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HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
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THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?



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A CENTURY ago, a pandemic unmatched in lethality since the Black Death compounded the human catastrophe of the Great War. The sense of relief in their aftermath ushered in a decade of incredible social, artistic, and cultural dynamism, fueled by consumer demand for technologically innovative goods and services. Like many other generations emerging from a cataclysmic conflict, that one too embraced the illusion that history had come to an end. With the rejection of the Versailles Treaty and the rise of totalitarian ideologies still a long way off, prosperity and nonchalance in much of the developed world came to dominate the era known as the Roaring Twenties.

THIS edition of *Horizons* is hardly unique an attempt to draw comparisons between that decade and possible developments in the 2020s. The most obvious points of commonality at their respective outsets are global contagion and hope. Although the underlying statistics pale in comparison to those of the Spanish Flu, the coronavirus has brought enormous disruption and hardship to billions of people around the world. The repercussions will be exacerbated by at least three general trends that predated the COVID-19 pandemic, but have accelerated as a result of it. *First*, the cascading global environmental emergency brought on by decades of inattention and the present lack of appetite for carrying out sufficiently bold measures to combat climate change; *second*, growing inequalities within societies and between states that fuel increasingly flagrant populism; and *third*, resurgent rivalries between great powers that seem to be destined to intensify in this decade.

THE gradual easing of pandemic-related restrictions and the trillions of dollars injected into the global economy by governments will undoubtedly arrest the freefall and produce short term growth. But legitimate questions are being raised about the sustainability of the associated boom. The vaccine nationalism of today portends a widespread economic de-coupling tomorrow. Present squabbles over 5G infrastructure carry the omen of restrictions on consumers' liberty to choose innovative goods and services crucial for sustainable progress, for instance in the fields of green technology and artificial intelligence. Hence the World Bank's warning of a potential "lost decade," with global growth predicted to be less than 2 percent per year in the 2020s.

THESE and related issues are taken up by our distinguished authors, as they examine in these pages the foreign policies of major powers, broad historical and geopolitical trends, and cross-cutting political and socio-economic issues like neuro-rights, international justice, and big tech regulation. Differences in approach and subject-matter notwithstanding, our contributors generally concur on one fundamental point: there is still time for the present generation to rouse itself to concerted action in order to prevent wholesale chaos. But the clock is ticking and there is hardly any leadership in sight.

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FROM THE STORM TO MORE THAN A CALM

AMERICA AND THE ROARING TWENTIES

George Friedman

THE storm and the calm are addressed here by an American. The world is vast and each decade has experienced the past decade through the eyes that their place and nation have given them. Reality—from disease, to war, to the softness of peace—exists throughout the world, but even an event such as COVID-19 is seen in different ways. Each nation has a different history, different imperatives, and different understandings of what must be and what must not be. And the dynamic which defines each country differs and is frequently misunderstood by outsiders.

For the United States, the coming decade will be a period of political, social, and economic disorder. The United States experiences such storms about every 50 years. The last occurred in the late 1960s into the 1970s. There were massive race riots, with blacks facing the Army, assassinations of great men

such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, huge riots outside the Democratic convention in Chicago carried out by left wingers, anti-war demonstrations against Vietnam (a war we all knew was lost), and the resignation of President Richard Nixon who had committed a criminal act and resigned before he could be impeached.

I can go back 50 more years to the Great Depression and point to similar conditions but the point is made. The United States travels through predictable crises, the world declares the United States finished; yet it survives and redefines itself. The United States is in all respects the epitome of creative destruction, and rage and violence is the transition to a new era of peace and growth. This time it faces COVID-19 as well, and we are challenged to understand what this force from outside the machinery of the Republic does. To understand the

George Friedman is Founder and Chairman of Geopolitical Futures and a New York Times bestselling author. This essay is an updated version from part of his latest book, The Storm Before the Calm: America's Discord, The Coming Crisis of the 2020s, and the Triumph Beyond (2020). You may follow him on Twitter @George_Friedman.



Biden's inauguration broadcast live on Chinese television and projected onto a giant screen in a shopping mall in Beijing

Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

impact of the pandemic on the United States, I believe we must view them through the cycles of American history.

There is a second cycle that is rarer: an 80-year cycle in which the United States transforms its institutional structure. That structure was first sketched at the founding. Then, 80 years later in the time of the Civil War, the U.S. federal government shifted power away from states and produced a more federal system. Then, 80 years later, in World War II, the relationship shifted again, with the federal government taking control of much of society and governing through expertise. This results in the emergence

of a new crisis at the heart of which we see the onset of a debate about the relation of experts to governance.

These two cycles coexist in time, increasing the tension materially. And so we come to the present, where COVID-19 comes into play.

RIDERS ON THE STORM

THE storm has arrived, on time and with inevitable fury. All sides focused on one man—either Trump or Biden—as a hero or a scandal. Through them, we evaluated each other. Those who did not see these men as despicable, or who saw them as praiseworthy,

were banished from our company. We spoke only to those who hated or loved as we did. At a time when the fabric of the country was being torn apart, it was comforting to regard one man either as solely responsible or as the source of our salvation. The idea that what is happening must happen—because the nation is failing and must reinvent itself again—is too far-fetched to comprehend, and too painful to grasp.

Behind the assassinations, the collapsing markets, the crushing debts of war or the price of land, there must be a villain, loved by those who see these events as the course of things and despised by those who see an evil will perpetrating them. It is a time of anger and virtue. The country is torn apart by the virtuous who see themselves as the stewards of the principles of the country, and others as defilers.

Meanwhile, many care only for their private lives, ignoring such passions. The civic-minded others are for the moment tearing the country apart in fits and starts of righteousness and indignation. The idea that this too shall pass, and that it will pass into the hands of neither faction, is unthinkable. The nation is divided in two, and the idea that there is another choice, another reality that will impose itself on the nation regardless

of what the two now-obsolete factions think, is beyond belief. The war between Roosevelt and Hoover will always be won by one or the other. An Eisenhower or Reagan cannot at this time be imagined.

Two cyclical crises coincide in the United States. One is the crisis of a federal government that no longer functions well but defends its prerogatives. The other is a crisis of a social and

economic system that has served us well but has run its course, leaving chaos in its wake. All those we love and loath are simply the shadows of exhaustion. Paradoxically, when these socio-economic and

institutional systems lose their energy, they are seen as and believe themselves to be the center of all things, and are perceived to be the only promise for our redemption. Individuals often come to symbolize each of these crises, as presidents symbolize the political. It is useful to begin by looking at a symbol.

Our current cycle ends with something extraordinary: COVID-19, a disease that has terrified the world in part because it has been so long since we have had a pandemic. The governments of all countries were expected to assume at least part of the responsibility for its lethality and, in a real way, for curing it. Since the United States is the center of

The United States is in all respects the epitome of creative destruction, and rage and violence is the transition to a new era of peace and growth.

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gravity of the global system, and also of technology, it fell to Washington to deal with the problem.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, a physician and researcher who was said to know about such things, was the head of an American federal bureau charged with keeping us safe. Diseases frequently confound even the most expert among us and so confound the U.S. federal government. No one was sure how to cure the disease or prevent its spread. This should not have been surprising, given the limits of human knowledge; but the expectations on the miracles the U.S. federal government could achieve—from winning World War II, to launching satellites into space, to making Twitter possible by inventing the internet—was a terrible force to behold. If there was no cure, then the U.S. government had been failed by its minions.

HIVE OF EXPERTS

The U.S. federal government is the hive of experts, and Dr. Fauci is among them. He did not know how to cure COVID-19, but he had an idea how to contain it. The virus spread through human contact, so eliminating human contact would solve the problem.

Humans refusing to come close to other humans and shielding their breath at a distance was the only solution available at the time, and the U.S. federal government, worshipful of expertise, adopted this as the best available solution.

Dr. Fauci's solution may have been the best available, but it did not account for the hidden costs. Humans are social animals. At all phases of their lives, they require intimacy. It was unclear how long it would take for a cure to be found, and therefore unclear what the cost of social separation would be. What would be the cost for children growing up without close contact with other children, the ritualized games of our culture banned along with the beautiful and banal?

The cost was not calculated because this was a virus, and the physician who controlled the government's response did what was required of him. The best temporary solution to the disease was social distancing and wearing masks. As an expert in viruses he focused on his field, unqualified to discuss the social consequences and unable to tell us how long it would take. He did his job precisely as he was expected to, and he

did it well. The economic, social, and personal costs were real and measurable, but not addressable.

The feds could have brought in an economist, a child development expert, or an ethicist. That Fauci's solution was not subjected to the expertise of other fields was unfortunate but not surprising. The stovepipe did not welcome company. But the ethical question could not be answered by ethicists. No amount of advanced degrees permit someone to dictate the ethical. The United States considered all citizens to be ethicists, and the political figures selected by the citizenry were forced to face the nightmare of ethical choice.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the moment where the foundations of the U.S. federal government first laid down during World War II showed their weakness.

How many deaths is a normal childhood worth? Perhaps death trumps all else, perhaps not. But that question cannot be delegated to an expert in virology, who himself must address the costs evaluated by members of a team of experts. A team of experts is no more able to address the moral question than any citizen, who is an expert in being human and in decency. Ethics is not like most subjects. It derives not from learning an esoteric subject, but from mastering the common sense of being human and embracing the obligations that flow from that. Common sense and the ethical

derive from the same virtue: being able to see the whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the moment where the foundations of the U.S. federal government first laid down during World War II showed their weakness. The value placed in expertise elevated a class of people to effectively rule through meritocracy. These people were frequently unknown to citizens, could

not be judged or held accountable by citizens, and could not be reached by them. They differed from politicians in that they were answerable only to politicians, who were in turn—while often critical—terrified of defying them. Dr. Fauci is neither

villain nor hero. The power wielded by experts, isolated from the public and each other, yields mayhem.

Absent was someone with a deep ethical base who could measure the consequences—intended and unintended—and who had the power and the moral authority, as well as the modesty, to evaluate the solutions offered by the medical establishment.

David Halberstam posed the problem of expertise in his 1972 book, *The Best and the Brightest*. He saw the Vietnam War as the creation of the best educated and most intelligent products of Harvard

University. Their expertise lacked the reality that a sergeant on the ground could see, which was that the war could not possibly be won using their tendered strategy and tactics. There was no one present who possessed both the common sense and the ethics needed to block what they did. The best engineered concept has to pass the test of common sense and decency. Both are complex skills that are frequently at odds with technical brilliance.

The pandemic captured the doubt and mistrust that is inherent to the American people towards their political leaders and their teams of experts. The rebellion against wearing masks and social distancing was not the rebellion of the ignorant; it was a rebellion of those who saw the costs of the medical solution as greater than the benefits. It was accompanied for many by a distrust of vaccines. It was a fear that the experts had not properly calculated the risks. And there was no one with superb common sense and decency to mediate the issue. The more intensely Dr. Fauci's opponents were vilified, the more powerful they became, making an institutional crisis both real and intense.

All the while, the pandemic wreaked havoc on our society and economy. There were many dimensions to it, of

course, but the single most important was how differently various social and economic classes experienced the crisis. Zoom has been a welcome way to conduct business at home, but for many workers Zoom was irrelevant. Construction workers, farmers, truck drivers, service industry folk, and countless others could not isolate themselves or continue their lives uninterrupted and streamlined.

The pandemic merely accelerated the cyclical failure of the U.S. federal government and aggravated tensions between the technocrats and workers. It also intensified the instability in society in general.

They had to risk the virus or lose their livelihoods. Countless many lost their jobs due to rules laid down by the medical community. Others had to continue their jobs amid tension, fear, and frequently anger at those who lectured them on proper behavior regardless of what it did to their

lives. This was not a crisp division, and many fell on each side, but it was a significant social division nonetheless.

Former President Donald Trump represented the growing mistrust of the U.S. federal government and expertise. Yet, the institutional crisis preceded the economic and social crisis. COVID-19 was unexpected, but the type of institutional and social crisis at hand was not. The pandemic merely accelerated the cyclical failure of the U.S. federal government and aggravated tensions between the technocrats and workers. It also intensified the instability in society in general.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE ANTISEPTIC SOCIETY

COVID-19 also revealed the weakness of our technological culture. The primary focus of our current cycle was non-biological. There has been biological research and implementation, of course, just as there had been since the late nineteenth century. However, the centerpiece of technology was based around the microchip and dealt primarily with non-biological matters. I discussed in my book, *The Storm Before the Calm* (2020) the cyclical culmination of microchip-based technology and its replacement by a biologically-focused technology that would drive the economy and society of the next cycle. My argument was that as life expectancy increases and the reproduction rates of millennials decline, the burden on society will come from the elderly and the unproductive. Given my premise that technology is a response to pressing social problems, it followed that a radical new approach to aging was inevitable.

Because COVID-19 affected virtually every aspect of society, a new imperative emerged. There was a sense of an antiseptic society in which disease may not be banished but at least would not rage out of control, taking lives and warping ordinary

human relationships with it. We expected modern medicine to keep us safe, but we increasingly became aware that the medical community was unable to—and unaware of the consequences. No one knew if the virus would mutate into something worse, something that couldn't be stopped by masks or by social distancing.

The reality of a radically misshapen demography has now been powerfully joined by the reality that communicable diseases holding all of humanity hostage is not part of the distant past but a real threat that, if it doesn't kill, distorts all life.

It follows that the primary social imperative is a comprehensive theory of medicine that simultaneously creates defenses against viruses and manages the degenerative diseases of old age. This is, of course, easier to demand than to deliver. Even so, the medical process of treating diseases is unique and highly inefficient. When something unexpected emerges, the timeframe needed to understand it can be disastrous, and the length of time to deal with known diseases that are spreading out of control is also disastrous.

To give a wholly and undoubtedly insufficient set of examples: the microchip was able to manage data and served as a

The reality of a radically misshapen demography has now been powerfully joined by the reality that communicable diseases holding all of humanity hostage is a real threat that, if it doesn't kill, distorts all life.

core solution to all computing. It was a place to begin. The internal combustion engine served the same purpose in both land and air transportation. Electricity allowed the American Industrial Revolution to proceed.

Each epoch has had a core technology that facilitated the various capabilities of the age. The significance of the core technology was not recognized for its power at first, and the applications were unexpected. But the genius of each technology was its flexibility. There are many useful technologies in modern medicine, but none with the breadth of applicability of electricity, the internal combustion engine, and the microchip. I have no idea what the next core technology will be, but in looking at the history of technology, I note that solutions appear when urgently needed. In the next cycle, we will need a very different approach to medicine.

Although Jack Kilby (a key inventor of the microchip) and Nikola Tesla attended university, Thomas Edison and Nikolaus Otto did not, and all grew up in rural areas. This was to their advantage as they had not absorbed the limitations imposed by academic thinking. In particular, they did not absorb the protocols of seniority whereby they would be judged by their seniors wedded to old

ideas. All of them looked at their work from both an intellectual and a commercial perspective, whether within a corporation or as lone entrepreneurs. And when in a corporation, they behaved with the dynamic of an entrepreneur. They were not all Americans, but they were all iconoclasts with deep insight into technology and business. There were armies of such people around them, but they are worth considering when we consider the next cycle.

There are many useful technologies in modern medicine, but none with the breadth of applicability of electricity, the internal combustion engine, and the microchip.

For each, there was a social problem to be solved. For each, there was a solution to be fought for. For each, there was great honor and wealth to be gained, though perhaps less for the German Otto. Thousands of others followed in their footsteps as they forced solutions to a social problem.

Now the problem is biological, and if history is a guide, some iconoclast will force the way to a solution that will be obvious to all once it has succeeded. When and how I have no idea, and history may fail us. But the urgent need for a new approach to medicine—one that is agile, supple, and profitable—will continue.

For this to happen, the U.S. federal government must be restructured. The post-World War II model of a deep

interlocking of private life with a federal government helmed by experts, poorly overseen and managed by those who can't see the unintended consequences of expertise, has been outstripped by reality. It is not the size of America's government that matters but its claim to authority over the breadth of society and the inevitable clumsiness of its exercise of that authority.

Trump articulated this problem, however incoherently and ineffectively. Like Nixon, Hoover, and Grant, Donald Trump sensed the problem, but the time and his personality made a solution impossible. Solutions are stated by Reagans or Roosevelts, presidents who understand that a solution is necessary but must not be disruptive. It must flow gently from the problem, and even then vile things will be said of them. But Trump was not a Roosevelt or Reagan. Like Nixon and Hoover, he ended in disaster, while at the same time opening the door to the inherent problem of the American federal government.

The first institutional cycle did not define the relationship between federal and state governments in the United States. The second established the primacy of the U.S. federal government but did not set its limits. The third created almost complete domination of America's states. All were in their time what was needed.

It follows that the next cycle will be one that accepts the U.S. federal government's primacy but will necessarily require the creation and institutionalization of a new level of expert—the generalist—to make certain that the area experts are both effective and non-contradictory. The deeper problem is citizens' access to the government. Here, I expect that the core relationship of the U.S. federal government to states will remain, albeit with two notable changes. First, the states will have at least an informal role in federal decisionmaking. Second, the states, much closer and more sensitive to their citizens' interests, will become a channel for allowing citizens to petition their government. This will, in turn, result in curbing unilateral U.S. federal authority over states, and shift the World War II model to one that is collaborative or adversarial, both of which achieve the same end.

UNIFIED THEORY OF MEDICINE?

We are now at the point where the initial crisis has been announced but has been personalized. The first part of the transitional phase is normally political, as the Trump years were. Then the political subsidies as there is deep social and economic dysfunction under the surface. In the 1970s, this was embodied by the Ford and Carter presidencies. They were politically much calmer than the Nixon years, but the calm was an illusion. Economic and social problems festered, while relative political calm was

maintained, until the late 1980s when the Carter presidency broke and was replaced by a radical political, economic, and social force: Ronald Reagan. Where Carter focused on tax cuts for the middle class, Reagan focused on tax cuts for the wealthy because there was a massive shortage of investment capital. Out of that decision came the microchip economy. Roosevelt (who covered several phases of the process) shifted the tax cut to increase consumption. President Rutherford B. Hayes, elected in 1876, created a gold standard to encourage safe investment in the American Industrial Revolution.

The economic problem of the next cycle will be a surplus of money, driving down the cost of money and wrecking retirement plans. The great social problem is that the boomer generation that built retirement on savings is being crushed. The surplus of money in the system and the lack of a new core technology limits opportunity for investment, channeling money into equity markets that behave irrationally.

As the political calm sets in, the economic and social crisis intensifies. One or two "normal" presidents

will hold the presidency until 2028 (I doubt it can hold until 2032), at which point a new and radically-minded president will address the crushing issue of a surplus of money. The task will be contracting the money supply. That can be done only if a new core technology is ready to begin

One or two "normal" presidents will hold the presidency until 2028 (I doubt it can hold until 2032), at which point a new and radically-minded president will address the crushing issue of a surplus of money. The task will be contracting the money supply. That can be done only if a new core technology is ready to begin its slow then stunning trajectory.

its slow then stunning trajectory. If I am right—that the technology will be medical—I suspect the unified theory of medicine, as I choose to call it, is already being prepared and likely ridiculed by the older paradigm. In the 1980s, the nation was saved from a cash shortage by a minor shift in taxes and the microchip. There will have to be a contraction of money through taxes, redistributed through social security. The

new president will be hated by the old orthodoxy as Reagan, Roosevelt, Hayes, and Andrew Jackson were. And then will come the calm.

The old will get older, the millennials too—the first millennials are now 40 and their declining reproduction rates will create an interesting old age. But then all epochs produce their solutions and their own problems. It is the nature of the United States. ●

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

AMERICAN DIVISIONS AND THE J-CURVE

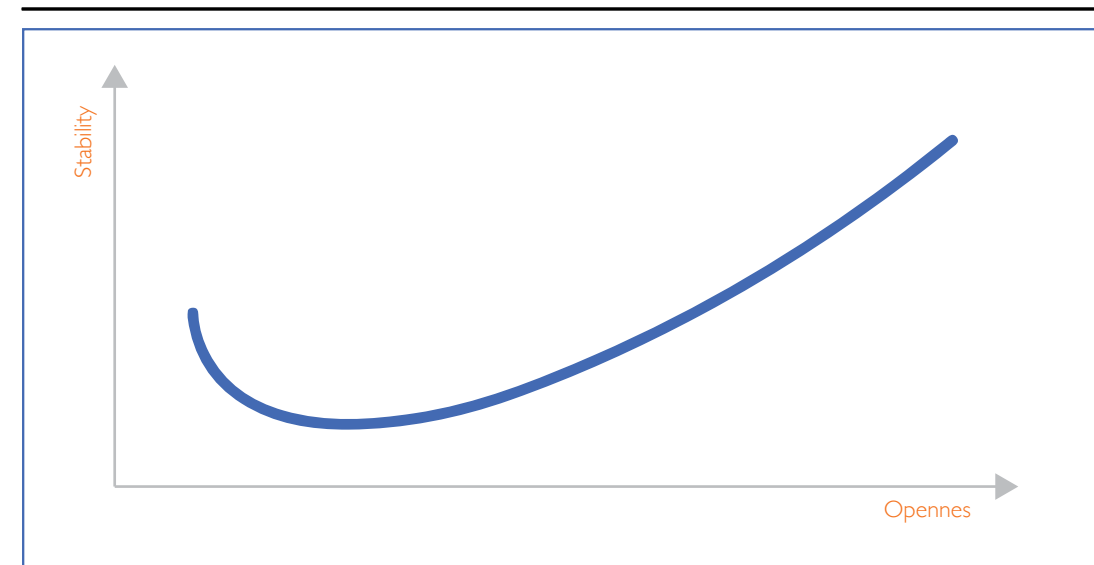
Ian Bremmer

THE Donald Trump era will go down as the most significant domestic stress test that the United States has endured since the Civil War. Trump spent the last four years pushing American democratic institutions to their limits; some buckled, a few broke, but others stood fast. All the while, political divisions in the United States deepened—not all of which can be directly attributed to Trump, though he certainly did not help matters. As the United States rounds into the 2020s, the country is more polarized than ever, and with some of its most critical political institutions severely weakened. If President Joe Biden aspires to return the United States to any kind of global leadership role, he must first begin by addressing the multiple domestic challenges the country faces.

Many moons ago, I devised a method for understanding the relationship between a country's political stability and

its openness to the rest of the world. The fundamental observation that underpinned my analysis was this: there are some countries that manage to be politically stable because they largely avoid interacting with the rest of the world (think North Korea, and to a lesser extent Venezuela and Iran). Other countries are able to maintain political stability exactly because their extensive ties to the outside world mitigate the worst aspects of their domestic politics when things go awry. The “J-Curve” graph is the result.

Countries like North Korea, Venezuela, and Iran are on the left-hand side of the curve; the world's advanced industrial democracies tend to be on the right-hand side. Moving from a closed system to an open one, or vice versa, is inherently dangerous for political stability, represented by the dip in the graph above. Up until the 2016 election, the United States was situated on the far right of the “J”, but the Trump years have seen it



The “J-Curve”

Source: Ian Bremmer

slowly begin to slide down, both in terms of openness and in terms of stability. Before discussing why the United States is so uniquely divided among advanced industrial democracies today—and it is, even without Trump leading it—it is necessary to examine the current state of American political institutions through a tripartite categorization: the standouts, the weakened, and the damaged. Each will be addressed in turn.

THE STANDOUTS

First, *the military*. No American institution proved itself as well as the military over the last four years. Military leaders in the United States consistently thwarted Trump's worse impulses—from hastily withdrawing troops stationed in the Middle East to his threats of deploying soldiers onto

American streets to quell Black Lives Matter protests. There were stumbles, of course, most notably the incident in Lafayette Park in Washington, DC where protestors were forced out in the presence of U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper and General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, for the sake of a photo-op. But when Trump spent the last few months of his presidency trying to subvert the 2020 election results (leading to the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riots), the Joint Chief of Staff as an institution responded by issuing a tacit but firm rebuke of its Commander in Chief, reaffirming their oath to the U.S. constitution (“we support and defend the Constitution”) and ending any possible speculation that the military would intervene on Trump's behalf (“On January 20th, 2021, in accordance

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with the Constitution, confirmed by the states and the courts, and certified by Congress, President-elect Biden will be inaugurated and will become our 46th Commander in Chief.”).

Second, *the judiciary*. Much like the military, the courts stand out for acting

as a firm and consistent check on Trump’s most egregious policies; the last months of them swatting down attempts to overturn the election results further underscored that point. Plenty will complain about the process through which judges were confirmed during the Trump years,

both at the federal and Supreme Court levels, but that is more a criticism of politics than anything else: once they took their respective places on the bench, judges exercised their judicial independence consistently, ruling in the direction that their interpretation of the law took them rather than bending to outside political influence.

THE WEAKENED

First, *the civil service*. For all of Trump’s complaints about the “deep state” conspiring against him, much of his frustration was with the career bureaucrats whose positions in government are supposed to supersede allegiance to any one political party.

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Trump began and ended his presidency demanding unwavering loyalty from all he came in contact with, which made the relationship between him and the civil service fundamentally untenable; the decline in morale among officials at the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control was

particularly notable. The election of Joe Biden and a return to more traditional American politics looks likely to stem the tide of defections and keep the country’s most capable and engaged civil servants still serving the public interest of the United States. But another president in Trump’s mold could very well change that.

Second, *the U.S. Congress*. The legislative branch of the American federal government had not just one but two opportunities to prove they were up to the task of executive oversight, and they failed both times to follow through on impeachment. But the erosion of Congress as an institution goes beyond the last couple of years; redistricting (or “gerrymandering,” depending on your political stance), a continuous need for fundraising, and the deep-seeded polarization of the American electorate has made it more difficult than ever for legislators to work on a bipartisan basis to sustainably address problems facing



Photo: Eurasia Group

Ian Bremmer

the American public. All this has had the effect of further delegitimizing the Congress, which helps explain why just 13 percent of the country has confidence in the institution today.

Third, *the electoral process*. Both nationwide elections in which Trump has been a candidate have been “rigged,” according to the losing side—a state of affairs that bodes serious problems for the future of American democracy. In 2016, it was Democrats who claimed that Trump was an illegitimate president, charges that ranged from criticism of the U.S. Electoral College (one that produced a U.S. president that lost the popular vote) to active interference in

the electoral process from foreign actors. Four years later, it was Republicans crying foul with (baseless) claims of voter fraud. Yet while the process to certify Biden’s legitimate election victory was contentious (to put it charitably), it still worked, proving there is still some resilience left in the processes through which Americans elect their national leader.

THE DAMAGED

First, *the executive branch*. More than any other American political institution, the executive branch of government is defined by the person leading it. And given Trump’s three most defining personality traits—corruption, incompetence, and a genuine affection

for authoritarianism—the stature of the U.S. executive branch undeniably suffered over the last four years as Trump publicly fawned over strongman leaders and used the powers of his office to enrich himself in plain sight (e.g. taxpayer money spent at Trump properties). The good news? Those same Trump character traits (particularly incompetence) limited the amount of lasting damage he could really do while in office (alongside the civil service, the courts, and the military). The bad news? Trump conclusively proved that an executive branch constrained by norms and customs rather than laws is an executive branch that is barely constrained at all.

Second, *the media*. Did social media ruin our public discourse, or did our public discourse ruin social media? Wherever one comes down on that question, the reality is we now live in a world where algorithms are the most important driver of public information, a system that reinforces our prior political beliefs and makes it near-impossible to constructively engage with any information that runs counter to them. And there is no shortage of actors—both foreign and domestic—willing to take advantage of this reality to spread slanted news and misinformation for the sake of furthering their own political goals; or, frankly, just

for capturing more advertising revenue. This is one of the biggest systemic threats facing the United States going forward—and one that is hard to overstate, as will be discussed further below.

WORLD'S MOST DIVIDED DEMOCRACY

This is not all to say that the United States is in danger of sliding so far down the J-curve that it is about to become an authoritarian state; it isn't. But there is no denying that American political stability has taken a significant hit in recent years.

One of the things most useful about the J-Curve is that it is an assessment

that accounts for differences between political systems; democracies can rise and fall along the J-Curve just like authoritarian states can. But what happens individually within countries matters plenty as well. And there are features of American society that gives further cause for concern, and underscores the current place of the United States as the world's most divided advanced industrial democracy.

We can begin with the *media landscape*, as mentioned above. While all democracies with open internet have to contend with the way social media and algorithms are reshaping their citizenry and the information

flowing to them, the United States has a harder task than most given that the West's great technology powers are all based in America. That means more lobbying and capture of politicians in Washington; it also means more involvement in day-to-day politics.

For example, while multiple world leaders have said noxious things over social media, it was Trump's incitement of the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riot that made him the first world leader banned from Twitter, a move that has generated criticism across the political spectrum. Tech companies are embroiled in U.S. politics like nowhere else, and their economic size and importance to social discourse makes extricating them from U.S. politics particularly difficult. All the while, their echo chambers drive political divisions ever-deeper.

Another feature of US politics is the country's reluctance to earnestly grapple with its *history of structural racism*. There are plenty of countries with their own shameful pasts of racism and repression of minorities, but the United States stands out for avoiding any serious reckoning with that legacy for generations, particularly in the country's South.

This has given rise to both legitimate grievances among the country's black population (a consequence of which is the rise in popularity of Black Lives Matter), while more recently also giving rise to fears of displacement among the traditionally privileged white class that fears being shunted to the side.

The emerging reality is a system

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of deepening identity politics that will take generations to address earnestly, while we just saw that these very real divides took a single U.S. presidential term to inflame. And there are plenty of opportunistic politicians who will attempt to seize on these divisions to further

their political aims even it causes serious harm to the country as a whole.

Finally, there's the *evolving nature of capitalism*, and the unique nature of its American variant. Broadly speaking, labor is being increasingly disassociated from capital across the world, largely a result of technological advances and the continued pursuit of more profits. But the rise of automation and AI does not just take away factory jobs; it has also given rise to a gig economy that over time will come to define an increasingly large share of our day-to-day economic lives. That is a

problem the whole world faces, not just the United States.

But the American version of capitalism—one that deifies and promotes the brilliant individual and visionary over the collective well-being of workers—exacerbates the dangers that are inherent in this economic transition. The traditional “American story” has been one of pulling yourself up from your bootstraps: of refusing government assistance to persevere and “make it on your own.” On the one hand, this popular conception of American capitalism has resulted in the United States becoming the world’s largest economy and coming to stand at the forefront of global technological innovation. On the other hand, it led to an economic system in which health-care and social safety nets are treated as secondary concerns by the United States government rather than being understood as constituting some of its most critical functions. This has also led to the political capture of these issues by big business and special interests, which in turn has fueled the kind of economic anxiety that we have seen repeatedly spill into the country’s politics.

This will continue happening as we go forward.

The last four years have exposed many of America’s key frailties.

The last four years have exposed many of America’s key frailties. And while the vulnerabilities of the political institutions of the United States have existed for years, they required an unorthodox leader like Trump to throw them into sharp relief. Those institutional vulnerabilities—paired with the socioeconomic challenges posed by race, capitalism, and the media—will take longer than a single presidential term to be addressed in earnest. This means that the United States is going to spend much of the 2020s focusing inwards more than it has in any of the decades since World War II, as it begins to address its own issues and systemic challenges.

That is a problem for the rest of the world—whatever you think of American global leadership abroad, at least it provided some form of stability and direction. But when the world’s most powerful country—in terms of military strength, in terms of economic might, in terms of innovation—is divided among itself, it cannot lead abroad. This will invariably make addressing key global challenges requiring global cooperation that much more difficult. The not so roaring 2020s indeed..., but if the United States is serious about looking inwards and addressing its own shortcomings, the 2030s may not be too bad. ●



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THE DECADE OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

CHINA'S PLAY AT GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Kevin Rudd

THE year 2020 was a devastating one, a year of plague, turmoil, and loss. It was also a year of great change and transformation, as the world adapted with difficulty to meet challenges largely unprecedented in living memory, and the trends of global power appeared to shift beneath our feet. Whether from fear or dark humor, it has even been described as the year of the *apocalypse*. This may be more accurate than most consider: the word *apocalypse*, after all, means “revelation,” stemming from a Greek word literally meaning to pull the lid off something, uncovering what lies beneath.

The year 2020 was like this in more ways than one. It pulled the lid off the true extent and meaning of our globalized, interconnected world; it revealed the dysfunction present in our

institutions of national and international governance; and it unmasked the real level of structural resentment, rivalry, and risk present in the world's most critical great power relationship—that between the United States and China.

The year 2020 may well go down in history as a great global inflection point. For that reason alone, it's worth looking back to examine what happened and why, and to reflect on where we may be headed in the decade ahead—in what I describe as the “decade of living dangerously.”

For the dangerous decade ahead, several major themes emerge from this apocalyptic 2020. *First*, the descent of the U.S.-China relationship into Thucydidean rivalry as the balance of power continues to close militarily,

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Will such hopeful messaging be possible again?

economically, and technologically, and with Taiwan and the South China Sea still looming as the most likely clash points. *Second*, the urgent need to find a new framework to manage these dangers, while providing room for full strategic competition as well as sufficient political space for continued strategic collaboration on climate, pandemics, and global financial stability. *Third*, the continued absence of global leadership as the great powers turned inward and against one another, leaving a vacuum waiting to be filled, as reflected in the failure of multilateral and international institutions at a time when they were needed most.

Fortunately, there are positive signs on these fronts. In Washington, the newly arrived Biden Administration has moved quickly to make effective multilateralism a key pillar of its foreign policy. In Beijing, Xi's commitments on climate change and investing in a “sustainable recovery” from the global COVID-19 recession are welcome developments. But much, much work remains to be done.

As we enter the second quarter of 2021, the world has many reasons to be hopeful that with effort a better path forward can be forged in the decade ahead. To understand where we might

be headed, it is necessary to take a look back at how we got here.

This essay will focus on three crucial issues in the year of the apocalypse, aiming to uncover what

lies beneath. *First*, by providing the necessary background to how Xi Jinping managed to strengthen his domestic political position. *Second*, the political ambition that came out of the Fifth Plenum meeting of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in November 2020, which will likely go down in history as a major turning point for China and the world. And *third*, by examining how that boldness

has translated into a new determination by Xi Jinping for China to make a bid for true global leadership for the first time—and why the issue he chose is climate change.

Xi's announcement in September 2020 that China will aim to achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 marked an important new milestone, signaling that it was not just willing to be a participant in the international fight against climate change but now aspired to be seen as a global climate leader. Deng Xiaoping's 30-year-old

dictum of “hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead” is well and truly over. This marks an important new era for the geopolitics of China's leadership, but also one in which Beijing must understand that it will be judged more

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sharply than ever before, including by its developing country compatriots. And with President Biden having taken office in the United States with a wide-ranging and ambitious program to tackle climate change both domestically and internationally, climate also looms as a test case for whether a new balance of cooperation and competition between Beijing and Washington is possible.

CHINA HAS POLITICS, TOO

While both America and the world were transfixed by the U.S. presidential election on the third of November, very few people would have noticed that just five days before, China concluded a major meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party that outlined the core elements of Chinese political and economic strategy for the next 15 years.

The truism is true: our Chinese friends do think in the long term. We in the

West find ourselves captured by a combination of the electoral cycle and the news cycle. This highlights one critical difference between China, the United States, and the West: notably, the difference between what is tactical as opposed to what is strategic.

It is, of course, natural that the world would focus on who would become the 46th president of the United States. This is not just because of the political theater that U.S. presidential elections represent. It's because U.S. domestic politics drives U.S. foreign policy, international economic policy, and strategic postures across the Asia-Pacific region and the world.

And if anyone thought that somehow domestic policy and foreign policy were clinically separate domains, I offer as “Exhibit A” the experience of Donald Trump as the classic counterproof. Trump's politics and personality radically impacted American policy toward the world at large.

But just as American domestic politics matter, so too do Chinese domestic politics. The political systems may be radically different. But the truth is

that the internal politics of the CCP also radically impact the course of Chinese economic policy, foreign policy, and national security policy. And should anyone doubt this proposition, I offer “Exhibit B” as the counterproof: the impact of Xi

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Jinping on China's international posture over the past seven years.

