems are integrated with artificial intelligence to identify individuals in real time, track their movements, and even analyze patterns of association. Mobile phone tracking, mandatory real-name registration for online accounts, and the monitoring of messaging apps like WeChat extend the reach of the state into the private sphere of communication. Information control is another pillar of this digital regime.

The Great Firewall, China’s elaborate system of internet censorship, has become more sophisticated under Xi, not only blocking foreign websites but also actively filtering domestic content. Entire narratives can be erased within hours, replaced by state-approved interpretations. Independent journalism, already under pressure before Xi’s tenure, has been pushed to the margins, while NGOs, religious groups, and online communities have been subjected to tight regulations or outright closures. This digital architecture has also made repression less visible. Unlike the mass arrests or public trials of earlier decades, dissent today is often smothered before it becomes organized.

Posts disappear, accounts are deactivated, and individuals receive quiet visits from security officials warning them about their activities. Protests that do occur are quickly contained, with organizers monitored or detained in ways that leave little public trace. This has created what some scholars call “authoritarianism without dissent”, not because discontent has vanished, but because the space for it to manifest publicly has been almost entirely eliminated. Xi’s digital authoritarianism serves multiple purposes. It strengthens the Party’s monopoly on information, gives the leadership an unparalleled capacity for social engineering, and reinforces the image of a state that is omnipresent and omniscient. In the eyes of its architects, it is a tool for stability, efficiency, and even modernization. But it also represents a fundamental shift in the nature of authoritarian control: the ability to maintain power not only through force or ideology, but through the constant, invisible shaping of everyday life.

THE NEW FACE OF STATE CAPITALISM

In Xi Jinping’s China, economics is not merely about growth. It is a political instrument, a lever to reinforce Party authority and align the private sector with state priorities. While China has been officially “socialist” since 1949, the reform era under Deng Xiaoping and his successors allowed market forces and private enterprise to flourish in ways that sometimes operated beyond direct political control. Xi has moved to close that gap, reshaping the country’s economic model into a form of state capitalism with Chinese characteristics, where the market exists to serve the strategic and ideological goals of the Party.

Authoritarian control now rests not just on force or ideology, but on the invisible shaping of daily life.

This transformation has been most visible in the crackdown on major private firms. Tech giants like Alibaba, Tencent, Didi, and Meituan, once symbols of Chinese entrepreneurial dynamism, have faced heavy regulatory penalties, forced restructuring, and public rebukes. The official narrative frames these moves as necessary to curb monopolistic behavior, protect data security, and promote “Common Prosperity,” a slogan Xi has elevated into a central policy doctrine. The deeper logic, however, is political: no private enterprise can be allowed to rival the Party’s influence or operate outside its guidance.

“Common Prosperity” is both an economic and ideological campaign. On paper, it seeks to reduce inequality and create a more balanced distribution of wealth. In practice, it reasserts the Party’s role as the ultimate arbiter of economic direction, ensuring that business elites align with state priorities or face swift consequences. Philanthropic gestures from billionaires, wage

hikes in big firms, and renewed pledges to support rural revitalization all carry the unmistakable imprint of political pressure. At the same time, Xi has doubled down on strategic state intervention. Key sectors, such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and advanced manufacturing, receive targeted subsidies and state-led investment.

The “Made in China 2025” and military-civil fusion initiatives blur the line between civilian industry and defense capability, binding technological progress to national security objectives. This reassertion of state power in the economy is not a retreat to central planning of the Maoist type, but a recalibration. The private sector remains a vital engine of growth, but its autonomy is curtailed, and its survival depends on political loyalty. For Xi, economic success is inseparable from political control: a flourishing economy must be one that strengthens, rather than dilutes, the Party’s dominance. In this new model, profit is not the highest metric of success: alignment with the Party’s vision is. Under Xi, state capitalism has become not only an economic system but also a mechanism of governance, ensuring that the wealth and innovation of China’s economy are harnessed first and foremost in service of the political center.

EXPORTING AUTHORITARIANISM

Xi Jinping’s vision for China does not stop at its borders. While his predecessors largely adhered to *taoguang yanghui*, keeping a low profile abroad, Xi has embraced a more assertive role for China as both a global power and a model of governance. This includes promoting an alternative to the liberal democratic order, one in which sovereignty, stability, and economic development take precedence over political freedoms. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most visible vehicle for this ambition. Officially framed as a win-win infrastructure and development program, it has funded ports, railways, and power plants in over 140 countries.

But beyond cement and steel, the BRI carries political blueprints. Chinese financing often comes with fewer governance conditions than Western loans, but with deeper economic dependency. This intertwines recipient countries’ economic futures with Beijing’s strategic interests, subtly reinforcing authoritarian governance norms and discouraging alignment with democratic blocs. Alongside physical infrastructure, Xi has promoted a digital dimension to this outreach. Chinese firms export surveillance systems, facial recognition technology, and “smart city” platforms to governments seeking tighter control over their populations.

This “authoritarian tech stack” provides both tools and a governance philosophy: technology as an enabler of political dominance. At the ideological level, slogans such as the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” and the “Global Civilization Initiative” frame China’s system as a

legitimate, even superior, alternative to liberal democracy. In multilateral forums, Beijing champions principles of non-interference and regime stability, aligning itself with other authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states. Through trade, technology, and narrative diplomacy, Xi is not simply projecting Chinese influence: he is normalizing a governance model where state control and political centralization are presented as compatible with prosperity and modernization.

FRAGILITIES AND HIDDEN STRAINS

Beneath the polished image of a confident, all-powerful China under Xi Jinping lies a set of vulnerabilities that even the strongest propaganda cannot erase. The most visible pressures are economic. After decades of double-digit growth, China's economy is slowing. Structural issues such as mounting local government debt, a property sector crisis, and sluggish consumer demand weigh heavily. Youth unemployment has reached record highs, prompting social media censorship of the statistics themselves. For a system that stakes its legitimacy on delivering prosperity, prolonged stagnation is politically dangerous.

Demographics add another layer of strain. China's population began shrinking in 2022, and the workforce is aging rapidly. This "getting old before getting rich" dilemma threatens productivity, increases welfare burdens, and complicates long-term growth strategies. There are also political fragilities inherent in Xi's one-man model. The dismantling of succession norms means that no clear pathway exists for leadership transition after Xi. While this consolidates his authority in the short term, it creates uncertainty, and potentially instability, in the long term. Hyper-centralization also carries a subtler risk: distorted information flows.

The paradox is that Xi's strength may also be his system's weakness.

Subordinates may be reluctant to present bad news or alternative viewpoints, leading to decision-making blind spots. Socially, dissent has been muted, but not extinguished. From "white paper" protests against COVID lockdowns to sporadic

labor unrest, pockets of resistance remind the Party that control must be constantly enforced. Maintaining this control requires ever-growing investment in surveillance and propaganda, a costly and ultimately defensive posture. The paradox is that Xi's strength may also be his system's weakness. By concentrating power so completely, he has made the resilience of the Chinese state more dependent than ever on the health, judgment, and political survival of one man.

The Xi Jinping era represents a decisive break from the collective leadership and restrained diplomacy that defined China's post-Mao decades. In their place stands a political system in which power is concentrated to a degree unseen since Mao, yet fused with the mechanisms of a modern state: digital surveillance, a disciplined Party apparatus, and an economy where private enterprise survives but bows to political authority. Xi's governance model is a hybrid, rooted in the CCP's Leninist traditions, infused with a revived ideological narrative, and supercharged by twenty-first-century technology.

"Xi Jinping Thought" enshrines him in the Party canon alongside Mao, while a carefully curated personality cult reinforces his centrality in China's political life. Meanwhile, the fusion of Party, state, and military leadership gives him unparalleled command over both domestic and foreign policy, enabling rapid policy execution but also creating potential blind spots. Internationally, Xi has abandoned *taoguang yanghui* in favor of *fenfa youwei*, a willingness to "strive for achievement" and assert China's role on the global stage. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road, China is exporting not only infrastructure but also an alternative governance model: one that challenges liberal democratic norms and appeals to regimes seeking growth without political liberalization.

Yet this system is not without fragility. Economic headwinds, demographic challenges, and the inherent risks of one-man rule such as succession uncertainty, information distortion, and decision-making bottlenecks cast long shadows. In many ways, Xi's China is both a blueprint and a warning. For some, it offers proof that authoritarian governance can thrive in the modern era; for others, it is a reminder that concentrated power, however efficient in the short term, carries the seeds of its own instability. In any case, the "Xi model" will shape not only China's future, but the evolving global order of the twenty-first century.

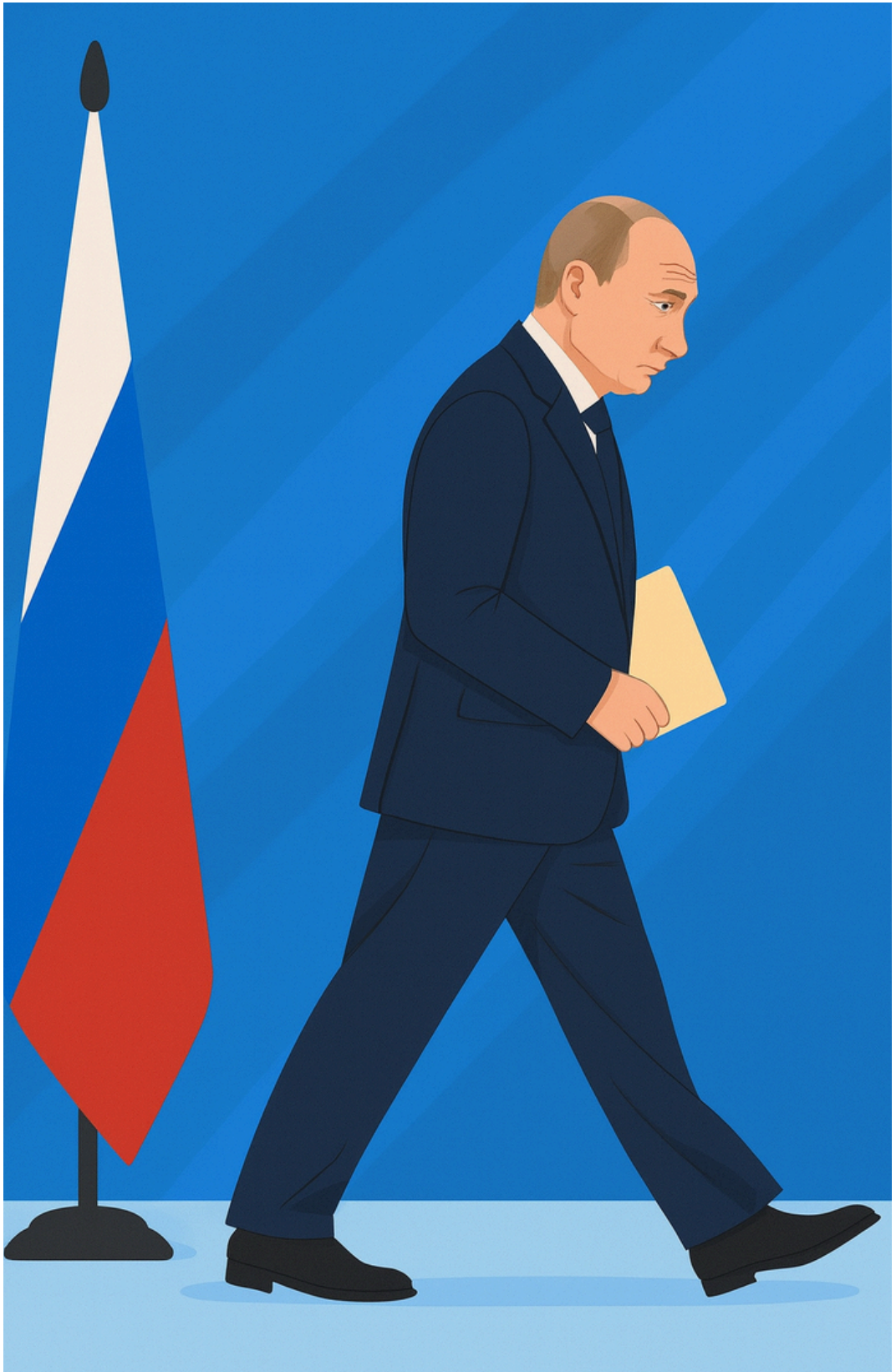
Russia's Strongman in an Age of Uncertainty