Despite this fact, there is a predisposition, both in the United States and elsewhere in the world, to simply take Chinese politics as some sort of “given.” This is a wrong conclusion. Chinese politics has never been static. It is constantly changing, although the patterns of change may be less evident to the untrained eye.

We in the democratic world need to radically lift our understanding of what makes the CCP tick. Perhaps it's because we are so obsessed with our own politics that we just don't care. Or we assume that the CCP is monolithic, notwithstanding the fact it now has 92 million members and a multiplicity of factions. Or perhaps it is thought that Chinese statecraft is somehow eternal, somehow detached from the series of bloodbaths and political reversals that have colored the history of the CCP

since its founding in 1921. Or maybe we just think it's all too hard to make sense of Chinese internal politics, that it's all too impenetrable and even inscrutable.

This mindset must change. China is on course to become the largest economy in the world this decade and is already a peer competitor with the United States militarily in East Asia. And what China now does with its economy, environment, and climate will also deeply shape the world for decades to come.

And all of the above are deeply influenced by the worldview of one man: Xi Jinping.

2020: THE YEAR THAT WAS

Xi Jinping, like China itself, has had a tumultuous year. For Xi, the year began appallingly with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan and its rapid spread to other parts of the country and then the world. Xi's domestic political position came under increasing challenge. He was criticized internally for the failure of the initial efforts to contain the virus on the grounds that local officials were too hesitant to report the truth to central party officials under Xi for fear that

they would be punished for being the deliverers of bad news. This was despite the fact that a supposedly "failsafe" system had been established after the SARS pandemic of 2003. This system was meant to immediately report any

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future coronavirus outbreaks to the center—just like the center had supposedly directed the closure of all Chinese wet markets following the SARS outbreak 17 years ago.

Xi Jinping was also under pressure for a slowing economy, not only because of the impact of the virus, which ground most of the economy to a halt in the first quarter of 2020, followed by a creeping recovery during the second quarter. Xi was also criticized for having brought on the trade war with the United States, which had also begun to slow domestic growth, as well as a range of other domestic economic policy settings after 2015 that had gradually eroded private sector confidence, contributing to collapsing private fixed capital investment, and slowing growth.

By the middle of 2020, with the world also rounding on China for having "exported" the virus to them, Xi Jinping found himself under considerable domestic pressure. But, if a week is a long time in politics, 12 months is an eternity. A year following the outbreak

in Wuhan last November or December 2019, the virus has by and large been brought under control across China.

Furthermore, China's economy in the second half of 2020 recovered rapidly, with annual economic growth coming in at 2.3 percent, which made it the only major world economy to grow in the year of the pandemic. China is now distributing its vaccines to countries across the developing world at a time when the United States does not appear to have yet turned the corner on its comprehensive COVID disarray.

Indeed, from Beijing, America's political system has been seen as dysfunctional, its economic recovery questionable, and its overall international standing undermined as a consequence of its comprehensive mishandling of the pandemic.

The net effect of all the above is that Xi Jinping, whose domestic political position was in considerable difficulty earlier this year, now finds his position strengthened. Xi Jinping's continued political ascendancy was underlined by the Fifth Plenum Meeting of the Central Chinese Committee, which concluded

on October 29th, 2020. Judging by the Plenum's outcome, Xi's political ambition to remain in power for the next 15 years looks increasingly secure.

China looks to be in a better position to surpass the American economy in the 2020s, accelerated by the rapid pace of the Chinese recovery. And this decade increasingly appear to be the decade when Xi Jinping will want to see the realization of reunification with Taiwan.

China also looks to be in a better position to surpass the American economy over the course of the 2020s, accelerated by the rapid pace of the Chinese recovery.

And the 2020s increasingly appear to be the decade when Xi Jinping will want to see the realization of reunification with Taiwan. Indeed, a little noticed op-ed by a senior party official in early November 2020 stated, "It may be difficult to achieve the goal of cross-strait unification without using military force." No one has used that sort of language about Taiwan at senior levels in Chinese politics for more than 40 years.

For these reasons, the 2020s loom as the make-or-break decade for the future of Chinese and/or American power. Whatever each country may publicly declare as being its strategic objectives in relation to the other, the reality is that deep strategic competition between Washington and Beijing is already well underway.

And the prize at stake is who gets to write the rules of the international order for the rest of the twenty-first century—not just in the rarefied world of foreign policy, and not just for the international institutions that form the current rules-based system, but also who gets to set the standards for the new technologies that will drive and, in some cases, dominate our lives for decades to come. In many ways the test case, so to speak, for all this ambition is climate change—China’s first-ever bid for true global leadership on any issue.

The 2020s therefore will be very much the decade of living dangerously for us all.

CHINESE POLITICS DURING 2020

The Fifth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in October 2020 was ostensibly about economics. It was to approve the party’s formal recommendations for the content of the 14th Five-Year Plan, which will be formally considered by the National People’s Congress in March 2021. And while the economic content of the next Five-Year Plan is important, the primary significance of the Plenum was politics. It laid the foundation for the 20th Party Conference in November 2022, which will formally determine whether Xi Jinping will become, in effect, leader for life.

What the text of the Plenum communiqué reveals is that Xi Jinping’s political position has become even further entrenched. The adulatory language used at the Plenum about Xi Jinping was deeply reminiscent of that used for

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Mao. Xi was referred to as China’s “core navigator and helmsman.” The last time the word “helmsman” was used to describe a Chinese

political leader was in reference to the “great helmsman” (*Weida de Duoshou*) Mao Zedong himself at the height of the Cultural Revolution.

Central Committee members also showered Xi Jinping with praise, including Xi’s “major strategic achievement” in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most important, however, beyond the public sycophancy toward Xi, was the fact that the Plenum did not nominate a successor. In recent decades, it had become “normal” practice for China’s leaders to use the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee during their second term in office to indicate who was most likely to succeed them. For example, under the previous party General Secretary Hu Jintao, at the Fifth Plenum of the 17th Committee in 2010, Xi Jinping was appointed vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, thereby making it plain to all that he would be inheriting Hu Jintao’s mantle.

No comparable appointments were made during the Fifth Plenum in 2020. It is, therefore, the most formal indication so far that Xi Jinping will seek to remain in office for a third term and probably beyond, thereby finally breaching the convention laid down by Deng Xiaoping that party leaders should only remain in office for two terms, thereby avoiding the problem that arose with Mao in the last 20 years of his career.

Xi Jinping had already paved the way for this change back in 2018 when the National People’s Congress formally amended the constitution to allow the Chinese president to exceed a two-term limit. However, the decision by this Plenum not to appoint a successor to Xi Jinping provides the final formal proof that this is now his clear intention.

Let there be any doubt on this question, Xi Jinping has also spent a large part of 2020 eliminating any real or imagined political opponents. There have already been a range of purges, imprisonments, arrests, removals, or demotions of individuals who have been critical (or at least seen to be critical) of Xi Jinping’s policy course.

Most spectacular among these was the investigation of Vice President Wang Qishan’s former chief of staff, Dong Hong, who had worked closely with Wang for 20 years between 1998

and 2017. This has been a remarkable development. Wang Qishan and Xi Jinping had previously been regarded as close, with Xi entrusting Wang with the leadership of the party’s anticorruption campaign between 2013 and 2018. Indeed, Dong Hong worked for Wang in this capacity. Dong’s arrest is a shot across the bow for any potential political challenger to Xi’s authority, including those closest to him.

In June 2020, Xi also launched a new “Party Education and Rectification Campaign” targeting the Party’s legal and security apparatus in particular. Chen Yixin, the secretary-general of the party’s Political and Legal Affairs Commission—which oversees China’s law enforcement bodies—was more explicit. In his words, the goal of the campaign was “pointing the blade inward, to completely remove the cancerous tumors, remove the evil members of the group, and ensure that the political and legal team is absolutely loyal.”

In October, Chen said that the “three month pilot program” of the rectification campaign was ending, but only to consolidate so that a “nation-wide rectification can begin next year.” He highlighted that, so far, 373 officials had been put under formal investigation and 1,040 others disciplined. “Rectification of political and legal teams has entered a critical period of investigation and correction,” he said.

Therefore, in 2021, the year during which preparations for the critical Party Congress of 2022 will be most intense, the party's internal security apparatus is about to be reminded that Xi Jinping means business.

The series of purges that have occurred across these security-related institutions over the past seven years reflect the fact that Xi Jinping has never believed that this central part of the Chinese Communist Party's internal machinery was fully under his control. Indeed, in Beijing, it was widely believed that these institutions had been the last redoubt of former General Secretary Jiang Zemin, despite Jiang having left office in 2002. One of Xi Jinping's political hallmarks is that he never leaves anything to chance.

As soon as Xi Jinping took power, he conducted widespread purges of the senior leadership of the People's Liberation Army with the anticorruption campaign, replacing them with his own appointments of people he believed to be "absolutely loyal" to his command. Xi had earlier also brought the People's Armed Police (China's massive paramilitary force) under the direct control of the CCP, removing it from the control of the State Council, where it had long enjoyed a level of institutional autonomy.

Finally, Xi Jinping succeeded at the most recent Plenum in promoting six

new members of the Central Committee. All six are very much Xi Jinping's men. These are the party's secretaries in Hubei, Zhejiang, Shaanxi, and Liaoning and the governors of Shanghai and Shandong. The promotion of "Xi's people" has been unfolding rapidly in the six weeks since the Fifth Plenum.

These actions build on a range of measures already implemented by Xi Jinping in his first seven years in office that consolidated more and more political power in his own hands. Xi has been described as "the chairman of everything." He is personally chairman of all the major leading groups of the party that in any way deal with significant policy questions. He has also relegated the status of Premier Li Keqiang and the State Council (China's cabinet) to a secondary and sometimes peripheral role. Under Xi, power has been relocated to the center.

This is also consistent with Xi Jinping's more general assertion of the centrality of the party's political and ideological rule over the country, the economy, and society at large. The opportunity for any form of policy, let alone political dissent, outside the internal organs of the party has now been severely circumscribed. This now also extends to the universities, civil society, the media, and even international organizations (e.g., the investigation of the most recent president of Interpol, Meng Hongwei).

NATIONAL SECURITY PRIORITIZED

A further innovation of the recently concluded Party Plenum, and the recommendations for the 14th Five-Year Plan that the communiqué outlines, has been the large-scale expansion of the party's security control machinery. The communiqué states: "We will improve the centralized, unified, efficient, and authoritative national security leadership system, [...] improve national security legislation, [...] and strengthen national security law enforcement." Tellingly, the communiqué also explains that the party now sees security as the key factor in China's future development. As it states: "We have become increasingly aware that security is the premise of development and development is the guarantee of security."

This was also visible when Xi hosted a November 2020 meeting on crafting new national security directives, when Xi stressed the necessity of achieving "security" in every facet of China's existence, including "economic security, political security, cultural security, social security, and ecological security."

Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi gave a much more detailed explanation

in a long *People's Daily* op-ed published on November 12th, 2020. "The public security organ," he said, is the most "important tool of the people's democratic dictatorship and a 'knife handle' in the hands of the party and the people. Poli-

Xi Jinping's determination to extend security control across most aspects of Chinese life has also been reinforced by rising geopolitical tensions with the United States.

tics is the first attribute and politics is the first requirement." It was their job to "firmly grasp the eternal root and soul of loyalty to the party" and to "focus on building and mastering public security organs politically, and to earnestly implement absolute loyalty, absolute

purity, and absolute reliability as the only thorough and unconditional political requirements" along with being "absolutely loyal to the CCP Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core." Zhao concluded that would require giving "full play to the role of 'knife handle'" to "resolutely defend the long-term ruling status of the Communist Party of China."

Xi Jinping's determination to extend security control across most aspects of Chinese life has also been reinforced by rising geopolitical tensions with the United States. Guo Shengkun, the Politburo member who heads the party's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, drew an explicit link between the party's internal and external security challenges in another article in November 2020. He stated that "we

must firmly safeguard the state's political safety, regime safety, and ideological safety" and "we must defend against and strike hard on sabotage, subversion, and splitism by hostile forces."

For Xi Jinping, the reality of geopolitical tension with the United States has both fortified and, to some extent, helped justify domestically his preexisting determination to assert maximum control over Chinese politics,

media, business, academia, and society. It is important to note that no previous Chinese Five-Year Plan document has ever included a section dedicated specifically to national security. That has now changed. Of itself, this underlines China's worsening external environment; the threat (in Beijing's mind) now posed to China's future national development; and the justification, therefore, for the securitization of everything.

MAJOR TURNING POINT

As noted, the Fifth Plenum is remarkable for what it says about both Chinese politics and economics. The Plenum celebrates the fact that China has now achieved the first of its twin centenary goals—that is, for China to become "a moderately prosperous society" by the centenary of the

establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. The second of the centenary goals, scheduled for 2049 on the centenary of the People's Republic itself, is for China to achieve the status of a fully developed economy.

No previous Chinese Five-Year Plan document has ever included a section dedicated specifically to national security. That has now changed.

Over the past year or two, however, Xi Jinping has been advancing a new intermediary goal for 2035. And for the first time, in the October Plenum document, Xi outlined his blueprint for turning China into a "great modern socialist nation" over the course of the next 15 years.

The plenum document indicates that Xi now intends to accelerate China's second centenary goal—making China into "a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious" by the end of 2049—to at least majority completion by 2035.

This was underlined a week before the Plenum by Li Junru, former vice president of the Central Party School of the Communist Party, who said that Xi believed China's economic success "allows us to now have a very good foundation for the basic realization of modernization proposed by Deng Xiaoping 15 years ahead of schedule." He also indicated that the Fifth Plenum would be "a

major turning point" for China's path to modernization.

In 2035, Xi will be 82. This is the same age as Mao at his death. Therefore, it seems Xi is aiming to see his vision realized before his own passing—and quite possibly before the end of his own time in power.

Finally, Xi Jinping's campaign to continue in office for another three five-year terms, his expansion of party control across Chinese politics and society, as well as his broadening of the powers of the party's national security apparatus have been reinforced by a parallel campaign to ramp up popular nationalism.

In a strikingly fiery speech on October 23rd, 2020, Xi used the commemoration of China's entry into the Korean War to harness Chinese nationalist sentiments against future external threats.

Xi quoted Mao calling China's "victory" in the Korean War against the United States as "a declaration that the Chinese people had stood firm in the East, and an important milestone in the Chinese nation's march toward the great rejuvenation." Xi also stated that the correct lesson from the Korean War was that "seventy years ago, the imperialist invaders fired upon the doorstep of a new China, [...] that Chinese people

understood that you must use the language that invaders can understand—to fight war with war and to stop an invasion with force, earning peace and respect through victory and that the Chinese people will not create trouble, but nor are we afraid of trouble, and no matter the difficulties or challenges we face, our legs will not shake and our backs will not bend."

In the same speech, Xi added that "Once provoked, things will get ugly," and that China will "never allow any person or any force to violate and split the motherland's sacred territory [...] for once such severe circumstances occur, the Chinese people shall deliver a head-on blow." And finally, in a pointed jab at the United States, he declared that "Any country and any army, no matter how powerful they used to be" would see their actions "battered" by international sentiment if they stood against China.

Earlier, on September 3rd, 2020, Xi had spoken at a ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of the war against Japan, where he declared the five things the CCP could "never allow." *First*, for anyone to "smear" the party or its history; *second*, for anyone to "deny and vilify" the party's achievements; *third*, for anyone to "impose their will on China through bullying, or change China's direction of progress"; *fourth*, any obstruction of China's "right

to development”; and *fifth* (and most importantly), any attempt to “separate the CCP from the Chinese people.”

In a new book of previously unpublished Xi speeches released on Sep-

tember 6th, 2020, titled *Discourses on Preventing Risks and Challenges and Responding to Emergencies*, Xi also warns of “the treacherous international situation” that China faces, and “an intensifying contest of two ideologies,” with the United States desperate to

Westernize and split China as the global balance of power shifts in China’s favor.

To conclude, Chinese domestic politics over the course of 2020 went through its own radical cycle: from a leadership that was, in many respects, reeling from the impact of COVID-19 and economic implosion in the first part of the year to a leadership that by year’s end was committed to the further consolidation of Xi Jinping’s power as well as the strengthening of the overall control of the party.

This does not mean that internal opponents to Xi Jinping’s political, economic, social, and foreign policy measures have disappeared. They have not. But they have been placed in check by Xi Jinping’s superior political craft. As

I’ve written many times before, within the brutal politics of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping is both a master politician and a master Machiavellian. His ability to identify where the next political challenge will come from, and

how to prevent it and/or outflank it, has proven to be formidable.

HISTORY IS ON HIS SIDE?

The China of the future is becoming increasingly different from the China of the pre-Xi Jinping past. And

he well may prevail, particularly if U.S. strategy continues to fail.

Alternatively, many factors are still at work within China itself that could cause Xi’s domestic strategy to unravel: a radical polarization of domestic political opposition as a result of the harshness of the party rectification campaign to be unleashed in 2021; a Chinese private sector that embarks on a private investment strike in response to diminished business confidence; a large-scale, system-wide financial crisis, driven by excessive indebtedness and bank and corporate balance sheets that are no longer able to cope; further natural disasters, including a possible repeat coronavirus pandemic, given that these have occurred periodically in China’s recent past; or an unanticipated

The China of the future is becoming increasingly different from the China of the pre-Xi Jinping past. And he well may prevail, particularly if U.S. strategy continues to fail.

national security crisis with the United States that erupts into a premature conflict or even war.

Xi Jinping, however, believes that history is on his side. Xi is a Marxist determinist who believes in the twin disciplines of dialectical and historical materialism. For these reasons, he believes that China’s continued rise is inevitable, just as the relative decline of the United States and the West is equally inevitable.

The critical variable for the future is what the Biden Administration and its friends, partners, and allies around the world now do. The recent record of U.S. policy has been less than impressive. But President Biden has assembled a formidable domestic, economic, and international policy team. They certainly have the intellectual capacity to grasp the complexity of the interrelated challenges (both foreign and domestic) that they face.

The question is whether, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in a previous century, the politics of this curious American democracy, and its permanent predilection for divided government, will accommodate the strategic clarity and resolve that will be necessary for America to prevail.

An early test case is turning out to be climate change.

GEOPOLITICS OF CLIMATE LEADERSHIP

The origins of China’s newfound desire to play a leadership role in the global fight against climate change can be traced back to 2014, when Xi Jinping and U.S. President Barack Obama made a landmark joint announcement on climate change. This event took place less than three weeks before CCP’s Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in the same year, which is when China embarked on a new era of confident, independent international policy activism under Xi’s leadership.

Since then, China has shown a steady determination to demonstrate its own climate credentials, which increasingly has become a bright spot in China’s position on the world stage. Yet, Xi’s announcement in September 2020 that China will aim to achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 marked an important new milestone. For the first time, China has signaled it is not just willing to be a participant in the international fight against climate change, but that climate leadership has crossed the geopolitical Rubicon in Beijing’s eyes. In other words, it has become a central priority for China irrespective of the steps taken by other countries, including the United States.

This marks an important new era for the geopolitics of China’s climate leadership but also one in which Beijing must understand that it

will be judged more sharply than ever before, including by its developing country compatriots. This is especially the case as President-elect Joe Biden takes office in the United States with a wide-ranging and ambitious program to tackle climate change both at home and abroad.

To best navigate these newfound expectations and responsibilities, China will need to significantly bolster its short-term efforts to reduce emissions through its 2030 Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Climate Agreement, especially with regard to its future use of coal. Piecemeal steps forward, such as those foreshadowed by Xi in December 2020, will be insufficient in the eyes of the international community. At the same time, China must demonstrate a propensity to achieve Xi's vision of carbon neutrality as close to 2050 as possible and start to seriously reorient its support for carbon-intensive infrastructure overseas through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Without these steps, any goodwill generated by Xi's September 2020 announcement risks quickly becoming a thorn in China's side because of the geopolitical benchmarks it has now set for itself. The lack of any such evidence of a shift in short-term thinking towards Xi's long-term vision in the recently published 14th Five Year Plan does not therefore bode well in this regard.

ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION

While it was President Hu Jintao who first used the phrase "ecological civilization" in 2007 to describe China's own brand of environmentalism, it is Xi who has made it part of the party's lexicon and a key pillar for the country's development. In doing so, Xi has deliberately sought to differentiate China's approach from traditional Western notions of liberal environmentalism. This includes by underscoring the economic importance of environmental action, as evidenced by his regular pronouncement that "clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as mountains of gold and silver," a phrase Xi first used in 2005 when he was party secretary in Zhejiang province.

Until now, domestic imperatives have been driving China's creeping environmentalism. The single greatest inspiration for the change in behavior between the China the world grappled with at the UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 and the China that was instrumental in the securing of the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 was rising concerns among the Chinese population about the level of air pollution in their cities. Declaring a "war on pollution" during the opening of the 18th National Party Congress in March 2014 underscored this.

However, that same year, Xi's rhetoric also started to emphasize the international

imperatives of climate action. This included his declaration that "addressing climate change and implementation of sustainable development is not what we are asked to do, but what we really want to do and we will do well." Nevertheless, China remained cautious, as demonstrated by Xi's decision not to attend a climate summit convened by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in September 2014, which was billed as the most important moment in the lead-up to Paris.

Xi's announcement in September 2020 that China will achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 marks an important new era for the geopolitics of China's climate leadership.

Nevertheless, in 2015 and 2016, Xi embarked on an intensive environmental reform effort within the party, including through embedding the concept of "ecological civilization" in the 13th Five-Year Plan and pitting it alongside the concepts of the "Chinese Dream" and the "Two Centenary Goals," including doubling China's GDP by 2020. China's vision of ecological civilization was also a central concept in the 2015 NDC it tabled as its first commitment under the Paris Agreement.

This helps demonstrate why, by January 2017, just days before the inauguration of President Donald Trump (who was elected on a platform that included withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement), Xi was prepared to use an address to the

World Economic Forum in Davos to signal China would nevertheless stay the course with the agreement. The significance of Xi's statement at the time should not be underestimated. If China had chosen to use Trump's formal confirmation in June 2017 of his intention to withdraw America from the agreement as an opportunity to obfuscate on its obligations—or worse to also seek to withdraw from the agreement altogether—it is unlikely that the agreement would remain intact today. For that, the world owes China a debt of gratitude.

A NEW ERA

Xi's announcement in September 2020 that China will achieve carbon neutrality before 2060 marks an important new era for the geopolitics of China's climate leadership. Xi's announcement was his most important speech on climate change since his January 2017 address in Davos and his November 2014 joint announcement with Obama.

For most of the Trump era, China's approach to the international fight against climate change had been akin to that of a substitute teacher. Beijing had never signaled a desire to do more than simply cover the field in Washington's absence. Important initiatives such as the establishment of the Ministerial on Climate

Action (MoCA) alongside the EU and Canada were more at the behest of Brussels than Beijing. And for Beijing, this was an easy win until the breakdown in relations with Ottawa beginning with the arrest of Huawei's Meng Wanzhou in late 2018, which made the optics of cochairing this forum difficult.

However, the September 2020 announcement demonstrated that China's diplomatic calculation had changed. With a deadline looming later this year for countries to respond to the Paris Climate Agreement's invitation to develop long-term decarbonization strategies for mid-century, and to enhance their short-term climate targets (NDCs), few expected China to make any serious pronouncements on either before the outcome of November's U.S. presidential election was clear. And in the event of a Biden victory, Beijing would still have a sweet spot between November and January to make announcements to head off future pressure from a Democratic administration in Washington. The fact Xi decided China should nevertheless be prepared to adopt—for the first time—a clear pathway to decarbonize its economy was therefore hugely significant.

The fact that Xi's announcement also made no reference to China's traditionally hard-held bifurcation

between developed and developing countries' responsibilities—or indeed linked China's actions in any way to the actions of others—was also very significant. Xi's dismissal of the Europeans' attempts to extract such an announcement

The challenge for China now is to live up to the new geopolitical benchmarks it has set for itself in the eyes of the international community.

just a week earlier during a virtual EU-China leaders' meeting underscores that he clearly now sees greater geopolitical value in China's preparedness to signal its desire to act alone compared with the domestic value of being

seen to use minor steps by China as a lever for extracting stronger commitments from the developed world in return.

NEW GEOPOLITICAL BENCHMARKS

The challenge for China now is to live up to the new geopolitical benchmarks it has set for itself in the eyes of the international community. This includes among its G77 developing country compatriots, not the least of which the many island nations whose very existence hinges more than anything else now on the actions of developing countries such as China, but also India (with Xi's announcement, India is now clearly forecast—for the first time—to become the world's largest emitter). In other words, China will now be judged on an increasingly level playing field with the United States, the European Union, and regional powers

like Japan, rather than simply rewarded for coming to the table.

At the same time, China will need to be conscious that any goodwill it has built up in recent years for staying the course with the Paris Climate Agreement will quickly be eclipsed by the weight of Biden's own ambitions. This includes his determination to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, aggressively ramp up U.S. short-term action through a new 2030 emissions reduction target, and completely decarbonize the domestic energy system by 2035.

China would be wise not to cut against this, given the troubles with the wider bilateral relationship. It is in both countries' interests to rebuild the cooperative relationship on climate change they established under the Obama Administration, and which Biden—and his Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry—played a key role in creating. From Biden's perspective, any attempt to address climate change without China doing more will inherently remain limited.

From Beijing's perspective, a cooperative relationship will help take the heat out of U.S. attempts to extract additional efforts by China, including with regard to its domestic use of coal and the Belt and Road Initiative—as well as potentially the implementation of carbon border tax adjustment policies

and the like. Through a new framework of managed strategic competition, this can also be achieved while the overall relationship remains difficult. Indeed, climate change can be the topic that protects against the “decoupling” narrative across the board, and which builds a cooperative bridge to the United States and the broader West.

This will require a sophisticated approach by China, including overcoming its traditionally tin-eared response to the views of the international community on its climate credentials, and instead to demonstrate a willingness to understand genuine areas of geopolitical weaknesses on climate and to seek to overcome them.

MID-CENTURY AMBITION

First, China would be well advised to confirm through its formal depositing of a long-term strategy with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change that Xi's September 2020 announcement will cover all greenhouse gas emissions and not just carbon dioxide. According to modeling by the Institute of Climate Change and Sustainable Development at Tsinghua University undertaken during Xie Zhenhua's leadership (before his recent appointment), and a separate study by the Asia Society Policy Institute and Climate Analytics, this would put the goal squarely in-line with the global temperature limits set by the Paris Climate Agreement, especially

if coupled with deeper cuts in the short term to avoid higher cumulative emissions over time.

Ideally, China would also join the Biden Administration and the European Union, plus every other G7 economy, including Japan (and now also South Korea), in committing to reach this goal closer to 2050. Few governments have as strong a propensity for effective and centralized long-term planning as does China. The celebration of the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2049 provides a ripe milestone for Beijing to have in mind.

SHORT-TERM AMBITION

At the same time, China must be prepared to do much more to reduce emissions in the short term, including through depositing a new NDC later this year in the lead-up to COP26 in Glasgow. President Biden signed the paperwork for the United States to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement on his first day in office, and America is likely to deposit its own new NDC in April 2021.

What is already clear is that Xi's other announcement in September that China will now aim to peak emissions "before"—as opposed to "around"—2030 will simply not cut it in the eyes of the international community that will be looking for China

to reach this milestone by 2025, while also taking action to address the three other quantitative targets contained in its existing NDC and the one to come.

China has an opportunity to ground its new NDC in a government-wide process, rather than simply present it as an effort by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE). In other words, the new NDC could help reinforce, rather than be seen to detract from, Xi's vision of carbon neutrality. However, much of this will rest even more immediately on the decisions China continues to take as part of its economic response to COVID-19. The approval of a large number of new coal-fired power plants in 2020 does not augur well for ensuring there is a green economic recovery, even with Beijing's investment in so-called "new infrastructure" such as electric vehicle charging stations and rail upgrades. Indeed, the total capacity of coal-fired power generation now under development in China is larger than the remaining operating fleet in the United States. And while many had hopes that the delivery of the 14th Five Year Plan would bring with it additional ambition in the short-term to reduce emissions, the reality is that it did not go any further than a number of incremental improvements Xi announced in December 2020 to China's existing 2030 goals. The development of a special FYP for climate later in 2021 provides another important window of opportunity. The possibility of the U.S.

and China forging a cooperative lane for engagement on climate change also has the potential to help deliver additional ambition.

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

A third area that will require a sophisticated reset by Beijing concerns the Belt and Road Initiative, and especially China's support for large amounts of carbon-intensive infrastructure around the world, including coal-fired power stations. By some estimates, China is currently involved in the construction of more than 100 gigawatts of coal-fired power stations around the world, including in South East Asia, Africa, and even Eastern Europe.

While some would counter that China's support of coal actually extends far less than that of Japan or South Korea, this is not the case when considering foreign direct investment alongside development financing and the exporting of equipment and personnel. In fact, most estimates would put the ledger at least two-thirds in the direction of China, and only likely to get worse as Japan announced in July 2020 that it would not finance any new coal projects abroad. South Korea's parliament is also looking to put in place a ban on its own financing, including after the state-owned utility Kepco announced it would scrap two coal projects in the Philippines and South Africa.

Beijing should be careful not to underestimate the extent to which this has the potential to significantly impinge on BRI—the jewel in the crown of Xi's foreign policy—in the years ahead. Already moods are shifting in many recipient countries. The awarding of the prestigious environmental Goldman Prize to Chibez Ezekiel for organizing his fellow Ghanaians against plans for a Chinese-supported coal plant in that African nation provided a powerful example of this. And this attitudinal shift will only accelerate once additional and more accessible sources of clean energy financing become available.

President Biden has not only pledged on the campaign trail to shine an uncomfortable light on China's offshoring of emissions through BRI, but his commitment to massively ramp up America's overseas clean energy investments also has the potential to result in a sophisticated diplomatic squeeze on China. If China does not want to be seen to be moving only at the behest of U.S. pressure, it would be well advised to begin to make these reforms earnestly.

While the recent effort ostensibly overseen by MEE to establish a "traffic light" system for new BRI projects is welcome, it will require more teeth to be effective. Ultimately, the most powerful thing China could do would be to follow Japan's and South Korea's lead and halt its overseas support for coal

entirely. The economic hard heads in China will find that difficult, especially as the country winds down its domestic coal sector and seeks to redeploy its human and financial capital in the sector elsewhere. But the extent to which China can at least extend many of the laws and regulations it has put in place domestically in recent years to equally apply to its overseas projects will be an important first step.

None of this should take away from the fact that Xi's announcement in September 2020 marked a new era for the geopolitics of China's climate leadership. Gone are the days when China would be lauded for simply coming to the table, or for holding the table together in the absence of the United States. The decisions that China takes now as the world's largest emitter will be judged increasingly on the same playing field as those that the United States is prepared to take, as well as the rest of the international community.

Whether China's leaders understand this new geopolitical paradigm remains to be seen. The decisions they take in the period ahead with regard to China's 2030 NDC and toward Xi's vision of reaching carbon neutrality will be the clearest indicators of this, as will

the reforms they are prepared to put in place around the Belt and Road Initiative. Piecemeal steps forward will no longer cut it, including in the eyes of their developing country compatriots.

Gone are the days when China would be lauded for simply coming to the table, or for holding the table together in the absence of the United States.

Xi's legacy as a climate leader in China may be assured. But his legacy as a climate leader internationally is not yet guaranteed. This is a key international opportunity for China and a key international oppor-

tunity for Xi. It is also one that aligns with the country's domestic interests of upgrading its economy, cleaning up its environment, and shoring up its energy security.

We will see how this plays out in the 2020s—our decade of living dangerously in which the contest between the United States and China will enter a decisive phase that will be characterized by growing tension and intensified competition. Even amid the inevitable escalation to come, there will be some room for cooperation in a number of critical areas. One of the most mutually advantageous surely ought to be climate change, a common planetary challenge. Certainly, Xi Jinping hopes that greater cooperation on this issue will help stabilize the U.S.-China relationship more generally—a common planetary hope if there ever was one. ●

HORIZONS

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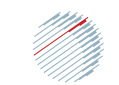
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ASIA IN THE ROARING TWENTIES

ACCOUNTING FOR CHINESE EXPANSIONISM

Parag Khanna

CHINESE expansionism is not like a British model: it is not conquering the Raj, it is not sending Chinese people to run foreign countries. And it is not like an American model, because China does not have a plethora of formal alliance relationships. Rather, Chinese expansionism is built on economic bonds and assumption of economic leverage. It's really about global supply chains and securing its own supply chains.

Coming to grips with this novel, particularly Asian expansionism is a prerequisite to properly imagine the trajectory of China and all Asia in the Roaring Twenties. The mistake many people made in 2015 or 2016 was to complain that China was on a linear pathway toward dominance. But now the pushback has begun. And that is what we see with the trade war, with

Europe being very strict about investments, with the Quad alliance, and the military maneuverings, the efforts to pull supply chains out of China, and so forth.

It is also important to remember that just because China *was* dominating certain industries, it does not mean that China *has to* dominate certain industries; and, conversely, it should not mean that China *must not* dominate certain industries. China was doing so because the world let it happen. And the main reason the world let it happen is because it was cheap. But once China began to act in what was perceived to be a hegemonic or unipolar or monopolistic way, the world countered that. And we see it with rare earth minerals, with manufacturing, with telecommunications, with medical devices and equipment, and that is where we stand right now.

Parag Khanna is the founder and managing partner of FutureMap, a data and scenario-based strategic advisory firm. His latest book is The Future is Asian: Commerce, Conflict and Culture in the 21st Century. This essay draws from two articles written for Noëma and a more recent essay published in The National Interest. You may follow him on Twitter @paragkhanna.



Photo: Guiver Image/Getty Images

Just one recent successful example of Chinese expansionism...

ENTROPY AND TECHNOCRACY

The end result, I can predict with confidence, is that Asia and the world will see a continuation of entropy. Entropy means the diffusion or the dissipation of power in more places, but also more distributed production and more democratization of power, because that is the nature of the world in the 2020s.

The rise of Asia presents the strongest evidence for geopolitical entropy as the new arc of history—and China, today's going concern, is only half the story. China has managed economic ascent while clinging to political authoritarianism, reinforcing Samuel Huntington's point that modernization

does not mean Westernization. But much as today nobody visits America seeking to copy Washingtonian politics when all they want is to replicate West Coast tech giants, the "China model," too, is not an off-the-shelf package. China is not exporting its ideology just because others are imitating its supplied growth, industrial policy, and full-service digital apps. Corrupt regimes don't need to hold up China as a role model to justify importing its surveillance technologies; they could buy these tools from American or Israeli firms as well.

China's unshakeable presence as a superpower affirms that geopolitics has become, for the first time in his-

tory, both multipolar and multi-civilizational. But we need to put this in context. China today represents about 15 percent of global GDP, not the 50 percent embodied in post-World War II America. Furthermore, the contemporary geographic playing field does not favor China, which is surrounded by more than a dozen neighbors with which it mostly has hostile relations. As poor former European colonies or Soviet republics, they welcome Chinese investment in their dilapidated infrastructure but are highly suspicious of Chinese neo-mercantilism. China's wolf warrior diplomacy and pandemic cover-up are a reminder of Asians' abiding wariness of China, even as they've benefited enormously from its rise. In this new post-post-colonial era, however, China faces the insurmountable reality of an anti-imperial psychology by which there is little appetite for either American or Chinese "leadership." The 2020s will see all this playing itself out across Asia and indeed the entire world.

Furthermore, the entropic trend does not stop with China, which is why it is only half the story; the rest of Asia is now doing to China what China has done to the West: hitching themselves to global and regional supply chains,

China's unshakeable presence as a superpower affirms that geopolitics has become, for the first time in history, both multipolar and multi-civilizational.

demanding joint ventures and technology transfers, and building their own national champion firms rather than becoming Western or Chinese neo-colonies. Both America and Europe are eager to assist, launching a slew of strategic initiatives like the military "Quad" with India, Japan, and Australia and the "Clean Network" to yank Huawei 5G telecom equipment out of Asian infrastructure networks. A decade hence we will look back at the post-Cold War era, not for the rise of China but the reemergence of this much greater Asian system encompassing a half-dozen major powers.