How One Man Became Russia

NINI PATARIDZE

As one of the most consequential political figures of the 21st century, Vladimir Putin has come to embody Russia on the world stage. A former KGB officer who was hand-picked by his predecessor, Putin has shaped Russia's political, geopolitical, and ideological trajectory following the turbulent 1990s. Over the last two decades, he carefully cultivated a tightly controlled image of strength that he projects globally. Today, he dominates conversations on autocracy, global security, and war.

NINI PATARIDZE, M.A. in International Affairs from the George Washington University, specializes in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, post-Soviet politics, and international security.





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Before his name became synonymous with modern Russia and autocracy, Putin was somewhat of an unknown figure operating behind the scenes, leveraging the uncertainty of the post-Soviet collapse and laying the foundation for his political rise. Understanding Putin's ascent to his decades-long presidency and his tools of control is indispensable for grasping how personalist rule can take root, endure, and ultimately redefine the boundaries of modern autocracy, which are often cloaked in the façade of democracy.

THE PUTIN ERA BEGINS

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the years that followed placed Russia under intense scrutiny. Questions remained about how the country could establish itself within the international system, transition to a democracy, and rebuild its economy. Under President Boris Yeltsin, Russia remained formally committed to becoming a democratic market state integrated into the international system. However, Yeltsin's goals failed to materialize, and new problems emerged, including the rise of a new class of oligarchs. Yeltsin's Russia saw the exaggerated power of the presidency, weak accountability, immense privatization, and deep entanglement of economic interests in political decision-making.

By the end of the 1990s, it was clear that Yeltsin's vision of Russia was out of reach. The country was thrown into chaos due to economic instability and inflation. Meanwhile, Yeltsin himself attracted criticism for his erratic behavior, appearing visibly intoxicated at official events and public appearances. By this time, political opposition was also growing, with favorable odds to win the election against Yeltsin. When Yeltsin resigned in 1999, however, the Kremlin already had a successor ready who appeared to be his complete opposite: a young, sober, and disciplined former KGB officer who could instill hope in the Russian people and project an image of stability.

What swung the public in Putin's favor was a series of events in 1999, where several explosions across Russia killed hundreds of civilians. As prime minister, Vladimir Putin responded by sending the Russian military into Chechnya, blaming it for the attacks. Conveniently, the timing proved advantageous: the military assault boosted his approval ratings and cast him in sharp contrast with Yeltsin's erratic leadership. Most importantly, it offered a template for using such domestic security crises as a means of rallying public support and legitimizing his executive authority. This approach would remain in place throughout his presidency.

When Vladimir Putin officially became president in 2000, he quickly understood that many Russians longed for a strong state with a leader who could restore national pride, even at the expense of reconciliation with the

West. His presidency began with a clear objective: to centralize authority and consolidate executive power to strengthen the “power vertical”—ensuring that reforms were driven solely from the Kremlin, insulated from competing political actors. Putin’s background in the KGB during the chaotic 1980s and 1990s played a key role in his governing approach as it reinforced his conviction that only centralized strength could shield Russia from further humiliation and internal fragmentation.

To plant the seeds of his autocratic ascent, Putin launched a calculated campaign against oligarchs who openly challenged his authority. He drove them into exile and seized their assets, using the reclaimed wealth to consolidate state control over key industries and media outlets. This allowed Putin to expand his grip on state-owned newspapers and television channels, which became a platform to curate the image of Putin throughout his leadership. In this way, he eliminated alternative centers of power within Russia’s post-Soviet system and laid the groundwork for his unchallenged authority.

The expansion of state-owned television and media was not merely a propaganda tool but a pillar of his regime’s survival, ensuring that dissenting voices would remain marginalized. Yet, Putin’s consolidation of power was not sealed from the beginning. Instead, it took years of restructuring his inner circle and placing the so-called “siloviki” around him, enduring moments of political humiliation and vulnerability, and crafting a deliberate, intentional strategy on a global scale to position Russia as a Great Power.

The 2007 Munich Security Conference became a turning point. There, Putin openly challenged the U.S.-led security order, accusing Washington of “overstepping its national borders in every way” and imposing a unipolar world detrimental to global stability. This was more than diplomatic theater—it was a public declaration that confronting the West would serve as both a foreign policy and a domestic legitimacy strategy, positioning Russia as the defender of sovereignty against foreign encroachment.

THE PUTIN CONSTITUTION

By 2008, Putin still had not pushed the limits of Russia’s domestic legal archetype. He stepped down from the presidency due to constitutional term limits, installing his successor, Dmitry Medvedev, as president while assuming the role of prime minister himself. Such “tandemocracy” allowed him to retain control and continue to shape domestic and foreign policy. The arrangement also signaled that Putin’s authority was the real source of power in Russia, with Medvedev serving mainly as a figurehead. At the same time, Putin tested boundaries, pushed legal and political red lines, and laid the groundwork for his eventual return as the country’s long-term autocrat.

The same year, Russia invaded Georgia, reinforcing the idea that Russia was prepared to defend what it perceived as its sphere of influence through force, while domestically reinforcing the image of Putin as a leader who could restore Russia's status as a great power. By the end of Medvedev's four-year term, Putin had managed to extend the presidential term limit to six years and expressed his intention to run again. However, Putin's return to the presidency did not come easily. The 2011-2012 election cycle presented challenges for the country's leadership, as large-scale protests erupted due to electoral fraud and Putin's decision to return.



RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN (R) AND PRIME MINISTER DMITRY MEDVEDEV (L) ATTEND A WREATH LAYING CEREMONY TO THE TOMB OF UNKNOWN SOLDIER, MARKING THE DEFENDER OF THE FATHERLAND DAY ON FEBRUARY 23, 2017 IN MOSCOW, RUSSIA. (PHOTO BY MIKHAIL SVETLOV/GETTY IMAGES)

Despite massive public unrest, Putin was declared president, which was followed by his enacted legislation to elevate penalties for protesters who pose a threat to his regime. His new term marked the beginning of a full-blown autocracy, as Putin actively resumed curbing civil liberties, eliminating and oppressing political opposition, and further expanding restrictions on independent media. The increased social repression during Putin's third term was aimed at ensuring the survival of his regime. As he realized that his ratings were falling and the forged myth of his leadership competence was wavering, Putin was in desperate need of a renewed approach.

One of the components of the renewed autocracy was additional mechanisms of repression, including the well-known 2012 "foreign agents" law, which labeled non-governmental organizations receiving financing from abroad as instruments of foreign influence (or foreign agents), eventually limiting them from finding alternative funding sources and

curtailing independent activism. During this period, Putin also tightened his grip on state-owned media outlets and jailed his political opponents, including Alexey Navalny, Sergei Udaltsov, and Leonid Razvozhayev. Putin's regime even went to extremes, assassinating Boris Nemtsov, the former deputy prime minister and a vocal critic of Putin, in 2015.

However, the physical tools of oppression were not effective; the political machine of oppression could not be solely constructed on a brutal grasp on power. This approach silenced the opponents of Putin's regime, but it did not rally the public in his favor. Learning from the experience of the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, Putin understood that the regime needed a story that would rally Russians behind the autocrat—one rooted in Russian history and glory, forged as a myth of Russian identity against Western influence, which identified a clear enemy of Russia and its traditional values.

In 2014, Putin reinforced this narrative by annexing what he perceived as Russia's sphere of influence—Crimea. Putin enforced the narrative that adversarial Western forces were attempting to seize Ukraine by ousting the Russian-allied President Viktor Yanukovich. While Putin's initial plan in Ukraine did not go as planned and Ukraine greeted a pro-Western leadership regardless, his objective of regime survival and perpetuating the historical narrative of returning Greater Russia with its historic sphere of influence would persist. Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war, which transformed the conflict into a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia, was an attempt to recover the country's status as a Great Power yet again.

His new term marked the beginning of a full-blown autocracy.

In his speech to the U.N., Putin underlined that it was Russia's duty to support Assad's regime in fighting terrorism, stating that Russia "could no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world." By challenging the U.S. directly on foreign soil

and justifying the intervention, Putin made a strategic move to reestablish Russia's influence on the global stage and demonstrate its ability to shape international affairs. Shaping world politics in line with a country's interests is a defining feature of a Great Power and projects power both domestically and internationally. In 2016, two years before the 2018 presidential elections, Vladimir Putin established a National Guard that bypassed the Ministry of Defense and answered directly to him.

By placing his judo partner and a former bodyguard, Viktor Zolotov, as head of the Rosgvardiya, Putin guaranteed its loyalty, needed for countering terrorism, maintaining public order, monitoring opposition, and suppressing public unrest when needed. In 2018, the so-called "siloviki," or the people with a state security background, also reached their

zenith. Coming from a KGB background himself, Putin's individualistic politics led him to reshape his inner circle of decision-makers by appointing the siloviki who could resort to force to curb opposition and carry out his tasks. In 2020, Vladimir Putin passed constitutional reforms through a national vote, which further entrenched his political authority.

The central political change was amending the constitution by resetting Putin's presidential term counts and allowing him to run for two more six-year terms. In addition to allowing Putin to remain as president until 2036, the 2020 reforms brought about institutional reshaping that increased presidential powers in relation to the judiciary. The amendments also marked the continuation of the Russian myth narrative, as they embedded nationalist ideas of defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman and affirming the belief in God as Russia's national heritage. Through these political maneuvers, Putin systematically eroded the existing legal norms and engineered a political system centered on his authority.

By eliminating the lines between state institutions and his power, he created an architecture of ultimate control that combined ideology, coercion, legal manipulation, mythmaking, and repression. Each point in Putin's path to engineering his unchallenged authority as a Russian leader reinforces the notion that the country's stability and greatness are almost inseparable from Putin himself. Putin's personalist politics of power were further reinforced by the revival and forging of imperial-historical myth, portraying Russia as a great empire, with countries like Ukraine cast as inherent parts of the Greater Russia.

HISTORY AS A WEAPON

To perpetuate his resilient image of a strongman defending Russia from the adversarial West and its "non-traditional values," Putin could not tolerate the prospect of a democratic and prosperous Ukraine, since its success risked inspiring Russians to question and resist his increasingly autocratic rule. Such a Ukraine would also undermine Putin's constructed myth that the country not only belongs within Russia's sphere of influence but is also an inseparable part of its historical identity. This narrative was formalized in July 2021, when Putin published his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, in which he argued that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" who were divided as a consequence of foreign interference.

By constructing the narrative as such, Putin attempted to justify the subsequent invasion and frame it as legitimate in the eyes of the Russian public. The invasion of Ukraine, therefore, serves not only as a geopolitical tool in Putin's handbook to expand his sphere of influence and challenge

the West, but also as his performance as the guardian of Russian history and protector of the country's national pride. To sustain this image and global prestige, Putin tapped into disinformation as a weapon. By filling both domestic and overseas information spaces with conspiracy theories, myths, and fiction, he manipulated history and wartime facts to strengthen anti-Western rhetoric and challenge cohesive resistance to the war.

As the world sought to isolate Russia and punish it for its aggression, Putin focused on its strategic relationships with China, Iran, and other allied countries to escape entrapment and the repercussions of sanctions. He leveraged energy exports and food insecurity as pressure points, while increasing the Russian Central Bank's interest rates to 20% immediately after the invasion to curb inflation. These tools, however, could not mask the underlying weaknesses that have plagued Putin's regime since 2022. Military setbacks in Ukraine exposed the gaps in Russia's great power image, sanctions strained its economy, and the grip on international influence remains under question.

FROM WEAKNESS TO FORTRESS RUSSIA

Putin's ability to maintain power for more than two decades is based on a carefully balanced mix of elite loyalty and widespread fear. Such a political equilibrium has so far prevented the fragmentation of Russia's ruling structure. In an authoritarian system, the leader's survival often hinges on ensuring that no rival can accumulate enough influence to pose a challenge, while also avoiding the alienation of key stakeholders. Putin achieved this through a combination of patronage networks, targeted coercion, and controlled political competition from the outset of his presidency. These measures ensure that the elites remain dependent on his continued rule while fearing the consequences of defection.

By rotating officials, playing competing factions against each other, and reserving high-profile prosecutions for those who overstep, Putin keeps the system tightly bound to his personal authority. The rise of siloviki in his inner circle also guarantees that Putin's decision-making apparatus is rooted in a hard, autocratic approach where ends justify the means. One of the central elements of Putin's durability is his exploitation of historical grievances and false narratives to rally national unity and incite nationalism. Putin has long framed Russia as a besieged fortress, threatened externally by NATO expansion and the "collective West," and internally by instability reminiscent of the chaotic 1990s.

This narrative is not merely propaganda. It taps into deeply embedded cultural and historical experiences, including memories of the Soviet collapse, and the perceived humiliation of the post-Cold War settlement. By presenting himself as the guardian of Russian sovereignty and dignity,

Putin transforms external pressure into an instrument of domestic consolidation. Military campaigns, such as the 2008 war in Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022, have been used to reinforce this narrative, portraying Russia as reclaiming its rightful place in the world.

Another key to his longevity is strategic adaptability, particularly his willingness to make tactical retreats without conceding strategic goals. Putin has repeatedly shown that he can recalibrate policy in response to domestic discontent or international

Military setbacks in Ukraine exposed the gaps in Russia's great power image.

setbacks. When protests over pension reforms in 2018 threatened to erode his legitimacy, he softened specific measures. When Western sanctions after 2014 weakened the Russian economy, he shifted trade toward China, India, and other non-Western markets, while also promoting import substitution policies in agriculture and industry. However, in each case, the long-term direction of policy, such as centralizing political power, expanding military influence, and asserting Russia's role as a great power, remained unchanged.

This flexibility allowed him to absorb shocks without destabilizing the system, while keeping his ultimate objectives intact. It is also true, however, that Putin's cult of personality plays a role in his endurance. At the beginning of his leadership, Putin played into the idea that he was the exact opposite of Yeltsin. While Yeltsin was a drunk and an unfit man, Putin was young, sharp, and most importantly, sober. While one projected an image of instability and chaos, the other exuded confidence and strength. During Yeltsin's tenure, Russia was perceived as weak both abroad and domestically. Today, Russia stands strong and challenges international regimes.

Often, its strength is equated with Putin's physical image—one of a man in his 70s with perfect health and undisputed international prestige. To create an image of a patriotic, Russia-loving Vladimir Putin and attract the public, the Kremlin had to resort to using "machismo" propaganda. Pictures of Putin shirtless on a horse, fishing, and swimming in rivers circulated heavily among the public throughout his presidency. The images of Putin, emphasizing physical masculinity, aimed to create a sense of desirability in a leader. While a product of Kremlin image-makers, such propaganda ensured that Putin's persona became intertwined with nationalism, as he engaged in activities traditionally attributed to male strength and dominance.

The combination of rigidity in strategic vision and flexibility in tactics created what can be described as the "Putin paradox." He appears indispensable to the functioning of the Russian state, even as the costs of

his leadership mount both internally and externally. Domestically, economic stagnation, demographic decline, corruption, and a narrowing base of political talent raise questions about the sustainability of his model. Internationally, prolonged confrontation with the West, reputational damage, and resource-draining military operations strain Russia's capacity to project power.

Yet these very challenges reinforce the perception among the elites and much of the public that without Putin at the helm, the state would face fragmentation or collapse. In this way, Putin's endurance is not only the product of his personal authority but also of a political architecture he has built to make his removal appear too risky for those within the system. The interplay of loyalty, fear, historical narrative, and adaptive governance ensures that even as pressures accumulate, the structure holds, at least for now.

THE ENDGAME OF CONTROL

Putin's political model illustrates both the resilience and fragility inherent in personalist autocracies. For more than two decades, he has successfully concentrated power by dismantling institutional checks, forging historical narratives, using repression, and altering legislation. Yet such concentration of authority is bound to leave the system vulnerable: repression cannot remain perpetual, and the risks of public discontent increase. Additionally, in the absence of institutional checks and regulations, questions loom about potential successors to Putin. This is the paradox of Putin's hard rule: the very strength of his personality politics exposes the regime's fragility, even as he has revived the myth of Russian imperial destiny—an ideological framework that continues to resonate with his people and shape the logic of his governance.

The Transformation of Erdogan

From Democratic Promise to Authoritarian Reality

JAMES BOWDEN

The Lord of the Rings was a highly successful book series which was turned into the larger, much more successful film franchise. Its story rests on a premise that can be traced back through multiple channels, including the Bible and the verse quoted at the top. The main conceit of The Lord of the Rings is that there were multiple (9) rings of power, granting authority to those who possessed the nine rings, ruled by the highest ring of them all, the tenth. But the ring was a trap, it took as much as it gave. Currently, in our world, we can look around and see that there are an emerging number of strong, powerful nationalist leaders who are emerging all over the world, not just in one single continent.

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Other writers in this volume have covered Donald J. Trump and Viktor Orbán. In many ways, the two men of Asia, Benjamin Netanyahu and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have emerged as leaders of Asia and have moved the world into a post-democratic, liberal world order and increasingly on the verge of single leadership. This article is dedicated to Erdogan. Recep Tayyip Erdogan began his rise to power in the early 2000s, and he was the first of the European strongmen to emerge and to remain in power. Though he was the first, he has not been the last, and can be seen as the initiating power behind this class of new strongmen.

Erdogan has been successful as he has sought the resurrection and reconstitution of the Ottoman Empire, in everything but name. With Türkiye sitting at the nexus of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, he has sought to leverage this geographically strategic location into a means of creating not just a personal power base but a base upon which to establish Türkiye as the dominant force of these regions. By eliminating challenges to his own personal power and moving from liberal reformer to strongman, he has similarly placed Türkiye itself on a new path from being one of many nations in Europe and among the NATO alliance to becoming a force to be reckoned with.

His path to personal power and to a more powerful Türkiye has been through the strongman playbook. The creation of a political party answerable to himself, the initiation of substantial changes in the judicial system, extensive regulation of and antagonism with academia, an adversarial relationship with the media resulting in influence and power over it, changes to terms in office, and the labeling of all opposition as terrorism. These are an informal yet recognizable set of measures which have exploited the safeguards that democracies have set up to prevent the very rise that they have seen. This article will briefly trace the history of Erdogan's rise and the implementation of these steps that he has undertaken from his appearance in 2003 until the present time.

It will then pivot to a brief analysis of his moves and, more importantly, his objectives, and finally will offer some thoughts on the future. Recep Tayyip Erdogan emerged in 2003, being elected as the Prime Minister at a time period when the world was largely focused on the Middle East proper, the war in Iraq was the dominant news item and Türkiye's (as it was then written and known) role was subordinate. Most views of Türkiye at the time were that it was the quiet country, Türkiye was present but not making great waves in NATO or Europe. This had been its general position since its reforms post-World War One and even more so as the Cold War began.

Under the rule of a few, but strong quasi-dictators, Türkiye was seen but not heard in European circles. For Turkish observers, the rise of Erdogan was initially viewed with favor and as a man who could potentially lead

Türkiye into a new era of European engagement. Erdogan, indeed, was viewed as someone that would bring Türkiye to great prominence but do so under the banner of constitutionalism and democracy. Indeed, in 2009 he was widely praised in an article that appeared in *Foreign Policy Magazine*. That article presented a fresh-faced, Western-friendly leader that was going to reshape Turkish politics but do so in a manner that could be praised by the rest of the world.

However, the timing of the article would become either greatly ironic or simply poorly chosen. By 2010, the dark clouds were gathering on the horizon. In 2010, he introduced a series of proposed changes to the constitution, largely moved and enabled through his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or the AKP). In the same spirit of past strongmen, and some current ones, Erdogan has fostered the majority of his rise through the establishment of this party. Erdogan has used this party to advance through what would have been normally very objectionable or questionable changes, including moving the country from the parliamentary system to that of a presidential system.

This has enabled him to aggregate more power into himself as the executive. He then moved against the judiciary. This process of advancing against the judiciary has been strategic and tactical in removing key pieces of legislation and judges that were inimical to his plan. In the same vein as prior strongmen, his attack on the judiciary has been carefully calibrated to weaken its institutional role not just in the government but in society as well in order to create and perpetuate the view of a hostile judiciary. These changes played on deep-seated discontent, areas for which there was obvious complaint and frustration within the general population, but many of those opened additional avenues to create deeper, more systemic ruptures.

By 2011 and 2012, the attacks on the judiciary had become outward attacks on the media and academic institutions. Moving to isolate and delegitimize those that were in a position to speak to the public and potentially control the narrative, Erdogan deftly swept aside many of his fiercest opponents into silence and near-total irrelevance. These attacks on academia took the form of removing academics, removing professors, and entire departments from academic institutions. According to an extensive report in Middle East Research and Information Project, the attacks on academia have a significant resemblance to current efforts underway in the U.S., yet have a distinctive Turkish flavor. In the purges, the government challenged academic freedom and integrity by focusing on the area of terrorism, an area not only deeply militarily resonant but also carrying an ethnic tone, that of the Kurds.