Indeed, if there is a political system that has emerged victorious from the coronavirus pandemic, it is Asian democratic technocracy. China's resilience has put paid to the notion that China's mandarins are merely East Asian versions of Soviet apparatchiks. But more significantly, Asia's gold-standard democracies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have proven to be global role models for their blend of competence and transparency. They embody a far more balanced and healthy relationship between rationalism and freedom than America or Great Britain today. These societies are the vanguard of what I call the "new

Asian values" of technocratic governance, mixed capitalism, and social conservatism that are far more likely to become a global set of norms than post-truth Western democracy. From restoring pride in experts to massive economic bail-outs to restricting "fake news," Asian approaches appear to have already gained favor in the West. Bottom line: while amateur political scientists talk democracy, professional state administrators talk governance.

And so, rather than the global hierarchy freezing in 1989, in the 2020s we will see further evidence of a landscape featuring at least four coherent and viable centers of global leadership: the United States, Europe, China, and democratic Asia (especially the budding entente among Japan, Australia, and India). Geopolitically, it's three against one. Economically, it's every power for itself. And ideologically, each holds itself to be superior to the rest. In the 2020s, it is clear that no model will prevail over the others.

So, the question will depend on whether or not China is able to adapt to a new equilibrium and accept that it cannot dominate Asia alone. It has to accept certain limitations and settle certain disputes that it cannot win. And

its competitors near and far, large and small, have to accept that China is no longer willing to settle being the point of origin of cheap goods destined for consumers beyond its borders.

If there is a political system that has emerged victorious from the coronavirus pandemic, it is Asian democratic technocracy.

TAKING A STEP BACK

The story of Chinese expansionism starts with roads. Upon the conclusion of the country's civil war in 1949, China began a decades-long campaign

to push westward into restive and contested terrain. Roads and railways began to inch westward along the Yellow River and through the narrow Gansu corridor—the ancient northern Silk Road passageway between the more inhospitable Mongolian and Tibetan Plateaus—into Xinjiang, land of the Muslim Uighurs, onto terrain labeled East Turkestan on many maps that depicted the Anglo-Russian maneuverings of the fabled nineteenth-century "Great Game." By the time the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chinese roads were well-positioned to expand across once frozen Cold War borders and reshape the trade relations of the half-dozen newly-independent Central Asian republics. China's plan to win the new Great Game was to build new Silk Roads.

Throughout China's turbulent decades under Mao Zedong, the same domestic

power play was unfolding in Tibet. When Tibetans resisted the convulsive campaigns of the Great Leap Forward, their 1959 uprising was crushed and the Dalai Lama fled into exile in India. In the 1962 Sino-Indian war, China seized parts of India's Arunachal Pradesh (which China considers part of "South Tibet") as well as Aksai Chin, a disputed region in the western Himalayas abutting India's state of Ladakh.

Buddhist Tibet and Muslim Xinjiang are China's two largest provinces, yet they are mutually distinct cultural universes. The only thing that connects them is a road: the Western Highway—formally, Highway 219—that goes through Tibet along the Nepali border, over Aksai Chin's rugged passes and then descends into Xinjiang's forbidding Taklamakan Desert.

In 1962, the construction of this highway kindled the first Sino-Indian War. In 2020, road-building again sparked a conflict between the two countries, this time in Aksai Chin. China claims it was responding to two changes India recently made to the decades-old status quo: First, declaring Ladakh a Union Territory directly governed by New Delhi (something people in Ladakh wanted), and second, building roads in disputed areas near the ambiguous Line of Actual Control that stretches from the Karakoram Pass, which connects China to Pakistan, and

the shimmering blue of Pangong Lake, which extends from Ladakh into Aksai Chin and Tibet.

BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

For the Romans, Ottomans, Russians, and British, transportation infrastructure was an essential tool of conquest. It is no different for China today. In a world of mostly settled boundaries, China seeks to control infrastructure and supply chains to achieve leverage over its neighbors as well as carve through them to its destination: the oil-rich Gulf region and the massive export markets of Europe. From oil refineries and ports to internet cables, China is maneuvering for infrastructural access where it cannot dominate territory. Even where China shifts boundaries by force, the purpose is nonetheless to pave the way for its infrastructure. China is a mercantile power, not a colonial one.

When it comes to using roads and rails as instruments of power projection, China has gotten used to being the only game in town. Nobody builds roads faster or cheaper, at home or abroad, as Chinese construction crews. In 2006, it took me two months in the most rugged jeep available to drive the full length of the Western Highway, with a number of high-altitude near-death experiences along the way. Every day, I would encounter Chinese road crews hard at work, and army convoys fording rocky

rivers and gingerly navigating slippery gravel mountainsides. Today, you could make the journey without raising your heart rate, though you might need oxygen at 16,000-plus feet of elevation.

China has actually had little choice in taking this approach. In the 1990s, it was militarily weak but economically surging. Around the time China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, it suddenly found itself the world's largest importer of raw materials as well as one of the largest exporters of consumer goods. Yet still, it was subject to the "Malacca trap," for most of its trade passes through the narrow Strait of Malacca, the world's busiest waterway, which it does not control. Building road and rail infrastructure across neighboring states was thus something of a defensive measure to reduce dependence on a single chokepoint. When China innocuously announced its aspiration to construct a "New Eurasian Land Bridge" in 2003, few took notice. But defense can quickly become offense.

Borrowing from the Cold War paradigm, American analysts have long been focused on China's military modernization to assess its geopolitical power. Until recently, many still held China

to be only a limited threat in the Western Pacific, and not at all beyond its immediate maritime periphery. Hence, it was not deemed a peer competitor. But China differs from the Soviet Union in fundamental respects. Whereas

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the Soviet Union was not integrated into the global economy, China is the top trade partner of more than 120 countries, and is now the largest international creditor as well. China's main instruments in pursuit of its grand strategy have been connectivity

projects, not military incursions. Rather than conquer colonies, China has sought to buy countries.

Still, by 2017, when China convened a gathering of nearly 100 countries for its inaugural Belt and Road Forum, nobody viewed it as a purely unanimous exercise. India boycotted the summit, as well as its 2019 edition, on the grounds that Chinese road projects such as the Karakoram Highway traverse Kashmir, which India claims in its entirety. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi also stepped up India's pace in the infrastructure arms race, both in the east in Arunachal Pradesh (where China and India skirmished in 2017 over Chinese road-building activities) and in the west in Ladakh. In 2019, it completed

a road from Leh, Ladakh's capital, to the world's highest gravel airstrip at Daulat Beg Oldi, less than five miles south of the Chinese border.

China certainly hoped that no one would dispute its checkbook diplomacy, nor its "use it or lose it" approach to planting its flag in disputed areas. But instead, a wide array of initiatives have emerged as a direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative to undermine and dilute China's infrastructural prowess: the U.S. International Finance and Development Corporation, the EU's "Asia Connectivity Initiative," the EU-Japan "Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure," the U.S.-Japan-Australia "Blue Dot Network," the India-Japan "connectivity corridors" and myriad other coalitions. None of these existed even four years ago. Roads have always been the pathways of conquest; now they are the battlefield of competitive connectivity.

It has also taken just four years for China to go through the whole imperial lifecycle, from economic preponderance and strategic entrapment to widespread resentment and outright rejection. Whereas European colonial powers were able to practice divide-and-rule politics for centuries, and Cold War manipulation lasted decades, today's world is largely defined by sovereignty and transparency. Governments are coming under fire for

signing deals with unfavorable terms; the slightest rumor of commercial capitulation to China can bring down a government. Even in China-friendly Pakistan, Chinese nationals are often tracked. After centuries of colonialism and the Cold War—and enough leaders alive to remember both—no country wants to be a pawn again.

China's leaders are presumed to play the long game, thinking several moves ahead. But in dozens of visits to Beijing, I have found my interlocutors unable to grasp this basic psychological fact. While many societies admire China's success and are grateful for China's role in their development, none want to be like China, nor be subservient to it. It's an argument that's fallen on deaf ears in Washington, too. And as with America's experience of benevolent nation-building, China's policy of intimidating neighbors into feebly muting their own interests has predictably backfired.

GOING FOR BROKE?

There was a time not too long ago when China was big yet still largely unnoticed in the global strategic calculus. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, China's focus on commercial cooperation and non-interference in politics paid off. It managed to simultaneously have good relations with pairs of rival states across the globe: India and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and

Iran, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Brazil and Venezuela. It even provided tacit aid and other lifelines to America's designated "rogue states" such as Cuba, Sudan, Syria, and North Korea. Boggling down the adversary while moving stealthily towards one's objective has been an axiom of Chinese diplomacy for generations. But there is little stealth anymore in China's land grabs, island-building and wolf-warrior diplomacy.

With China's suppression of information about the coronavirus

painting it into a corner, Beijing no longer feels it has anything to lose and is going for broke: moving on Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Senkaku Islands, India's borders, and other disputes while the rest of the world is off-kilter, girding itself for a new Cold War with America. China's leadership has convinced itself that West-leaning powers seek to encircle it militarily, splinter it internally, and destabilize the Communist Party. This is the classical psychological spiral at the heart of any security dilemma in which each action taken by one side elevates the perceived insecurity of the other.

A repeat of the Cold War would surely not play out as favorably for the United States as the last one. America is

politically polarized and is the world's largest debtor nation. Its most recent major wars have been disasters and its military needs time to rebuild and adjust to new adversaries and tactics. And many of its erstwhile allies from

It has also taken just four years for China to go through the whole imperial lifecycle, from economic preponderance and strategic entrapment to widespread resentment and outright rejection.

Europe to Asia are far more vested in China than America is and don't trust it to lead a consensus-based global coalition. Furthermore, China is the world's most populous nation (almost five times the Soviet Union at its peak), is effectively the world's largest economy and is already an enormous

sophisticated technological power. Lastly, unlike the Cold War in Europe, China has home-court advantage in Asia.

What the United States and Europe do have in their favor is that they are territorially secure whilst China is not. China has 14 neighbors, all of which harbor deep suspicions of its motives, even as many (especially Russia) cooperate with it. Small and vulnerable lands have always welcomed America's strategic presence: Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Kurdistan, the Baltic nations, Mongolia, and other prisoners of geography tend to want more America, not less. Yet American strategists have been far more fixated

on China's presence in Africa and South America rather than developing a comprehensive strategy for reassuring China's neighbors and supporting their own efforts to stand up to it. More than any other measure, this could decisively shape China's trajectory in the decade ahead.

Recent American measures make clear it is taking a firm stand to pressure China in its own domain. The United States has rescinded Hong Kong's special status, is selling more arms to Taiwan, stepping up freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, sanctioning Chinese officials involved in Xinjiang's labor camps, blocking American pension funds from investing in China's bond and equity markets, forcing Chinese companies to delist from U.S. stock exchanges, and seeking to near-shore production of key industries out of China.

But a similar slate of measures is needed that generates strength in numbers among China's many smaller and weaker neighbors. Despite the immense economic leverage China has accrued vis-à-vis the many states along its perimeter, it is the complexity of having so many neighbors that constrains China more than its increasingly sophisticated military arsenal suggests. Maintaining global influence is much harder when you are fighting a 14-front war in your own neighborhood.

Along its vast periphery, China must learn that "victory" on one front means backlash on others. Seizing territory from India or Vietnam should embolden Mongolia and Kazakhstan to defer projects that strengthen China's hand. It is not a coincidence that when Sri Lanka ceded operation of its Hambantota Port to China on a 99-year lease in 2017, countries from Kenya to Pakistan to Myanmar made moves to scale back their exposure to Chinese lending to avoid a similar fate. These simultaneous awakenings are not a coordinated containment strategy, but they are an essential pillar of one.

China is both a terrestrial ("heartland") power as well as a maritime ("rimland") one, so its neighbors include its proximate littoral ones. Owing to America's naval preponderance on the world's oceans, this strategy has evolved considerably more quickly. From Malabar to Pearl Harbor, the United States, Japan, Australia, India, and numerous other countries have been deepening their coordination in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain. The "Quad" coalition features joint strategic patrols and hardware support for the navies of Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia in the South China Sea. In the summer of 2020, ASEAN foreign ministers finally graduated from their usually limp communiqués watered down by Chinese pressure and reaffirmed that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea must be the basis for arbitrating maritime disputes.

CONTAINMENT?

The delicate balance that lies ahead involves both acceding to some of China's grievances and actions while also convincing Beijing that it has much more to lose should it continue down the path of imperial overstretch. History shows that it is wiser to settle borders than to fight over them. Boundary agreements are rarely perceived as fair by both sides, yet such settlements have the virtue of enabling countries to mature towards functional cooperation.

There is much more that can be done to strengthen China's neighbors at its expense. More companies should divert supply chains to Southeast Asia, India and Central Asia, making only in China what they sell in China. Capital continues to pour into China as it lifts foreign ownership caps in financial joint ventures and other areas; the rest of Asia deserves the same as countries from India to the Philippines privatizes assets, liberalize capital accounts and build new national champion firms. Amazon, Facebook, and Google's large bets on India's e-commerce, mobile services, and AI sectors, respectively, speak to this enormous potential.

Furthermore, the United States under the leadership of Joe Biden must recommit to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement that will boost Southeast Asia's exports, while working with governments such as Vietnam and the

Philippines to strictly prevent Chinese firms from using them for mere relabeling of their products bound for America. The European Union trades much more with China and Asia than does the United States, and should more quickly pursue free trade agreements with India and Southeast Asian countries on the model of its existing FTA with Singapore and the newest one with Vietnam. Through the aforementioned rival initiatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative, they could also much more efficiently deploy and disburse loans and credit bilaterally and via the Asian Development Bank to wean countries off Chinese debt. What China does not finance it cannot lay claims to in the event of default.

Such moves are more important now than ever. Precisely because the United States and the EU have imposed such stiff restrictions on Chinese investment, China has redirected its outbound capital portfolio ever more towards its more proximate Asian domain. The West may be squeezing China out of some markets, but China's balloon is inflating across Asia as it lowers tariffs on all its Belt and Road trading partners. The American and British plot to convert the moribund G7 into a "D10" of democracies—including Asian powers India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia—is a timely step to offer an alternative. The focus on building strong innovation and commercial linkages across members in areas ranging from 5G and the "internet

of things” to pharmaceuticals and medical devices will also benefit countries from Kazakhstan to Vietnam that have the natural resources and human capital to contribute to thriving biotech and manufacturing activities, but won’t cede control of their companies to China.

China’s weakest neighbors also need much more reinforcement. Western diplomacy was crucial to pushing Myanmar in a more democratic direction a decade ago, but commercially, China still rules the roost because Western governments aren’t backstopping risky investments. Laos and Cambodia, two of Asia’s poorest countries, have become all but wholly owned subsidiaries of China, even as China’s Mekong River dams have ravaged their agriculture through volatile water flows and chemical pesticides. With stronger technical and diplomatic assistance, these countries could demand that Chinese investments reinforce their sustainability and local businesses.

Asia’s neighbors should use China’s playbook against it. For the past four decades, China has risen through a combination of foreign investment coupled with mandatory joint ventures, technology transfer and its own industrial supports. Now it is time for Asia’s next wave of developing nations across South and Southeast Asia—2.5 billion people, and all demographically younger than China—to do to China

what China did to the West: absorb, learn, copy, innovate, resist. After all of this is done, China will still be China, but it will be somewhat more dependent on good relations with its neighbors rather than only its neighbors being dependent on its goodwill.

EQUILIBRIUM

It was always going to be an uphill battle for China to be perceived as a benevolent superpower. Unlike America or the European Union, China is wholly unconvincing as a multiethnic empire. It systematically squelches diverse identities rather than elevating them. Furthermore, though China is an ancient and rich civilization, it coexists with other Asian civilizations with equally respectable glory. None will ever bow to the others, as Japan learned the hard way in the twentieth century. Every time China gains an inch of territory, it loses a yard of credibility. The essence of geopolitical stability is equilibrium, and the pathway to it follows the logic of reciprocity.

China’s assertiveness signals neither an inevitable new Cold War nor a new unipolar hegemony. Rather, it is one phase in Asia’s collective story and the global shift towards multipolarity.

There is a lesson for America, too. Both the left and the right have fallen into line behind the view that China’s rise presents the world with a stark choice between worlds led by the

United States or China, or a new Cold War between them. But clearly, this is not what the rest of the world wants. The greater agenda that countries deeply suspicious of both America and China can agree upon is the preeminent importance of preserving equilibrium on the Eurasian continent.

Never has Eurasia been ruled by a single hegemon. The Mongols came closest 700 years ago, but the fourteenth-century Black Death fractured its disparate khanates, and the Silk Road fell idle. Today again, a pandemic has emerged from China, but rather than shut down the Silk Road, we should build many more of them among dozens of Eurasian nations rather than in and out of China alone. All roads need not lead to Beijing.

PEAKED ALREADY?

China has studied every great power’s rise, but it is a fair question to ask whether it failed to pay an equal amount of attention to great power decline. Here it is useful to go back to November 2006, when the Chinese public was held rapt by a 12-part documentary series titled “The Rise of the Great Powers.”

Curated by a team of respected Chinese historians, each episode revealed the pathways major empires took to

reach the zenith of their global influence, including the United Kingdom, Japan, Russia, and the United States. At the time, China was viewed—both at home and abroad—as Asia’s central force and a future superpower, but not the main geopolitical story—especially as America was in full “hyper-power” mode, deep into its indefinite occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. This was all the more reason for the Chinese to sit back and cautiously study how nations could become so powerful as to extend their might all across the planet.

“The Rise of the Great Powers” achieved its central objective: to socialize and legitimize the notion that it was China’s turn to rise into the pantheon of history’s superpowers. And China has clearly followed the documentary’s lessons to a tee: practice import substitution, force technology transfer, amass currency reserves, hoard precious metals, deploy merchant fleets, lend prodigiously, install infrastructure far and wide, build a powerful military, protect your supply chains, buy off elites in colonies and client states, and so forth. If world history were a game of Risk, then in every century the board would be reset and another player would get a turn to rule the world. The scale is finally weighted in China’s favor.

The essence of geopolitical stability is equilibrium, and the pathway to it follows the logic of reciprocity.

Or maybe not. If history really did repeat itself, we would marvel at our own predictability. But this time could also be very different. We have amassed enough history to preventively alter the course history seems to be taking us on. It is said that Westerners reason in linear terms and Easterners in circular concepts. Neither though seems to grasp complexity, in which every collision of forces, every action and reaction, produces fractal outcomes that recirculate and ripple through the system. What if, rather than confidently repeating the past, China is mistakenly repeating the present?

CCTV unfortunately never produced a sequel on imperial *decline*: the ideological rigidity and strategic blunders that corrupted, subverted, and undermined the success of empires. But even without a formal curriculum on imperial overstretch and hubris, Chinese television has beamed home blow by blow America's past two decades of international flailing and domestic decay. Yet convinced it can do no wrong, China's decline may have begun before its rise is complete. America has quickly fallen from its hyper-power apex. China may well never reach it.

It seems premature to speak of "peak China" when the country is still going from strength to strength. Growth has slowed, but in the wake of COVID-19, it is the only economy growing at all. It

is rapidly aging, but still has more youth than Europe has people, while robots churn out enough goods for itself and the world. Its domestic debt has skyrocketed, but it still has enormous reserves, is opening its capital account and deploying a global cryptocurrency. But the sense in which to use "peak" is akin to "peak oil" or "peak America"—relative, not absolute. Proponents of "peak oil" missed the reality of vast additional global reserves as well as the phenomenal rise of alternative and renewable energy. Because we have reached peak oil *demand*, supply has become irrelevant.

Similarly, despite foreign policy blunders and much else besides, America will remain the world's preeminent power long into the future. Its economy is gargantuan, and it controls the world's only reliable reserve currency. Its military has global reach and can reinforce allies across the globe, and North America is the only truly conflict-free continent. Yet as with oil, the *demand* for American leadership has peaked. Countries choose their service providers for military assistance, financing, technology, and other utilities from a global marketplace of suitors and vendors.

WINNING BATTLES, LOSING THE WAR

Until recently, most Americans thought the world wanted to be like them. By now, they probably know better. In recent years, the Chinese have

been telling themselves similar things, given the country's internal dynamism and external activism in building a new layer of global infrastructure through its Belt and Road Initiative. But much as America has abused its privileged status by cajoling allies toward policies counter to their own interests and imposing wanton sanctions that inhibit meaningful progress in rehabilitating pariah states such as Iran and North Korea, China has very quickly crossed the line from receiving fraternal goodwill to permanent suspicion.

From the Himalayas to the South China Sea, its aggressive pursuit of micro-territories has ensured that more than three billion Asians may never trust it again. Arabs, Africans, and Latin Americans are trimming their exposure to Chinese debt and projects. For its part, the European Union recently declared China a "systemic rival." China has been so busy winning battles that it doesn't realize it may already have lost the war.

Both America and China have also overestimated their technological superiority. The United States has conflated invention with innovation, overlooking how rapidly technologies spread and are adapted to foreign markets by rival governments and their firms. The internet and gene sequencing

were pioneered in America, but Japan, China, and others have delivered the fastest bandwidth and gene therapies to their citizens. The same goes for 5G and quantum computing.

Entropy is inherent in complex systems; power inexorably diffuses. Never before have we had such a global distribution of power.

China too has mistaken market prowess for monopoly. But the coordinated ejection of Huawei from critical infrastructure networks—and efforts such as the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative to boost the

industrial capacity of countries such as Japan, Australia, India, and others in semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, rare earth minerals and automobile parts—demonstrate how quickly dominance can be eroded.

Why go with Chinese companies that harvest your data when American-backed Indian firms offer AI-as-a-service—a third-party provision of big data analysis, machine learning and other statistical tools to clients without the need for large self-directed investment—with no strings attached? The most inevitable force in history is not imperial cycles but technological diffusion.

In the same vein, today's world is far more characterized by geopolitical entropy than concentration. The EU has emerged as an independent pole of financial, diplomatic, and regulatory

authority. Far from despondently accepting junior status in a U.S.-China bipolar “new Cold War,” Brussels is increasingly going its own way in dealing with Russia and Iran. The EU-Asia Connectivity Initiative is a far more sensible approach to Eurasian engagement than anything America has come up with, and EU trade and investment ties with Asia could soon be double America’s.

Dynamics within Asia itself are also hastily bringing an end to China’s version of America’s “unipolar moment.” Japan has mounted a strategic revival and India is confidently parrying Chinese maneuvers in multiple Himalayan theaters; even a neo-Ming armada of “treasure fleets” will never control the Indian Ocean. Together with the United States and Australia, these Indo-Pacific powers have formed a strategic “Quad” to fortify the defenses of China’s weaker neighbors to limit Chinese expansionism. Today’s weak states aspire to sovereignty and self-actualization, not neo-mercantile subservience, and strong lifelines have emerged to ensure they remain on the former path rather than succumbing to the latter.

FAILURE OF IMAGINATION

It bears repeating: entropy is inherent in complex systems; power inexorably diffuses. Never before have we had such a global distribution of power: the twenty-first century is the first time in human history that every

continent or region represents independent poles of power in their own right. This complex global system is far greater than any single power: within its webs of relationships, no power can impose itself on the world without counter-coalitions forming. There are limits to power, but no end to entropy.

Demographics and psychology are also significant variables nudging us toward a non-cyclical tangent for the future—certainly in the 2020s. Since 1945, the global population has more than tripled and the number of states recognized by the U.N. has nearly quadrupled to 193. The vast majority of the human population lives in post-colonial countries with unhappy memories of both colonialism and the Cold War; they do not wish for history to repeat itself—and will not let it. The backlash against China that has materialized in just the past three years would have taken decades, centuries ago. The 2020s will provide a rude awakening from the “Chinese Dream” of the 2010s.

All of this suggests that today’s conventional wisdom—by which either America restores its primacy or China displaces it while the rest of the world is forced to choose sides in a new Cold War—represents a fairly spectacular failure of imagination. Nonetheless, our recent intellectual shortcomings can be instructive in teaching lessons in the emerging dynamics of world politics. An

older and increasingly out-of-date scholarly tradition takes comfort in simplicity, with theoretical parsimony masquerading as rigor.

Not only have Western academics been seduced by their historical models but ironically, so too were the Chinese. After all, from Beijing’s perspective, what is not to like about Western authorities telling you it is your turn to rule the world? The media has been all too eager to embrace the “Thucydides Trap,” as if Graham Allison’s great book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* did not contain a question mark in the subtitle.

What has actually transpired, however, embodies the rapid feedback loops inherent in a complex global system: hyping the China threat has inspired myriad responses to that threat, shifting geopolitics along new vectors. A similar phenomenon has been underway with respect to the global population. Fears that the world population would reach fifteen billion and plunge the world into Malthusian anarchy evoked widespread measures to control rampant population growth. Current estimates suggest the human population will reach about ten billion people in 2050.

With no institutional memory of past pandemics, most Western societies failed to heed the simple lesson of the 1918 Spanish flu: stay at home and wear a mask.

There is a tempting objection to this drift from fatalism: It’s all priced in already. Like Christopher Nolan’s film “Tenet” or Alex Garland’s slightly more comprehensible miniseries “Devs,” asserting free will is an element of the dramatic apotheosis, but merely a distraction from the master plot we cannot escape (think of the final elevator scene in “Devs” or the cat-and-mouse between Kenneth Branagh’s Andrei and John David Washington’s Protagonist in “Tenet”). In sci-fi at least, the future communicates with the present, providing a stark incentive to act on its message. In real life, we maintain the illusion of control and consign the worst-case scenario to a corner of our mind.

The pandemic has been a tragic reminder of this default mental state: all the foresight in the world meant very little when it struck. While scientists warned of its exponential global spread, militias occupied state capitol buildings demanding an end to lockdowns they never took seriously in the first place. With no institutional memory of past pandemics, most Western societies failed to heed the simple lesson of the 1918 Spanish flu: stay at home and wear a mask. Similarly, the Transition Integrity Project ran scenarios of disputed U.S. election outcomes

so that steps could be taken to prevent chaos, but ideological division and our incapacity for collective action all but ensure that one of those scenarios will come to pass anyway.

Isn't it just the same with geopolitical cycles of cataclysmic wars? We may claim to have the foresight to advise China to accept realities America ignored prior to provoking wars that will similarly erode its hard-won ascent—but what if China actually *wants* these wars as part of its master plan? Indeed, another worrying example from the recent past: The Trump Administration's overt upgrading of diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan—combined with sanctions banning the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company from selling semiconductors to China—are meant to disentangle allied countries' supply chains from the Chinese mainland, yet they could very well be accelerating China's plans to invade Taiwan and physically capture the production of these critical components. A strategy designed to cripple China's high-tech industries would perversely enhance them, boosting China's ability to dominate the battlespace.

WHISTLING A DIFFERENT TUNE

Still, even if China has thought two steps ahead, has it thought three or four? I have my doubts. China is nimble but not omniscient. It could have averted the present (and

future) pushback to its ambitions through a more “peaceful rise,” but Xi Jinping's nationalism hijacked the country instead. An inescapable pivot in history's master plot? Perhaps. But China would not be the first power to confuse its momentum for longevity. Both nationalism and triumphalism indicate a high likelihood of conflict—but not that its aftermath will necessarily favor China.

The present needs more voices from the future. Absent the “temporal pincer movements” of “Tenet”—the process by which characters move backwards (“inverted”) through time in order to alter events in the present—we must constantly run scenarios and derive pathways to avoid the worst outcomes. In the 1983 hit film *WarGames*, the War Operation Plan Response simulator cycles through every possible nuclear war scenario and upon realizing they all end in stalemate, famously utters: “A strange game: the only winning move is not to play.”

If history is a pre-programmed algorithm, our only hope is a collective will to maintain a self-regulating autopoiesis. We have a dangerous amount still in common with our forefathers: pride, fear, and greed. But what is different should matter more: deterrence, sovereignty, a common climate threat, and more. In the 2020s, it's high time to start whistling a different tune. 🎵



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CAN BREXIT BRITAIN STILL BE A GLOBAL PLAYER?

David Landsman

DURING the 2016 referendum campaign, one of the arguments against what has become known as “Brexit” was that, outside the European Union, the United Kingdom would lose substantial international influence. The loss would be far greater than merely absence from internal EU deliberations. If in 1999 Tony Blair was right that the UK had the potential to be “the bridge between Europe and America,” London’s number would move down in Washington’s address book. If the United States were less interested in Britain, the rest of the world would likely follow suit. During the campaign, Prime Minister David Cameron went further, questioning whether peace and stability in Europe were “assured beyond all reasonable doubt,” causing a frenzied media to report that he had claimed that Brexit “could lead to World War III.”

For their part, supporters of Brexit (“Brexiters”) argued that outside the EU Britain would be freed to pursue a more

active “global Britain” policy. This argument was primarily expressed in economic terms, in particular the opportunity to conclude more favorable free trade agreements and benefit from the higher growth potential of Asia and Africa. This explains the decision by Cameron’s successor Theresa May in July 2016 to establish a new Department for International Trade to negotiate such agreements. Brexiters also argued that leaving the EU would prevent the UK coming under pressure to support greater European defense integration at the expense of NATO. But they talked relatively little about specific foreign policy opportunities, not only because the UK had clearly exercised its own foreign policy while an EU member, but also because they did not agree among themselves about the detail of the foreign policy an “independent” Britain should pursue.

In any case, polling provides little evidence that influence or security arguments weighed heavily on voters.

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking questions in the House of Commons on “global Britain”

According to one poll, immigration, sovereignty, and money (i.e. freedom from paying contributions to the EU) were the most important drivers for Brexiters, while for pro-EU “Remainers” the economy, employment rights, and environmental protection along with a sense of commitment to the EU and European neighbors were the main reasons not to leave. Influence is arguably a part of the Remainer argument, but the articulation is clearly different.

Although it may not have often captured the public imagination, influence was clearly important to politicians and commentators, i.e. those (including the

author) with a professional interest in Britain’s role in the world. Many Remainer commentators argued that the UK would be diminished outside the bloc. This view was endorsed by many foreign statesmen and stateswomen from Carl Bildt to Hillary Clinton. When challenged, Brexiters argued the opposite: that the UK would be freer to pursue its own objectives outside the EU, exercising the influence that its history, economy, military, and other assets enabled it to do.

While influence was discussed in the *Financial Times* and *Economist*, it was not only the relative lack of salience that limited its profile in public

debate. In the context of a universal plebiscite, the argument from influence was arguably rather elitist and therefore problematic, articulated by those who feared for their own professional influence. The Brexiteer campaign understood that

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many of their supporters (particularly those who did not normally vote in elections because they felt their vote “did not count”) saw Brexit as a way of addressing their perceived lack of influence over their own lives, as when they told pollsters that in voting for Brexit they “[wanted] to teach our

own politicians a lesson.” This insight was brilliantly captured in the Brexiteer campaign slogan “take back control” (where *back* has something of the restorationist quality of *again* in “MAGA”). For the Remain campaign, already attacked as a self-serving elite, dwelling on the risk of losing influence was unlikely to provide a winning argument.

INFLUENCE ABROAD

The UK has been *de facto* outside the EU only since the end of the transition period at the beginning of 2021. There has been some evidence of disruption to trade, particularly but not only in Northern Ireland, and vocal complaints from certain groups whose interests have been affected. Even without COVID-19, it was to be expected that once, in Prime

Minister Boris Johnson’s words, Brexit is “done,” the political heat would be reduced. With the main opposition Labour Party, taking a strategic decision not to oppose Johnson’s trade deal with the EU, it seems clear that no major UK-wide

political party will contest the next General Election (due by late 2024) on a manifesto of pursuing a constitutionally closer relationship with the European Union. Nor, in the hypothetical event of a British volte-face, is the EU likely to be in any hurry to take back its errant former member.

As it has turned out, COVID-19 has significantly eased the domestic political pressure on Brexit, having both dominated the news agenda and caused such economic disruption that Brexit effects are harder (though not impossible) to isolate. In the short term and potentially for longer, the disparity between the EU’s and Britain’s performance in procuring vaccines has provided a graphic example of the benefits of “going it alone,” which has been accepted even by a number of prominent British and European pro-EU commentators. While underlying views on Brexit may not have changed greatly, for the time being discussion of Britain’s place in the world will not include any credible debate about reintegration with the EU.

The “foreign policy establishment” of think tanks, former diplomats (the present author and a few others excepted) and commentators were—and very largely still are—unsympathetic towards Brexit. Nevertheless, almost all, like the business community, agree that the UK still has relatively strengths which can be exploited. A good example is Robin Niblett’s January 2021 Chatham House Research Paper “Global Britain, Global Broker” which argues that the UK can deploy its diplomatic and wider assets in support of international objectives including supporting democracies and combating climate change. No serious commentator argues that post-Brexit Britain should give up and leave the stage.

That is perhaps no surprise: without a credible role for British foreign policy, there wouldn’t be a role for the foreign policy establishment. It is perhaps only of academic—or campaigning—interest to speculate on the counterfactual, i.e. whether Britain’s influence will be greater or smaller than it would have been if Brexit had not taken place. To argue that post-Brexit Britain will be unable to recover lost imperial power is to attack a “straw man” as no serious Brexiteers sought this. The more realistic question is what kind of second-order power the UK can be and whether it

can, and wants, in the words of former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd to “punch above its weight.”

Before addressing this question, we should first enquire about the *purpose* of influence. There has long been an expectation that Britain should play a

Calling for the UK to play a serious role is not the same as agreeing on a strategic or philosophical underpinning for an active foreign policy.

significant international role: “Little England” isolationism was always a minority position. But calling for the UK to play a serious role is not the same as agreeing on a strategic or philosophical underpinning for an

active foreign policy. While Dean Acheson famously argued in 1962 that “Britain has lost an Empire and failed to find a role,” Suez notwithstanding, the Cold War provided UK foreign policy with a clear role, in support of a U.S.-led Western agenda against Soviet Communism.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a strong elite consensus on the need for what former Foreign Secretary William Hague described as an “active and activist” foreign policy. However, there was remarkably little effort to engage the country in a broad strategic debate about the purpose of Britain’s foreign policy and influence. Case-by-case reactive activism (“reactivism”?) to the latest threat or atrocity has often been a substitute for a clear strategy and an effort to secure public acceptance for it.

For conservatives, these are opportunities to project power; for the liberal left, to right the world's wrongs. Lobbies from defense to development press for higher budgets and more initiatives. Iraq did much to curb support for the military dimension of activism. Even if the British public still wants the country to play an international role, the fact that for too long the political establishment did not trouble sufficiently to argue the case for action has reduced the appetite for difficult trade-offs. Today, when climate change has risen up the political agenda, there is still a big gap between support for action and acceptance of the personal consequences of it.

Brexit was arguably in part a reaction to an establishment which seemed more interested in *elite structures and activities* than in *national interests*. Given that Brexit is a turning point, it provides an important opportunity to change this. One product of Brexit is the creation of the British Foreign Policy Group, a think tank that *inter alia* studies public attitudes to international affairs and promotes discussion among business, civil society, and diaspora groups. In what is—remarkably—a novel departure, the LSE Economic Diplomacy

Commission has recommended that a domestic policy assessment should be made of the distributional implications of international economic policies. While Brexit was not necessary for either of these innovations, it provides an opportunity to challenge the elite conception of foreign policy. Whether that challenge will be pursued remains an open question.

A strategy is not the same as a wish list. Any strategy needs core objectives and a means of deciding both what to do *and* what *not* to do, as well as how to deploy the available resources in

pursuit of the aim. As this issue was going to press, the UK Government published its *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, which it had described as “the most radical assessment of the UK’s place in the world since the end of the Cold War.” It sets out four “overarching national security and international policy objectives to 2025,” namely: “sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology”; “shaping the open international order of the future”; “strengthening security and defense at home and overseas”; and “building resilience at home and overseas.”