According to the report, many academics signed a petition calling for peace between the Turkish government and Kurdish forces that were

fighting in the south of Türkiye and the north of Syria, the PKK. Just as in America, the academics were accused of supporting terrorists and perpetuating terrorist propaganda. Many professors lost their jobs in teaching, some merely forced out of it as a profession, and others were sentenced to jail time. The attacks on the media took on the nearly universally recognizable tone of attacking bias, partisanship, and essentially reducing all negative coverage to acts of antagonism against the government rather than legitimate criticism.



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS HOLD A BANNER DURING A NIGHT DEMONSTRATION IN IZMIR, TURKEY, ON MARCH 23, 2025. SINCE MARCH 19, MASS PROTESTS HAVE ERUPTED ACROSS TURKEY OVER THE JAILING OF ISTANBUL'S OPPOSITION MAYOR EKREM IMAMOGLU. SEEN AS A KEY RIVAL TO PRESIDENT ERDOGAN, IMAMOGLU WAS REMOVED FROM OFFICE AND IMPRISONED IN A CASE HIS SUPPORTERS CALL A POLITICAL COUP. (PHOTO BY BERKCAN ZENGİN / MIDDLE EAST IMAGES / MIDDLE EAST IMAGES VIA AFP) (PHOTO BY BERKCAN ZENGİN/MIDDLE EAST IMAGES/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

The media was charged with conspiring with members of the government to institute their policies against the will of the people; thereby, the AKP accused their opponents of acting in a manner similar to their own. This frequently employed tactic of projection is used because it is often highly successful and shortcuts the process of logical thinking, exploiting the fears and anxieties of the people. While discussed in more detail below, the 2015 events with Syrian immigrants were not just about power politics against Europe, but may be seen as a test of European resolve and the limits to which Erdogan could exercise power.

It was an opportunity to determine to what degree Europe would let him set the agenda for both the Middle East and European regions. In that instance, he found that he had a substantial amount of safety and stability. Europe grudgingly acquiesced to his moves and did not threaten his

position in Türkiye. There were no calls for his removal, and there were no plans to liberate Türkiye. Passing the removal test, Erdogan likely understood that he could be confident that there was little Europe would do if he pressed a little harder. During this same time, a key step which strongly signaled Erdogan's ultimate aim was his reopening of Ottoman imperial-era barracks for soldiers in Istanbul.

He then restored elements of Ottoman symbols into the government iconography and took pictures replicating poses and backgrounds in Ottoman-era paintings. A much later, but still important, move of bringing Türkiye back to its roots has been the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque. The former Christian church and then museum was converted into a functioning mosque, heightening the position of Islam back in Turkish life. The move appealed to religious Turks and, though possibly possessing some genuine religious aim, it was aimed at deflecting criticism of his rule and coopting the religious community.

The 2016 coup was Erdogan's means of sealing his power. In the summer of that year, he engineered—or took strong advantage of—an attempted coup led by an exiled religious leader, Mohammad Fethullah Gulen, leader of the Gulen Organization. The sadly ironic nature of the coup was that the Gulen Organization, according to MERIP, had given the Erdogan government support, and many of their teachers had survived the academic purges of the earlier years with the cooperation of the AKP. The event in 2016 put that cooperation to a sudden end, and many, if not all, of the teachers who had emerged through the Gulen Organization found themselves thrown into jail or simply disappeared.

The coup itself did not last long; it was eliminated within a short week, yet the results would last for far longer. The result of the coup was that Erdogan was able to

move against even more of the remaining opposition parties and forces in the country and to round up anyone that posed a potential problem to his rule. In some instances, there is a concern that he used false allegations of alignment with the movement to arrest political enemies and those he disagreed with, and that they had no means to challenge these accusations. It should be noted that the present writer lost a connection on professional webpages in the aftermath of that event, and no word has resurfaced as to their whereabouts.

Since the 2016 coup, he has moved from being Prime Minister to being president—and a president that has faced faux challenges in the electoral process. These “challengers” have allowed him to continue to window-dress the process in the clothing of democracy, but there is very little disguising the fact that the elections are predetermined and that he will

**The 2016 coup was
Erdogan's means of
sealing his power.**

He suffered a seizure during an interview and, while the video was ended, the audio continued to capture the moment. The moment reminded Western observers that, while Erdogan has become a strongman of Türkiye, his strength is not unlimited. Following that appearance and clear evidence that he was experiencing some slowdown in his physical capabilities, he announced that he would be retiring or not seeking re-election in 2028. It is hard to conceive of a situation where he may follow through on this unless he is substantially weakened. As we have seen in Israel and America, the baby boomer generation is having a difficult time letting go and retiring from their leadership and job roles with the grace and dignity of prior generations.

It is also difficult to part with such complete and unobstructed power and influence. In the opening of this article, it was suggested that Recep Tayyip Erdogan is in the process of reforming the Ottoman Empire. While he may not be seeking the precise name and designation of such, his work has largely set the stage for Türkiye to be in a dominant position. In regards to internal measures, beyond establishing a neo-sultanacy, Erdogan has allowed himself to be photographed in iconic Ottoman settings, posing on staircases and in other venues that have a direct relationship to Ottoman Sultans. As mentioned earlier, he has restored to working order barracks used by Ottoman soldiers, and this has had profound nationalistic implications and in many ways signaled that he was seeking to couch his legitimacy on deeper, embedded cultural associations.

As a scholar whose work has touched on these issues, it is clear that the means and the message were not accidental. Just as Sargon the Great built ziggurats in every key ancient leadership city of Mesopotamia to establish legitimacy, so Erdogan has touched on these key aspects of Ottoman authority to establish political legitimacy for extended rule. But, in addition to these symbolic and internal changes, he has added regional interactions and influence campaigning. Türkiye is, by virtue of its geographical location, in a highly influential position in terms of regional traffic flow for trade, but Erdogan has added to this by making all alliance roads between Europe, Asia, and the broader Arab and Persian Middle East run to and through Türkiye. The following is best understood if one imagines Erdogan standing on a vast map of Türkiye and looking at the nations that surround him.

STRONGMAN WITHOUT REACH

In looking to his south, Erdogan can see an area of the world once ruled either by soft or hard power. His near abroad is defined by Syria, a state that until recently was more a territory than a state and lacked any central authority and direction. Currently, Erdogan is engaged in negotiating a

long-term presence for Turkish troops in Syria, reoccupying bases formerly used by Syrian as well as Russian troops. With the presence of these troops and Israel's extensive activities in the south, Türkiye and Israel are close to a collision in Syria at some point in the near future. While likely to begin as a collision between Syria and Israel, the status of forces agreement to be reached will likely include a clause requiring Türkiye to become involved in the case of Syrian requests for assistance.

Both Türkiye and Israel possess highly sophisticated and well-trained pilots, which will mean that the collision will be of greater consequence and duration than that between Israel and Iran. Turkish pilots are highly practiced and capable of mounting a significant defense. Another issue in Syria, northern Iraq, and northern Iran is the Kurdish issue. Erdogan has sought to bring an end to the Kurdish issue to the south, which has been (so far) successfully settled through the disarmament of the PKK. How enduring this disarmament will be is yet to be seen; for the present, it enables Erdogan to shift his attention to northern Iraq and to parts of Iran which Türkiye shares with its long border.

Northern Iraq remains a trouble spot; however, after years of attempting military solutions, it appears that the government is increasingly looking for political and domestic Iraqi means to resolve the conflict. Türkiye has been involved on the northern front since 2015 without any resolution. Northern Iran remains a more difficult matter. Erdogan has reached multiple defense and economic agreements with Iran. These would break down if he were to launch any military actions across their shared border. The hope is to give the resolution to the Iranians, just as in Iraq. Going a level further south, he has sought to intervene in the disputes between the Israelis and Palestinians.

In this context, he has attempted to portray himself as the chief defender of the Palestinian cause. This support has been manifested through a large number of diplomatic statements and warnings from himself directly and issued through his foreign ministry and longtime foreign minister Hakan Fidan. More substantial, physical means of support have included the portage, supplying, and facilitating of relief boats sent to the Gazans in order to aid in their relief from an economic and resource siege that began as early as 2005, near the time of Erdogan's first entrance into Turkish politics. While none of these has been successful, their continued use has been a thorn in the side of Israel's international relations, as these often enable Türkiye to portray the Israeli government in a negative light.

The influence that Erdogan has been able to assert does, however, appear to have reached its maximum extent in not penetrating the Arabian Peninsula. The leadership of the United Arab Emirates and also that of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in Saudi Arabia have served as effective breakwaters to the encroachment of Turkish power into the lower

Middle East. The strong personality and leadership of Bin Salman and the national leadership of the UAE appear likely only to gain strength in the coming years and to present stronger challenges to Turkish measures. The only area in the Middle East where he has had complete success is in regard to the Kurdish issue. His strongman position has not yet made a measurable change in Palestine nor in the daily life of the majority of those in the Middle East.

ERDOGAN'S EUROPEAN GAMBLE

If Erdogan were to turn from the Middle East and view the Balkans region and then Europe beyond that to the north and northwest, he would see a more complex situation. Europe has long resisted, both militarily as well as diplomatically, Turkish entrance into European affairs. This has had some deleterious effects and has resulted in some level of reprisal on the part of Erdogan. In his immediate near abroad in Europe, he is looking at a still unstable Balkans region. The Balkans are still in some state of flux, and Türkiye is certainly working towards peace and stability in that region.



NATO SECRETARY GENERAL MARK RUTTE (C) AND FOREIGN MINISTERS POSE FOR A FAMILY PICTURE DURING AN INFORMAL MEETING OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION (NATO) FOREIGN MINISTERS AHEAD OF POTENTIAL PEACE TALKS BETWEEN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA IN TURKEY, IN ANTALYA, ON MAY 15, 2025. NATO CHIEF MARK RUTTE SAID THAT HE WAS "CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC" FOR PROGRESS TOWARDS PEACE IN UKRAINE, BUT THAT IT WAS UP TO RUSSIA TO TAKE THE "NEXT STEPS NECESSARY". (PHOTO BY OZAN KOSE / AFP) (PHOTO BY OZAN KOSE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Serbia remains the most unstable of the countries, and restoration of stability would bring Türkiye some assurance that their most immediate trade networks in Europe were secure. Türkiye is one of the oldest members of the NATO alliance, yet they have not been allowed into the

European Union, and it has long served as a major objective of Erdogan to enter into the alliance. He has attempted to manipulate his way into the economic and military alliance by leveraging soft power. In the summer and fall of 2015, he used this position by allowing nearly a million Syrians to cross Turkish borders and flood into Europe, causing a very damaging period of cultural, social, and economic chaos within Europe.

The massive influx of immigrants in Germany and in England produced two very substantial right-wing, nativist movements within Europe, which has reset the typical liberal orientation of the continent. In many ways, the rise of the strongman Viktor Orbán was a reaction to the processes set in motion by the strongman Erdogan. This human tsunami forced European nations to come and speak with him, and he leveraged the toll to receive many more concessions. Further attempts at leverage have been his ability to block the entry of Sweden and Finland into NATO, and it took a deep diplomatic crisis and several months of systemic engagement with Türkiye in order to allow Finland to enter into the military alliance. Sweden has been on Erdogan's worst enemies list.

Türkiye has accused Sweden of various crimes against the Muslim community, including a general refusal to help the Muslim community. In looking at further Europe, France and England still dominate European politics, along with an emergent Poland. Two of these three nations, France and Poland, are currently setting the agenda for the European Union. It still may be an elusive goal, but if Erdogan can bring Türkiye into the bloc, it will be the most successful entry and the best, most beneficial cooperation bloc that Türkiye has been able to accede to. It has seemed that the most ardent, long-standing, and most active goals for Erdogan appear to be European-focused, with the Middle East constituting an important but secondary front in his orientation.

But, Erdogan is running out of time. The great equalizer of death is approaching, and he will not remain in power forever. The question is, how will his legacy and the state go forward from that moment? Future leadership is a key question, one that might be delayed because few leaders like to project that one day their power will be stripped by nature, if not by force of arms. Within authoritarian systems, this lack of leadership preparation takes on an added dimension as they are cautious about elevating a person who might decide that nature is taking too long and prefer to gain their new position in the short term.

This leads to a paradox in which there is awareness that there needs to be leadership training and stability, but it often comes too late for the successor, given that they have not had time to fully appreciate the magnitude of a role grown into by the established leader. In the case of Türkiye, there are three leading men who may fill this void and who would be necessary to fill the void. The most likely of those men will be Hakan

Fidan. Fidan has been in a close position of power; being the former head of the Turkish intelligence agency, he has access to much more than just the dirt on Erdogan's sons and family—he has the levers to start disappearing and moving them out of the way as he notes Erdogan's decline.

The great equalizer of death is approaching, and he will not remain in power forever.

In his current role as Foreign Minister, he is much more exposed to the worldwide media as well as national leaders who are listening to his voice and getting used to his presence. This carries with it significant weight in terms of personality as well as authority. Fidan has also been a strong

advocate and fighter against Israel as well as the Kurds, and he would be in the best position to take over the institutional flow of any efforts to maintain the military and intelligence campaigns against these two powers, one of which—Israel—may challenge Türkiye in the near future. Other analysts have preferred to view one of Erdogan's sons, Necmaddin Bilal, as the more likely candidate.

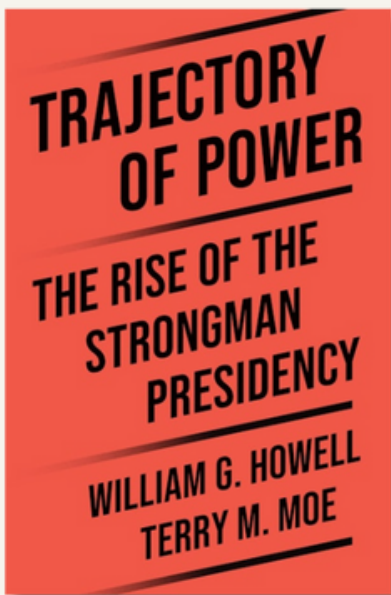
He has reportedly built a very successful business empire and has a good grasp of management and economics. However, running a strong, nearly one-man state institution requires political acumen, understanding the processes of power, and the ability to work with entrenched leadership. Fidan more thoroughly possesses all of those qualities and would do so from day one. It is likely that a key sign of the changing of political leadership in Türkiye will be foreshadowed by the quick exit and virtual exile of any members of Erdogan's family who may pose a challenge to the leadership of Fidan.

Whether Fidan has the same skills and leadership pull that Erdogan possesses will be quickly known. The lack of a successor may lead to a tarnishing of the Erdogan legacy. The question is: is that a good thing or one that is bad? Erdogan has restored Türkiye to a leading position in the region—one in which, as stated at the beginning, countries that surround it must take into account and consider what would happen if Türkiye were to intervene.

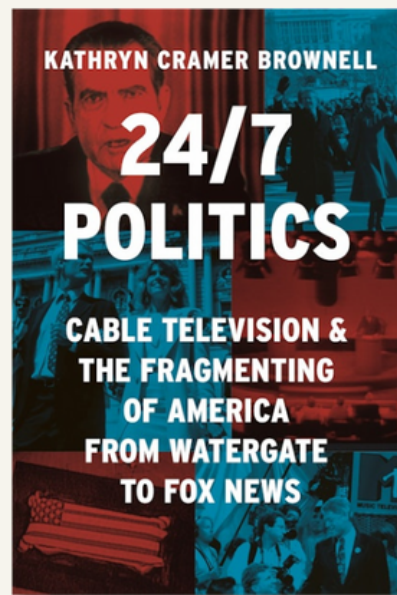
However, he is a strongman, and the legacy of strongmen does not often endure well or withstand the test of later history. The alienation and the impact that he has had on the religious group of the Gulen movement are yet to be fully explored and, in one way, have been personally felt, as this writer has known at least one person who may have disappeared as a result of her association with the group. Therefore, it cannot be said that the rise has been without consequence.

On the other hand, the future will tell whether this legacy will be supported, and what will happen to Türkiye will test the quality and the mettle of the changes made. If these changes quickly disappear, then the

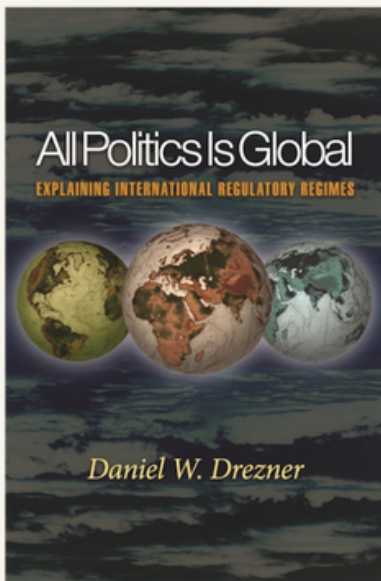
impact and legacy of Erdogan will be seen as ephemeral. If the changes endure—if there is continued respect and soft-and-hard foreign power in terms of the military as well as pure political power—then the leadership of Erdogan will likely be seen as one of those few moments when the means by which it was reached may not be looked down upon and will be evaluated as a means to an end.



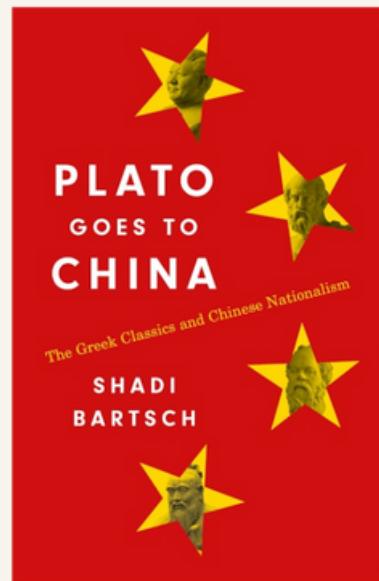
"Will Trumpism outlast Trump? Howell and Moe answer with a definitive 'yes.' This tour de force analysis traces the evolution of Republican presidents' efforts to retrench and even undermine the administrative state over time. Foreshadowing the persistence of our present moment, the book uncovers how novel legal theories and populist anger have fueled the rise of strongman politics."—
Douglas L. Kriner, Cornell University



"Brownell, a historian, details how the opponents of network broadcasting successfully cast the industry as 'elitist' and peddled cable as a democratizing force that would 'empower people, politicians, and perspectives.' Her persuasive account argues that cable's advocates were, in fact, motivated primarily by profit, and that cable television's Sisyphean pursuit of ratings and revenue ultimately served to cultivate a toxic media—and political—environment."—*New Yorker*



"Important.... Drezner shows that it is control of their own large domestic markets that give major states the ability to wield power in the global economy. His main contribution, however, is to explode a popular notion of globalization and thereby to set an agenda for the study of global regulatory politics."—G. John Ikenberry, *Foreign Affairs*



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Europe's Illiberal Vanguard

Orban Inside the Union, Against the Union

MICHELLE REITANO

The trend of rising illiberalism and autocratization has not spared Europe, far from it. While the European Union's founding treaties, signed in Maastricht in 1991, refer to the liberal values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the free market, the last decade has seen actors contesting this supposed universal normative system from within. In particular, since his election in 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has attracted enormous attention due to his Eurosceptic illiberal rhetoric. Now fifteen years later, Orbán and his Hungarian far-right party Fidesz remain in power domestically and have gained a reputation for being a leading disrupting force within the EU.

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Indeed, Orbán's illiberal politics have not only affected the rights and freedoms of Hungarians, but have also taken a central role in the development of a transnational illiberal European political movement, uniting populist far-right forces across the continent. While illiberalism, autocracy, and far-right nationalist populism are not unique to Orbán or his so-called political doctrine of 'Orbanism', the Hungarian example showcases the ways in which effective mobilization of illiberal rhetoric and transnational ties can promote the erosion of core liberal values at a European and global level.

Orbán's politics should thus not only be viewed within his domestic Hungarian context, but also have to be situated in view of transnational political networks and alliances. While events such as the recent banning of the 2025 Budapest Pride have sparked widespread condemnation across EU member states and institutions, the EU context has also benefitted Orbán and his allies, allowing them to mobilize around Europe-wide populist grievances. It is from this multi-level perspective, taking into account domestic, European, and international dimensions, that this article analyses Viktor Orbán's political influence.

DEMOCRACY HOLLOWED OUT

To understand Viktor Orbán's political vision and his impact on the current European landscape, it is perhaps most useful to go back to his 2014 speech in Tusnádfürdő, Romania. Orbán opens by presenting the 2008 financial crisis as a pivotal moment in global history, set to change the world order. He views the crisis as the fundamental failure of Western liberalism, and evidence that Eastern illiberal states can rise within the world order without adopting Western liberal values. Orbán goes on to lament Western states' focus on accruing revenue for mega-corporations at the expense of the domestic working class, Western politicians' praise of multiculturalism and pro-immigration stances, and Hungary's lack of economic standing within the EU.

His conclusion to these problems? The illiberal democratic state. Orbán's Tusnádfürdő speech reveals a few things central to his worldview. To begin with, he views liberalism, that is, the school of thought valuing the inalienable rights of the individual, democratic representation, and the equality of all citizens before the law, as inherently Western. As such, Orbán positions liberalism as diametrically opposed to supposedly authentic Eastern values, and presents it as a doctrine imposed upon Hungary by Western powers. This dichotomy between the 'Western' and the 'Eastern', which is essentialized without further critical engagement, is at the core of Orbán's ideological standpoint: It serves as the rationale to promote a return to authentic Eastern illiberalism and a rejection of the alien and hegemonic Western liberalism.

Orbán's idea of the illiberal democratic state is further underpinned by a populist anti-elite view claiming to promote the interests of the working people. Orbán paints the ills of the 2008 financial collapse on Western elites' focus on the profit of the few over the needs of the many, and on their willingness to support foreign immigrants over nationals. This serves as justification for Orbán's skepticism towards the liberal free-market economy and the welfare state in favor of a supposedly working-class-based economy. The examples of successful illiberal Eastern economies Orbán presents, such as Singapore, India, and China, suggest a belief in the economic success of states that broke free-market principles in favor of selective state interference in the economy.