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Its publication is timely not only given Brexit but also in the light of other significant changes, from the rise of China and the checks on globalism. The range of threats under the heading of “security” has expanded significantly to include everything from cyber to climate change. While the complexity of the modern world cannot be wished away, a mid-sized power like the UK, even if it seeks to err on the side of ambition, must still focus on strategic priorities and not pretend to be able to “do it all.” And, if it is to secure broad public as well as elite support for its international posture, its selection of objectives must be explicit and avoid the neglect of public buy-in that characterized its predecessors.

CREDIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE POLICY

Looking beyond the document, which projects only to the middle of the decade, one could ask more broadly: what will constitute a credible and sustainable British international policy for the 2020s?

Firstly, any foreign policy should unashamedly reflect a well-articulated sense of national interest. While in almost every country from the superpower U.S. to the smallest island, the importance of national interest as a driver is taken for granted, it is often absent from British elite discussion. This is perhaps a post-imperial legacy with the UK still regarding itself as having a *droit de regard* over

less developed nations and much to offer them in development towards the goal of being more like Britain. If so, this is more a reflection of the evangelical rather than the acquisitive side of Empire. Less attractively, there is a long-standing British elite tendency to regard national sentiment as demeaning, as evinced by George Orwell’s famous quotation “It is a strange fact, but it is unquestionably true, that almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during God Save the King than stealing from a poor box.” The contemporary British thinker David Goodhart in his seminal *The Road to Somewhere* (2017) observes unsympathetically an elite tendency to show no greater interest in the wellbeing of one’s own fellow citizens than of people on the other side of the world, which he regards as more narcissistic than disinterestedly altruistic.

One of the more egregious manifestations of this approach was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office under David Miliband, which adopted the slogan “Better World, Better Britain”—as though British foreign policy should be driven by something as un-British as possible. Above all, it is unselective and therefore unstrategic, hardly likely to win friends either at home or abroad. Domestic public opinion, though broadly supportive of “values-based” foreign policy, becomes less so when faced with trade-offs, as reported in British Foreign Policy Group polling. Abroad, an insistence that policy

is based on values rather than interests, especially when it involves a *mission civilisatrice* of one kind or another, is neither convincing nor welcome outside a Western-leaning elite. This is not to say that a foreign policy should be immoral or even amoral, but that a focus on values should not be *carte blanche* for an elite to construct alternative realities. The aim should be *grounded enlightened self-interest*.

Secondly, national interest will be best served by reaffirming Britain's orientation as part of the free democratic world. Early signs suggest that Britain's ability to work with the Biden Administration will be at the upper end of expectations, bolstered by close alignment on major issues such as Russia, China, and climate change as well as experience of managing differences, for example on Iran. There is no reason why this should not endure whoever succeeds Biden in the White House. The UK will always need to work at maintaining the relationship—not least by avoiding the temptation to boast of it as “special”—and the U.S. will as a result continue to see real benefit in working with Britain.

At the same time, the best should not become the enemy of the good in the choice of partners. Values in Western Europe evolve at break-neck pace and we cannot afford to work only with those who keep up with the fastest of the advance guard. Boris Johnson's initiative to launch the D10—the G7 plus South

Korea, India, and Australia—is timely, not least because it brings greater diversity. If we want to advance democracy and freedom, we need to start broadening the coalition, even if that coalition does not agree on every issue or value.

It is likely that taking a firmer line on both Russia and China even at the expense of some economic disadvantage will be attractive to the present British Government. It will appeal to both center-left and center-right. The left—and not only the left—will support taking a stand on human rights. Conservatives will be keen to “teach a lesson” to hostile powers, all the more when Russian agents are caught using nerve agents on British soil or China violates the terms of the Hong Kong settlement. It will bind the UK closer to the policies of the nascent Biden Administration. And, since the EU under pressure from mercantilist French and (especially) German interests is likely to be softer on both China and Russia, it will allow the UK to demonstrate the potential of an “independent” foreign policy in a way that will be attractive to many across the left-right and Brexit divide. The UK's version of the U.S. “Magnitsky Act” is an early example of a broadly popular foreign policy measure which (unlike some other claimed benefits of Brexit) would not have been possible if the UK had remained in the EU.

That said, no second-order (or even first-order) power can afford to work

only with those who share its democratic values. To achieve strategic objectives in 2021 and beyond, Britain and its Western allies should bear in mind that they have no interest in driving Russia into China's arms, and they equally cannot afford (literally) to “contain” China in a way that might once have worked with the Soviet Union. However much is said about values, foreign policy will remain the messy business of dealing with the hostile as well as the friendly. In an age of social media-enhanced campaigning, it would help if national governments made more explicit that engagement is almost always to be preferred to isolation and that dialogue does not imply acceptance or compromise.

Thirdly, foreign policy should be ethical but not moralistic, especially not moralistic with force. Operating to high moral standards around the world should always be the aim. Preaching, bullying, and bombing others to behave like us shouldn't. We celebrate diversity at home and need to be prepared to promote a pluralistic approach abroad. Perhaps less time spent in Brussels committee rooms can wean British diplomats off an excess of “declaratory diplomacy” with hectoring statements on every international development. Sanctions should be used sparingly too: they are better than war, but they are also less effective than patient engagement and often harmful to ordinary citizens. It is time, perhaps, to return to diplomacy

as “jaw jaw” rather than an unrelenting campaigning machine.

Fourthly, diplomacy, development, and international trade should work hand in hand so that we can do well by doing good. The merger of the UK foreign (FCO) and aid (DFID) ministries should translate into an unashamed acceptance that aid policy is in lockstep with foreign policy. When public money is spent, there is no case for “semi-detached” aid sending out mixed signals. A separate “aid” objective, detached from foreign policy, is also at risk of being directed by the producer interests of aid providers, a particular concern in a country such as the UK, which (even after recent reductions) has one of the world's largest aid programs (it now stands at 0.5 percent of GNP). We should also be unashamed in arguing that trade is often the best way of doing good at home and abroad. When the UK adopts policies on climate change or free trade, there should be a clear process linking policy to domestic interests.

Finally, we should continue to be flexible about the best means to achieve foreign policy goals. With a Biden White House, the U.S. pendulum appears to be swinging back towards multilateralism, but only so far. Britain should not be “holier than thou” in supporting blocked or unreformable multilateral mechanisms because we can't bear to keep away. Bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral

diplomacy all have their place. It always pays to be as inclusive as possible, but it's the result that counts, not the mechanism.

ELEMENTS OF AMBITION

How should an upper-middle power like the UK go about pursuing an ambitious foreign policy in the 2020s? What are the essential elements, domestic, and outward-looking? What effect will Brexit have on these elements?

First, there is a need for a creative rethinking of the UK relationship with the EU. It goes without saying that the UK should aspire to a good relationship with close neighbors with whom it has much in common. This relationship should be neither an attempt—as Theresa May apparently sought—to preserve as much as possible of the old structure and mindset, nor a desire to deviate as a matter of principle.

The UK's absence from the EU will certainly have an impact in one specific sense. One of the main ways in which the EU seeks to maintain its influence in the world is through its regulatory regimes and standards. Outside the room, Britain will not be able to influence their evolution. Traditionally, under multiple governments Britain was successful in steering the EU in a more free-market and less *dirigiste* direction than many of its continental members would naturally have adopted. With the greater use in recent years of qualified majority voting and

the rise in the power of the European Parliament this became more difficult. More trade-offs became necessary, with the consequence that even if the UK did not seem to be “losing votes” more frequently, it had to acquiesce to more decisions that it would not have taken by itself.

Following the conclusion of the EU/UK Free Trade Agreement, the UK will need to make a success of the trade-off between autonomy and access/influence by being prepared to diverge where it makes sense while accepting (and perhaps influencing indirectly) EU regulation in other areas. One of the most important benefits of Brexit is that it will be necessary for Britain to have this debate—for example, whether to adopt lighter regulation on new technologies or tougher animal welfare rules—far more openly than when regulation was decided in Brussels and “parliamentary scrutiny” of EU legislation was an elegant fiction.

This provides an opportunity for the UK to develop a more cordial and functional relationship with its EU neighbors. In some areas, it may be prepared to be more accommodating, once freed from its fear of a “slippery slope” in which compromises on specific policies could lead to pressure for unwelcome institutional change.

Britain's new freedom to conclude trade agreements around the world will bring with it a huge opportunity to

foster wider relationships and strengthen influence for the future. Of course, there may well be areas (e.g. on food standards) in which UK governments prefer a closer relationship with the EU than with, say the United States or India, but if so they will be able to make those choices freely and explicitly, subject to Parliamentary and public accountability.

On foreign policy, the UK will need to work with individual EU member states to pursue shared interests. The most useful foreign policy conversations are likely to be had in Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and so on rather than in Brussels. Some argue that the UK should aim to channel its engagement through joint institutions in the way envisaged by Theresa May. But there are dangers in this approach. The “institutional EU” is too often focused on building its own power rather than solving the challenges at hand. The UK will on many occasions want to be with the EU, but on others—sometimes with respect to Russia and China, most obviously—we will want to differ, at least on balance and degree. There may be a case for a partnership council on foreign affairs, just as the EU has dialogues with many regional powers. But the last thing UK diplomacy needs is an unending series of EU coordination processes drawing energy and creativity from policymaking, encouraging diplomats to keep their eyes on Brussels rather than the world beyond.

There will be many areas for fruitful cooperation between the UK and the EU. In the Western Balkans the UK will be content to support from a distance the continued EU ambitions of the region, while complementing its engagement with active contributions to a range of reform and development initiatives, both bilaterally and through its membership of NATO and the OSCE. If, as is not inconceivable, the EU integration process stalls, the UK will be in a good position to contribute to finding a durable alternative.

Another practical consequence of Brexit will be that British ministers no longer sit around the Brussels table with their European counterparts. On the one hand, they will need to make more explicit effort to maintain relationships, always difficult in a political system where British ministers' time for overseas visits competes (more so than for some of their counterparts) with a heavy agenda of Government, Parliamentary, and constituency commitments. Perhaps a post-pandemic world—with what is almost certainly to include a greater emphasis on virtual diplomacy—will come to their aid. But a considered and well-prepared bilateral visit can still have greater impact than a brush-past in Brussels. To realize the opportunities, Britain should follow the French example of investing time and resource in inward and outward bilateral visits.

MEANS TO PURSUE?

Does the UK have the means to pursue this ambitious agenda? This is the essence of influence: a combination of political and economic strength at home and a portfolio of tangible and intangible assets deployed internationally, as well as the creativity to do so effectively.

Domestically, the disruptions of Brexit notwithstanding, the central assumption is that the UK will remain a broadly prosperous economy at the free-trade and sound money end of the Western world, which will presumably as a whole move more in the direction of protectionism and debt-fueled public spending. The long-term effects of COVID-19 on the economy, combined with the fact that Johnson's majority depends on Members of Parliament elected by former Labour Voters (the so-called "Red Wall" constituencies), will lead to an enlarged public sector which will threaten entrepreneurialism, but this should be containable.

The big unknown is the constitutional fallout of Brexit accelerating centrifugal trends within the United Kingdom. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland, in very different ways, look less securely tied to the UK than at any time in modern history. It is quite possible that the Scottish (devolved) Parliamentary elections in May 2021 will give an overall majority to the Scottish National

Party, which would treat such a vote as a mandate to hold another independence referendum, bringing it into loud conflict with Johnson's Government in London. But there is no certainty that a referendum will be held in the medium term or that, if it were, it would lead to independence. Paradoxically, while Brexit may have strengthened pro-independence sentiment in Scotland, it was Britain's status in the EU that made it possible at least to claim that independence could be achieved smoothly with all the benefits and none of the disadvantages. In the event of another referendum, it will now be much harder to provide convincing answers to vital questions, from a "hard border" between Scotland and England and the currency options for an independent Scotland.

In Northern Ireland, pressures for a "border poll" (on the question of unification with the Republic of Ireland, provided for under certain circumstances in the Good Friday Agreement) will grow, but are unlikely to reach a decisive point in the medium term.

An unknown at this stage is how far either challenge will distract the UK from pursuing an active international policy or reduce its credibility in doing so. Clearly if the situation became unstable and outside players were invited in some way to participate—as America did in facilitating the Anglo-Irish Agreement—the UK would risk

becoming an *object* of diplomacy, making it harder to remain an active *subject*. But we are not there yet, if at all.

In seeking to interpret the prospects for constitutional upheaval, it is worth noting that, in addition to the voices of Scottish and Northern Irish nationalists, some strong British pro-EU campaigners are inclined to talk up the risks that the UK will break up as evidence of the folly of Brexit. How Remainers will behave in the event of a real challenge, or what influence they will have, is one of the many unknowns at this early stage of the debate. For now, none of this looks like a major brake on the UK's foreign policy aspirations.

Internationally, influence is about the need for a long-term perspective, building relationships, and making oneself useful to those one wants to influence. The UK can bring breadth through its global diplomatic presence and membership of key international organizations, without the risk of casting a shadow as a "global policeman," provided of course that it avoids the temptation to resort quickly to declaratory or interventionist activism. It can consciously build on a longer-term and more sensitive approach, while focusing clearly on the enduring pillars of its foreign policy: adherence to Western, liberal, democratic, and free-trading values. Its reputation—mixed, certainly, but still overwhelmingly positive—is there to be leveraged.

The UK's armed forces, diplomatic and intelligence services, along with its membership of the UN Security Council and an aid budget that remains one of the largest in the world, mean that it still has something to say about the world, and can—most often working with others—do something about it. British contribution to science and technology has recently been shown to be disproportionate to its size. While the State has a role, these achievements are significantly private and almost entirely unrelated to the Government of the day. As is so much of what the UK can bring to the party, from the English language (as valuable as ever in international diplomacy) and Shakespeare to the Beatles and the Premier League. "Despite Brexit," bankers are working hard to stay in the UK and unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers make great efforts to come. At both ends of the spectrum, Britain still has pulling power.

There are many among Britain's friends who believe that it has made the wrong choice in leaving the EU. But they will move on quickly and want to know what, with its new status, it plans to contribute. Brexit is a major change, but it is unlikely either to make or break the UK. Only continued hard work and effective diplomacy can make the difference. And in that respect, in the world of the twenty-first century, Britain is no exception. ●

CAN WE FORECAST THE 2020s...

OR ARE WE JUST GOOD AT PREDICTING THE PAST?

Gordan Grlić Radman

THEORETICIANS in the field of international relations often commiserate that their discipline is only good at predicting the past. This paradoxical notion has been prevalent especially since the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving many to wonder if an international event of *that* magnitude cannot be predicted, then what can be?

The daily grind of activities, a never-ending news cycle, and a constant stream of unexpected events constrict the abilities of world leaders, ministers, diplomats, and foreign policy experts alike. Looking beyond the horizon of daily events has always been challenging, and our predictions, even the most imaginative ones, often fail to capture the true shape of future events. Still, the fact that international relations are complex and uncertain

does not mean we should not try to gauge its future state; when doing so, we simply need to couch our ambition with a dose of humility.

HISTORY IS BACK

To reaffirm this general sense of unpredictability, one simply needs to summarize the current moment in which we find ourselves. We are in a midst of a prolonged lockdown due to a global pandemic; democracy stared into the abyss at the U.S. Capitol; the UK formally left the European Union roundtable; the annexation of Crimea has threatened Europe's security order, and the rise of China has been upending the international system as we have known it. In other words, the global pandemic has locked us down, the insurrection in the United States has shocked us, the British

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Photo: mvep.hr

withdrawal from the EU has exhausted us, the Crimea annexation has distressed us, and China's rise has challenged us. Taken together, the state of world affairs today could not be more different than what past predictions about the "end of history" used to suggest.

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: have we indeed come full-circle from the lulling notion of the unstoppable march of democracy and free market capitalism, to the point of confronting the internal vulnerability of free societies and a rising tide of authoritarianism?

Beyond all the aforementioned unexpected events, the COVID-19 pandemic is now coming to be seen as the ultimate stress test of our times. The entire short-term effects of the spread of this virus on our societies are still unknown—let alone its long-term consequences; but there is already a clear impression that the pandemic has exacerbated a number of previously visible negative trends. The increasing role of state interventionism and growing market protectionism, anti-globalization impulses, disinformation and fake news campaigns, and sharpening competition between governing models of free

and controlled societies have all been amplified by the pandemic.

While temporary measures restricting our daily lives and distorting free markets are indeed necessary from the standpoint of both public health and economic logic, the world's democracies should start to back away from the gravitational pull of permanent protectionism. The hard-won and patiently-built freedoms that have fueled post-World War II prosperity need reaffirmation, restoration, and strengthening in the post-pandemic period to come. We should not necessarily rush this effort, as we continue to balance between public health and other priorities, but the intent and trajectory of our political commitment to fully restore and reinvigorate our freedoms should be clearly stated.

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The present pandemic will, hopefully, be brought under control soon, but it has already ushered in a new normal, and our efforts should be geared toward making this new reality more, not less, free and prosperous. An uneasy and at the same time somewhat paradoxically soothing lesson of history is that connections within and between societies tend to become stronger in the aftermath of

major catastrophes such as wars, violent revolutions, or previous pandemics. We should not make this one an exception to the rule.

The 2020s will be a defining one for the trends we witness playing out today, but it would serve us well to remember that the ultimate result is far from certain and remains within our ability to influence. The lessons of the three post-Cold War decades have taught us of the need to reexamine the accuracy of the models we have used, readjust approaches we have pursued, and improve policies we have enacted. While most of us were under the impression that we were leaving history in the rearview mirror, we have slammed into its new and evermore confusing version. Clearly, auto-pilot is not an option in world affairs. It is high time we switch out of it.

A LOOK AHEAD

In forecasting the landscape of 2020s, some major themes can help us navigate our thinking. These are not all new items on the agenda, but their shaping in the current decade will take place under changed circumstances. These major themes interlink domestic, regional, and global aspects of future foreign policymaking; they are, however, only indicative and far

from constituting an exhaustive list of forces that will ultimately shape future events. How successfully we navigate these problem-sets will not only determine the overall dynamics of this decade in many ways; they will also provide insight into those that follow. To that end, each of these major indicative themes will be briefly discussed in what follows.

First, *strengthening democracy*. To put it simply, what happens inside our respective democratic societies matters. A diverse set of political, economic, and security risks continue to undermine democracy, which depends on a steadfast political commitment to the nurturing of democratic institutions and the development of a democratic political culture. The rising trends of populism, radicalization, inequality, and ever-present disinformation cannot serve as a solid basis for democratic societies. The urban-rural divide is deepening, further expanding the gap between the city-dwelling elite and the rest of society. The old destructive patterns are now further intensified by new technologies, fueling division, mistrust, and spectacle in our politics. These trends will not be easily reversed; but as a starting point, there must be an acceptance by all political actors that

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None of our democracies are perfect, but what is more important is that we recommit ourselves to a patient and continuous effort of making them ever more so. The 2020s need to be a decade of democratic reconstruction in free societies, if these societies are ultimately to thrive. Safeguarding and strengthening our own democracy at home is also clear and necessary prerequisite for promoting it abroad.

Second, *defending democracy*. The European Union, as a community of nations built on joint values, has a fundamental interest in strengthening democracy, upholding international law, and promoting human rights around the world. Democratic backsliding continued in 2020, which was a bad year for democracy worldwide. According to the well-respected Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, almost 70 percent of countries included in the study recorded a decline in their overall score, and the global average score fell to its lowest level since the index was launched in 2006. Clearly, the negative effects of the pandemic are partially to blame, but evidence of

broader negative trends toward democratic backsliding preceded the pandemic by over a decade.

If we have learned any lessons about the limits of liberal interventionism, it is that we should be more modest in expecting overnight changes in countries that have been developing for decades under different societal, political, and economic models. Still, there are past positive examples that remind us there is no predetermined outcome for any given country. Setbacks and negative trends will be recurrent: we see them in our own societies, but we should not allow for them to become a norm or a trend in the upcoming decade. In this sense, we look forward to the May 2021 launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the new U.S. administration's proposal to hold an international Summit for Democracy during President Joe Biden's first year in office. Both of these initiatives will contribute to gaining momentum for democracies worldwide to renew the consensus within and between their respective societies, and also to recommit to the shared goal of a more democratic world.

Third, *the future is green and digital*. Just as the pandemic was emerging in our societies, the European

Union made a momentous pronouncement through the announcement of a European Green Deal: a commitment to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent. With it, the European Union has made a first and necessary step of turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities, charting a clear way for a just and inclusive green transition.

Mainstreaming the green economy has an important foreign policy element. European gas emissions do not stop at our external borders, and the same applies to those of all other countries. It should also apply to solidarity, both within and beyond the Union. The Western Balkans, as the EU's closest neighboring region, stands to benefit from its own Green Agenda. Correspondingly, the overall accession process of the countries of the Western Balkans will now have an even more pronounced green transition component. As one of the continent's more ecologically-preserved and tourist-oriented countries, Croatia has an existential interest in Europe's successful green energy transition as well as in helping its neighbors along the way.

Understandably, the current pandemic has taken away some of the focus from the European Green Deal; but there is little doubt that the 2020s will

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challenges into opportunities, charting a clear way for a just and inclusive green transition.

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be a decade in which this monumental task is enshrined as one of the major domestic and foreign policy priorities for our continent and the world.

Similarly, as we spend ever more time communicating in a virtual world, the importance of digital infrastructure and the rules regulating it have become increasingly evident. Business opportunities, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, freedom of expression, private data protection, and numerous other aspects and values, all clash and coexist as part of our now increasingly digital lives. As with the green transition, the EU's aim in the digital sphere is to lead the way and to become a global role model for the digital economy. Developing digital standards and promoting them internationally has been, and will continue to be, intertwined in foreign policy actions of the EU and its member states.

Taken together, the green transition and the digital revolution present clear pointers for progress in the next decade. Both will require robust intra-European and broader multilateral cooperation in setting regulatory standards and practices that will benefit our citizens, societies, and the global community.

As a regulatory superpower, the EU has a clear role to play in setting the rules that will preserve working, security, ecological, and other standards of free societies.

Fourth, *everything is geopolitical (again)*. These days, the almost naive expectation that unimpeded globalization will result in unifying conditions for international trade and cooperation has given way to ruptures due to a resurgence of geopolitical consideration. The prominent example of 5G technology or contested energy projects like Nord Stream 2 serve as foreshadowing to the upcoming "battle of standards." This is far from the first time that geopolitics is inserting itself in economic affairs. However, today's stakes are even higher, as some of the new technologies that guide our domestic affairs are now part of these wider geopolitical battles. In essence, our daily lives have become a matter of geopolitics.

As a regulatory superpower, the EU has a clear role to play in setting the rules that will preserve working, security, ecological, and other standards of free societies. Crafting these rules and norms will require a broadening scope of foreign policy expertise which goes beyond traditional and narrow notions of foreign affairs. As a member state of the European Union, Croatia will seek to strengthen this effort as well as work to create a level playing field and good practices for all international investments. Our guiding line in this effort

should be, as much as possible, to aim for win-win solutions.

Fifth, *no alternative to EU enlargement*. The current decade also needs to be an enlargement decade for the EU

and the Western Balkans. The European Union's enlargement policy has suffered from a multitude of internal and external crises, but the strategic notion that the Western Balkans has a clear European integration perspective has been maintained.

As protracted as it may sometimes seem, the fact is that the accession process has not ground to a halt. A European perspective still anchors the region, but there is a clear need for an even stronger recommitment to enlargement on the part of the EU and its member states, on the one hand, and the candidate and aspirant countries, on the other.

Such a recommitment should start by clearly dispelling certain myths surrounding the EU enlargement process. It is an indisputable fact that EU enlargement has benefited the entire continent immensely in security, economic, and social terms. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the vision of a unified Europe was one amongst many other possible options, and more sinister scenarios could have just as easily prevailed. Slobodan Milošević's wars for Greater

Serbia offer a stark reminder in that respect. Today's Europe is more prosperous, stable, and at peace because of the EU's enlargement policy, and it should not be made a victim of its own success.

Today's Europe is more prosperous, stable, and at peace because of the EU's enlargement policy, and it should not be made a victim of its own success.

Moreover, the European Union's own global ambitions should be underpinned by its ability to stabilize and integrate an integral part of the European continent, namely the Western Balkans. The EU needs to be able to honor its com-

mitment when the region delivers on needed reforms, both during the accession process as well as with respect to the admission of Western Balkan countries as full EU member states. Croatia's example—whose own integration process lasted more than a decade and took place against the background of an increasingly complex environment—can serve as encouragement to those that follow to persist with necessary reforms.

During its recent EU Presidency, Croatia kept the enlargement perspective high on the European agenda and we will continue to be a voice for inclusion in the time ahead. Croatia's own, the region's, and wider European interests should guide us during the 2020s towards a finalization of the successful integration of the Western Balkans for the benefit of all.

Sixth, *diplomacy matters*. The current pandemic has reminded us again of the value of diplomacy and we have learned the hard way that direct human interaction cannot be supplanted through Zoom or Webex calls and meetings. We have learned to adapt, and these new methods of diplomatic work still allow us to improve further, but the fact remains that the ancient art of diplomacy simply requires direct human interaction if it is to fully develop and deliver. Properly staffing and budgeting our external services should be one of the takeaways of the pandemic as we embark on a decade rife with challenges and opportunities alike.

CROATIA'S TRAJECTORY

As we enter the new decade, even the partial list of tasks presented above is far from simple. Our success will require nothing less than political determination, economic mastery, new ways of thinking about public policy, finding better ways to connect with our fellow citizens, increasing levels of international cooperation and, as always, a bit of luck and determination.

In this context, the example of Croatia may be useful to keep in mind. As a rule, negative daily news cycles tend to overtake and overshadow the overall positive longer-term but perhaps less tangible trends. Croatia's own trajectory in modern times offers one example of long-term progress underpinned by

clear strategic choices, a commitment to democracy, the values of freedom, and faith in its own abilities.

Since the fall of communism in Europe, Croatia has had to fight an independence war that was in turn followed by a complex transition that spanned the whole of political, economic, and social life. In rebuilding and reforming, as the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, we were guided by a clear notion of belonging to the European family of nations. Along our EU integration path—and now as a full EU member state—we have greatly benefited from this vision of European integration and its main principle of European solidarity.

Three decades ago, Croatia's current position in the international community was far from preordained. We could have made other, less prudent choices, and Europe could have developed in other, less benevolent ways. It was a mutual commitment to pursue this particular version of the future that brought us to this point in time—one in which a country that had hosted foreign peacekeepers on its territory has now become a security provider in its neighborhood and elsewhere. Furthermore, Croatia's newly-built Krk LNG terminal is now adding to the EU's strategic autonomy through energy diversification. And finally, Croatia's open and technology-friendly environment has launched one of the fastest electric cars in the world.

Croatia's success is not mentioned here for its own sake, but rather as a reminder that the values we hold dear actually work when we commit ourselves to them. EU integration and solidarity works, human rights and freedoms matter, and strategic goals are achievable if we clearly set out and follow them. Our future choices are only ours to make.

Clearly, auto-pilot is not an option in world affairs. It is high time we switch out of it.

Croatia's example is also a reminder that in facing the challenges of the 2020s, we do not necessarily need to reinvent the foreign policy wheel: the clear principles that have guided Europe and the West since the disasters of World War II continue to be valid. There is no reason why democracy, freedom, and human rights should be less desirable in our times. The past generations have made many, and some have even made the ultimate sacrifice, to keep these in place for us and future generations. Today, all we are asked to do is to simply recommit to these same values that have guided us well so far.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

As the amount of interactions in our increasingly interconnected world dramatically increases, history accelerates too. We have not overcome history—quite the contrary, in fact: we produce too much history. The international

system is rearranging itself too fast for the existing institutional network to respond adequately. This is the challenge to which diplomats need to rise. The 2020s will undoubtedly solidify the already visible trends around us.

As always in the course of human affairs, the outcome is not, and need not be, a straightforward one. All members of the international community—governments, organizations, and enterprises alike—have a stake and a role to play. By adding all our voices to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, we will be able to build a more prosperous future for all.

In the coming decade, Croatia will continue to contribute to the Euro-Atlantic project, and will remain a steadfast voice in favor of the strategically important integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union. We will do so not only because it serves our interest, but as a way of passing along to our neighbors the promise of European integration and European solidarity which has been extended to us.

Jointly, we stand facing both challenges and opportunities stemming from the already ongoing green and digital transitions. Our most immediate task is to chart a path which develops and makes use of new technologies in ways

that do not infringe on our longstanding principles: green technologies ought to lift everyone up, not leave some behind; social media should be enriching, rather than tearing apart our social fabric; and digital technologies should be standardized in a way that would preserve our freedom of choice and establish a level playing field for all. All of these challenges require sustained and meaningful international cooperation: further multilateralizing our efforts (to coin a term) can only mean achieving better outcomes for everyone.

If it is indeed the case that at the beginning of the 2020s we are entering into a competition of systems between free and controlled societies, we should find comfort in the notion that the values we have defended in the past also equip us well for the future. We should not run away from what lies ahead. Instead, we should aspire to shape it to the best of our abilities, in order to not only avoid the known pitfalls of the 1920s, but more importantly, to fully harness the as-yet unknown opportunities of the 2020s. ●



THE NEXT CLASH OF IDEAS?

HOW PERCEPTIONS OF JUSTICE MAY SHAPE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IN THE 2020S

Mikhail Troitskiy

AT the start of the 2020s, domestic political debates within democratic societies are heating up and at times radicalizing. The middle ground in such debates has been waning for more than a decade, while both left and right wings of the political spectrum have become increasingly vindictive, manipulative, and uncompromising. Traditional conservatism is now flirting with populism, while liberalism is at the risk of being monopolized by emancipatory rhetoric and almost unbounded demands for entitlements by disadvantaged groups on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

Unlike the times of the Cold War when confrontation between the superpowers, in part fueled by ideological differences, divided societies across the Third World, today's domestic polarization is not induced

by global trends. In most cases, the sources of current polarization are purely domestic. They include economic grievance and the tension between equality for all from the perspective of political rights, on one hand, and the growing inequality among the same people from the perspective of accumulated wealth, incomes, and actual ability to have their voices heard, on the other. But can the reverse dynamic also occur whereby domestic divisions lead to intensified competition of ideas at the level of international community?

Indeed, precarious politics create what Dartmouth's William C. Wohlforth calls the "temptation of subversion" among rival powers that may seek to fan the flames of domestic partisanship to undermine their opponents by weakening their social cohesion. This is one way in which domestic polarization

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Photo: CIRSD

Lady Justice personified: will debates about her role define the 2020s?

may play out in international politics, but are there any other—perhaps more direct—avenues?

I argue that the rhetoric of justice, which seems to be driving much of the domestic political scene in economically advanced and developing countries alike, will increasingly spill over and impact international politics. If this dynamic continues at the current pace into the 2020s, it will be my candidate for the most influential single trend in international politics of the new decade because of the strength of the domestic contradictions in major countries that their

governments and people will not be able to ignore.

It will, however, take a more subtle form than the "class struggle" that was instigated internationally by Soviet Russia and later the USSR as an idea for obtaining justice after October 1917—in the 1920s, economically advanced societies adapted relatively quickly to fend off the risks of a successful communist coup and a global proletarian revolution. The rest of the world left such possibility behind at least 35 years ago after the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev acknowledged the shared goal of survival for the West and the East.

The coming clash of justice principles will now be more complicated than a showdown between advancing democracy and lingering authoritarianism. While democracy has made major strides since the fall of the Berlin Wall, transition—as it was expected to look like—stalled in many countries, fresh attempts at cascade democratization (such as the Arab Spring) did not bring immediate results, and some nations registered a rollback on democracy altogether. Indeed, the next global clash of ideas with material consequences—as it is likely to develop in the 2020s—will not happen exactly along the lines of representative versus unrepresentative government or open versus closed political systems.

Domestic discord and the unraveling of the social fabric may lead to bouts of inter-faith or inter-civilizational strife in the international arena. That, however, is likely to happen only in cases of fragile societies in developing countries, with fallout only reaching regional scale. The most prominent example in the twenty-first century has been the massive—but eventually contained—regional security crisis in the Middle East and the rise of ISIS that happened as a result of civil conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

The most powerful ideas-driven international dynamic is likely to be the building of coalitions around competing principles of justice. These principles will be instrumentalized by major powers and their alliances with the goal of enlisting support for their competing agendas. To win the competition, each side will try to tilt the balance of global public opinion towards its “own” interpretation of justice and then leverage this interpretation to increase support or neutralize resistance to this side’s interests and policies.

The rhetoric of justice, which seems to be driving much of the domestic political scene in economically advanced and developing countries alike, will increasingly spill over and impact international politics.

The competition of ideas of justice in the 2020s is likely to be soft; it will not achieve the fever pitch of the Cold-War ideological rivalry. However, the outcome of some contests of justice narratives may shape the security landscape in a number of regions as well as globally.

JUSTICE ENTERS THE GAME

Major domestic events and trends have a long history of affecting international politics in earlier decades. Indeed, proving causal links is usually impossible. However, the interplay is clear in many cases.

The main event of the 1990s that set the stage for both domestic and

international politics in the rest of the decade was the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its alliances across the globe. The ensuing peace dividend reinforced by fast technological progress spurred an array of economic and social trends known as globalization. These trends could have hardly made the same impact on the world if the USSR and most of its allies stayed aloof—preoccupied with maintaining stability of their regimes and working against globalization that would have no doubt been seen by them as a threat to their closed societies.

The most powerful ideas-driven international dynamic is likely to be the building of coalitions around competing principles of justice.

The first decade of the new millennium writ large was shaped by multi-vector domestic political transitions in the Middle East: marginalization of groups that morphed into transnational terrorist movements, attempts to remove old regimes during the Arab Spring, and build a new political framework in Iraq. On the international level that led, after 9/11, to a wave of U.S., allied, and—later on—Russian interventions and protracted civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Despite the tragedy and drama, this did not bring about tectonic shifts in the Middle East or the adjacent South Asia, with all major divides—Arab-Israeli, Sunni-Shia, India-Pakistan—remaining in place.

In the 2010s, key domestic events—the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency on his platform of economic nationalism and Xi Jinping’s decision to stay in power in China beyond the usual two terms while accelerating the country’s emergence as a major international player—led to resurgent great power politics and increased interest towards balancing against the United States. That balancing has involved not only the usual suspects, namely China and Russia, but also allies. Among them, not only Turkey is overtly asserting views and interests that often run counter to those of Washington, but even France and Germany seem to be balking at the United States and are not in a hurry to leave behind the transatlantic contradictions and divisions of the Trump era. Yet a broad coalition determined to challenge the United States is not shaping up. While significant, the overlap among the opponent agendas is still insufficient to undergird a decisive move against the superpower. All of that sets the stage for a new round of domestic developments that will have a direct impact on how the rivalry will play out over the 2020s.

As the new great-power game is unfolding, its major participants rarely use the language of confrontation. Instead they tend to declare commitment

to negotiated solutions to any security, economic, and other issues arising among them. At the same time, great powers are looking for ideological arguments and rhetorical tools to enhance domestic mobilization, facilitate coordination within the government apparatus, and rally support for their actions among other members of the international community. As a key part of such efforts, international players—big and small—have long been working to embed their positions, postures, and strategies in a discourse of justice. As will be seen from the examples below, they look at justice from

The quest to increase the appeal of a nation's foreign policy and, more specifically, negotiating posture through embedding them in a specific justice discourse leads to interaction between, if not a clash of, conceptions of justice.

the angle of their respective entitlements that they usually frame in ethical terms. These actors then assert that justice will be served if what they consider their entitlements are met by other actors.

In the words of the negotiation scholar I. William Zartman, negotiating parties look for “formulas” that lay the foundation for their postures and then try to find a mutually satisfactory “formula.” Justice has been a particularly strong anchor for these “formulas,” perspectives, positions, and strategies because justice is broadly seen as a powerful ethical notion that arouses people’s emotions, generates sympathies, and incites them

to collective action. The Soviet Union and the United States wasted no opportunity to frame their positions on the world stage in the terms of justice—not just for themselves, but for broad groups of countries that they were looking to recruit as allies. However, the rhetoric

of justice—and ideology writ large—are generally considered to have been secondary to geopolitics during the Cold War. In any case, interest towards justice as an anchor outlived the era of global geopolitical confrontation. The language of ethically-grounded entitlement and justice is being widely used in a much more complex,

multipolar, and non-linear world of the twenty-first century. For example, a 2018 paper by Russian international affairs experts led by Andrey Sushentsov that sought to exert influence on actual policymaking explicitly proposed placing the notion of justice at the heart of Russia’s foreign policy rhetoric. Indeed, as two leading Russia hands at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace indicated in a recent article, the “message of a historic injustice that fate dealt Russia, the country that more than any other was responsible for defeating fascism, [...] became the cornerstone of the new national narrative and of Putin’s foreign policy.”

The quest to increase the appeal of a nation’s foreign policy and, more specifically, negotiating posture through embedding them in a specific justice discourse leads to interaction between, if not a clash of, conceptions of justice. This happens as the dividing lines between competing positions in the key debates in international politics have become manifest

One of the key factors that we need to predict when building forecasts for the 2020s is the extent of restraint that is likely to be exercised by major powers.

and the game of recruiting supporters for each perspective has begun. Outcomes of many of those debates will therefore set long-term trends in international politics. The outcomes will depend on the relative acceptance by neutral states of the rival conceptions of justice. By “acceptance” in this context I mean the extent to which a view of what is just is shared by the policymaking elites as well as broader groups of people in those states.

Perceptions of justice may also affect and change the established patterns of action in standard situations, such as a trade dispute or a cyberattack. Aggravating global challenges—climate change and pandemics—instigate debates about justice as it becomes commonly invoked in relation to the distribution of collective costs and benefits. Justice-conscious players then apply their cherished conceptions of justice to other domains, including bilateral interactions with their counterparts.

The leveraging of justice by international players—big and small, acting unilaterally or in concert—is likely to be one of the key trends of the 2020s.

JUSTICE IN CONFLICTS AND NON-PROLIFERATION

One of the key factors that we need to predict when building forecasts for the 2020s is the extent of restraint that is likely to be exercised by major powers. Do we expect the speed of conflict escalation to rise, or are the players becoming more inclined to consider and implement response options later—for exam-

ple, not until reaching a reliable judgment about the real scale of the attack and attackers’ intentions? Escalation scenarios will become very widespread in multi-domain conflicts—involving military, cyber, financial, diplomatic, and other tools simultaneously—that are so complex that no pre-meditated strategy of conduct in such conflict will work beyond the first or second move. Escalation uncertainties will require broadly accepted guiding principles that could prevent conflicts from spiraling out of control. Perceptions of justice appear a promising source of such principles.

Proclivity to respond immediately and forcefully depends primarily on the scale of the attack (is there simply time

to think before we are destroyed?), the calculation of risk arising from each response option, and—most importantly—on the assessment of credibility loss short of a demonstration of direct and clear link between attack and retaliation which seems to be a rational factor. However, the way we calculate risks is underpinned by our choice: whether our undisputed entitlement to respond immediately and proportionately may be outweighed by larger benefits from an alternative course of action that would not involve reciprocity, symmetrical or not.

Given the relatively high stakes, the debate around the future of nuclear weapons may eventually boil down to a contest between conceptions of entitlement and justice.

For example, if potential ripple effects from an immediate counterattack—for example, in the cyber domain—may not just punish the attacker, but also harm or put at risk the cyber infrastructure of a large number of other states that were not responsible for the initial attack, serving justice may require refraining from immediate escalation. Even if no government is likely to forswear the right to reciprocity in an official doctrinal document, a broad discussion of the shared goal of survival—along the lines of Mikhail Gorbachev’s “new political thinking” of the late 1980s—may consolidate the belief that the global community has a bigger entitlement to avoiding catastrophic risks from great power conflict

escalation than any of those great powers are entitled to tit-for-tat interactions with no clear boundaries.

Another key debate in global politics—the outcome of which will depend on the dominant interpretation of justice—is focused on the future of nuclear weapons and other indiscriminate means of mass destruction. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force in January 2021, effectively pitting scores of influential states demanding a quick

phase-out of nuclear weapons against the nations that possess—and at times brandish—these weapons. The long trend which involves rising pressure on major nuclear weapon states towards disarmament will continue in the 2020s.

Nuclear non-proliferation has hinged on the assumption that non-nuclear weapon states—and the international community as a whole—will be better served by the strict limits on the number of states possessing nuclear weapons. The logic has been that everyone’s—not just nuclear-weapon states’—security is better ensured when only five states are allowed to have nuclear bombs. In other words, the imperative of global security trumps the justice principle of equality. The abolition

movement removes the contradiction between the two principles and harnesses them both to the cause of nuclear prohibition. Even Iran—a country suspected by many of not ruling out the option of building the bomb—played with the possibility of acceding to TPNW at the time when its 2015 nuclear deal with P5+1 was in force.

Indeed, it is attractive to ground one’s positions on key global issues and trends in the widely accepted notions of justice. Such bid is difficult to counter for the states that rely on the rhetoric of justice and shared benefit in their foreign policy doctrines. For example, while the United States and Russia—the owners of the bulk of global nuclear weapons stockpile—are likely to keep dismissing the quest for “nuclear zero” at a limited cost to their international standing, China may turn out to be more sensitive to demands for scaling back China’s advanced nuclear-capable weaponry. Such demands may come from China’s neighbors in Asia as well as developing countries across the globe. Given the relatively high stakes, the debate around the future of nuclear weapons may eventually boil down to a contest between conceptions of entitlement and justice.

CROSSING BORDERS

Another key trend that will be shaping global politics in the 2020s is the reaction by major international players to the handling of internal political dissent and other domestic crises by other states. The pattern of response by the international community to internal political crises triggered by the struggle for power or territory will depend on the prevailing conception of justice. Domestic groups rebelling against governments—as political opposition or secessionist movements—appeal to justice principles to rally support for their cause not only domestically, but also internationally. Appeals by opposition groups for protection from their governments are likely to become more vocal in many countries—from Asia Pacific and post-Soviet Eurasia to Latin America and the Middle East.

The clash between the right to interfere in other states’ internal affairs and unconstrained sovereignty is mirrored by the competition between the basic justice conception of equality and collective progress as a form of communitarian justice.

The clash between the right to interfere in other states’ internal affairs and unconstrained sovereignty is mirrored by the competition between the basic justice conception of equality and collective progress as a form of communitarian justice. While equality of recognized sovereign governments

means that each state is entitled to immunity from interference by other states, the global community may be equally entitled to progress understood as improvement in people's living conditions. The size and—consequently—power of coalitions of states and other actors willing to breach other states' sovereignty out of support for their suffering populations will depend on the extent of global acceptance of the notion that collective progress does better justice to any nation—understood as a group of people—than full freedom of hands for that nation's government. In other words, ask yourself which situation is fairer from your perspective as a citizen: your government exercises unconditional sovereignty like governments of other states or you and your fellow citizens have resort to transnational norms that create inequality because they may constrain your government while empowering others. It is not an easy question, but it is likely that the 2020s will finally offer us at least a preliminary answer.

So far, the principle of nominal sovereign equality of governments has been gradually giving way to the doctrines emphasizing solidarity with suffering people irrespective of the position of their governments. Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is the core solidarity doctrine that has achieved broad recognition. In the 2000s, the UN General Assembly and

then the Security Council endorsed R2P, thereby recognizing the right of the international community to intervene in domestic crises even against the will of the governments unable to cope with serious domestic challenges or abusing their powers. However, the need for obtaining permission from the UN Security Council is accepted as a limit on interventionism.

The fate of that limit will depend on important material factors, such as the presence of actors willing to intervene in domestic crises overseas as well as these actors' calculations of the costs and benefits of intervention. But even more it will depend on the outcome—at least preliminary—of the debate on the fairness of unconstrained sovereignty. That outcome appeared almost sealed during the presidency of Donald Trump who saw an irreconcilable contradiction between multilateral solidarist agendas and the pursuit of the national interest of the United States. However, his successor U.S. President Joseph Biden has stated he plans on “revitalizing America's network of alliances and partnerships that have made the world safer for all people” in order to “shape the rules that will govern the advance of technology” and “stand up for democratic values [...] pushing back against those who would monopolize and normalize repression.” A few weeks before Biden's speech, the quintessence of the opposing view of international justice as

unconditional equality was delivered by Xi Jinping: “No two leaves in the world are identical, and no histories, cultures or social systems are the same. Each country is unique with its own history, culture and social system, and none is superior to the other [...] The right choice is for countries to pursue peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect and on expanding common ground while shelving differences, and to promote exchanges and mutual learning.” In his turn, Russian President Vladimir Putin cautioned, several years ago, against “American exceptionalism” as a motive enabling foreign policy action, including armed intervention by the United States in the domestic conflict in Syria. He concluded: “There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”

This discussion will continue into the 2020s, and the pressure on the states and organizations positioning as active international players will gradually mount, as conflicting parties on the ground issue their appeals to the competing respective justice principles. Such dynamic will increasingly galvanize major players and force their hand for a variety of reasons, including their own declared commitment to particular

justice principles as well as pragmatism. However, even reactions undertaken by cynical politicians seemingly on the basis of hard-headed conceptions of national interest may on a closer look turn out to be equally driven—if indirectly—by perceptions of justice, such as Trump's recognition Juan Guaido as the legitimate leader of Venezuela in January 2019. According to a popular interpretation, the move was aimed to beef up support for Trump in the swing state of Florida by appealing to the Cuban Americans who solidarized with the Venezuelans suffering under an oppressive regime.

While Guaido failed to seize power in Venezuela, Trump carried Florida in the November 2020 presidential election. The contribution of the Guaido decision to Trump's electoral success in Florida can hardly be measured, but in this case it is immaterial. What is important is that an American president was responding to a popular demand galvanized by transnational appeals to justice.

In any case, in the 2020s, major players may no longer enjoy the freedom to define their stance on a particular case of separatism or internal strife in other states on the basis of their naked national interest. These players will increasingly come under the influence of their own domestic groups sympathizing with one of the

conflicting parties in other states, and that will prevent the definition of seemingly faraway conflicts in terms of pragmatic national interest. Such dynamic will spark discussion focused on ethics and justice, with the winner concept driving policy—at least, until a painful reassessment in case of a conspicuous failure.

The ideas of collective entitlement to progress are gaining additional influence because of the impact of global challenges, such as climate change or pandemics. Actors seeking to estab-

lish themselves as leaders on climate change are rapidly enacting norms that have clear extraterritorial application, such as the European Union’s clean energy requirements for corporations seeking access to its market. Should the rise of green parties and agendas continue in Europe, North America, and economically advanced Asia, the notion that long-term goals of collective survival should be given priority over benefits of cheap energy and immediate corporate profits may deal a significant blow to sovereignty understood as discretion rather than responsibility.

Such effects may be reinforced by the politics of support that is likely to be

The notion that long-term goals of collective survival should be given priority over benefits of cheap energy and immediate corporate profits may deal a significant blow to sovereignty understood as discretion rather than responsibility.

eventually extended in the fight against COVID-19 to the states that are unable or unwilling to produce their own vaccines. Provision of vaccines will be linked to increased transparency of the national health systems of recipient

developing countries and may result in social protest against revealed inefficiencies.

Given the current trends, it is difficult to see how the principle of sovereign equality could in the 2020s hold the ground against the ethically attractive collective entitlement to progress.

JUSTICE IN REGIONAL SECURITY?

Another long-time international political contradiction which is framed in justice terms and which the 2020s may see at least partially resolved is the one between spheres of influence claimed by great powers in the neighboring regions, on one hand, and the right asserted by smaller states in those regions as well as off-shore powers to build alliances of their choosing. This contradiction largely underlies the relationship between the United States and Russia and—to a smaller, but still significant extent—the United States and China. Each side in the debate has for decades tried to rally support behind their respective view

of great-power neighborhoods. China has gone to great lengths to assert its right not to allow Taiwan to formally proclaim independence, probe U.S. alliances in East and Southeast Asia, and to deny the U.S. Navy freedom of maneuver in the South China Sea.

In a similar way, contradictions over multilateral governance and domestic politics in post-Soviet Eurasia have been at the core of conflicts in U.S.-Russia relations over the past two decades. Moscow has utterly disliked the prospect of post-Soviet

Eurasian republics getting closer to NATO and/or the European Union, which, according to the popular view, could only happen at the expense of Russia’s security interests. Even NATO member Turkey, having grown into an aspiring regional leader and looking to assert its autonomy of strategic and tactical decisions, is now challenging the United States in Syria, the EU in the Mediterranean, and Russia in the South Caucasus. In their turn, the United States, the European Union, and their various partners in the neighborhoods of larger powers have been claiming that every nation is entitled to a completely unconstrained choice of alliances and—more generally—foreign policy orientations.

The lack of progress in finding a way out of the long-standing “neighborhood” conflicts points to a deep incompatibility of perspectives rooted in some fundamental aspects of each side’s position.

Encoding these policy contradictions in terms of justice may strike some observers as an unusual and possibly gratuitous approach. And yet, the lack of progress in finding a way out of the long-standing “neighborhood” conflicts points to a deep incompat-

ibility of perspectives rooted in some fundamental aspects of each side’s position. While the small and medium-size neighbors relying on support from the super-power claim the equality of rights for all states, the regional powers point out the inevitability of hierarchy and emphasize

the principle of equity of contributions to regional security. Those bigger powers claim a special role in maintaining regional security—because they are capable of making a bigger contribution to resolving regional conflicts and also because—cynically speaking—if they are upset, they can create bigger security problems for the region than smaller states.

While the concerns of smaller states with potential *diktat* by the regional powers are fully legitimate, the bigger regional powers themselves—such as China, Russia, or Turkey—also have a point when expressing their own concerns with the negative impact that alliances and partnerships involving the

United States, the EU, or other major offshore powers and smaller states may have on the regional powers' security. Choosing between equality and equity as justice principles is a particularly difficult challenge. The debate on the applicability of each of those principles has been ongoing in its current form since the end of the Cold War, and the jury of global public opinion is still out.

As the risks of conflict escalation are constantly rising because of the ongoing technological innovation in foreign policy toolkits, it is difficult to see, at the start of the 2020s, how the international community may be able to afford another decade of wrangling over contested regions. These contradictions are likely to repeat themselves even if the geopolitical landscape undergoes transformation as a result of relative strengthening or weakening of some states or the emergence of new ambitious players. It is therefore likely that in the current decade we shall see attempts to address the political consequences of the contradiction between equality and equity among players in contested regions—from East and Southeast Asia to the Middle East to post-Soviet Eurasia. Such attempts may well shape the trends in the evolution of the global

security architecture and define the relative amount of international conflict and cooperation in the new decade.

One way of bridging the gap between the two principles in the areas where

It is likely that in the current decade we shall see attempts to address the political consequences of the contradiction between equality and equity among players in contested regions.

the security interests of offshore and regional powers collide may be to concede sufficient equality to smaller states worried about the behavior of their bigger regional neighbors; but at the same time for those smaller states and their offshore superpower allies to give a more equitable treatment to the regional leaders. These actual or aspiring regional leaders will need to find a form of providing acceptable security reassurances to their smaller and vulnerable neighbors—including credible rhetoric of peace, shared security challenges, increased military transparency, and fostering closer economic interdependence (instead of threatening disengagement) within respective regions. In their turn, smaller states and their offshore supporters could foster inclusive regional security solutions that would envisage the settlement of long-term conflicts and contradictions that have been creating grounds for mutual security concerns between aspiring regional leaders and their smaller neighbors. Equitable treatment of the regional leaders by their neighbors

could include, for example, refraining from fearmongering about the leaders in the domestic politics of smaller states once reasonable security reassurances have been offered.

At this time, the discussion of win-win options for regional security solutions across the vast space from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus to the Middle East and the South China Sea appears to have reached an impasse, as the sides have firmly grounded their positions in the cherished conceptions of entitlement and justice and have been unwilling to find a middle ground combining elements of each of the competing conceptions. Over the past decade, the aspiring powers—mainly China, Russia, Turkey—have been hardening their stances, while the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia have been struggling to find a response. Their reactions have been criticized by some as weak and inconsistent, and by others as provocative. In the meantime, the conflicts around Ukraine, Syria, Taiwan, and the South China Sea have shown no signs of subsiding and at times threatened to spin out of control.

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a strong chance that the 2020s will become the time when the stakeholders find a solution to the equality vs. equity dilemma in the context of regional

security. The relative success in finding a compromise between unconditional reciprocity and the avoidance of unfair collateral damage shows that grandstanding on what competing players may consider as immutable principles of justice may be a strategy with suboptimal outcomes.

JUSTICE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Academic debates about the meaning and applications of justice to international affairs have been unfolding for decades. On the level of practical politics, these debates are likely to come to a head in the 2020s when they will play an increasingly prominent role and define key outcomes in conflict resolution and addressing global challenges. The impact of conceptions of justice on international politics is rising because of increased interest among both the aspiring and status quo players in grounding their foreign policy positions in the universal ethical principles of equality, equity, effectiveness, efficiency, and others that underlie the most influential conceptions of justice. In a situation when major global divides have finally transpired after three decades of the post-Cold War transition, justice conceptions are seen as powerful reference points that can provide players with additional leverage in adjudicating the costs of combating global challenges, providing reassurances to partners, or showing resolve to rivals.

Technological progress will not slow down, making plenty of promising new instruments of statecraft available to the leaders of technologically advanced states. However, in the past, defense usually caught up with offense relatively quickly, so that technological innovation, fast military buildups, or surprise foreign policy maneuvers did not have a lasting destabilizing effect. This dynamic is unlikely to change in the 2020s when every major competitor in the international arena is doing its best not to fall behind on any breakthrough technology that may be instrumentalized for the purposes of foreign and security policy.

Propaganda understood as intentional misleading of large and/or important audiences for political purposes has also largely run its course: it has become largely detectable, and governments and private media have achieved tangible results in designing and implementing measures that reduce

the exposure of unwitting social groups to purposeful lies and manipulation. As a result, achieving an edge over peers in the traditional domains of competition becomes difficult, if at all possible. Innovation in foreign and security policy toolkits will thus shift to the domain of persuasion in inter-state negotiations and transnational outreach to broad social strata.

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Unlike propaganda, such outreach will pivot around genuine ethical principles defining stakeholder entitlements in debates and open conflicts. It will constitute a more transparent mode of engagement with limited if any hidden agendas and yet with plenty of uncertainty about the impact of competing justice conceptions on the views and opinions of leaders and general public in stakeholder states. At the end of the day, while many of those conceptions seem mutually exclusive at first glance, they may prove to be reconcilable and even complementary in particular regional and global contexts. 🌐

JEREMIĆ ADDRESSES KAZAKHSTAN'S

G-Global Plenary Session

On November 19th, 2020, CIRSD President **Vuk Jeremić** addressed the plenary session of the annual conference of the G-Global platform for cooperation, co-organized by Forte Bank and the Club de Madrid.

"I'm honored to serve as a General Advisor to the International Project of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev 'G-Global.' This initiative is designed to help the world achieve what an important UN report published during my term as President of the General Assembly defined as a "more participatory system of global economic governance." It was in this spirit that I organized a high-level thematic debate at the UN in April 2013 focusing on how significant economic actors, including IFIs as well as informal groupings such as the G20, may interact with the rest of the world in the future. One of the conclusions of the event was that the General Assembly, like the G-Global initiative, can provide inclusive platforms for all developed and developing countries to exchange views and share information on common economic concerns. Today, we face a crisis that is even greater than the one we faced then, and that's a reason the G-Global platform remains important. Vaccine availability is going to be a challenging geopolitical game because all countries have the same goal: to provide and distribute the vaccine before others. This could easily cause devastating consequences around the globe."

–Vuk Jeremić

The welcoming address to the G-Global annual conference was made by **Krymbek Kuserbayev**, State Secretary of Kazakhstan. Other plenary session speakers included **Bandar M. H. Hajjar**, President of the Islamic Development Bank; Croatia's former president **Ivo Josipović**; Belgium's former prime minister **Yves Leterme**; and Nobel Peace Prize laureate **Rae Kwon Chung**.



MASTERS OF OUR FATE

GLOBAL ORDER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

Bobo Lo

JANUARY 2021: the start of the new decade. Picture the scenes. In the United States, a far-right mob takes over the U.S. Capitol, encouraged by the outgoing president. In Russia, leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny is arrested on his return to Moscow, just months after his attempted assassination by the Russian authorities. Chinese president Xi Jinping maintains his systematic persecution of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, while ramping up military activities in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. In New Delhi, the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi sets about disenfranchising millions of Muslims through a revised Citizenship Law. In Europe, the EU is visibly struggling to cope with the consolidation of “illiberal democracies,” the rise of national populism, and Brexit.

It is hard to imagine a worse time for global governance since the end of

the Cold War. The liberal international order established in its aftermath is coming apart at the seams. Relations between Washington and Beijing are at their lowest level in half a century, as talk of a “new Cold War” becomes commonplace. The pace of global warming is accelerating, with little sign that the goals set by the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement will be met. The coronavirus pandemic continues to rage, as the number of fatalities worldwide reaches levels not seen in one hundred years. And the global economy faces its most serious crisis since the Great Depression.

So grim is the landscape that there seems little prospect of improvement in the foreseeable future. Indeed, things could get worse. U.S.-China animosity may escalate into direct confrontation. Russia’s relations with the West could see a further ratcheting of tensions over Ukraine. Global free

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“Good Defeats Evil,” a sculpture donated by the Soviet Union in 1990 depicting St. George slaying the dragon and made from fragments of American and Soviet nuclear missiles

trade is under immense pressure from protectionist and mercantilist sentiments, and globalization may give way to “decoupling” and economic autarky. Pandemics could become more frequent and devastating. And the planet will certainly get hotter as most countries remain addicted to fossil fuels.

In these circumstances, it would be natural to lapse into fatalism, to accept the inevitability of major power conflict, deglobalization, and the fracturing of the world along ideological and normative lines. This essay, however, takes a different approach. It argues that, in focusing on the (admittedly

many) negative trends in the contemporary world, we surrender too easily to the “logic” of historical determinism and underestimate the importance of human agency and free will. For nothing is inevitable, and everything has the potential to change—for better as well as for worse.

Even today, there are indications that the 2020s could yet surprise us and prove a positive decade—whether it is a new urgency in addressing anthropogenic climate change, or a dawning realization among policy elites post-coronavirus that multilateral cooperation is key to problem-solving. The original

“Roaring Twenties” were characterized by frenetic escapism and the shelving of long-term problems—a course that led to global disaster. Our task, difficult but not impossible, is to ensure that the twenty-first century version is less “roaring,” more transformative, and more constructive.

THREE ARGUMENTS

This essay maps out a post-pandemic global order as it might evolve over the coming decade. It makes three arguments.

First, the liberal, “rules-based” international order in its classic, post-Cold War form is over. But a new, post-American system has yet to emerge in its place. Today’s world is characterized by power vacuums, fluidity, and ambiguity—not a new global order, but a *new world disorder*.

Second, the coronavirus has been a catalyst for pre-existing trends, exacerbating great power tensions and reinforcing nationalist impulses. But its most important legacy may be to highlight the universal nature of the challenges we face, and the vital need for collective action in response.

Third, the future, counter-intuitive though it may seem, is multilateral. The

2020s will further expose the limitations of the great powers. Geopolitics will remain important, but will lose ground to priorities of greater global resonance, such as combating climate change. Realist assumptions about order, power, and governance will become increasingly strained.

THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

It is a conceit of Western policymakers that they should equate global order with the “liberal international order,” also known as the “rules-based international order.” Consistent with this interpretation, the travails of the liberal order have become synonymous with the breakdown of global order *tout court*. But in reality the current condition of global order—what I call the new world disorder—extends far beyond a crisis of liberal values, norms, and institutions.

The new world disorder encompasses multiple other elements: a lack of clarity (or agreement) over the rules of the international system; the discrediting of multilateral institutions; the diminished authority of the great powers; systemic and personal failures of governance; and worsening conflicts over ideology, identity, and culture. The simultaneous action of multiple

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destabilizing elements has meant that the very notion of a global order, of *any type*, is in question.

IRAQ AND THE DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

The unravelling of the liberal international order has been an extended process over the past 15-20 years. With hindsight, the seminal event was the decision by George W. Bush to invade Iraq in 2003 in the face of concerted international opposition, including from NATO allies such as France and Germany. Crucially, Washington sidestepped the United Nations once the latter signaled that it would oppose armed intervention. The Iraq war demonstrated that, in the rules-based international order, the United States would decide what rules applied, when, where, and to whom.

The fateful decision to invade Iraq—what Zbigniew Brzezinski aptly described as “suicidal statecraft”—had two major implications for global order. *First*, it confirmed other major actors in their belief that the liberal international order was an artifice, designed essentially to put a gloss on U.S. self-interest. It possessed no particular moral legitimacy, but was upheld by American military and economic might. International norms and rules were all very

fine, but power mattered above all things. Those who had it were free to act as they pleased; those who did not were obliged to be rule-takers. This lesson resonated especially in Russia and China, two countries with long realist traditions and a strong belief in their own exceptionalism.

The *second* consequence was that American—and Western—power turned out to be much less formidable than first thought. Protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, and the passive response to the civil war in Syria revealed the weakness of the liberal West. The United States was shown to be impotent as well as self-serving. There was a growing credibility gap in terms of both values *and* power.

The simultaneous action of multiple destabilizing elements has meant that the very notion of a global order, of any type, is in question.

Donald Trump’s one-term presidency accentuated these problems. His open contempt for liberal norms and institutions reduced the moral standing of the United States to a new low. The world witnessed a weird inversion of the normal: America’s democratic allies and partners were bullied and alienated, while authoritarian leaders were indulged. Trump’s behavior reflected an American exceptionalism with few boundaries. At the

same time, the limitations of American power were brutally exposed. For all his macho posturing, Trump was unable to contain the rise of Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific; prevent the expansion of North Korea's nuclear weapons program; constrain Iran; or defeat the Taliban. By the end of his four years in office, the liberal rules-based international order appeared a misnomer in every respect—being neither liberal, nor based on rules (other than those of power), nor orderly. Instead, it just looked weak.

It is both a cause and a symptom of the crisis of the liberal order that the future of a unitary West is in some doubt. Under Trump, transatlantic relations sunk to their lowest point since the Suez Crisis of 1956, while the European Union today faces unprecedented pressures. Long-held assumptions about common interests and shared values are being challenged. Democracy and the rule of law are under threat from the siren call of “strong” leadership and crude appeals to national, cultural, and ethnic identity.

The West has never appeared so ineffectual, or restricted in its capacity to shape global governance. This has been rammed home by the pandemic. The United States and the United

Kingdom—the standard-bearers of liberal values—have the highest per capita mortality rates among large nations. In the early months of the pandemic, the much vaunted solidarity of the West was conspicuously absent, as the United States and a number of European countries adopted a devil-take-the-hindmost attitude. More recently, we have seen the hoarding of vaccines by rich Western countries, delaying distribution of vital supplies to the developing world. Such behavior highlights the disjunction between the often pious rhetoric of liberal internationalism and the self-serving actions of Western governments.

THE TROUBLES OF MULTILATERALISM

The troubles of the liberal order are paralleled by a crisis of multilateral institutions. The United Nations and its various bodies, from the Security Council to the World Health Organization, have rarely seemed so dysfunctional. The World Trade Organization faces significant protectionist and mercantilist headwinds. And the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are under mounting strain.

The need for multilateral cooperation is self-evident, yet nation-states—the

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great powers most of all—have made it almost impossible for international institutions to function effectively. The difficulties are not limited to well-established structures. Organizations and frameworks such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) have done little to fill the gaping void.

It is emblematic of the troubles of multilateralism that the breaking of, or withdrawal from, international agreements has become routine. Trump's decisions to pull the United States out of the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and to abrogate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action over Iran's nuclear program, are the most salient examples of this trend. But Beijing's rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling on South China Sea territoriality has been no less damaging. Moscow's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donbass rode roughshod over its obligations under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which had committed it to safeguarding Ukraine's territorial integrity.

The disregard of multilateral institutions and agreements by the great powers is not new. What is different is the scale and frequency of such

breaches. The former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has spoken of an “age of impunity.” National governments no longer feel bound by previous commitments, let alone imbued by a sense of the larger good. This is evident even within institutions such as the EU, where Hungary and Poland have acted in open defiance of the Union's core values.

DIMINISHED AUTHORITY OF THE GREAT POWERS

It is fashionable to speak of a new age of great powers and geopolitical rivalry. Liberal internationalism is dead, realism is back. If there is to be a global order, we are told, then it will emerge out of the struggle between the great powers, most obviously the United States and China.

However, the truth is that the great powers have seldom been more impotent than they are today, either in their ability to impose their will on others, or in their capacity to deal with the enormous challenges facing humanity. The United States, for example, has floundered in the face of multiple geopolitical challenges and the degradation of its moral authority. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative faces growing pushback as countries become increasingly apprehensive about Chinese ambitions. And Moscow's attempts to reassert Russian primacy over the post-Soviet space have been largely frustrated.

The major powers are able—sometimes—to obstruct the objectives of others. But they have shown no capacity to take charge of global order, either singly or in “Concert.” Over the past decade, various schemes for great power governance have been floated—“a new type of great power relationship” (U.S.-China), “Yalta 2.0” (U.S.-China-Russia), and, most recently, Putin’s proposal for a “G-5” summit (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) to establish international rules of the road. But such ideas have failed to take root for various reasons: Washington’s refusal to compromise on American primacy; the dismal state of U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relations; and the weakness and divisions of the major European states. Most crucially, the problems of today’s world are too complex and challenging to be stitched up through “grand bargains.” The “golden age” of great powers, when they co-managed the world and smaller nations did as they were told, is long gone. The great powers can barely manage themselves, let alone anyone else.

The coronavirus has cast an unflattering spotlight on their failings. The abject response of the Trump Administration made the United States

more an anti-model than model. But the crassness and ineptitude of other great powers has also been in evidence. China has touted its approach to managing the pandemic as exemplifying the virtues of its model of governance. But it, too, has been guilty of multiple missteps. First, it sought to cover up the original outbreak, and was less than

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transparent with the WHO. Then it launched a primitive propaganda campaign that alienated not only Western countries, but also some of its neighbors. It used the distraction of the coronavirus to step up its naval activities in the South China Sea, in-

crease pressure against Taiwan, and conduct border operations against India. Unsurprisingly, the international pushback against the rise of China—already strong before the pandemic—intensified and broadened over the course of 2020. Xi Jinping’s vision of a “shared future for humanity” appeared no less hollow than the “rules-based international order.”

THE FAILURES OF GOVERNANCE

The unravelling of the liberal order, the weakness of multilateral institutions, and the incapacity of the great powers add up to a crisis of governance. This, in turn, has been aggravated by a collective failure of leadership. It

is a cruel coincidence that at this time of extraordinary challenges the world should be cursed with the worst generation of political leaders since the 1930s. Trump’s gross excesses (now gone but certainly not forgotten), Xi’s strategic overreach, Putin’s loutish behavior, Modi’s repressions, Boris Johnson’s evasions—these are only a few prime examples of deficient leadership around the world.

They reflect a larger systemic problem, which is that the culture of leadership and responsibility—not to mention basic competence—has become an endangered species. Political expediency is no longer just a means to the end, *it is the end*. Gaining and holding on to power has become its own virtue, and governing secondary. Governments and leaders are trapped in a vicious circle. Aware that their legitimacy is fragile, they resort to ethno-nationalism and culture wars, deal out “bread and circuses,” and manipulate media and historical narratives. In doing so, they neglect the real challenges, which as a result become more intractable.

Such an approach is supremely harmful to global order. Leaders and governments are programmed to pander to domestic constituencies, not to think about the international condition.

The sense of being part of a global society is evaporating. The response to the pandemic has confirmed that most governments—democratic as well as authoritarian—take a narrow, and short-term, view of the national interest. This was typified by the EU’s agonies in negotiating a Union-wide economic recovery package. In the face of a common existential threat, member states focused almost entirely on themselves.

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The coronavirus has revealed a fundamental disconnect between the global nature of many contemporary problems and national (and nationalist) approaches to

problem-solving. The world has never been more globalized, but the mindset of policymakers has rarely been more parochial. To the extent that they engage with multilateral institutions and structures, they do so with the purpose of socializing the risks and individualizing the gains—just like many banks did around the time of the 2008 global financial crisis.

THE END OF GLOBAL ORDER?

This phenomenon of national self-interest on steroids is largely responsible for the blowback against globalization and the principle of an international society based on agreed norms and rules. It has encouraged the

fetishization of history and identity, and a corresponding xenophobia. It has aggravated geopolitical tensions and widened normative divisions. It has fostered a winner-take-all mentality. It has led to a world more unequal than in decades.

Given these circumstances, it makes little sense to talk about the liberal international order as if it were still the holy grail. Equally, it is idle to pretend that a new “multipolar order” or “polycentric system” is taking its place.

Humanity today is experiencing a general crisis of global order—the *new world disorder*. Yes, a certain amount of anarchy is part of the human condition, and the contemporary world is a far cry from the brutal “state of nature” imagined by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century. There are *some* rules, norms, and functioning structures.

Nevertheless, the decline of global order is profoundly concerning. Not just because global order is desirable in itself, but because its degradation severely handicaps our ability to address concrete and universal challenges such as climate change, pandemic disease, global poverty, technological transformation, and the information revolution. Without revitalizing global governance, imperfect as it must be, there will be no effective problem-solving

—as the international response to coronavirus has so vividly illustrated.

GLOBAL ORDER IN THE 2020S

The legendary American baseballer and wit Yogi Berra observed that “it’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” There are two temptations in particular. The first is to follow a linear logic, to extrapolate from existing trends and assume that change will be essentially incremental. This approach is rightly criticized by thinkers such as Nassim Taleb, who argue that change often takes the form of big shocks (“Black Swans”) that we should have seen coming, but failed to do so because we were trapped by conventional thinking.

The second temptation is to cover as many contingencies as possible by offering a range of scenarios, an approach I myself have used several times in the past. But this has always struck me as faintly pusillanimous. So instead I am going to commit to a number of predictions about global order and governance in the 2020s, at the obvious risk of being embarrassed by events.

First, *the liberal international order is over, at least as we know it*. The election of Joe Biden has revived hopes in the West for a renewal of U.S. global leadership, a strengthening of transatlantic relations, and a fresh lease of life for the liberal, rules-based international

order. Biden himself has foreshadowed a “summit for democracy” and committed America to engaging once again with international institutions. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity or determination.

Nevertheless, the liberal international order is unsustainable in light of contemporary realities. The most influential is the changed balance of power in the world today. The United States lacks the capacity to realize its vision of global order, unlike in the immediate post-Cold War years when American power was at its zenith, China was in the very early stages of its rise, Russia was crippled by state collapse, Europe was beholden, and much of the planet was in awe. Three decades later, none of these conditions apply. The world has moved on, and will not accept American leadership in its previous dominant form or take lessons from it in international morality.

Indeed, Washington will find it hard enough to preserve the idea of the West. Liberal internationalism will survive as a policy and philosophical approach, but in a diminishing number of capitals. There are already clear signs of this. India, much touted as the world’s largest democracy, has become noticeably more authoritarian and nationalistic. Across the world, democracies are giving way to elected dictatorships and majoritarian regimes. Even within

the EU, liberal values are under threat. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2020 Democracy Index found that only 8.4 percent of the world’s population lived in what it called a “full democracy,” while more than one third lived under authoritarian rule.

This is not to say that Biden will be dissuaded from spreading the liberal internationalist message. He stands as the anti-Trump, the opposite of the cynical amorality of the past four years. His credibility is on the line. But he will also have to deliver on a hugely challenging domestic and foreign policy agenda. A far from comprehensive list includes addressing the public health emergency in the United States; rebooting the economy; mending some of the fissures in American society; combating climate change; engaging and competing with China; containing Russia; and managing Iran and North Korea.