This underpins Orbán's belief in a strong state that is able to provide for its national constituency over a liberal state minimally engaging in a free market. Furthermore, Orbán's belief in the privileging of the domestic working class leads to his rejection of multiculturalism and tolerance. Orbán views the acceptance of a diversity of cultures, religious beliefs, and gender and sexual identity as a threat to the Hungarian nation. He positions tolerance as a foreign norm, and calls for a return to traditional Hungarian values, such as Christian beliefs, traditional gender roles, and cultural homogeneity. A return to these traditional values is presented as a way to preserve the true essence of the Hungarian nation and fight foreign-imposed multiculturalism.

With that, Orbanism advocates for a highly nationalist worldview, based on an ethnic understanding of the Hungarian nation. As opposed to civic nationalism, which understands the nation as sharing a set of values and civic rights, ethnic nationalism defines the nation through a common ancestry, shared language, religion, and cultural background. While ethno-nationalist components exist in many national imaginaries, Orbán conceives Hungarian nationalism through a purely ethnic lens and completely rejects civic nationalism and those perceived to not belong to the Hungarian nation. This has led to a highly hostile anti-immigration rhetoric within Orbán's political discourse, as well as a targeting of ethnic and religious minorities, which are seen as feeding off the state at the expense of the Hungarian populace.

Despite proclaiming his political movement as democratic, Orbanism has also acquired contradictory autocratic tendencies. This has led some to describe Orbanism as an inherently autocratic movement, fundamentally at odds with a democratic political vision. 'Illiberal democracy' could thus be considered an oxymoron, as the foundations of a healthy democracy arguably rely on liberal foundations. A polity that places ethnic Hungarians above other constituents, for instance, can be viewed to compromise the vision of equal citizenship required for a true democracy.



HUNGARIAN PRIME MINISTER VIKTOR ORBÁN ADDRESSES A BUSINESS CONFERENCE IN BUDAPEST, HUNGARY, JUNE 9, 2021. REUTERS/BERNADETT SZABO

In addition, Orbanism functionally hollows out checks and balances, institutional accountability, and the independence of the judiciary fundamental to upholding a democratic political system. This tension within the concept of ‘illiberal democracy’ thus raises the fundamental question: Is Orbán not simply arguing in favor of autocracy through euphemistic, palatable phrasing? Some might find it more appropriate to call Orbán’s Hungary an electoral autocracy: a political system that maintains a pale semblance of democracy through regular elections allowing opposition, but that is heavily skewed in favor of the incumbent and is designed to erode citizens’ rights.

AN AUTOCRAT AMONG DEMOCRATS

Nevertheless, and perhaps most contradictorily, Orbán’s 2014 speech does not present his vision of the illiberal democratic state as fundamentally incompatible with membership in the EU. While Orbán anticipates conflict and pushback, he presents EU membership as feasible, under the condition that Hungary be able to regain its sovereignty and rebalance the financial relations between EU institutions and its member states. While Orbán is widely considered a Eurosceptic for his questioning of the value of supranational European governance and his advocacy for national sovereignty, he has to this day yet to make a serious push for Hungarian secession.

Instead, Orbán has privileged contesting the EU and re-writing the rules from within. This contestation began with domestic reforms, which posed

a challenge to EU liberal values and legal standards meant to underpin a common foundation for all member states. In 2011, shortly after gaining power, Orbán and his political party Fidesz amended the Hungarian constitution under the presumption of breaking away from Hungary's communist past and protecting Hungarian national assets. In reality, the new constitution significantly reduced the influence and independence of the judiciary and extended the power of the legislative and executive branches.

Particularly, the new constitution allowed for the introduction of cardinal laws that gave the Parliament (at the time under Fidesz majority rule) the power to appoint and remove judges from the Constitutional Court. In the following years, reforms further eroded democratic freedoms. Political opposition was curtailed through financial and disciplinary sanctions, smear campaigns, and the defunding of civil society organizations and NGOs. Moreover, the Hungarian Media Council was co-opted by Fidesz, leading to heavy censorship of independent media and press. Similarly, Orbán's government diminished universities' ability to conduct independent research through the establishment of private trustee boards including government-appointed members.

Last, Fidesz heavily campaigned on the ideal of a traditional family and gender roles, truncating LGBTQ+ people's access to marriage equality and adoption, and eroding women's access to reproductive healthcare. Economically, Orbán challenged the EU's liberal free market and fiscal policies. While Hungary had experienced significant economic growth after reforming into a market economy in the late 1990s and joining the EU in 2004, the 2008 financial crisis led to a sharp drop in GDP and increased financial dependence on the EU, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. This instilled a negative connotation towards transnational liberal private ownership within Hungary's domestic context.

Orbanism functionally hollows out checks and balances, institutional accountability, and the independence of the judiciary.

As such, Orbán preached the reclaiming of Hungarian ownership over key economic sectors, most crucially energy, banking, and media, in order to curb foreign economic influence. Similarly, foreign direct investments (FDI), which had been crucial to Hungary's economic growth in the 90s, were now seen as a national threat benefitting foreign corporate elites, leading to a heavy increase in taxation of foreign businesses. Furthermore, economic reforms attacked the European welfare state model and dramatically cut unemployment benefits and pension schemes, which Orbán argued rewarded migrants and lazy non-working people.

Instead, Orbán aimed to build a working-class-based economy, and set out to curb working-class unemployment through work programs increasing employment in the public sector. These economic reforms promoted cronyism and corruption within Hungary's national apparatus, and curtailed the freedom of the market. As a result of these legal, political, and economic reforms, Hungary has dramatically fallen off democratic standards. Over the last decade and a half, Freedom House reported a democracy score of 43/100 in 2024, classifying Hungary's political regime as transitional or hybrid. Hungary is thus generally described as the first EU country to have breached the classification threshold from a democracy into a partial autocracy, and one of the nations with the greatest democratic backsliding worldwide in the last decade. Despite this dramatic shift, Hungary remains a member of the EU, raising questions regarding the future of the European project and the effects on other member states.

THE INTERNATIONAL STRONGMAN CLUB

However, Orbán's promotion of illiberalism goes beyond domestic reforms. Indeed, transnational ties with like-minded far-right populists have been at the core of his political strategy. Within the EU, Fidesz has led the vanguard of Europe's far-right through the creation of the new parliament group Patriots for Europe following the 2024 European Parliament (EP) elections. This new group encompasses European far-right parties such as Belgium's Vlaams Belang, France's Rassemblement National, Spain's Vox, and the Netherlands' Partij voor de Vrijheid. The creation of this new alliance, which was accompanied by a significant increase in parliamentary seats for European right and far-right parties and a loss of seats for center-left parties, has been at the forefront of a push for a nationalist, illiberal, and Eurosceptic sovereigntist agenda.

Far-right political discourses surrounding gender and LGBTQ+ identities, immigration, and religious and cultural diversity have crept into the EP, lending a wider platform to illiberal and autocratic ideas at the center of European democracy. In addition, Patriots for Europe has taken an active stance in countering the center-right European People's Party (EPP), the dominant and pro-European party within the EP, such as pushing a motion of censure against European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in July 2025. The building of a European far-right coalition has gone hand-in-hand with the building of international illiberal ties, directly challenging the liberal international order.

While most European states took a strong stance against Russia in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Orbán stands out in his refusal to cut ties with Moscow. In July 2024, as part of Hungary's duties as the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU, Orbán met with Russian

President Vladimir Putin despite heavy condemnation from Brussels. This seemingly friendly relationship with a leader that is otherwise perceived as an existential threat by most of the EU stems from like-minded beliefs in a return to traditional Eastern values and a rejection of Western liberal hegemony. With the election of Argentina's far-right President Javier Milei in 2023 and the re-election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2024, Orbán's international circle of like-minded far-right populists only threatens to grow.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel and member of the far-right Likud party, has also been a key international ally in Orbán's transnational illiberal network. In the aftermath of the October 7th attack by Hamas, Orbán staunchly stood at the side of Israel, on the grounds of defending Jewish communities. This stands in sharp contrast to Orbán and Fidesz's antisemitic political rhetoric domestically, which excludes Jewish communities from the Hungarian ethno-national ideal and diminishes Hungary's role in the Holocaust.

Netanyahu has only welcomed Orbán's embrace, taking advantage of his illiberal rhetoric to pursue his own political gain and gather support for Israel's war on Gaza. Despite Netanyahu being subject to an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and crimes against humanity, Orbán invited Netanyahu to Hungary in April 2025, in direct violation of the Rome Statute. Subsequently, Orbán withdrew from the Rome Statute, invalidating the ICC as a pillar of international law and thereby undermining a core institution upholding the international liberal order.

THE PRICE OF APPEASEMENT

Orbán's contestation of the liberal order occupies an interesting place within the European political theatre, engendering both contestation and acceptance. Starting from 2011, key EU institutions have directly challenged Orbán and presented him as a threat to European values. Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship at the time, denounced Orbán for deliberately eroding democracy and the rule of law domestically. Similarly, the Venice Commission under the Council of Europe raised worries about constitutional changes, in particular regarding the independence of the judiciary.

In 2022, more than €6 billion in EU recovery and cohesion funds for Hungary and Poland were frozen in a push from the European Commission to combat the states' erosion of the rule of law and stifling of civil society. While both Hungary and Poland contested the sanctions, presenting a case to the Court of Justice arguing that the Commission and Council were

abusing their power and violating the European Treaties, they were eventually dismissed. In addition to the financial mechanisms invoked by the Commission, the European Parliament has repeatedly condemned the Hungarian government in its declarations for violating fundamental European values.

While mostly discursive, these declarations contributed to the positioning of Orbán as a challenger of European democracy. Recent political developments further exacerbated tension between Orbán and the European mainstream. While European member states have been united in their condemnation of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and in advocating for sanctions, Orbán's Hungary has proven to be a thorn in their side. Within the European Council, Hungary has repeatedly refused to vote on new sanction packages, effectively allowing for their approval but without active support.

Moreover, in June 2025, the annual Budapest Pride Parade, aimed at celebrating LGBTQ+ identities as well as equality and inclusion, was cancelled by the Hungarian Parliament under the presumption of it presenting a threat to children. This decision is part of a longer list of Orbán's curtailing of LGBTQ+ rights, which he views as Western-imported ideals. Nevertheless, the move to ban the Budapest Pride Parade was challenged domestically, with multiple grassroots protests erupting and Budapest's mayor re-instating the event. Ursula von der Leyen, the current President of the European Commission, has expressed her support for the Budapest Pride and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities, and condemned Orbán's ban.

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In addition, the Budapest Pride Parade was attended by many foreign members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and activists who showcased support for the Pride-goers challenging Orbán's ban, leading to an estimated record attendance of 200,000 people. Nevertheless, despite seemingly widespread contestation, the illiberal ideals of Orbán and his allies have also partially been accepted by the European mainstream in an attempt to quell the appeal of far-right parties. With regards to migration policy, the EPP has adopted a rhetoric not so dissimilar to that of Orbán, aiming to curb immigration from outside of Europe and reinforcing border militarization.