Given these consuming priorities, there is only limited bandwidth for promoting democratic values and a liberal international order. Moreover, Biden (or a successor) will have to make difficult choices, for example, whether to ignore the bad behavior of others in order to secure key objectives. Although he has explicitly disavowed such transactionalism, that is easy to say and much harder to avoid—as illustrated by the fudge over Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s

role in the murder of the journalist Jamal Kashoggi. (The U.S. government concluded that MBS had ordered the operation, but refrained from sanctioning him.)

Second, *the United States remains the preeminent global power.* The various setbacks and humiliations of the United States during the Trump presidency have reinforced a declinist narrative whereby China supplants it over time and imposes its authoritarian model of global governance. Although nothing can be definitively ruled out, this scenario is unlikely to unfold in the next decade at least. While the gap between the United States and China has narrowed, America will remain the preeminent global power by every meaningful criterion—military, economic, technological, cultural.

In fact, it will not be close. Today, the United States has a nuclear warhead inventory (5,800) 18 times larger than China’s (320). It can project conventional military power almost anywhere on earth. It dominates the global economy and finance. It is the leading gas exporter in the world, and in the big three (along with Saudi Arabia and Russia) for oil. Its technological power is unmatched, despite China’s dramatic

improvement in this area. Its soft power is immeasurably superior. And, unlike China, the United States is supported by a network of political and security partnerships around the world.

The only power capable of defeating the United States is not China, much less Russia, but the United States itself. Trump systematically if unwittingly undermined its global influence during his four years in office, and a future president could preside over further self-harm. Other powers will be quick to exploit any weaknesses and failures to strengthen their position. Yet even this would not be sufficient to knock the United States off its number one perch.

American power is not strong enough to restore the liberal international order, but it is not so weak as to allow anyone else to implement an alternative vision. This is implicitly understood by the Chinese, which is why they prefer to operate within the existing international system, for all its imperfections. Tellingly in this connection, Xi’s 2050 vision speaks of China becoming *a*, not *the*, global leader.

Third, *China’s difficulties accumulate, but its rise continues.* For decades, China-watchers in the West

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undermined its global influence during his four years in office, and a future president could preside over further self-harm. Other powers will be quick to exploit any weaknesses and failures to strengthen their position. Yet even this would

have predicted that China’s rise would hit the buffers at some stage. Either it would be caught in the “middle-income trap,” or the lack of democratic accountability would undermine the regime, or its leadership would succumb to the temptations of strategic overreach. In the 2020s, the most plausible scenario is the last. Xi has badly mismanaged the politics of the coronavirus. Just as he underestimated the pushback against the Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing’s overly-aggressive actions in the Western Pacific. The cumulative effect of these misjudgments is that anti-Chinese sentiment around the world is greater than at any time since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

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Nevertheless, China’s “friendlessness” will not prevent its rise as the next genuine superpower. One braking scenario is a possible U.S.-China conflict in the Western Pacific. However, if there is conflict, it is unlikely to assume the character of a protracted major war. China would most likely be defeated, Xi might be ousted as a result, but the country itself would recover quickly. It is important to emphasize here that democratization and liberalization in China would scarcely constrain Beijing’s ambitions. For many Chinese, there is nothing incompatible between democratic aspirations, nationalism, and an abiding belief in civilizational

destiny. China will compete with the United States, regardless of what direction its politics takes. And the gap between them will narrow over the coming decade.

Fourth, *the European Union remains a geopolitical pygmy.* European concerns about the reliability of the United States as an ally have prompted much talk of “strategic autonomy.” The challenges presented by a rising China and disruptive Russia have also forced European policymakers to pay more attention to geopolitical considerations and hard power. The old days of the EU focusing almost exclusively on economic and normative priorities are over.

This new geopolitical consciousness will be heightened in the 2020s. Yet European strategic autonomy will remain an illusion, and the EU a geopolitical pygmy. European nations have neither the capacity nor, excepting the United Kingdom and France, the ambition to play significant geopolitical roles. The United States will be the guarantor of European security, and NATO’s viability will depend on Washington and a substantial American military commitment to Europe.

There is a more fundamental problem. Over the coming decade, the European

project will further unravel, even as politicians seek to rationalize this by talking of a “multi-speed” Europe. In the post-Brexit era, divisions within the EU will become chasms. The EU will continue to be a formidable economic bloc, and “European-ness” an identifiable cultural and normative phenomenon. However, a political Europe, disaggregated and directionless, will steadily lose traction in international affairs.

Fifth, *geopolitics becomes less important, as the nature of power evolves.* This is the most counter-intuitive prediction of all, given the escalation of great power rivalries over the past decade, China’s intensive military modernization and obvious strategic ambition, and Russia’s military interventions in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. Of course, geopolitics will still matter; the vision of a geopolitics-free world is as fantastical in the 2020s as it was in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, other priorities will move to center stage, and start to displace traditional foreign policy goals.

Chief among these is the universal imperative of addressing climate change, an issue that is of far more direct relevance to the mass of humanity than geopolitical power projection,

the balance of power, and spheres of influence. The human losses from global warming (150,000 deaths per annum according to the WHO) and air pollution (7 million deaths per annum) vastly exceed those from all military conflicts since the Second World War. As we look ahead, climate change will also be the trigger for other major challenges, such as mass migration and

refugee outflows, that will impact increasingly on the developed world.

The coronavirus emergency likewise puts into perspective the secondary importance of geopolitics. In the United States alone, the number of deaths from the pandemic is already

greater than the total number of American combat fatalities during two World Wars and the Vietnam War. Even in countries where geopolitical priorities resonate, populations are experiencing great power fatigue. In Russia, for instance, opinion surveys show that economic and environmental goals matter more to the public than the assertion of strategic influence in foreign lands.

Public attitudes are all the more critical as foreign policy becomes “democratized” and less elitist. Greater accountability is changing the balance of priorities and sometimes the direction of

policy. The case of Brexit in the United Kingdom is a notable example of this. Similarly, the attention the Chinese government has devoted to climate change and other environmental issues in recent years is a consequence of the domestic backlash over levels of industrial pollution. The world may, or may not, become more democratic in the 2020s. But authoritarian regimes, too, crave popular legitimacy in foreign as well as domestic policy.

It is not just a matter of changing goals, but also of the evolving nature of power. Military might is likely to become less important in relative terms, that is, compared to economic influence, technological innovation, cyber and informational power, and political functionality. America’s prospects of engendering a post-Trump bounce in the international system are not contingent on its military capabilities. Russia’s ready resort to force has done little to strengthen its strategic position in the post-Soviet space. And China’s military activities in the Western Pacific have ranged a growing number of countries against it.

None of this is to say that military power will become redundant. However, it will be contingent on other forms of power. The competition for

regional and especially global influence will be fiercest in the economic and technological realms, because it is success (and failure) there that will decide who is rising, who is stagnating, and who is in decline. That is why, over the next decade, the United States will still be the number one power in the world, China will continue to rise, and Russia will stagnate (if not decline).

Over the next decade, the United States will still be the number one power in the world, China will continue to rise, and Russia will stagnate (if not decline).

Sixth, *multilateralism rides again.* The 2020s could turn out to be a golden decade for multilateralism. The coronavirus exposed serious flaws in the operation of the WHO and its relations with key players, such as China.

But more significantly it underlined the need for multilateral approaches to problem-solving. It is no coincidence that the worst affected nations have been those most skeptical of (or hostile to) multilateral cooperation: the United States under Trump, the United Kingdom under Johnson, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and Mexico under Andres Obrador (AMLO). To adapt a famous Churchillian aphorism, multilateralism may be the worst form of cooperation, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time. Without it, humanity has no hope of tackling an array of global threats—from climate change, global poverty and inequality, and

pandemic disease, to regional conflicts and nuclear insecurity.

The case for multilateralism is strengthened by the sheer impracticality of conventional great power arrangements and “grand bargains” in a twenty-first-century global environment. Great powers and their relationships will remain important. But there will be no twenty-first century Concert of Great Powers along the lines of the 1815 Congress of Vienna or a Yalta 1945 2.0. Any attempts to replicate such oligarchic arrangements will be futile.

At the same time, catching the “multilateral moment” is conditional on a significant improvement in the performance of international institutions. This will not be easy. Multilateral organizations are only as effective as nation-states allow them to be. During the coronavirus, it was the WHO’s misfortune, first, to be held hostage by Beijing, then scapegoated by the Trump Administration, and finally to suffer collateral damage from the further rapid deterioration of U.S.-China relations.

We will most likely see significant changes in the way multilateralism functions in the next decade. The United Nations may retain its formal status as the primary body of global decisionmaking, but in practice multilateral authority and influence will be devolved far and wide. We can

expect, in the first instance, to see a process of regionalization, a trend that has already been underway for some time—witness the emergence of groupings such as the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership).

Multilateral mechanisms will become more informal and flexible. Organizations such as NATO and the EU will survive the decade, although with difficulty. But tightly institutionalized partnerships and binding commitments will give ground to more open arrangements. These, in turn, will be more interests- and issues-based than united by common values. They may also be somewhat temporary, lasting only as long as a particular issue stays current and participating states continue to identify a stake in engagement.

Perhaps the greatest change will be the erosion of the dominance of the great powers in multilateral institutions. Middle powers and smaller nations will assert themselves. Non-state actors—tech companies, renewable energy providers, media networks, civil society organizations of various types (environmental, human rights, etc.)—will become increasingly influential. The norms and rules of multilateral engagement will be fluid and subject to various, and loose, interpretations.

There may be ideological conflicts, but ideology itself will play only a peripheral role, as state and non-state actors alike are preoccupied by the immediacy and scale of the threats confronting the world.

Seventh, *the world becomes more disorderly, but not necessarily worse off.* The term “new world disorder” was coined by the political scientist Ken Jowitt to describe an environment where the lines were blurred, rules were unclear, and there were “blank spots” or vacuums of power. Crucially, though, he did not apply the term pejoratively. He was describing the aftermath of the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. This “disorder” was a marked improvement on the oppressive Soviet-led order that preceded it. Disorder, too, did not imply military conflict, although it did not exclude it. Indeed, the post-communist transition turned out to be considerably more peaceful than many predicted.

The 2020s are likely to prove more disorderly than the last decade. The struggles of the liberal international order, the limitations of the great powers, the enormity of challenges such as climate change and the coronavirus, the growing involvement of non-state actors are all factors that

will shape world order/disorder. There will be some “rules of the road,” but the hallmarks of the decade will be fluidity and lack of clarity. This might seem a recipe for anarchy, and yet there will be multiple self-regulating elements, and perhaps a surprising unity of purpose and sense of urgency in the face of existential threats. Not all “disorder” is bad. What matters ultimately is a commitment to better, more inclusive governance.

Perhaps the greatest change will be the erosion of the dominance of the great powers in multilateral institutions.

The phenomenon of globalization will reflect this messy reality. Contrary to the expectations of some,

it will not be reversed. There will be no overall process of de-globalization, although individual states may sometimes seek refuge in autarky and “decoupling.” What will change, though, is the meaning and character of globalization.

The era of Western-led, predominantly economic globalization is past, just like the liberal international order. It will not be replaced by a putative ‘China model,’ but by multiple co-existing and competing variants. Globalization will signify different things to different audiences, and be managed or adapted to accordingly. The term will lose many of its normative connotations, and be understood more

generously and literally: as denoting globalizing trends in information, technology, the physical environment, and problem-solving. It will lose its “Western” and elitist character.

OVERALL DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

Nothing is inevitable. Free will, not historical determinism, is key to the future. The 2020s could see the aggravation of negative trends over the past decade—the systematic gutting of a rules-based international order, the escalation of great power tensions, the rise of extreme national egoism and populism, and a general degradation of global governance. International society could go down the same path as in the 1920s, a decade of enormous creativity and dynamism, but also of complacency and procrastination. If this turns out to be the case, the consequences would be disastrous—a replay of the 1930s, only more global in scale and even more lethal.

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Or humanity could learn some of the lessons from a hundred years ago, from the last decade, and especially from the past year. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted what should have been plain to everyone: that good governance really matters, and that the absence of it carries terrible human and material consequences.

The 2020s, then, could turn out to be a transformative decade, when humanity finally comes to grips with the great challenges of our time—climate change, global poverty and inequality, technological transformation, the information and telecommunications revolutions, pandemic disease, accessible public health. There would still be serious conflicts. Many problems would remain unresolved. Global order would be a relative concept. But the overall direction of travel would be positive. For we are not condemned to live in an “age of impunity” or impotence. We can be the masters of our fate. ●

THE CASE FOR JUSTICE

ONLINE DISCUSSION WITH ALAN DERSHOWITZ

*On March 20th, 2021, the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD), in cooperation with the Faculty of Law of the University of Niš, organized a special online discussion with Harvard Law School Professor Emeritus **Alan Dershowitz**, the world’s best-known criminal defense lawyer and a leading expert in U.S. constitutional law and civil liberties.*



Moderated by CIRSD President **Vuk Jeremić**, the wide-ranging discussion touched on the state of human and civil rights in today’s turbulent world, the international criminal order, the relationship between Israel and Palestine, and his fascinating career defending clients that have included President Donald Trump, O.J. Simpson, Harvey Weinstein, and Jeffrey Epstein.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

TRAGIC PAST OR ABSURD PRESENT?

Zoran Čičak

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

– Karl Marx, 1852

WHEN Karl Marx wrote one of his most famous sentences—almost 170 years ago—he did it in a particular context: discussing the French *coup d'état* of 1851 that resulted in Louis Napoleon assuming dictatorial powers in France. However, the sentence itself survived both the context and the age in which it was written, proving its validity many times over.

Several months ago, when the third decade of the present century began, the relevance of this old Marxist proverb came to the fore once again: it still remains a symbol of the challenge that we carried with us from the previous century. It helps us to ask the following series of questions: *To what extent does the contemporary world remain obsessed with history? Why do people—whether*

they perceive the world in ethnic, religious, or ideological tribes—so enjoy this new sort of war over old historical narratives? To what extent are ancient myths and legends really assets that might help us win our new battles?

Indeed, examples were getting all the more numerous as time was passing by: as soon as the international economic crisis hit the European continent and the Greeks rebelled against the German-led austerity agenda in 2014, the media in Athens launched a campaign of cartoons depicting Chancellor Angela Merkel in a Nazi uniform. Then the Poles were more than happy to follow this pattern. Then in 2017 the Catalonia secessionist movement regained its strength, seemingly out of nowhere, and was widely seen as some sort of unfinished job from the Spanish Civil War. In the same manner,

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last year's American presidential elections were perceived as a second Gettysburg—and the South lost its 'cause' once again. Even in the Balkans—that part of Europe that launched this unholy campaign as early as the 1990s—it seems that nobody took a lesson, so to speak, thus leaving the old silly pseudo-historical arguments to run amok in the present era. Witness two events from earlier this year: the first enabled us to witness utterly pathetic Bulgarian claims over Macedonian identity; the second allowed us to see the vindictive expulsion of Serbia's ambassador to Montenegro by a regime that went on to lose an election soon thereafter (for the first time ever, I may add) over a comment the man made about an event that happened more than one hundred years ago.

The World War II era certainly remains a goldmine for all sorts of historical revisionists, as well: every summer, social networks throughout Europe explode in a shallow debate over the importance of the 1938 Munich Agreement and the 1939 Moscow Agreement. Questions are asked by people who are not really interested in anything resembling genuine historical inquiry:

To what extent does the contemporary world remain obsessed with history? Why do people—whether they perceive the world in ethnic, religious, or ideological tribes—so enjoy this new sort of wars over old historical narratives? To what extent are ancient myths and legends really assets that might help us win our new battles?

Who was the first to collaborate with Nazi Germany—the Western allies or the Soviet Union? Who was the last? Who betrayed the Allied cause more? Partisans of each side are so eager to blame the other; and in their enthusiasm both

forget two simple facts: eventually, the war was won; and the war was eventually won because allied nations from East and West came together to win it. If our ancestors behaved in 1941 in the manner we do today, they would have lost that war for sure.

Even if one takes a step beyond pure politics into the realm of culture, the impact of this war of narratives is visible. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic revived a world-

wide interest in the nightmares of the medieval Black Death. Old books written by people such as Boccaccio, Chaucer, Pepys, Defoe, and Camus became bestsellers again, as if stories about old perils might help us to fight the new ones. The summer of 2020, engulfed by racial discontent in the West, didn't affect only monuments to Confederate rebels in the American South, but ones of Christopher Columbus and Sir Winston Churchill, too. An old and almost forgotten dispute between two celebrities

of the French Left—Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre—over the Algerian war is now being hotly debated among French intellectuals once again. Two historical movies—a Serbian one about the Jasenovac concentration camp set in World War II and a Bosnian one that focuses on an event from the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s—were both candidates for 2021 the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film. Despite treating essentially the same—and timeless—motive of human evil, their respective stories were widely considered as opposite, and their audiences as hostile, to each other. A recently-unveiled monument to an early-medieval Serbian ruler in Belgrade raised a string of old ideological controversies, almost as if all of us recently had entered the thirteenth century instead of the twenty-first.

PRODUCING AND CONSUMING HISTORY

Winston Churchill is reported to have said in 1945 that “the Balkans produces more history than it can consume.” How does this prophetic remark sound today, given that the proliferation of history has gone far beyond the borders of Balkans?

There are several reasons why the entire contemporary world now appears

to us as more “historicized” than the one in which we were living just a few decades ago. On the surface, one has to take into account the impact of technology that came about in the meantime: once upon a time, in order to encounter

Conflicting historical narratives now serve as sort of postmodern weapon employed in warfare over the present and the future, rather than about the past.

some history one had to visit a library, or a theatre, or a museum; today, it is enough to visit a few of the countless historical, or pseudo-historical, websites that are just a click or two away. New software makes it much easier to produce a “document”—whatever fake image a user needs can now be easily “produced,” thus claiming its *prima facie* authenticity, which only *post facto* recourse to expertise can credibly deny. In the meantime, a fake historical “source” comes to spread fake history with the rapidity of a mushroom growing in spring amongst millions of internet and social networks users.

However, on a deeper level, we also encounter a serious problem with understanding history itself: it seems as if we indeed believe that history might somehow provide us with additional leverage for claims we raise in contemporary times. We ask questions like: *Who was the first to inhabit some territory? Who came from where? Whose crimes were more heinous? Who collaborated with the Nazis and who sacrificed*

the most in fighting them? Is it possible to compromise the moral stance of our adversaries by revising the historical credibility of their founding fathers?

In that respect, such conflicting historical narratives now serve as sort of postmodern weapon employed in warfare over the present and the future, rather than about the past.

An explanation was first given by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who shared Freud’s view that living memory involves the interplay of repetition and recollection, but argued that it operates according to a social rather than a psychological dynamic. It appears that Halbwachs (who was detained by the Gestapo in Paris and died in the Buchenwald concentration camp) indeed sounded prophetic when saying that, in repetition, our memories are not transmitted intact but are rather conflated, as they are continuously being revised. In each repetition of an experience particular idiosyncrasies are worn away. That which is eventually remembered is a reduction of particular memory into an idealized image, or *imago*. Furthermore, memories, while being recollected, are also reconstructed within social contexts. Memories waiting recall are provisional: they become whole only when they are located within the social framework of our present lives. In recollection, we do not retrieve images of the past as they were

originally perceived but rather as they fit into our present conceptions, which are shaped by the social forces that act upon us. Without social frameworks to sustain them, both our individual and collective memories wither away.

Indeed, there is no hill above the Dutch city of Breda where in 1625 Spanish general Ambrogio Spinola Doria received the keys of the besieged fortress from his surrendering Dutch colleague, Justinus van Nassau. The terrain is as flat as a pancake—no hill ever existed—but what we nevertheless stubbornly keep in our mind is a picture, painted only ten years after that event, by Diego Velasquez, the master of Spanish Golden Age. The artistic imagination, in this case, created an idealistic image—an *imago* as Halbwachs defined it.

Later, in a series of famous lectures delivered at the prestigious Collège de France in the mid-1970s entitled “Society Must Be Defended,” Michel Foucault posited that the victors of a social struggle use their political dominance to suppress a defeated adversary’s version of historical events in favor of their own one. He indicated that this sometimes might go so far as “denialism”—sometimes also called “historical negationism”—defined as a falsification or distortion of historical record. Taking an opposite approach in his *The Culture of Defeat: The American South 1865, France 1871, Germany 1918*

(2001), Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that a defeat is a major driver for the defeated to reinvent himself, while the victor, comfortable in his attitudes and methods yet dissatisfied by the high losses incurred and paltry gains made, may be less creative and fall back.

We are all familiar with numerous examples of this: the Greeks, for example, have preserved the Thermopylae myth for over 2,500 years; the Jewish people have done the same with the myth of Masada; ditto the French with the myth of Roland at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass in 778 and the Serbs with the Kosovo myth rooted in the 1389 Gazimestan battle at which the invading Ottoman sultan was killed as was the defending army led by Prince Lazar. Albeit rooted in historical events, embodied in these myths was the fact that each was, more or less, a clear military defeat. In that respect, myths were of fundamental importance in the making of modern nations, as well as in establishing great transnational ideologies that also sometimes preserve myths of defeats. On this past point, consider that international communism still shares the myth of the 1871 Paris Commune and the anti-fascism the myth of Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

However, if one is to believe Napoléon Bonaparte (one of the few individuals of whom it can truly be said to have made the European past), history is “a series

of lies on which we are in agreement.” This Napoleonic remark leads us to the third reason for our current uneasiness about history: it might be attributed to a growing sense of skepticism about more or less all truths. For instance, Adolf Hitler escaped his fate in a Berlin bunker (and might still be living in some Latin American Neverland); no man has ever stepped foot on the Moon; and, of course, we are all unaware that in fact the earth is flat. The stubborn and often childish wish to mock the very core of human knowledge, sometimes called “a mutiny against the era of political correctness,” in reality reflects a deep feeling of insecurity that postmodern men and women share about very pillars of their existence.

The creation of a historical fact has always been the result of a particular meaning ascribed to a particular event. In a 2018 *New Yorker* essay, Salman Rushdie speaks to this point: “Julius Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon is a historical fact. But many other people have crossed that river, and their actions are of no interest to history. These crossings are not, in this sense, facts.”

Rushdie also reminds us that the passage of time often changes the meaning of a fact. His example is instructive: during the British Empire, the military revolt of 1857 was known as the “Indian Mutiny,” and, because a mutiny is a rebellion against the proper

authorities, that name, and therefore the meaning of that fact, placed the “mutinying” Indians in the wrong. Indian historians today refer to this event as the “Indian Uprising,” which makes it an entirely different sort of fact with an entirely different meaning. The past is constantly revised according to the attitudes of the present.

There is, however, some truth in the idea that in the West of the nineteenth century there was a fairly widespread consensus about the character of reality, as Rushdie reminds us. “The great novelists of that time —Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, Edith Wharton, and so on—could assume that they and their readers, broadly speaking, agreed on the nature of the real, and the grand age of the realist novel was built on that foundation. But that consensus was built on a number of exclusions. It was middle-class and white. The points of view, for example, of colonized peoples or racial minorities—points of view from which the world looked very different to the bourgeois reality portrayed in, say *The Age of Innocence* or *Middlemarch* or *Madame Bovary*—were largely erased from the narrative. The importance of great public matters was also often marginalized. In the entire oeuvre of Jane Austen, the Napoleonic Wars are barely mentioned; in the immense oeuvre of Charles Dickens, the existence of the British Empire is only glancingly recognized.”

Finally, the passage of time sometimes changes the judgment over a particular historical person or subject. As Miroslav Krleža put it in his 1935 book of essays *Europe Today*, “it is a typical European phenomenon that the greatest European truths were spoken under the gallows, on execution sites, in dungeons and at Golgothas, and those crucified and flooded truths become European flags and last for centuries. Names humiliated as public spittoons, names branded with court verdicts and those of public opinion become European beacons that then shine for centuries.”

THE PAST IS A DIFFERENT COUNTRY

However, as L. P. Hartley wrote in the *Go-Between* (1953), “the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” Indeed, they do: contemporary Americans, Serbs, Italians, and Chinese have more in common with each other than each of them would have with their respective ancestors in the distant past: if they somehow happened to drop in amongst them thanks to some time machine, each of these time travelers would feel a similar sense of profound disconnect. This is not only about language—albeit we would hardly be able to understand a person from 500 years speaking our own tongue—but also about daily habits, lifestyles, values, traditions, beliefs, superstitions, codes of honors, and dozens of other, seemingly small but important, pieces

of the identity puzzle that, all together, establish what is called in contemporary parlance a “personality.”

We cannot fully understand the motives that moved our ancestors to action, the dilemmas they faced, and the nature and extent of both their fears and hopes—in the same way as they wouldn’t be able to understand ours. It therefore makes no sense to judge them or their actions by the standards that we would today judge ourselves or our own actions: the same historical event

or personage might be judged as either “good” or “bad” depending not only on the side that we take in such a sort of virtual trial, but also on the laws, codes, and moral standards we would apply with regards to the particular case.

Such considerations lead us to pose the next question: does history really exist apart of the dominant historical context? In other words, can history truly be a “neutral” science? Does objectivity always imply “neutrality”? Analytic and critical philosophers of history have debated for ages whether historians should express judgments on historical figures or if this would infringe on their supposed role. In general,

positivists and neopositivists oppose any value-judgment as unscientific.

In 1948, Winston Churchill famously quipped in the UK House of Commons that, “for my part, I consider that

What we do claim is not a right to be considered as victors once upon a time—when the particular historical event took place—but to be considered as such today—by claiming a right to judge the past ourselves.

it will be found much better by all Parties to leave the past to history, especially as I propose to write that history myself.” It might be less known that this was not the first time Churchill had said something similar: he was apparently fond of the idea of actively contributing to the historical narrative for a decade or more,

with various quotations to that effect being attributed to him throughout the 1930s—perhaps earlier.

However, it must be underlined that Churchill was hardly the first one who said something like that; one can also find similar examples in many other languages apart of English. Here are a few examples. During his final Nuremberg days in 1947, Hermann Göring is said to have written in his diary that “*Der Sieger wird immer der Richter und der Besiegte stets der Angeklagte sein*”; in the hours ahead of his execution in 1794, the vanquished Jacobin leader of the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre, was

apparently heard exclaiming, “*l’histoire est juste peut-être, mais qu’on ne l’oublie pas, elle a été écrite par les vainqueurs*”; once Emperor Charles V and Prince Andrea Doria reestablished the foreign power in Italy in the early sixteenth century, Giovan Marco Burigozzo, a Lombard shopkeeper and a chronicler of the Duchy of Milan, appears to have written “*La storia di questi avvenimenti fu scritta dai vincitori*.” In examining the past one has to come back to the English-speaking world and a chronicle of the 1746 Battle of Culloden

By distorting and revising historical facts, as well as by accepting such distorted facts, one often causes unexpected consequences; this in turn contaminates a much wider area, both in space and time.

in Scotland, where one defeated eyewitness writes with lament that no one will ever know how many members of his clan died on the battlefield because “*it is the victor who writes the history and counts the dead*.”

Nevertheless, it is clear that the phrase “writing history” nowadays has but metaphoric meaning, and it should be interpreted accordingly. In any event, the main corpus of world history (as well as most national ones) was written a long time ago. What we are, however, so eager to claim when talking about “writing history” is the right to interpret it—that is, to provide an authoritative version of historical

facts and their respective meanings. By doing so, what we do claim is not a right to be considered as victors *once upon a time*—when the particular historical event took place—but to be considered as such today—by claiming a right to judge the past ourselves.

However, by distorting and revising historical facts, as well as by accepting such distorted facts, one often causes unexpected consequences; this in turn contaminates a much wider area, both in space and time. For example, when sup-

porting the anti-Russian *coup d’état* in Ukraine in 2014, the West had to accept—no matter how unwittingly—the whole revision of history made by their new allies in Kiev. In just a few years, all sorts of Nazi quislings and collaborators were rehabilitated, their symbols revived, and their life stories re-written: *at the end of a day, these guys hated Russians*—and that was the only issue that mattered for the new elite. The European Union—which was itself created as an embodiment of anti-fascism—pretended it didn’t see what was happening in Ukraine (this distant land, always at the fringe of modernity); but even this didn’t help, either: the process was soon well

underway in the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, and Croatia. And nobody in Europe dared to complain. The right to do so was already forfeited in Ukraine. By the end of the 2010s, wide swaths of Europe were engulfed with a brand-new sort of nationalism: a historical one. Galleries of strange historical persons were marching through internet portals, school textbooks, television shows, and social networks—it was just as Shakespeare’s Ariel said in *The Tempest*: “Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

In the very same manner in which all the world’s major powers (e.g. the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom) remain so proud of their own “national” COVID-19 vaccines, each country suddenly became proud of its own version of “national” history, no matter how much that version contradicted established facts. If, in the former case, the mere fact of having one’s own vaccine somehow conferred lordship over the future, then in the latter one the mere fact of imposing one’s own historical narrative implied lordship over past. History’s nationalism, as much as the vaccine one, both remain intrinsic features of the postmodern world—as if nobody remembers Goethe’s wise exclamation from 1817 that “patriotism ruins history.”

THE HISTORY OF IDEAS (ARMAGEDDON OF THE TWENTIES)

In 1901, H. G. Wells wrote in *The Sea Lady* that “human history in essence is the history of ideas.” Let’s leave aside, for the moment, all empires, nations, ideologies, and religions to their eternal squabble for importance in world history and take up the topic from another angle. We can ask: is there anything else that matters? Is humanity doomed on this cyclical historical pattern, as it sometimes seems? In-

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deed, as Lenin said, “sometimes history needs a push”—but most of the time its course is rather more linear than cyclical. The World Bank tells us that in 2020, world GDP per capita reached \$17,000 for the first time ever; only thirty years ago (in 1990), the same source reminds us, it was barely above \$9,000. The advance of human race—both material and intellectual—is simply something that does not depend on a particular ideological or geopolitical context: it is a feature shared by all in the contemporary world. As French historian Fernand Braudel put it, long-term historical structures and trends—he called it the concept of the *longue durée*—eventually outweigh all short- and medium-term distortions. The world is inevitably becoming a better place for life, no matter whether we are always able to make use of it in an optimal manner.

What might, in that respect, the upcoming decade reveal is a sort of new balance between two mainstream histories: the particular and the universal one, the history of nations and the history of ideas. Both dominant worldviews of this century—international liberal order and particularistic populism—were seriously challenged by the mayhem of COVID-19. It is likely that both worldviews will continue to struggle over key historical narratives, ones that might help them to win the battle for hearts and minds: technological advancement, the growing power of social networks, and global interconnectedness might become allies of both.

Irrespectively of the aforementioned battle—or, rather, alongside it—the history of ideas will itself continue to unfold. Just as the Black Death in the fourteenth century undermined the very pillars of the medieval order, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged most of the prejudices we took with us from the twentieth century—including Francis Fukuyama’s that History has reached its end with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Black Death led to the liberation of very strong social and material forces, eventually leading to Guttenberg’s printing press, Columbus’

carracks, Luther’s reformation, Kepler’s celestial mechanics, Voltaire’s rationalism, and Robespierre’s revolution. The impact of all these events—the magnitude of change that each separately and all of them together implied—led humanity into the early modern age; and this shift, no matter how slow, was irreversible. In the same manner, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed all the deficiencies of the old order: its narrow-mindedness, inequalities, prejudices, and fallacies. If history is to be believed, the Cartesian impact of such an awareness is inevitable: it might be slow, but it will again be irreversible.

Both dominant worldviews of this century—international liberal order and particularistic populism—were seriously challenged by the mayhem of COVID-19.

What should be—in this context—the duty of intellectuals? As Erasmus once said, discussing the religious disputes of his age: “by burning Luther’s books you may rid your bookshelves of them, but you will not rid men’s minds of him.” The upcoming decade will certainly have its own intellectuals who will, once again, lend their services—for better or worse, as the case may be—to some cause. No matter if a particular cause is good or bad, national or ideological, or if such service would help or hinder it, such help will often be at the expense of the helper himself. But a serious intellectual should be both able and willing to do more than that.

Whoever among us—the author and readers of this essay alike—lives long enough to see the end of this decade might come to discover the outcome of the current battle between international liberal order and particularistic populism will be. Most likely, in finding it out, he or she will not need the help of an intellectual: the outcome will be both self-evident and self-explainable. What remains, however, the paramount duty of any serious intellectual—scholar, writer, philosopher, and historian alike—is not necessarily to help this or that warrior, but rather to describe and explain the battlefield.

What remains the paramount duty of any serious intellectual is not necessarily to help this or that warrior, but rather to describe and explain the battlefield.

There are dozens of issues that, for quite some time, desperately lack modern critical theory and should go beyond simple description: they should go deeper than just weaponizing these in actual social conflicts. For instance: relationships, such as one between the material world and the world of ideas; an individual and a community; freedom and security; production and distribution; democracy and inequality—are all important and challenging enough to be examined and impartially analyzed, outside of dominant frameworks. If all current wars between global narratives constitute the Armageddon of the Twenties, so to speak, then all these issues are its battlefields;

however, they are certainly much more than that—by representing the features of the world we will at some point leave our children to live in.

A MANUAL FOR CONTEMPORARY HISTORIAN

Therefore, it looks like there still are some common standards for understanding and applying history in

our world—no matter how wide the rifts in our political, ideological, economic, and cultural backgrounds might seem. In this penultimate section, we can try to compose a brief manual for the historian of the 2020s. We

can start by asking: is there anything he or she could do in order to help us leave it with at least a little clearer sense about the past than what we had going into the present decade? For the purpose of this essay, I have tried to summarize all the key advice to be proffered to contemporary historians in ten brief truths:

First, *history is a science*. It is not a product of fiction or wishful thinking and it must be based on a thorough research of historical sources and well as their verification and comparison, in order to establish—inasmuch as possible—precise and verifiable facts: their analysis and synthesis.

Second, *history is dynamic*. Like any other science, history is constantly advancing towards new knowledge, finding new historical sources, and connecting and reinterpreting all. Therefore, a revision of established historical facts is possible, but only as result of new research, as opposed to historical revisionism, which is nothing but manipulation with historical facts in order to serve a particular and already set-in-stone political agenda.

Third, *history is a discipline of critical thinking*. It is not a taboo that serves to enforce national sentiments and disseminate policies of identity by spreading stereotypes and prejudices. It serves to help us check the authenticity of data and recognize manipulations with and abuses of facts about the past.

Fourth, *history is a multiperspective*. Historical facts are established by scientific methodology, but the interpretation of such facts might be different, depending on the perspective from which they are interpreted. This doesn't imply that the past—facts themselves—should be allowed to be relativized or distorted. But it does allow for an area of debate in which all relevant facts

and conflicting opinions about them should be taken into account, without enabling the sanitization of facts and data that do not fit into the dominant worldview of the day.

States, nations, social groups, ideas, and movements were created, developed, and ultimately vanished by virtue of having influenced each other. There is no other way, except in this permanent complexity, to explain the past, understand the present, and envisage the future.

Fifth, *history is integral*. The past is not a supermarket, open to everybody to choose what he or she likes and dismiss whatever doesn't fit in the current taste or doesn't seem fashionable. Real history doesn't allow political or ideological selection; or, for that matter, convenient or inconvenient historical periods, states, nations, classes, ideas, movements, and so on.

Sixth, *history is supranational*. It cannot be confined to national, religious, or ethnic boundaries. By treating only ourselves, we're losing the wider picture of the world as much as losing touch with reality. The past is a wide web of interconnected, interdependent, and mutually affecting ties. States, nations, social groups, ideas, and movements were created, developed, and ultimately vanished by virtue of having influenced each other. There is no other way, except in this permanent complexity, to explain the past, understand the present, and envisage the future.

Seventh, *history is contextual*. Both past and present cannot be understood separately, taken outside of the wider context and confined on any particular, and thus isolated, problem. The realities of the past were influenced by a multitude of factors; thus, any attempt at non-contextual interpretation leads to an ultimate distortion of our understanding of the past. This is an issue that is constantly being overcome by cooperation among historians.

Eighth, *history is rational*. It is not a myth, dogma, religion, ideology, or an emotion. It is neither a temple in which we should pray nor a culprit we could accuse of something we dislike—and history is certainly not a football club that needs fans. It is rather like an impartial *post mortem* medical doctor for the past who attempts through his or her investigations to understand and explain it. By doing his or her work properly, the historian teaches us to understand the complexity of the past, and in so doing helps us to both to face the present in a rational manner and envisage options for the future.

Ninth, *history is free*. Like any other science, history can advance only if its

researchers are freed of any external pressures—be they political, ideological, clerical, or economic. There are no progressive or regressive, patriotic or unpatriotic, and honest or dishonest historians—just good and bad ones.

The present is constantly being built on certain representations about the past; such representations serve as pillars of our own self-understanding. The architecture of the present is thus endangered if these pillars are insecure—if they are made of non-existent, false, and ill-fitting stones.

Tenth, *history is responsible*. The present is constantly being built on certain representations about the past; such representations serve as pillars of our own self-understanding. The architecture of the present is thus endangered if these pillars are insecure—if they are made of non-existent, false, and ill-fitting stones. By putting in our representations of the past events

something that didn't happen, or taking out those that did—by misrepresenting the past—we are creating a false version of events that didn't happen—a collective impression that is misleading. Historians, like all other intellectuals, must be socially responsible because—in this case—the social responsibility at issue amounts to an intellectual one.

A PROPHET LOOKING BACKWARDS?

A historian, indeed, might be “a prophet looking backwards” —as Schlegel wrote in 1798. Whether one

adopts a teleological approach to history, as shared by Leibniz (the “principle of sufficient reason”), Hegel (“*Zeitgeist*”), and multiple neo-Hegelians such as Francis Fukuyama; or denies it, as did Nietzsche, Foucault, Althusser, and Deleuze; there is no doubt that past events often fundamentally shape our present ideas, thus indirectly influencing our future lives as well.

However, the men and women of today are not pure straws in the whirlwind of history—they also shape it for those who will come tomorrow. What separates historical discourse from

juridical or philosophical discourse is its particular conception of truth—that truth is no longer absolute but the product of a permanent struggle. History itself, which was traditionally the science of a sovereign's deeds—the legend of his glorious feats and building of monuments—ultimately becomes the discourse of the people, thus a political stake, which necessarily inserts a partisan aspect, or partisan claims and counter-claims, to the narrative. In the previously cited lectures, Foucault reminds us that the subject can no longer be seen as a neutral arbitrator—a judge or legislator, as in (he says) Solon's or Kant's conceptions. History as it is understood today is simply unable to judge human beings—their actions

and their opinions—in the way Hegel meant when he quoted a line from Schiller's 1786 poem “Resignation” that “World History is a tribunal that judges the World.” Therefore, Foucault maintains, what became the “historical subject” must search in “history's furor,” under or below the “juridical code's dried blood,” for what he calls the multiple contingencies from which

The men and women of today are not pure straws in the whirlwind of history—they also shape it for those who will come tomorrow.

a fragile rationality can temporarily emerge.

And yet we now face a genuine dilemma. As Rushdie writes, “how can we argue, on the one hand, that modern reality has

become necessarily multidimensional, fractured, and fragmented, and, on the other hand, that reality is a very particular thing, an unarguable series of *things that are so*, which need to be defended against the attacks of, to be frank, the *things that are not so*, which are being promulgated by, let's say, the Modi Administration in India, the Brexit crew in the UK, the [now former] President of the United States?” And of course, to this list we could add the Eastern European populists, Brazil's Bolsonaro and his supporters, and a whole host of others. This question in turn raises several others.

For instance, we can ask, with Rushdie: “how to combat the worst aspects

of the internet, that parallel universe in which important information and total garbage coexist, side by side, with, apparently, the same levels of authority, making it harder than ever for people to tell them apart?”

And we can also ask, also following Rushdie: “how to resist the erosion in the public acceptance of ‘basic facts,’ scientific facts, evidence-supported facts about, say, climate change or inoculations for children?”

Further still, we can pose, with Rushdie this question as well: “how to combat the political demagoguery that seeks to do what authoritarians have always wanted — to undermine the public’s belief in evidence, and to say to their

electorates, in effect, ‘believe nothing except me, for I am the truth’?”

And so we come to the final question: what, specifically, might be the role of the humanities in general and history in

particular, in countering all this awfulness?

In that respect, what Rushdie in that same essay wrote about truth in general might be said about historical truths in particular: “I do think

that we need to recognize that any society’s idea of truth is always the product of an argument, and we need to get better at winning that argument. Democracy is not polite. It’s often a shouting match in a public square. We need to be *involved* in the argument if we are to have any chance of winning it.”

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed all the deficiencies of the old order: its narrow-mindedness, inequalities, prejudices, and fallacies.

cirsd.org/horizons



AMERICA AT CROSSROADS

The Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD) held an online Horizons Discussion on October 27th, 2020. The conversation featured two distinguished Horizons authors: **Neera Tanden**, President and CEO of the Center for American Progress and a former senior official in the Obama Administration; and **Richard Fontaine**, CEO of the Center for A New American Security and a former senior adviser to the late U.S. Senator John McCain. The event was moderated by CIRSD President **Vuk Jeremić**.



“We have a level of division and hostility between Americans that I have never seen in my life.”

– Neera Tanden

“The normalization between Israel and key Arab countries such as Bahrain, UAE, and Sudan is a diplomatic win in the Middle East and I think the Trump Administration deserves credit for it.”

– Richard Fontaine

“The divisions plaguing America predate the arrival of the current occupant of the most powerful office in the world. They are unlikely to be overcome simply by his departure, whether now or in four years.”

– Vuk Jeremić

AN ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH INNOVATION AND PARTNERSHIP

MEANINGFULLY DELIVERING INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Karim A.A. Khan QC

THE recent history of international criminal justice can be viewed through many lenses. Through one, incremental progress has been made, precedent expanded, and the cause of justice gradually strengthened through the collective work of national and international authorities. Through another, one that we have too rarely been willing to look through, survivors and impacted communities have been promised much but received little.

While we must recognize where positive steps have been taken, it is the second lens—that through which our

efforts are viewed by victims' families, by those waiting for justice to be delivered—that we must judge our work to date. From this perspective, it can too often appear that the cause of accountability is not pursued in a manner reflecting the urgency of the calls for action made by impacted communities. If we are to realize the vision codified in the Rome Statute and place survivors at the center of our work, we must acknowledge that more can be done for them.

When looking closer at the current landscape, hope can be found in a renewed spirit of creativity and dynamism

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cutting across national and international planes of action. From the adoption of new methods in the prosecution of international crimes by domestic authorities, to unprecedented approaches in the establishment and implementation of international investigative mandates, an age of innovation is emerging to buttress the existing international criminal justice architecture. At the apex of this movement, the International Criminal Court (ICC) must be ready both to imbue its own action with this spirit of innovation and to further support national authorities in delivering accountability through this approach.

The coming decade could be that in which international justice is converted from a laudable aspiration to a meaningful reality for those that have suffered from the most serious of crimes.

To capitalize on the renewed hope that such dynamism can bring, our work must be collective, built on partnerships across the international and national planes and between formal institutions and the communities they seek to serve. If this is realized, the coming decade could be that in which international justice is converted from a laudable aspiration to a meaningful reality for those that have suffered from the most serious of crimes.

DELIVERING JUSTICE BEFORE DOMESTIC COURTS

While focus is often placed on how renewed action at the international-level can address the

accountability gap with respect to international crimes, it is within national jurisdictions that the dynamo of innovation and progress has often been found in recent years. An increase in the flow of individuals from areas impacted by atrocity crimes to other jurisdictions, combined with technological advances allowing for the easier capture and flow of information relevant to investigations, has presented national authorities with increased opportunities for action.

As a consequence of these developments, the number of international crimes cases being investigated by national authorities from EU Member States has risen by over one third between 2016 and 2019, with over 1,000 new investigations into international crimes opened each year and over 3,000 cases now pending or ongoing. As part of this increased activity, national authorities have demonstrated significant agility and imagination so as to ensure those potentially responsible for international crimes are effectively investigated and prosecuted.

Here we can highlight two key emerging trends: innovations in the application of universal jurisdiction and addressing terrorist acts as international crimes.

Faced with an increased number of cases in which atrocity crimes were neither committed within their geographic jurisdiction nor by their own citizens, national authorities have sought to further leverage the application of universal jurisdiction. This trend pre-dates even the more recent increase in action on international crimes within European jurisdictions, with 815 such cases taken forward from 2008 to 2017, nearly as many as in the previous two decades put together. Globally now, at least 16 countries have now heard cases under universal jurisdiction.

This spirit of innovation can be found in the current case of Gibril Massaquoi in which Finnish prosecutors are pursuing war crimes, crimes against humanity charges against the former commander and spokesperson for the Revolutionary United Front. While taken forward within the Finnish legal framework, these proceedings are not found in the courts of Helsinki but instead in specialized hearings established in Liberia and Sierra Leone to allow witnesses to come forward with their accounts. Just over two years since the commencement of the investigation, judges, prosecutors, and

defense lawyers flew to Freetown in mid-February this year and will move to Monrovia for about two months of hearings with the participation of over one hundred witnesses. By bringing the proceedings to the location of the alleged criminal activity, the Court will also have the opportunity to visit key crime scenes. Far from the often remote and disconnected feel of such cases played out in European capitals, this creative and survivor-centered approach strengthens the breadth and depth of participation of those impacted by the alleged crimes. Through this approach,

Finnish prosecutors are bringing accountability processes directly to the communities seeking justice.

In the German city of Koblenz, former Syrian intelligence officer Anwar Raslan has since April last year listened to extensive witness testimony presented before the Higher Regional Court alleging his participation in crimes against humanity. This is a landmark trial, using universal jurisdiction to address the alleged Syrian state torture campaign in criminal proceedings for the first time. Mr. Raslan stands accused of 4,000 cases of torture, 58 killings, and two cases of rape or sexual

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assault allegedly committed between April 2011 and September 2012 during his time in charge of the Syrian Secret Service Branch 251. As part of the same trial, Eyad al-Gharib, an alleged subordinate of Mr. Raslan, was in February this year convicted of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity. This represents the first time an individual has been prosecuted for international crimes in connection with alleged state-sponsored torture in Syria.

Germany has played a highly proactive role in recent years in taking forward cases of international crimes. The case of Mr. Raslan underlines how progressive approaches to this endeavor are being rewarded. The enhanced use of structural investigations has supported the collection of evidence for the purpose of building the constituent, contextual elements of large-scale international crimes. This has allowed prosecutors to act swiftly when individual suspects are identified. Such a structural investigation on crimes committed by the Syrian regime and opposition forces had been opened by the German Federal Prosecutor in September 2011. As a result, when Mr. Raslan contacted a police station in Berlin to report suspicions he was being followed by members of the Syrian regime from which he had defected, investigators were able to build the case against him rapidly on this structural basis. Through this approach, German

authorities have provided a potentially vital avenue for survivors and witnesses to come forward with their accounts and have their allegations of mass, state-sanctioned crimes validated in accordance with the rule of law.

A potential template for action by other national authorities in the coming years can also be found in the use of universal jurisdiction by German authorities in the prosecution of individuals participating in the crimes of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria. In a recent case commenced in Frankfurt, an Iraqi national, Taha Al J, is charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide as part of crimes committed by ISIL against the Yazidi community from August 2014. According to the case presented, Al J purchased two Yazidis as slaves—a mother and her five-year old daughter—proceeding to severely mistreat them including by handcuffing the minor to a window in extreme temperatures, leading to her death.

This is a watershed moment in a number of ways, representing both the first time that the crime of genocide has been charged against an individual with respect to acts inflicted on the Yazidi community and the first time that universal jurisdiction has been used to prosecute genocide under the international crimes legislation introduced in 2002 following the ratification

by Germany of the ICC's Rome Statute. Through a willingness to break new ground, this case strengthens the hope for justice for the Yazidi community and indeed all communities impacted by ISIL crimes.

The case of *Al J*, and the associated case of his German wife, *Jennifer W*, also presently before German courts, reflect a further identifiable progressive trend in the domestic sphere, with national authorities increasingly willing to address the acts of terrorist organizations through the prism of

international criminal law. This is an approach that should be both applauded as responding directly to the demands of survivors and supported as part of a comprehensive criminal justice response to the challenge of terrorist accountability, in particular the conundrum posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs).

To date, national authorities in States including Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden are taking forward investigations and prosecutions at varying stages, with a number of these States adopting a cumulative approach through which individuals are charged both

for terrorist offences and international crimes. These proceedings have included prosecutions of individuals for war crimes associated with posing with murder victims or body parts, slavery, pillaging, enlisting child soldiers, and

the above-referenced case of genocide.

Of course, the prism of international criminal law for the prosecution of ISIL fighters should not be available only within European jurisdictions; greater efforts should be made to support authorities in other regions to leverage this framework. In my role

as Head of the United Nations Investigative Team to promote accountability for crimes committed by Da'esh / ISIL (UNITAD) I have been consistent in my support for efforts by the Iraqi Council of Representatives to adopt legislation that would allow for the prosecution of members of ISIL for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Survivors and families of victims across Iraq have been resolute in their calls for these acts not to be treated merely as acts of terrorism but as targeted attacks on their communities that may include constituent elements for international crimes. This legislation remains pending before the Council at present but I have been encouraged by the clear

The addition of the lens of international criminal justice to the acts of terrorist organizations has the potential to have a profound effect on the ability of national authorities to deliver meaningful justice for victims.

support it has received from key Iraqi parliamentary groups, the Iraqi Government, and the Presidency.

The addition of the lens of international criminal justice to the acts of terrorist organizations has the potential to have a profound effect on the ability of national authorities to deliver meaningful justice for victims. These efforts have further been strengthened through cooperation facilitated by actors such as the EU Genocide Network, which has worked to bring relevant domestic investigative and prosecutorial actors together in order to share good practices and identify further avenues for cooperation. However, while momentum has built in recent years, domestic authorities still require further support in addressing the inherent and often significant hurdles they face when seeking to prosecute international crimes committed in other jurisdictions.

In working with such authorities in recent years, two key areas stand out as requiring further assistance and support from the international community. *First*, domestic prosecutors in many jurisdictions may still not be entirely familiar with the contours of the key offences under international criminal law as relevant to the factual matrix they are investigating. Support should be provided to national investigators and prosecutors in founding such cases on the key constituent elements of the

international crimes they are seeking to establish. *Second*, limited access to relevant crime scenes can lead to cases based only, and in some cases disproportionately, on testimonial evidence. In this regard, established mutual legal assistance mechanisms and, as outlined further below, the support of newer international investigative mechanisms have a crucial role to play in filling the evidentiary gap.

EMPOWERING DOMESTIC ACTION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

These significant developments in domestic accountability processes can perhaps pose an awkward question for those who have played a part in the development of the international criminal accountability architecture over the last 20 years. Does this national-level dynamism render the complementary international pillar less relevant? Is it a symptom of the limitations of the existing global architecture that domestic prosecutors and courts seem more willing than ever to shoulder responsibility for combating impunity?

The answer must be to embrace this dynamism, to strengthen collaboration between actors at the national and international level, and to draw inspiration from the efforts of domestic authorities globally. By renewing a spirit of partnership across these different strata of action, we can further narrow the

practical and jurisdictional gaps which perpetrators can use to avoid justice.

Here a discussion can be focused on two aspects. First, how to bridge the accountability gap and second how established international accountability actors can both lead through example and extend support through partnership.

In this spirit, and with a view to addressing the inherent challenges faced by domestic authorities in the prosecution of international crimes, the international community has responded positively through the development of new models of action in support of domestic accountability processes. While the international political context at present is perhaps not conducive to the establishment of new international tribunals or courts, UN entities in particular have demonstrated an ability to implement creative solutions so as to address potential accountability gaps, at least in part. This has included the establishment of a number of international investigative mechanisms aimed at supporting domestic authorities in taking forward investigations and prosecutions for large-scale crimes. Such mechanisms

must be fully harnessed in the coming years so as to assist national authorities in bridging the evidentiary hurdles they currently face.

In 2017, in response to the persistent calls for action by communities in Iraq most impacted by ISIL crimes, and thanks in particular to the relentless advocacy of Nobel Laureate Nadia Murad, the UN Security Council authorized the establishment of UNITAD. Initiated at the request of the Government of Iraq, UNITAD represents a unique partnership between the international community, Iraqi national authorities, and

the religious and ethnic communities that continue to suffer as a result of the legacy of ISIL crimes in Iraq. Having commenced its work in late 2018 to collect, store and preserve evidence of international crimes committed by ISIL in Iraq, progress has been made both in the development of case-briefs and individual case-files in relation to senior ISIL members and the provision of ad hoc support to domestic authorities with respect to ongoing proceedings. A key lesson that may be drawn from the UNITAD experience to date is that what may have originally been

While the international political context at present is perhaps not conducive to the establishment of new international tribunals or courts, UN entities in particular have demonstrated an ability to implement creative solutions so as to address potential accountability gaps, at least in part.

viewed as a vulnerability in its mandate—the perceived tension between its independent investigations and close cooperation with Iraqi authorities—has in fact served as its key strength.

It has been by both leveraging its status as an independent, impartial entity and simultaneously harnessing cooperation with national and local authorities that the most significant steps have been taken by the Team in the implementation of its mandate. This is reflected in areas including the provision of support to Iraqi investigative judges in building case-files against ISIL members for international crimes and the delivery of training to Iraqi investigators on dealing with victims of trauma. In parallel, building on its position in-country, the Team has been able to establish strong relationships with survivor groups and impacted communities. Through this engagement, the Team has sought to support the most vulnerable survivors to come forward with their accounts while addressing risks of re-traumatization and has also ensured its working practices are adapted to the cultural and religious customs of all communities with

which it works. By demonstrating an ability for a UN mechanism to operate effectively and independently within a national jurisdiction while continually deepening our cooperation with national authorities and impacted

communities, UNITAD may serve as a model for similar action in other jurisdictions.

The harnessing of these dual elements of international expertise and national engagement has allowed for the provision of tangible support to domestic accountability processes, both in Iraq and in States seeking to prosecute nationals that travelled to Iraq in order to join in the criminal

activities of Daesh. In Sinjar, the Team has provided extensive support to Iraqi authorities in order to ensure that mass grave sites are excavated in a manner that supports the collection and preservation of evidence in line with international standards. In Baghdad, Mosul, and other locations across Iraq our Team is working with investigative judges and government officials to digitize millions of existing files and battlefield evidence which to date have not been exploited for the purpose of accountability processes.

A key lesson that may be drawn from the UNITAD experience to date is that what may have originally been viewed as a vulnerability in its mandate—the perceived tension between its independent investigations and close cooperation with Iraqi authorities—has in fact served as its key strength.

Recognizing that meaningful accountability efforts must be holistic in addressing the needs of communities, UNITAD has also worked closely with the Yezidi community and Iraqi national authorities to ensure the remains of victims are returned and buried in accordance with religious and cultural custom. It was the profound honor of UNITAD support the ceremony held in Kocho village in February marking the return of the remains of 104 of the victims of mass killings undertaken by Daesh in August 2014. Attended by hundreds of family members of the victims, including Ms. Murad who laid to rest her brother as part of the ceremony, along with civil society organizations, Iraqi authorities and international partners, this marked a somber but crucial moment for reflection and recognition of the crimes inflicted on the Yezidi people. In addressing those present, I underlined that the collective action which allowed for the return of victims to their families must and will continue through to the prosecution of those responsible.

Seeking to bridge the evidence gap faced by other national authorities, the Team has received requests for

assistance from 11 States so far in relation to ongoing investigations and prosecutions of ISIL members. Such support can take many forms, from the identification of individual witnesses who may wish to provide their accounts in support of ongoing proceedings, to the cross-checking of information on persons of interest against our evidence holdings. Harnessing our advanced evidence management system and analytical tools—including facial and voice recognition technology—the Team has been able to identify relevant information in response to such requests on a consistent basis. This has included a wide range of internal ISIL administrative documents through which a personal history of individual ISIL members can be developed, including their receipt of payments, medical treatment, and housing from ISIL and confirmation of their participation in combat activities.

Where the unanimity of approach amongst the international community that underpinned the establishment of UNITAD has not been possible, the UN has still found a way to act to support accountability efforts in relation to large-scale crimes. With respect

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to crimes committed in Syria since March 2011, the General Assembly in 2016 established the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) in order to collect, consolidate, preserve, and analyze evidence of violations of international humanitarian law and to prepare case-files for use in fair and independent criminal proceedings whether before domestic courts or, potentially, any international court or tribunal that may have jurisdiction in the future. While not in place in-country, the IIIM has been able to leverage its role as a central repository of information in order to collect over 2,000,000 documents relevant to its mandate and is developing evidentiary modules in order to address the contextual requirements necessary for the prosecution of war crimes charges in competent domestic jurisdictions.

The more recently established Independent, Impartial, Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar builds on the model established through the IIIM and has commenced work in constructing a central repository of information on the most serious international crimes and violations of international law committed in Myanmar since 2011. In a recent statement in the context of the ongoing developments in Myanmar, the Head of the IIIM noted that wherever they see indications that serious international crimes or violations of international law have been or are being committed, they

will fulfill their mandate, and collect evidence and build criminal case files to hold to account those individuals responsible.

Whether following the in-country model of UNITAD or the international repository model of the IIIM and IIMM, this new generation of mechanisms have the ability to serve as a crucial bridge between the increasing willingness of national authorities to take forward proceedings in relation to international crimes and the hard reality that evidence needed is extremely difficult to access. In the case of the IIIM and IIM, they may also potentially serve as a bridge to efforts by the ICC to take forward prosecutions, depending on the gravity of the crime and provided relevant jurisdictional elements are met.

Further engagement is needed between these mechanisms and national authorities in the coming years to ensure that domestic proceedings benefit fully from the new avenues for cooperation that have been created through action taken in the Security Council and General Assembly.

Beyond these newer mechanisms, the more established actors in the international accountability framework also have important role to play in both supporting and harnessing the innovative spirit demonstrated by national

counterparts. This should be done by both extending their support through partnership and leading by example.

The International Criminal Court can and does serve as a source of inspiration and guidance through its own policies, practices, and procedures. This is particularly important in areas in which domestic authorities continue to find their feet as they explore the potential scope of action available to them within their national legal framework. The adoption of a trauma-informed approach to the engagement of witnesses and survivors, the investigation of sexual and gender-based crimes, and the investigation of crimes concerning children are all areas in which the experience of the ICC, and other relevant international actors, can serve as a crucial guide for national authorities in the initial stages of investigations touching on these themes.

In more concrete terms, the ICC is also able to provide direct support to national jurisdictions through the provision of information and the coordination of action with situation countries. There is positive precedent in the situations of Uganda and the Central African Republic, and it was highlighted in the recent Independent

Expert Review of the International Criminal Court and the Rome Statute System that this should be built upon through further information-sharing with other relevant national jurisdictions and the provision of assistance to local investigations and prosecutions. As the Expert group authoring the report noted, not to do so ultimately risks the wealth of evidence collected by the Office of the Prosecutor going to waste. In addition, by empowering domestic authorities through assistance and the provision of information, the OTP will strengthen the basis on which it can further prioritize its own cases.

To this end, it was recommended by the Expert group that the Assembly of State Parties consider establishing a working group to assist and support the ICC in addressing impunity gaps and facilitating domestic justice processes. In this area, the ICC may itself be able to benefit from the experience of newer entities such as the IIIM and UNITAD with respect to the proactive provision of support to relevant domestic jurisdictions. Again, a willingness to build partnerships across different channels of action will be crucial in ensuring opportunities for learning and mutual strengthening of practice are exploited.

A willingness to build partnerships across different channels of action will be crucial in ensuring opportunities for learning and mutual strengthening of practice are exploited.

WE ARE ONLY LIMITED BY OUR WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE AND TO COLLABORATE

In assessing the current landscape of criminal justice, and in considering what the next era in criminal justice may look like, an optimist would be able to identify a movement of dynamism and innovation emerging. This energy and progressive approach to delivering accountability will be essential if we are to adapt the process of justice to the realities of a world in which persons, information and criminality can move more freely than ever before.

However, real progress can only be achieved by bringing these strands of innovation together, across national authorities, international investigative

mechanisms, and transitional justice initiatives, with this partnership-building further supported and inspired by established actors including the International Criminal Court. Barriers must be broken down with respect to information-sharing, collaboration, and dialogue so that innovations on one plane of action can serve to inspire and accelerate progress in others. This is all possible, provided we remain focused on the urgency of the calls for action by those we seek to serve, the survivors of the gravest crimes, and the families of those that have fallen victim to their perpetrators. If we do so, we may finally hope to live up to the expectations of those that looked to the adoption of the Rome Statute as the beginning of the end of impunity. ●



IT'S TIME FOR NEURO-RIGHTS

NEW HUMAN RIGHTS FOR THE AGE OF NEUROTECHNOLOGY

Rafael Yuste, Jared Genser, and Stephanie Herrmann

SINCE its adoption in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has served as a moral beacon over the post-World War II world. The Universal Declaration has been both inspiration and aspiration, providing a common set of values and ethical guidelines for governments, corporations, and individuals. It has inspired the widespread adoption, for example, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), a multilateral treaty adopted by 173 countries and now covering more than 90 percent of the world's population. And it has led to more focused treaties addressing torture, disappearances, racial discrimination, and the rights of women, children, and people

with disabilities. It has spoken principle to power in over 500 languages and is the most widely-translated document in the world.

At the same time, the human rights landscape has evolved enormously since the Universal Declaration was adopted; our present world threatens human rights violations that its framers could not have foreseen. Technological advancements are redefining human life and are transforming the role of humans in society. In particular, neurotechnology—or methods to record, interpret, or alter brain activity—has the potential to profoundly alter what it means to be human. The brain is not just another organ, but the one that generates all of our mental and

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cognitive activity. All of our thoughts, perceptions, imagination, memories, decisions, and emotions are generated by the orchestrated firing of neural circuits in our brains. For the first time in history, we are facing the real possibility of human thoughts being decoded or manipulated using technology. Although neurotechnology presents critical opportunities for scientific and medical breakthroughs, and it will open a vast new field for economic development, it also presents unprecedented human rights implications.

For the first time in history, we are facing the real possibility of human thoughts being decoded or manipulated using technology.

Neurotechnology has tremendous potential to improve the human condition and advance our species but, precisely because it can be so transformative, it also raises fundamental human rights challenges that were never envisioned by today's international human rights treaties. Consequently, existing treaties cannot offer the robust and comprehensive human rights protection that a neurotechnological world requires. Instead, today's era calls for a novel protection framework: neuro-rights.

NEUROTECHNOLOGY TODAY

Neurotechnology is making possible what was previously science fiction. Companies and governments are developing devices that would allow people to communicate

by thinking, to decipher others' thoughts by reading their brain data, and to have access to all of the internet's databases and capabilities inside their minds. Additionally, scientists around the world are developing neurotechnology that could lead to new therapies for mental illness and neurological diseases, such as Alzheimer's, schizophrenia, stroke, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or addiction. The many forms of neurotechnology have led to endless possibilities for shaping daily life. To appreciate the human rights impact of neurotechnology, however, it is important to understand how it works.

At the heart of neurotechnology are brain-computer interfaces ("BCIs")—the devices which connect a person's brain to a computer or to another device outside the human body like a smartphone or a computer. BCIs allow a bidirectional communication between the brain and the outside world, exporting brain data or altering brain activity, and they can operate in two different ways. They can be either invasive (and be inside a person's skull) or non-invasive (like a helmet worn over their head). Both types of neurotechnology bring to light specific gaps in regulation which, in turn, give rise to gaps in human rights protection.

Some BCIs are invasive and require surgery to place electrodes directly into a person's brain. The electrodes send brain data to a computer, where it can be analyzed and decoded. Invasive BCIs have been used in mainstream medicine for years; some familiar examples of invasive BCIs are cochlear implants, or the deep brain stimulators which can help people with Parkinson's disease regain mobility. Scientists have also shown how invasive BCIs can help people with missing or damaged limbs to feel heat and cold through their prostheses. For example, implanted with a BCI developed by BrainGate, a person with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) who previously could not speak or move now can write and send emails, Google random questions, and shop on Amazon using an off-the-shelf Android tablet. The opening kick of Brazil's 2018 Soccer World Cup was given by a tetraplegic person wearing a robotic exoskeleton controlled by a BCI. It is expected that in coming years, BCIs will even be able to provide effective visual prostheses for blind persons, which would enhance their ability to sense proximity in the world around them.

Although there have been many remarkable applications in medicine,

invasive BCIs can be used in other ways. In 2018, the MIT Media Lab used an invasive BCI to transcribe human thoughts into typed messages. And Neuralink, owned by Elon Musk, announced it is developing a wireless implantable chip to link human minds to computers to create "superhuman" cognition by enhancing humans with AI. Scientists have already discovered how to use invasive BCIs to control the actions of laboratory animals, including mice. While a mouse is performing an action, such as eating, the BCI records its brain data. Scientists can then use this data to reactivate and stimulate the same parts of the mouse's brain that were previously recorded and cause the mouse to eat again—even if the mouse did not want to eat. This same process has already been used for the artificial implantation of memories or images into a mouse's brain, generating hallucinations and false memory of fear that, importantly, are indistinguishable from the real world.

By contrast, a non-invasive BCI does not touch the brain; instead, it rests on a person's head. "Wearable" BCIs, such as helmets, glasses, and diadems, can be used to predict a person's intended speech or movement. These devices could also help people with

Neurotechnology has tremendous potential to improve the human condition and advance our species, but it also raises fundamental human rights challenges that were never envisioned by today's international human rights treaties

create "superhuman" cognition by enhancing humans with AI. Scientists have already discovered how to use invasive BCIs to control the actions of laboratory animals, including mice. While a mouse is performing an action, such as eating, the BCI records its brain data. Scientists can then use this data to reactivate and stimulate the same

expressive or communicative conditions to communicate by decoding the images in a person's mind. Indeed, scientists have successfully shared images and words between two people in different rooms using non-invasive BCIs, effectively allowing the two to exchange thoughts. But non-invasive BCIs could do much more. They already have enabled a man who is quadriplegic to drive a Formula One race car.

Besides using BCIs to decode neuronal activity, coupled with similar methods to the one described above—for recording and stimulating the brain—BCIs can be used to effectively control animals' movement. In addition to reading and analyzing it, non-invasive BCIs may one day be used to alter human brain activity. What can be done with mice today could be done with humans tomorrow.

As is clear from these examples, applications of neurotechnology are replete with possible human rights violations. As often happens with new technologies, the development of neurotechnology has vastly outpaced countries' and international organizations' attempts to regulate it. Invasive BCIs require surgery and are currently regulated under the domain of medicine—but non-invasive BCIs, which will be used for the same purposes as invasive ones, often fall outside of

Endless applications of neurotechnology are replete with possible human rights violations.

medical regulations. In most countries, non-invasive BCIs are considered consumer items, and—to the extent they are regulated at all—may be classified under pre-existing frameworks that are inadequate to address the unique challenges posed by this new technology.

FROM LABORATORIES TO INDUSTRY

A neurotechnology revolution has been spearheaded by government bodies in the United States, China, and other countries; they are likely also developing non-medical neurotechnology for military and surveillance uses that are not fully explored or regulated by either national laws or international treaties. Sparked by U.S. President Barack Obama's 2013 BRAIN Initiative, which funded public research for developing neurotechnology and artificial intelligence, countries around the world have begun to heavily fund similar research projects. And, in parallel with progress in scientific laboratories and in governments, neurotechnology development is increasingly happening in the industry, to the point that, in the U.S., the private sector is now outpacing federal funding in developing new neurotechnology.

Indeed, in the past 20 years, over \$19 billion globally has been invested in more than 200 neurotechnology

companies. For example, Facebook's "Brain to Text" project, which started in 2017, is building a non-invasive BCI to decode human thoughts at a rate of 100 words per minute and write them on a computer screen. In 2019, Facebook acquired CTRL-Labs for reportedly \$1 billion, because it has developed a

wristband that may be the first consumer product to use neural activity to translate intentions, gestures, and motions into computer control or movements of a robotic avatar. The startup Kernel released their "KernelFlow" device in the fall of 2020: a helmet which can map brain

activity with unprecedented accuracy and resolution. Many other portable non-invasive BCIs are being developed to produce images of brain activity. Given the great progress in decoding brain activity using functional magnetic resonance (fMRI) scanners—whereby researchers can decipher with increasing accuracy images that one freely conjures in the mind—it is only a matter of time until the output of portable brain scanners can be systematically decoded.

As companies and governments continue to invest in and develop neurotechnology, one can reasonably conclude that unexplored ethical and legal dilemmas will continue to arise. In the

absence of an international regulatory framework, these dilemmas will inevitably result in human rights violations.

NEUROTECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Given the pace of progress and the profound consequences that neurotechnology has for the human experience, the current era will likely be remembered as the time that neurotechnology rose to prominence and the international community embraced unprecedented opportunities for public-private partnerships, innovation, and medical advancement. At

the same time, the pace of neurotechnology innovation has underscored the need for guardrails, in the form of principles and policies, technology safeguards, and national and international regulations to protect human rights.

The challenge of the coming years will be to create such guardrails that predispose good outcomes when neurotechnology matures and pervades multiple sectors. To build this new system, it is essential to understand the ethical concerns that neurotechnology raises.

Neurotechnology raises unique ethical concerns, because, unlike predecessor technologies, it directly

As companies and governments continue to invest in and develop neurotechnology, one can reasonably conclude that unexplored ethical and legal dilemmas will continue to arise.

interacts with and affects the brain. Media reports in recent years have uncovered only some of the ways in which neurotechnology has been used around the world that arguably infringes upon human rights. For instance, reports have shown footage of Chinese primary schools which require students to wear headsets to record their concentration levels. This brain data is stored on the teacher's computer and is later shared with parents without the child's consent.

Because the brain stores sensitive information and learned tasks, neurotechnology may

make this information dangerously accessible in the near future. Hypothetical scenarios that previously seemed outlandish are conceivable today. For example, brain decoding of images in response to questions could be used for effective interrogation of prisoners or even of kidnapped leaders, potentially creating a national security crisis. Alternatively, what if a hiring algorithm discriminated against a prospective employee at a company because it misinterpreted her brain data? Algorithms are capable of developing biases that mimic human ones, such as race or gender. Each of these scenarios highlights a different ethical quandary posed by neurotechnology, which can be intentionally or accidentally abused by its users.

Neurotechnology uniquely addresses two novel ethical challenges which are not presented by other forms of technology: mental privacy and human agency.

As neurotechnology will likely expand beyond medicine and into sectors including education, gaming, entertainment, transportation, law, research, and the military, it is critical to ensure its ethical application and accessibility. There is some overlap between the ethical concerns associated with neurotechnology and those associ-

ated with other biological and computational technologies, such as genomics and artificial intelligence. Some of these overlapping ethical concerns include data security, transparency, fairness, and well-being. However, neurotechnology

uniquely addresses two novel ethical challenges which are not presented by other forms of technology: mental privacy and human agency.

PRIVATE THOUGHTS & FREE WILL

These two ethical issue areas shine a spotlight on the protection gaps in existing international human rights treaties and underscore the need for new human rights to be created. Mental privacy refers to the presumption that the contents of a person's mind are only known to that person. In the age of neurotechnology, the presumption of mental privacy is no longer a certainty.

Most brain data generated by the body's nervous system is unconsciously

created and outside a person's control. Therefore, it is plausible that a person would unknowingly or unintentionally reveal brain data while under surveillance. Nevertheless, the concept of mental privacy is not contemplated within Article 17 of the ICCPR, which prohibits unlawful or arbitrary interferences with privacy. The General Comment—that is, the interpretation of Article 17—not only fails to mention technology, but it also fails to discuss the privacy of a person's thoughts.