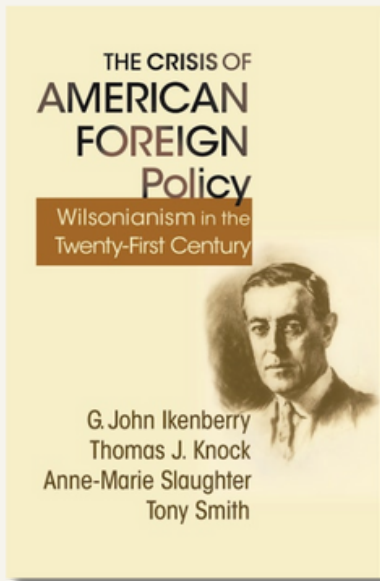
The 2021 New Migration and Asylum Pact, aiming to fight the rise of the European far-right, was adopted as a way to show that the EU could act on the 'problem' of migration. Mainstream EU actors thus often aim to fight the European far-right through the adoption of similar rhetoric and policies, showcasing a worrying willingness to compromise human rights and international law and accommodate illiberal positions. Furthermore,

mainstream EU actors have showcased similar undermining of international law with regards to the Israeli government's crimes in Gaza and ICC arrest warrants against Israeli leaders.

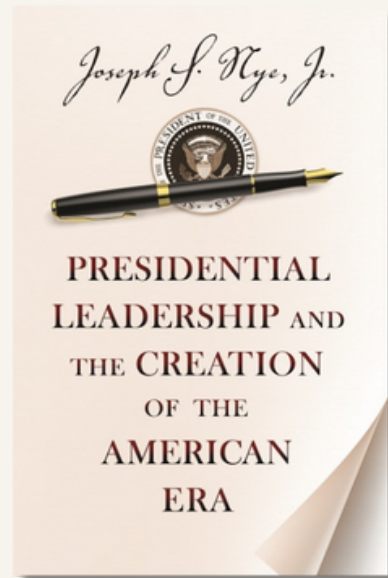
On October 13, 2023, von der Leyen and President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola visited Israel and voiced the EU's complete support for Israeli President Herzog, despite the Israeli government declaring a complete siege on Gaza including fuel, electricity, and water in direct violation of international humanitarian law. Furthermore, European leaders such as French President Emmanuel Macron have allowed Netanyahu to fly within their airspace despite their obligations under the Rome Statute. These actions indicate a wider EU turn against international law and its institutions not limited to far-right parties, and risk undermining the very international liberal order Europe contributed to build.

EUROPE'S ILLIBERAL DRIFT

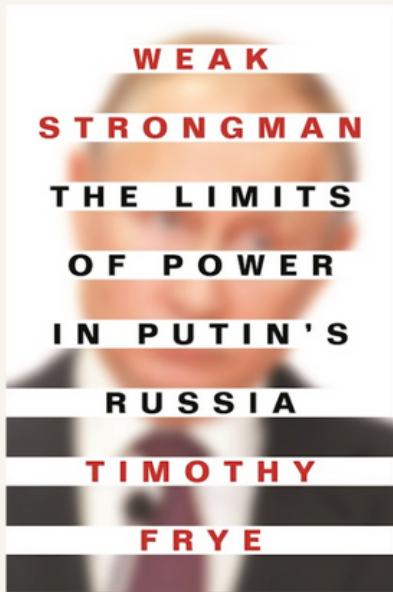
Orbán is not the only illiberal force within the EU, nor did he pioneer many of the illiberal trends pushing Europe towards a rightward shift. Nevertheless, his long-standing leadership of Hungary and contestation of liberal values within the context of the EU has facilitated the increasing normalization of illiberal beliefs. This normalization of illiberalism poses existential questions to the European project, and whether liberal values will remain at the center of it. Despite this rightward illiberal shift, there remain actors willing to defend liberal European values and act against their undermining from both far-right and mainstream European actors. The EU mainstream thus needs to critically respond to Orbán's illiberal challenge, as appeasement only emboldens it.



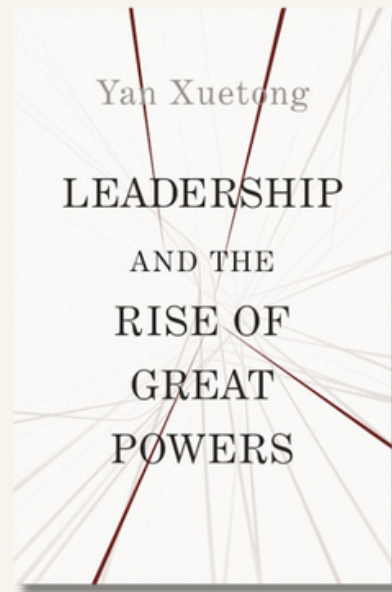
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Kim Dynasty Eternal

Inside the World's Most Enduring Dictatorship

SEAN HUY VU

When Korea achieved liberation from imperial Japan in August 1945, few Koreans likely imagined their country would become two disparate states in the ensuing decades. In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, even fewer policymakers in Washington believed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea would survive into the 21st century. Yet, seemingly against all odds, the DPRK has withstood the test of time and persevered under a third generation of leadership. Kim Jong Un has resisted integration into the liberal international order and successfully maintained an authoritarian model many observers once regarded as obsolete. While the DPRK may appear to be a case of *sui generis*, upon closer inspection its tactics are not unique.

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Far from being an anomaly, North Korea is a prime example of authoritarian governance, employing universal methods for internal domination and external control for the modern world. It combines effective propaganda, nuclear brinkmanship, and selective diplomacy in order to maintain its survival. Bordering only South Korea, Russia, and China, and constrained by international sanctions, North Korea faces severe economic isolation that presents challenges to its nuclear program and survival. However, it still manages to resist the rules-based order and convert its position of isolation into one of strength, making itself an information “black box” and the “hardest of hard targets,” stumping policymakers for generations.

LEGACY AND LEGITIMACY

North Korea’s most effective method of internal domination is the Kim family’s personality cult. While many authoritarian regimes, past and present, have produced their own, the Kim family’s cult stands in contrast to others for its intensity and extensiveness in daily life. The cult is maintained by indoctrinating the population with certain myths and rituals, strict censorship and regulation of media, and aggressive repression of freedom of thought. The central figure in North Korea’s national myth is Kim Il Sung, the country’s founding leader. Born into a devout Protestant family in 1912 in Pyongyang, he spent most of his formative years in Manchuria, fighting for anti-Japanese guerrilla units organized by the Chinese Communist Party.

North Koreans are taught to regard him not merely as a hero, but as a messiah who sacrificed himself for the salvation of the Korean nation. He was also, according to the orthodoxy, a genius theoretician who made a unique contribution to communist discourse: Juche, roughly meaning national self-reliance, a cardinal doctrine in North Korean domestic and foreign policy to this day. Kim Il Sung ruled North Korea from the country’s founding during Soviet occupation in 1948, through the Korean War (1950–53), and until his death in 1994. Through the late 1950s to 1960s, he consolidated his power by purging political rivals he regarded as too sympathetic with the Chinese, Soviets, or South Korean left.

His younger brother Kim Yong Ju and his son, Kim Jong Il, also made essential contributions to the family’s cult. Kim Yong Ju created the “Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideology,” the most sacred set of state doctrines which regulate and shape the thoughts and activities of North Korean citizens. Kim Jong Il, during his tenure as chair of the Korean Workers’ Party’s Propaganda Department from the 1960s to the early 70s, indulged in his passion for cinema by personally directing films and commissioning statues, novels, songs, and monumental architecture in

honor of his father. Military parades and mass spectacles were also orchestrated on important national holidays, especially the elder Kim's birthday—April 15, “the Day of the Sun.” While North Koreans may harbor ambiguous or even contemptuous feelings towards Kim Jong Il or Kim Jong Un, Kim Il Sung was a genuinely beloved charismatic leader for his perceived fatherly care and protection of the motherland.

Propaganda and mass performances not only inspire exaltation for the leaders but also reinforce the group mentality amongst a population. The most effective propaganda is implicit and resonates with certain social psychological foundations: the need to believe, the need to belong, and the feeling of contributing to something larger than oneself and which outlives them, such as one's race or country. North Koreans possess a strong sense of ethnic nationalism for one another, including their southern brethren. Even if North Koreans have mixed feelings about their leaders, the Kims are nonetheless the symbol of their community and would stop at nothing to protect their nation and each other. This is where the true strengths of the propaganda and personality cult lie, and it is against the mythical legacy of his family that Kim Jong Un has cultivated some of his legitimacy and exerts influence over his people.

DICTATORSHIP, THIRD GENERATION

At the time of Kim Jong Il's death in December 2011, Kim Jong Un's transition to power was incomplete yet adequate enough to secure his family a third generation of dictatorship. Before his father's passing, Jong Un's leadership was hinted at a few years in advance, whether through songs implying that the successor would follow in the General's “Footsteps” or by receiving high-level promotions within the party and military. State media also incidentally touted the younger Kim as a pious son of “The Respected Mother,” Ko Yong-hui, one of Kim Jong Il's many private mistresses. While most of the propaganda techniques and institutions initiated under Il Sung and Jong Il continue today, Kim Jong Un has broken with the personality cult's precedent on several fronts.

He founded an all-women band in 2012 called the Moranbong Band that exhibited extensive Western and Asian-pop influence. Although many songs have been composed for the Supreme Leader, not a single statue of Kim Jong Un has been constructed. In 2020, Kim did not pay his annual respects to his grandfather by visiting Kim Il Sung's mausoleum on the “Day of the Sun.” Then in 2024, Kim contradicted his grandfather's dying wish and reversed decades of state policy by declaring that the DPRK would no longer pursue unification with South Korea. Had any other individual made such a heretical pronouncement, they would have been sent to a gulag.

The most significant difference between Kim Jong Un's cult and those of his predecessors is the scant amount of details about his childhood, the facts of which remain shrouded in mystery even to experts. Of what little is known, Kim and his younger sister Kim Yo-jong both enjoyed a privileged childhood, having studied in Bern for a few years, attended by cooks, bodyguards, chauffeurs, and private tutors. And despite being the offspring of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong Un and Kim Yo-jong were both kept in secrecy from the rest of North Korea, including their own family. They were children born out of wedlock and to a former dancer of mixed Korean and Japanese descent from the diaspora in Osaka, qualities unacceptable in the conservative hermit kingdom.



ON APRIL 15, 2017 PICTURE RELEASED FROM NORTH KOREA'S OFFICIAL KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY (KCNA) ON APRIL 16, 2017 SHOWS NORTH KOREAN LEADER KIM JONG-UN (5TH R) ATTENDING A MILITARY PARADE IN PYONGYANG MARKING THE 105TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF LATE NORTH KOREAN LEADER KIM IL-SUNG. / AFP PHOTO / KCNA VIA KNS / STR / SOUTH KOREA OUT / REPUBLIC OF KOREA OUT

To this day, Kim Jong Un has not produced a single photo of himself with his grandfather, suggesting he and Kim Il Sung had little to no relationship. If ordinary North Koreans knew how much of a far cry Kim Jong Un's childhood was from the austere, revolutionary martyrdom of Kim Il Sung, it would seriously undermine his credibility. Kim Jong Un has broken with tradition not only culturally but politically as well. When he assumed power, most of the country's elite were adherents to the ideologies of Stalin, Mao, and Songun, or Kim Jong Il's military-first policy. His aunt Kim Kyong-hui and his uncle-in-law Jang Song-thaek were also key members of his court, continuing their responsibilities where Kim Jong Il had placed them during his tenure.

In the succeeding years, Kim Jong Un would purge or demote hundreds of these officials, replacing them with a younger, more sycophantic generation of elites or chairwarmers. He famously executed Jang in December 2013, allegedly for corruption, then four years later assassinated his older half-brother Kim Jong-nam (a CIA informant) in Kuala Lumpur. Purges are routine during leadership transitions in North Korea, but it was unheard of for relatives of the sacred Paektu blood to be executed. While life at the elite level has always been one of constant vigilance and performance, during Kim's early years, life in the middle and lower classes and outside Pyongyang was less restrictive.

Reforms allowed farmers to keep larger portions of their harvest for private use than before. Informal markets (*jangmadang*) and entrepreneurship quietly became more tolerated in exchange for rent to the state and to avoid famine. During this period, hard drives containing South Korean pop music and dramas were routinely shared amongst the population, despite the heavy fines. Gradually, Kim Jong Un became less tolerant of any potentially subversive thought, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The border with China was tightened, then eventually sealed, to reduce the number of defections and the flow of foreign media into the country, the possession of which currently carries a death sentence. Traditional methods of surveillance, such as informants within neighborhoods and bi-weekly hour-long "life review" or self-criticism sessions, were strengthened. The country's intranet persists well into the era of smart technology and nuclear proliferation, cutting off people's access to outside information. North Korean phones, which are modified imports from China, also monitor user activity by recording login data and capturing screens every five minutes.

THE ENEMY AS NARRATIVE

For all the country's repression and economic stagnation, the regime's nuclear weapons program remains a popular symbol of national pride among North Koreans and is regarded as a necessary tool for survival due to the history of the Korean War. Although the Korean War is sometimes referred to as the "forgotten war" in the U.S., the collective memory of it is routinely reinforced in North Korea. The U.S. Air Force dropped 600,000 tons of bombs and 20,000 tons of napalm on the Korean peninsula, mostly on the North; a higher volume than what was dropped on Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany.

American B-29s destroyed nearly all of the DPRK's civilian and military infrastructure, including hospitals, churches, temples, and schools. As napalm set villages ablaze in the night to drive out guerrilla units, irrigation

dams were destroyed, inundating cities, roads, and rice paddies. The bombings forced North Koreans to retreat to an underground existence for nearly three years and left them on the brink of starvation until the arrival of Soviet aid and Chinese forces. Approximately 10% of the North's population of 10 million died during the war. The North Korean propaganda apparatus has since embellished the war's history with evocative myths and exaggerations, presenting a Manichean worldview between Koreans and Americans.

Purges are routine during leadership transitions in North Korea.

While Koreans are regarded as the victimized and oppressed race, Americans are framed as the genocidal, treacherous, and predatory oppressors responsible for a "hostile" foreign policy and international

environment that isolates and impoverishes the North Korean people with sanctions and legal double standards. These attitudes and insecurities are held not only by much of the population but by the leadership itself. In the eyes of Pyongyang, Washington is an irredeemable and untrustworthy negotiator that seeks to ultimately undermine the regime to expand its hegemony in East Asia. Likewise, Americans find it difficult to accept North Korea as a reliable, good-faith nuclear actor due to its frequent verbal subterfuge at working-level talks and antagonism towards the liberal international order.

While the U.S. has demanded some variation of "complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization," this is simply not an option for Pyongyang. Demanding the authoritarian regime dismantle its only security guarantee in its power imbalance with the U.S. increases its perceived risk of facing the same fate as Libya, Iraq, or most recently, Iran. This is in spite of the fact that the U.S. has repeatedly offered security guarantees, food, and financial aid to the DPRK in exchange for suspension of its nuclear program for the past thirty years. However, the capricious nature of American democracy, which often prioritizes re-election, incentivizes short-term outcomes over long-term consistent strategy, and produces volatile changes in foreign policy, has also eroded trust between both sides.

MOSCOW'S NEW ALLY

In January 2018, Kim Jong Un declared his country's nuclear deterrent "complete" and vowed to discontinue nuclear weapons development. It came less than a year after the successful launch of the Hwasong-14, an intercontinental ballistic missile, on July 4, that demonstrated—for the first time—an altitude capable of hitting the U.S. mainland and its territories in the Pacific. What ensued, besides the "fire and fury" rhetoric, were a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions that completely cut off

the regime from accessing hard currency and raw materials. These stringent sanctions received unusual support from Russia and the PRC and were initially effective.

Later that same year, Kim Jong Un made a number of historic overtures with South Korea and the U.S. He sent an orchestra and a delegation, including his sister, to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics; signed several agreements with South Korean President Moon Jae-in moving towards peaceful reunification; and met President Trump in Singapore to agree to the “peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.” Although Kim’s outreach was more theatrical than substantive, a performance of dialogue and reconciliation was still better than none and excited audiences around the world.

As time passed, however, Kim Jong Un revealed his true intentions. In the succeeding months, Kim demonstrated his willingness to negotiate by deactivating the Yongbyon Reactor (the country’s first uranium enrichment site), suspending nuclear testing, and dismantling missile launch sites. U.S. negotiators remained unconvinced, as these moves appeared superficial and easily reversible. After the fallout between Kim and Trump at the 2019 Hanoi Summit, North Korea resumed its conventional missile testing. Although Trump and Kim briefly shook hands for a photo opportunity at the DMZ that summer, the DPRK has stonewalled all invitations by the U.S. to negotiate.

Kim Jong Un met Trump with the expectation that his country would formally be accepted as a nuclear state, only to be denied this acknowledgment from his country’s greatest adversary. North Korea’s strategic partnership with Russia has granted Kim Jong Un substantial leverage over the U.S. and has disincentivized him from negotiating any further. Since Moscow resumed its war with Ukraine in 2022, Pyongyang has been supplying its benefactor with an estimated 12,000 troops, multiple-launch rocket systems, long-range artillery, as well as ballistic missiles.

Reports estimate that millions of artillery rounds, shells, and rockets worth billions of U.S. dollars have been sent to Russia from North Korea via cargo train. In exchange, Russia has broken most, if not all, of the U.N. Security Council resolutions sanctioning North Korea for its nuclear program. Moscow is also believed to be sending food, energy, financial aid, as well as military technology to Pyongyang to aid its post-pandemic recovery. None of this is to mention the explicit outsourcing of labor by Chinese firms to North Korean workers, also contrary to U.N.S.C. resolutions, and the resurgence of trade between the two countries back to pre-pandemic levels.

KIM'S SURVIVAL MODE

Given the effectiveness of its totalitarian methods, its nuclear deterrent, and relations with traditional partners, the probability of the North Korean regime collapsing is as low as ever. For the foreseeable future, regime endurance is the most likely scenario, but this does not preclude other possibilities. Many experts have considered the possibility of a joint invasion of South Korea and Taiwan by the DPRK and PRC, respectively. The probability of this occurring imminently remains low, however, as it requires specific conditions to make it successful. The U.S. could find itself deterred from intervening in the region either by the threat of nuclear force from North Korea or China, by being consumed with its own contentious domestic politics, or by having its military and diplomatic resources spread too thin across the globe.

A second possibility lies in the collapse of U.S.-China relations, where Beijing might feel confident enough to sustain a self-reliant economy during wartime rather than one dependent on exports, and thus no longer see the need to maintain productive economic ties with South Korea, Japan, or the U.S. In such a scenario, if China and North Korea were to collaborate on a joint invasion of their respective rivals, Washington could either prove unwilling or unable to respond effectively, whether due to fears of nuclear confrontation or because of a turn toward isolationism. Finally, a weakened or divided South Korean government could create vulnerabilities that the North might exploit, coercing Seoul into concessions.

Millions of artillery rounds have been sent to Russia from North Korea via cargo train.

Yet, given the sophistication and superiority of South Korea's defense systems, this last scenario remains the least concerning. A full-scale invasion of the South, while always possible, is still highly unlikely as there are too many conditions

required for it to occur, and the robustness of the U.S.-ROK alliance serves as an effective deterrent against such action. Kim is a rational actor, and he knows that a failed attempt would be too costly for him and his regime. As Kim stated himself in 2024, he is no longer interested in unification with the South because his country is in survival mode. He is not interested in economic growth, which is why sanctions have failed to pressure the regime to change in a way that aligns with U.S. interests.

What is more likely in the coming decades is a series of provocations and skirmishes between the Koreas initiated by the North. The back-and-forth between both sides could escalate enough to motivate the South to initiate a violent reunification of the North. This would be even more likely if the Republic of Korea developed a domestic nuclear weapons program, had a

highly nationalistic administration in the Blue House, and if American influence over the alliance was weak, as it is now with Israel. A similar case occurred in Vietnam during the Lê Dynasty (1627–1802). Although officially ruled by a single family, the kingdom was de facto governed by separate clans who sporadically engaged in civil war: the Trịnh and the Nguyễn. Northern Vietnam under the Trịnh maintained close ties almost exclusively with the Chinese Ming and Qing Dynasties, while the South (present-day Central Vietnam) engaged in substantial trade with the Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese, and others.

With their growing wealth, advancements in military technology, and rich agricultural production, the Nguyễn managed to maintain large, powerful armies that expanded south into the Mekong Delta. The centuries of division and civil war were unilaterally resolved by the Nguyễn when they marched north and seized the ancient capital Hà Nội, establishing a new dynasty. If Vietnam's history is compared with Israel's current war on Gaza, it seems inevitable that the larger, wealthier, and more powerful half of a divided land eventually absorbs the weaker, smaller one by force.

NOT ONLY AN ASIAN STORY

As vulnerable as the North Korean regime may be, it is a success story in totalitarian endurance. It has withstood the test of time through uncompromising repression of domestic dissent and the strategic use of nuclear weapons as bargaining chips in its rivalry with the U.S. and South Korea. But above all, the regime has survived through internal cultural hegemony. When citizens are taught their nation's history, they are being taught more than a sequence of dates, figures, or events. They are inculcated in a narrative that promotes certain values, cultivates a national identity and community, and gives guidance to their lives. The story is rarely ever neutral because its ideas reflect and legitimize the ideology and privilege of those in power.

There is no clearer example of this approach than in North Korea. While it is not the only case of its kind, the DPRK's method of cult-building and maintenance of authoritarian rule has inspired other Asian leaders to follow in its footsteps, from countries as distant as Cambodia and Turkmenistan, or as close as the PRC under Xi Jinping. But the consolidation of power through the manipulation of cultural mediums or an ethno-national mythos is far from unique to Asia or autocracies. In a world that is becoming increasingly nationalistic and protectionist, and where tribal political and religious tensions take place both online and in real life, all nations are at risk of being swept up by charismatic leaders who can effectively generate collective effervescence for destabilizing purposes.

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