Human agency refers to a person's free will and bodily autonomy. Because neurotechnology can be used to stimulate a person's brain, it has the capacity to influence a person's behavior, thoughts, emotions, or memories. While there are numerous mentions across existing international human rights treaties of freedom of thought and freedom from coercion to adopt particular beliefs, it is unclear whether these provisions envisioned possible coercion through technology. For example, Article 18(1) of the ICCPR protects the universal right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Article 18(2) says that a person shall not be subjected to coercion which impairs his ability to adopt a belief of his choosing. Nonetheless, the General Comment of Article 18 makes no mention of technological means.

While the existing system for international human rights protection could

partially cover the human rights issues that neurotechnology raises, such as with the broad definitions provided in the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, it is incomplete and imprecise and not adapted to the future. It is crucial to both conceptualize the human rights violations that could be conceivably caused by the use or abuse of neurotechnology to protect individual autonomy and mental privacy, and to promote its safe, transparent, and effective use.

CLOSING THE PROTECTION GAP

To close protection gaps under the existing international human rights system and to protect people from the unique concerns associated with neurotechnology, researchers and bioethicists have proposed a new international legal and human rights framework—the so-called neuro-rights—which can be understood as a new set of human rights to protect the brain.

Proposed neuro-rights include (1) the right to identity, or the ability to control both one's physical and mental integrity; (2) the right to agency, or the freedom of thought and free will to choose one's own actions; (3) the right to mental privacy, or the ability to keep thoughts protected against disclosure; (4) the right to fair access to mental augmentation, or the ability to ensure that the benefits of improvements to

sensory and mental capacity through neurotechnology are distributed justly in the population; and (5) the right to protection from algorithmic bias, or the ability to ensure that technologies do not insert prejudices.

These ethical areas build upon and expand existing international human rights for the protection of human dignity, liberty and security of the person, non-discrimination, equal

Delivering neuro-rights to the world will require bold leadership, new institutional architecture, and focused strategies.

protection, and privacy. However, these are very generic terms, often subject to interpretation, and the ramifications of neurotechnology require specificity. Furthermore, a comprehensive framework does not yet exist to address the wider scope and range of possible neuro-rights violations.

Currently, there is no international consensus on what constitutes neuro-rights. Chile is the only country with a proposed law and constitutional amendment mandating neuroprotection and explicitly protecting neuro-rights. Both have been approved by the Chilean Senate. In addition, the Spanish Digital Rights Charter—recently announced by the Secretary of State of Digitalization and AI from the Government of Spain—represents another pioneering effort to explore the human rights landscape of the digital era and

incorporates the five proposed neuro-rights enumerated above.

Moreover, existing international instruments which address neuroethics or technology are still not nascent. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Recommendation on Responsible Innovation in Neurotechnology is one of the few examples in which an international organization has considered neurotechnology. While these frameworks discuss safety, consent, and privacy issues associated with neurotechnology, they fall short of addressing the dangers of identity abuse, unfair access, bias and discrimination, state responsibilities and duties, or additional human rights which may be infringed through neurotechnology.

A NEURO-RIGHTS AGENDA FOR THE UN

Delivering neuro-rights to the world will require bold leadership, new institutional architecture, and focused strategies. Due to the caliber of the problem, the fact that it affects the entire world, and its direct impact on the work of the United Nations to promote and protect human rights, we think that the UN is the logical forum in which to properly address it. While progress is never

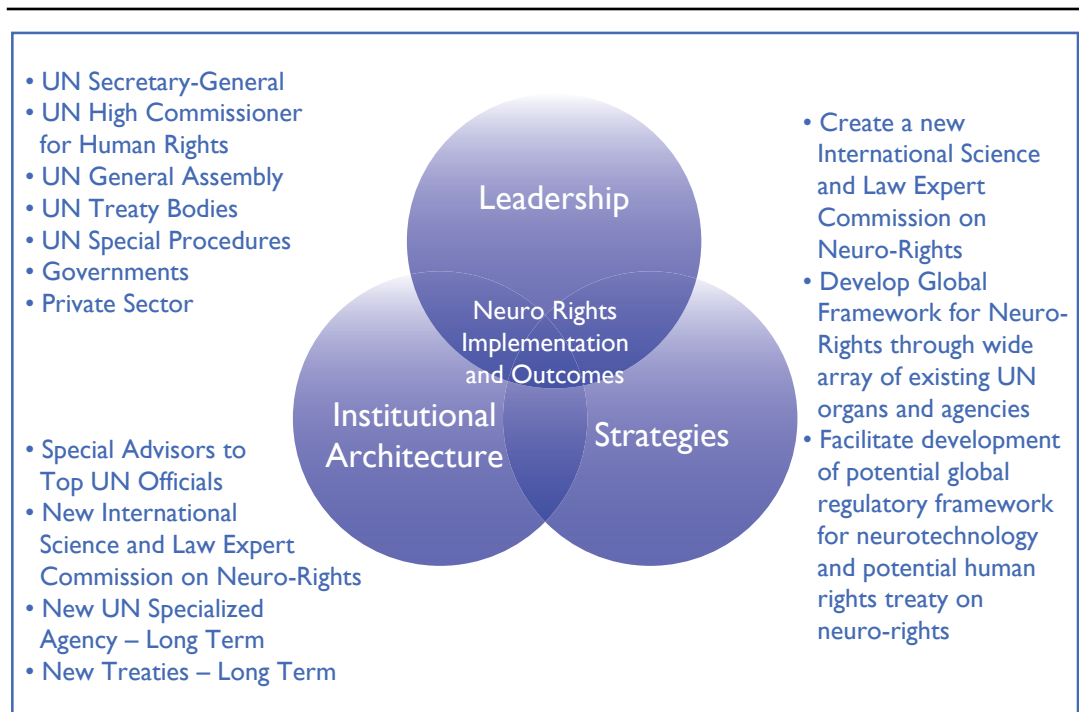


Photo: Jared Genser.

A proposed UN approach for advancing neuro-rights in the age of neurotechnology

immediate, the UN could divide its actions into both short- and long-term solutions to continuously generate momentum for protecting neuro-rights.

What follows are three short-term and four long-term potential measures which could be taken to diminish the risk of the widespread adoption of neurotechnology in the absence of any ethical or regulatory guard-rails.

Short-term measures could help build a consensus definition of neuro-rights and thereby consolidate neurotechnology research and regulatory practices. *First*, UN Secretary-General

António Guterres and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet should, in consultation with the treaty bodies and special procedures, create an International Science and Law Expert Commission on Neuro-Rights. The Commission should comprise both lawyers with international human rights law expertise alongside scientists with neuroscience and neuro-ethics expertise. The Commission could draw its members from academia, the private sector, and from non-governmental organizations. This Commission would specifically aim to develop an international consensus definition of neuro-rights through the exchange of scientific

knowledge and the application and development of human rights law.

Second, both these UN officials could appoint highly-qualified experts to serve as Special Advisors on Neuro-Rights. In this capacity, these advisors should identify the best regulatory practices in countries around the world, investigate alleged misuses of neurotechnology, and remain apprised of the latest scientific research. These advisors would also collaborate with the treaty bodies and special procedures to facilitate the long-term development of a framework for protecting neuro-rights, such as a potential international regulatory framework for neurotechnology and a potential new human rights treaty on neuro-rights.

Third, both the neuro-rights advisers and the Commission could hold regular consultations with key countries which have advanced neurotechnology or artificial intelligence research programs, including the United States, the UK, Canada, Australia, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and applicable EU member states, as well as countries with existing neuroprotection regulation, such as Chile and Spain. The advisers and the Commission should encourage these countries to be in frequent dialogue outside of the UN, as well, when possible.

Long-term measures could develop both a framework for the protection and promotion of neuro-rights and

a mechanism for monitoring countries' activities on neurotechnology.

First, the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, and other relevant bodies could either create a new treaty or propose a protocol of additions to existing treaties to incorporate neuro-rights. This measure will ensure that there are specific treaty bodies capable of further defining neuro-rights under international law.

Second, the UN Human Rights Council and its special procedures should encourage existing treaty bodies, such as the UN Committee Against Torture and the Human Rights Committee, to adopt General Comments on neuro-rights. These General Comments may interpret provisions in existing treaties as applying to neurotechnology, or they may interpret the scope of individual neuro-rights.

Third, the UN Human Rights Council could appoint a Special Rapporteur on the Impact of Neurotechnology on Human Rights. The Special Rapporteur would travel to specific countries, monitor their progress or violations of neuro-rights, and publish reports of their findings.

Fourth, the UN should consider the creation of a specialized agency to coordinate global neuro-rights activities and to help codify neuro-rights into an international human rights treaty.

THE WAY FORWARD

The technological challenges facing the world today are wholly unprecedented. The rapid development of neurotechnology is occurring in a vacuum of regulation in nearly every country and international organization. Even though sovereign states will ultimately create their own laws to address neurotechnology, as this technology affects the human mind, this is an issue that squarely impinges on human rights. Therefore, the United Nations should forge a path for states by setting global standards for the protection of neuro-rights.

When considering the diverse challenges neurotechnology poses for humanity, many may feel daunted by the number of ways in which neurotechnology can infringe upon human rights. However, effective multilateral cooperation can cause the law to both evolve and serve all countries in a technologically shifting world. Although it has never been modified, the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights proclaims that the “advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.” The advent of neurotechnology—with transformative yet unsettling consequences—is upon us; and the law must evolve to promote a world where technological advancements do not endanger the rights that the international community has long fought to protect.

As this is an issue that squarely impinges on human rights, the United Nations should forge a path for them by setting global standards for the protection of neuro-rights.

Although many human rights instruments and treaty bodies already exist, they never envisioned the world in which we live today. The United Nations cannot afford not to take action in the face of this profoundly transformative technology. It must act with urgency to bolster human rights protection through the incorporation of neuro-rights into the human rights protection system. While it can be a challenging endeavor, it will enable people around the world to harness neurotechnology’s full potential. 🌐

JEREMIĆ ADDRESSES THE UN GLOBAL COMPACT AS THE UN CELEBRATES ITS 75TH ANNIVERSARY



As part of the UN’s 75th anniversary celebrations, CIRSD President Vuk Jeremić gave a keynote address to the UN Global Compact, the world’s largest corporate sustainability initiative.



“Geopolitical circumstances have made it much more difficult for the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by the 2030 deadline. Achieving the SDGs is predicated on the assumption of increasing international cooperation. It’s also predicated on enough resources being dedicated to that end. Unfortunately, the reality for a number of years now has been the opposite, as we witness less and less cooperation between UN member states. I don’t mean to sound pessimistic, because I still think there is a way forward—a way for the world to get back on track. And I think the Global Compact—the private sector—can help generate the momentum we need to catch up and build the World We Want.”

–Vuk Jeremić

BREAKING THE BIG TECH MONOPOLY

THE COMING DECADE OF BIG TECH REGULATIONS

Winston Ma

FOR Chinese internet giants, 2020 started as a year of tremendous growth. Amid a pandemic crisis, tech giants demonstrated better real-time data of people's new daily routines, modified spending patterns, and their travel destinations (or lack thereof) than the government itself. Their mobile services have more reliable users' location data. Their digital payment systems record people's money spending habits and to whom they send money. Their apps also know what train, airplane, or concert tickets users have just bought. None of these things could be easily managed even by the most joined-up of bureaucracies, coordinating across agencies and ministries. In the end, many government efforts were hosted by internet platforms like

Alibaba and Tencent to take advantage of their exiting user networks—which grew further over the course of the year.

Building on the momentum, Ant Group, the fintech arm of Alibaba, planned to launch a mega IPO in November 2020. The dual listing in Shanghai and Hong Kong, which had sought to raise \$34.5 billion and would have valued Ant at over \$313 billion, was expected to break the IPO-proceedings record set by Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil giant of Saudi Arabia. As the largest online platform in China (and the world) for mobile payments and personal loans, the financial-services company received over \$3 trillion in orders from retail investors across its dual listings.

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Yet less than 48 hours before it was due to go public, Ant halted its planned Shanghai and Hong Kong listings as Chinese regulators published new draft rules for online lending. Meanwhile, the market saw a consultation draft of the Anti-Monopoly Guidelines on the “sector of platform economies” from antitrust agencies. In the same month, the central government also released the first draft of its comprehensive Law on Personal Data Protection, expected to become effective later in 2021, which restricts internet platforms' ability to collect and use consumer data. Within weeks, China's state watchdogs conducted regulatory talks with Ant Group, but also fined the company in parallel to launching an antitrust investigation into Alibaba. In March 2021, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that China's “antitrust regulators are considering levying a record fine against Alibaba.” As a consequence of all this, Ant Group's IPO has not yet resumed as of March 2021.

Taken together, these actions mark the first time the Chinese government has directly and systematically tackled anti-competitive behavior in the internet sector. It appears that the

Chinese government has decided to be more active in taking steps to curb high-flying digital platforms' power and dominance in the country. This signals the end of an era, as the rising regulations will fundamentally change the

Although geopolitical tensions are ever-present in the emerging post-pandemic world, all the major powers seem to share a consensus on at least one important issue, namely that Big Tech firms (irrespective of where they may be headquartered) are too big, too powerful, and too profitable.

competition landscape in China for internet companies.

China's latest actions also fit within an increasing global trend of regulators taking action against major internet platforms—what are called the “Big Tech” firms. Regulators from around the world are intensifying their scrutiny of Big Tech and reining-in their potential anti-competitive practices.

In the European Union, for example, Facebook was levied with a record \$5 billion fine in 2019 for violating consumer privacy rights, and Amazon was charged for antitrust concerns. Google was fined over \$9 billion in antitrust penalties by the EU, and three antitrust lawsuits were brought against it in the United States in just a two-month period at the end of 2020.

No doubt, at the beginning of this new decade, the world is waking up to the reality that tech businesses also have a dark side, like other leading

companies in other industries. With nearly one billion internet users, China has the largest internet population—more than the U.S. and India combined. Thus, it provides the best context and case study for the regulation of Big Tech firms. This essay will examine the reasons behind China’s development of a legal framework to restrain the power of Big Tech, how Chinese actions could be a catalyst for a global regulatory drive of Big Tech companies (especially in the United States), and what global collaboration is needed for what is arguably one of the most important policy initiatives in the coming decade.

THE AGE OF AI

Let us first go back in time. For China, the years of 2014–2015 have come to be seen as the most important inflection point in the history of the internet, as the country’s internet population officially entered into the age of mobile internet and multi-screen usage (e.g. smartphone, tablets, personal computer, and more). Alongside the widespread adoption of mobile applications during the mobile economy boom, there was a surge in data growth in China’s consumer market. In this ‘mobile first’ and ‘mobile only’ environment, people began to use their mobile phones heavily to shop for consumer goods, order meal deliveries, buy tickets and pay for almost all daily activities, leaving vast amounts of data on digital platforms.

Now, in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), internet users and tech companies clash with regards to personal data issues more directly than ever. Because data has become a critical resource in AI and data-driven technologies, internet giants are more often *proactively* collecting user data. Furthermore, they are collecting every aspect of user data—whether in the context of identity data, network data, or behavioral data—as illustrated in Figure 1. Take precision marketing, for example. Users’ data are analyzed and based on the different characteristic labels they are given (e.g. “makeup lover,” “sports fan,” or, say, “keen to travel.”). Then, companies show specific advertising messages to potential customers based on the matching of labels.

As the “mosaic theory” suggests, disparate items of information—though individually of limited or no utility to the owner—can take on added significance when combined with other items of information. In cyberspace, there is a lot of different information that an individual user would never think could be used to identify him or her as a specific person with specific monetizable preferences. But when a computer algorithm combines the different pieces together, the computer can see connections in ways that humans cannot. When a digital platform combines different sets of data—either from different service lines of the same platform

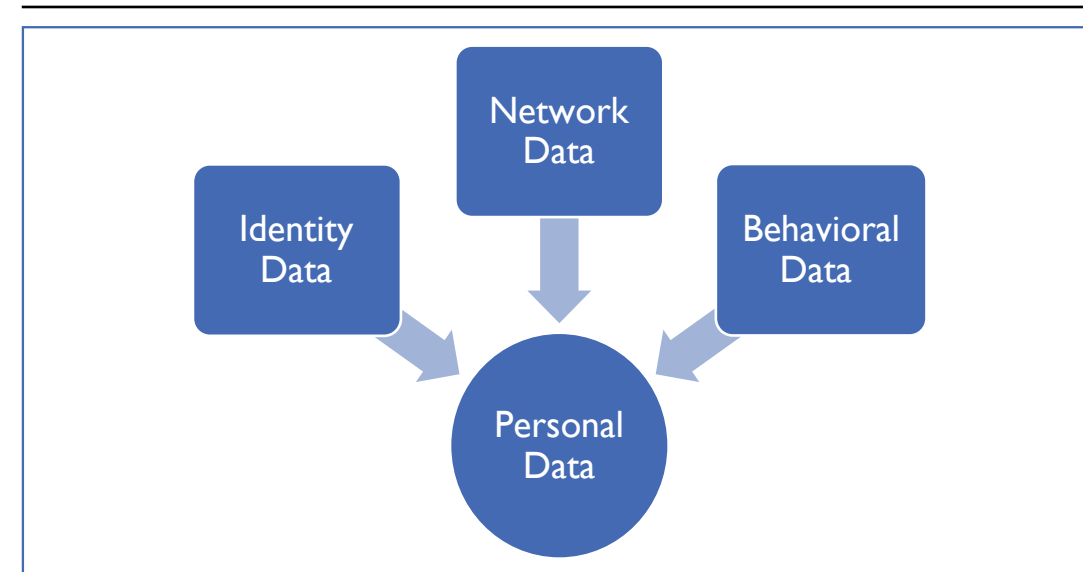


Figure 1: User data: identity, network, and behavioral

Illustration: ??????

or from third-party data vendors in different sectors—the power of user data integration grows exponentially.

Not surprisingly, many Chinese internet giants have expanded their businesses into “super apps.” They are active in various areas—from food ordering and taxi hailing to e-commerce and money lending—and they collect and possess massive user data from their numerous activities. For example, Tencent openly vowed to become the fundamental platform for China’s internet, the twenty-first-century version of a provider of “water and electricity supplies in daily life.” Another major platform, Meituan, covers food ordering, bicycle-sharing, and numerous other everyday services. Consequently, these

large platforms can profile their users in striking detail.

At the same time, these platforms have used big data analysis to provide users with more personalized and faster services. On the other hand, the data power of many platforms has also aroused public concerns that big data could be abused. They quickly learned the importance of data and privacy through “big data killing”—the more personal data the platforms have, the more users have to pay. It is to an explanation of this term to which we next turn.

BIG DATA KILLING

In Mandarin, the word “*shashu*” literally means “killing someone with whom a person is acquainted,” and it is a term that has emerged

from China's market economy. It refers to a situation whereby a person takes advantage of another who innocently believes the former is a friend who acts in the latter's best interest.

In the data economy, the concept has evolved into "big data killing" (or *dashuju shashu*) as internet platforms capitalize on information received from regular users whose spending habits become well-known by the platforms. The "killing" refers to the situation in which, for the same goods and services, the price shown to old customers is more expensive than it is for new users. In economic terms, big data killing is a form of price discrimination.

Big data killing illustrates the power and value of data. Because a given internet platform has no knowledge about a new user, it offers a relatively low product (or service) price so that the new user can enjoy the "sweetness" of the first experience (at the same time, the platform gathers his or her personal data through the user's platform registration and related transactions). Meanwhile the same internet platform offers a relatively higher price to existing users for the same product (or service), especially to those who are analyzed as having higher spending power and lower sensitivity to pricing.

Consider online travel agency sites—one sector where big data killing is prevalent. Savvy users have discovered that when they try to book air tickets or hotel rooms, the price is higher for a frequent user of a given website than for a newcomer. Online car-hailing platforms are also found to offer different prices in the same region to different users. A similar phenomenon is also reported to occur in online shopping, online ticket purchases, video websites, and many other fields.

In April 2018, iiMedia Research, a leading data mining and analysis agency based in Guangzhou, released its "2018 China Big Data Killing and User Behavior Report." According to its analysis, 77.8 percent of surveyed internet users indicated that service applications using big data for differential pricing were unacceptable, and 73.9 percent of respondents did not know that internet applications were using big data to categorize different user behaviors. The report suggests that a high percentage of internet users are unaware of such increasingly common industry practice. Many of them are insensitive to prices and are likely to become the target of big data killing.

China's regulators took action as the issue gained social traction. Big data killing is now prohibited by China's E-Commerce Law, which became

effective in January 2019. The law provides that when e-commerce operators provide a search result for a good or service, it should simultaneously provide the consumer with an option to see results that do not target his or her identifiable traits.

In other words, merchants could still offer customized services and products to users, but users also have to be provided with the option of seeing general offerings that are not based on personal data preferences. Later in 2019, new administrative rules came into force, which further required that customized recommendations created by algorithms driven by personal information, including news feeds and advertising, needed to be explicitly labeled.

As illustrated by the big data killing example, the notion that Chinese internet users care little about giving up personal data is not true. The more direct reason is that there is still a general lack of understanding as to how data is collected, categorized, and used by internet-based social platforms. Nevertheless, after years of Chinese internet companies building business models around the lack of awareness about privacy by Chinese users, these same users are becoming more knowledgeable, and they are becoming angry with companies abusing their personal information.

DATA PRIVACY REGULATIONS RISING IN CHINA

The year 2018 could be hailed as the one when the Chinese public started awakening to privacy concerns. When Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testified before the U.S. Congress in early 2018 with regards to Facebook's data practices, he had warned that regulating the platform's use of personal data would cause the United States to fall behind China when it came to data-intensive innovation, such as AI. As if echoing Zuckerberg's testimony, the founder of China's leading search engine Baidu, Robin Li, commented in a 2018 interview that if Chinese people "are able to exchange privacy for safety, convenience, or efficiency—and in many cases they are willing to do that—then we can make more use of that data."

Ironically, Li's remark was not accepted by the Chinese public. Baidu was sued that year by a consumer rights protection group in Jiangsu province for collecting user data without consent. The lawsuit was later withdrawn after Baidu removed the function to monitor users' contacts and activities.

In the same year of Baidu's litigation, Chinese users challenged other internet giants on personal data privacy issues, including most notably Alibaba. Ant Group, Alibaba's financial arm,

had launched Zhima Credit, an on-line credit scoring service which offers loans based on users’ digital activities, transaction records, and social media presence. Users discovered that they had been enrolled in this credit scoring system by default and without consent. Under pressure, Alibaba apologized.

No doubt, Chinese consumers are increasingly standing up to internet giants with respect to their digital privacy in unprecedented ways, and China is in the early stages of setting up a data protection regulatory system. For instance, the Cyber Security Law, which became effective in June 2017, for the first time included a set of data protection provisions in the form of national-level legislation. Moreover, the 2018 e-Commerce Law incorporated data privacy protections for consumers such as the ‘right to be forgotten,’ similar to the EU’s landmark privacy legislative act, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which came into effect the same year (more on this point below).

In May 2019, as the Law on Personal Data Protection was being drafted, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC)—the country’s highest administrative regulator of the internet—issued a document entitled “Measures on the Administration of Data Security.” The Measures lay out specific rules regarding the do’s and don’ts for how internet companies collect and use customer

data. The CAC Measures focused in particular on how users can gain greater control of their data in mobile apps. In parallel, the CAC together with the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and the State Administration for Market Regulation, launched a national campaign to inspect smartphone apps to determine if they illegally or excessively collect users’ information. By July 2019, a group of widely-used apps had been ordered to correct their data collection practices. At the same time, ten apps, including one issued by the Bank of China, were found to have no user privacy rules.

Additionally, in May 2020 China adopted a new Civil Code that took effect in January 2021. Its passage marked a key step forward in developing a legal framework governing individual data privacy. This sweeping package, which included numerous other civil laws, statutorily defined for the first time privacy as a “personality right.” The Code devotes an entire chapter to addressing various personality rights—covering individuals’ rights to control the commercial use of their name, title, portrait, reputation, and privacy, while adding new articles on protecting personal information.

Still, the ongoing pandemic creates novel data and privacy controversies. Data is being created at a

Year	Name of Law
2017	Cybersecurity Law
2018	E-Commerce Law
2019	CAC Measures on the Administration of Data Security
2020	Civil Code
forthcoming	Personal Information Protection Law; Data Security Law

Table 1: Timeline of China’s Data Privacy and Security Legal Framework

faster-ever rate since the coronavirus virus made everyone’s life largely virtual. For example, governments collect a vast amount of individual information to keep close tabs on population health and location data. Under ordinary circumstances, sensitive patient-linked medical records should be kept private, but during this extraordinary crisis governments needed to constantly collect such data, often through private internet platforms, raising concerns about data breach, loss, or unauthorized use.

To that end, China’s forthcoming Personal Information Protection Law and its Data Security Law are expected to address these complex issues in more detail. The drafters face tough challenges in balancing the considerations of individuals’ personal privacy, enterprises’ business development, and national and public security. Since these two laws are working their way through a process of formulation in the National People’s Congress, they may soon become effective—a major step towards regularizing this patchwork affair of personal information protection into an

integrated, comprehensive framework, as summarized in Table 1.

ANTITRUST ACTIONS ON BIG TECHS

In addition to data privacy protection (how private data is collected), another aspect of data regulation is to control the power of major platforms by antitrust regulations (how collective data is used), since their power mostly derives from the accrual of vast databases of user data. Thanks to advanced data analytics, Chinese tech companies are turning into business ecosystems in which sectors that once seemed disconnected are now integrated seamlessly by user data. They are increasingly assuming powerful positions in banking, finance, advertising, retail, and other markets that force smaller businesses to rely on their platforms to reach customers.

It is no coincidence that the antitrust crusades in China have accelerated during the pandemic. A locked-down world has come to rely on tech companies more than ever, with many racking up gains at the expense of smaller

competitors. For example, Meituan's platform dominates online-to-offline (O2O) life service such as food delivery and mobility services. When everyone was ordering take-out during the coronavirus outbreak, Meituan and Ele.me cultivated a clan of "virtual restaurants," operating out of ghost kitchens set up for the preparation of delivery-only meals, by providing targeted consumer marketing, as the O2O platforms probably manage the most sophisticated location-based technologies in the market.

Of course, the heavyweights charge a significant commission rate for the service. Meituan has gained market share and turned a profit, becoming the third Chinese internet firm—after Alibaba and Tencent—to exceed a \$100 billion valuation in the public market in 2020. On the other hand, smaller brick-and-mortar restaurants that rely on e-commerce platforms have found it hard to do the same. Under pressure, Meituan was forced to apologize after a restaurant association accused it of abusing its dominance during the outbreak by requiring merchants to sign exclusive agreements and charging restaurants commissions as high as 26 percent.

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In November 2020, the State Administration of Market Regulation (SAMR) issued a Draft Anti-Monopoly Guidelines for Platform Economy. This new document targets anti-competitive behaviors in the internet sector, such as big data price discrimination and exclusive cooperation agreements. This draft followed the aforementioned abrupt suspension of a \$37 billion stock offering by Ant Group, the fintech arm of China's internet giant Alibaba, partly due to new regulations relating to the use of consumer data for the offering and issuance of small personal loans. In February 2021, SAMR announced an updated draft guideline document to formalize the earlier draft and clarified a series of monopolistic practices on which regulators plan to crack down.

This represents the first time that China is attempting to define what constitutes anti-competitive behavior in the tech sector: the new anti-monopoly guidelines try to address shortcomings in applying existing antitrust theories to companies like Ant Group. For instance, the guidelines restrict behavior such as price discrimination (the aforementioned big data killing), preferential treatment for merchants who sign

exclusive agreements with platforms, and compulsory collection of user data.

Also, the same week in which these new anti-monopoly guidelines were released witnessed another new development, namely the acceptance by the Beijing Intellectual Property Court of a case filing by leading short video platform ByteDance, the parent of TikTok and Douyin apps, against Tencent over alleged monopolistic behavior as defined by those same guidelines. It seems likely that Chinese regulators expect this landmark case to fill in the details of the guidelines, so to speak, given that these still appear to be more of a framework than anything else. According to Bytedance, Tencent had blocked Douyin from its flagship networking apps WeChat and QQ for three years, banning users from viewing or sharing Bytedance content. All stakeholders are paying close attention to this landmark case to get a sense of where all this is headed, as it is poised to become a harbinger of the coming decade of anti-monopoly regulatory and legislative action in China.

Of course, the SAMR guidelines are, at present, merely administrative regulations. Further to the SAMR guidelines and regulatory actions, China's Anti-Monopoly Law is scheduled to be

amended later this year to incorporate more digital economy considerations. Large internet platforms have tended to resist handing over their data—a crucial asset that helps them run operations more efficiently and lure new customers at low cost. They do not share customer data with business rivals, giving them what some call an unfair, monopolistic advantage in their core markets. As such, the amendments to China's Anti-Monopoly Law are expected to address the risk of network and data monopolies. In short, Chinese Big Tech firms will likely have to fundamentally rethink the way they do business in the coming decade. The potentially strategic importance of these expected developments should not be underestimated.

AMERICA MUST CATCH UP

The bottom line is that China is accelerating its digital economy regulations. As the largest mobile internet user market, China's evolving data privacy and security framework will necessarily have profound global implications. China has already built a significant capacity in data centers and AI processing capacity, and it has also become the world's second largest market in cloud computing. At present, China stores about one-fifth of the world's data and—given its commitment to invest heavily in the

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“new infrastructure” (the infrastructure of the digital economy)—its share in global data is likely to continue to increase. Because foreign internet giants operate online in China and Chinese companies operate globally, China’s cyberspace laws and policies have worldwide relevance.

Thus, China’s regulatory actions must be viewed in the context of a global push for more Big Tech regulations. Although geopolitical tensions are ever-present in the emerging post-pandemic world, all the major powers seem to share a consensus on at least one important issue, namely that Big Tech firms (irrespective of where they may be headquartered) are too big, too powerful, and too profitable. And that global focus is only likely to intensify, driving governments everywhere to take such companies to court, implement strict local data rules, and pass new competition laws.

Certainly, the EU is another leading force. Its aforementioned General Data Protection Regulation has fundamentally changed the way data is handled globally after it came into force in 2018. The GDPR has forced global companies to reconsider their data policies, inspiring countries far and wide—from Brazil to India—to develop their own data

Because foreign internet giants operate online in China and Chinese companies operate globally, China’s cyberspace laws and policies have worldwide relevance.

privacy regulations based on a de facto GDPR benchmark. At the antitrust front, the EU has chased Facebook, Google, and Microsoft for years. It should be noted, however, that at least so far what the EU has accomplished is likely not enough. Even the high fines the EU has imposed on U.S.-headquar-

tered Big Techs firms have not significantly changed market dynamics.

By contrast, the United States—which was once a global leader in internet regulatory policy—has come to lag

far behind China (and the EU) in recent years. Today, America is no longer at the forefront of drafting privacy regulations. China’s new data privacy laws may stimulate the United States, which still has no national-level position on data protection, to expedite relevant legal measures. On antitrust, China’s actions against Ant Group shows that Beijing has been much more effective in curbing the dominance of Big Tech companies than the United States (or even the European Union), which has done little to rein in Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google.

America’s tech concentration crisis did not emerge in the Trump years, although it certainly deepened during his four-year term in office.

The Trump Administration failed to make Big Tech regulation a strategic priority. As such, notwithstanding how American tech companies may subjectively feel, they have in truth been enjoying a very high phase of innovation thanks to little U.S. federal government regulatory oversight. It seems clear that the United States needs a new rulebook for the tech sector. As a result, the Biden Administration must choose between taking a new, “digital era” view of antitrust law to rein in or break up Big Tech firms; sticking with a laissez-faire approach that critics say has led to the “curse of bigness”; or trying to find some middle path.

This is a major project. Fortunately, widespread concern over the power of Big Tech is in the air, and on the hardest tech policy issues (privacy, competition, and content) a bipartisan consensus seems to be building up amongst U.S. lawmakers. In a reversal from a general embrace of tech giants, the Biden Administration appears to be willing to put three critical elements—federal privacy law, standards for the collection and use of personal information, and a robust new competition policy regime—together as a coherent national

In this new antitrust era, Chinese examples may provide important reference points to the emerging generation of U.S. antitrust experts that look beyond the hoary concept that higher prices are the primary gauge of competitive harm.

policy. Furthermore, the Biden Administration may also find itself expressing an interest in beefing up America’s antitrust and data-enforcement agencies, as enforcing technically complex rules is even harder than passing new laws for the new economy.

In this new antitrust era, Chinese examples may provide important reference points to the emerging generation of U.S. antitrust experts that look beyond the hoary concept that higher prices are the primary gauge of competitive harm. For decades, antitrust

reviews have employed a “consumer welfare standard” that focused on pricing power. This no longer applies to the digital economy because the biggest tech companies have established trillion-dollar monopolies by charging consumers next to nothing. In fact, many platforms in China often doll out cash rebates to netizens in order to incentivize them to use the mobile applications.

But individuals are not just consumers—they are also workers, entrepreneurs, and community members. In practice, as industries consolidate, consumers sometimes pay less for products, but wages also stagnate and

entrepreneurship is stifled. Therefore, China’s new antitrust thinking suggests that the more important consideration should be given to data privacy, data usage, and the overall impact on smaller companies. (Yes, compared to Tencent, Bytedance is a smaller company, even though it is the highest valued private media company with more than \$100 billion valuation.)

Due to the fact that to a large extent the cyberspace-based digital economy remains undefined, the data law framework has become intertwined into broader geopolitical considerations. *Whichever country (or block) will be able take the lead in achieving breakthroughs in legislation will to a large extent be able to provide a model for the next-generation of internet usage.* Subsequently, this country (or block) is likely to have more leadership power whenever a digital economy version of WTO rules is eventually formed by nations. That is why more and more people are talking about what the China model could represent.

In the EU world, GDPR is so far not explicitly tied to more far-reaching goals regarding national security and social stability. However, in February 2020 Brussels unveiled a plan to restore

what its officials called “technological sovereignty,” which aims to boost the EU’s digital economy and avoid the block’s overreliance on non-EU companies. As such, new laws to reflect more “data sovereignty” considerations can be expected to emerge in the EU space. Furthermore, China’s framework may also provide a reference point for major emerging economies such as India, Brazil, and the ASEAN countries when they look to regulate cyberspace activities and emerging technologies. The United States may still hold a leadership in the digital economy, but it will need to quickly take major regulatory actions on Big Tech firms to stay in the game.

GLOBAL COLLABORATION

Big Tech regulation is new territory for legislatures all over the world—not just in China, the EU, and the United States. There is thus a great deal of uncertainty as to the eventual form of governmental policy and its impact on global business operations. While there is a general consensus that heightened regulation is needed, a major risk lies in the failure of the Chinese regulatory framework (or the EU’s recently proposed Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act) to become

an effective global standard and instead serving to legitimize bad regulatory practices in other countries. Governments must enhance cooperation across national competition agencies to address competition issues that are increasingly transnational in scope.

It would be extremely positive for the global digital economy if the major digital economies—namely, the United States, China, and the EU—could

collectively develop a regulatory framework on Big Tech companies. At the January 2021 Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for the world to work together to tackle global challenges. For that, collaboration on Big Tech regulation is critical to sustain the momentum of global tech innovation. The coming decade will almost certainly redefine the digital economy. Hopefully for the better. ●



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THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN MILITARY INTERVENTION

Roger Petersen

SINCE the end of the Cold War, the world's only superpower militarily intervened in a large number of conflicts. The most well-known cases include Operation Provide Comfort in Northern Iraq after the First Gulf War, Operation Gothic Serpent in Somalia, Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti, Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Operation Allied Force in Serbia/Kosovo, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 Iraq, Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya, and the intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. This article considers the trajectory for U.S. military intervention for the near future. Many commentators hold that the failures of the Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya cases have effectively ended an era of large-scale U.S. military intervention. Others point to the entry of Susan Rice and Samantha Power into the Biden

Administration and expect the persistence of the use of the military in the vein of "liberal interventionism."

I will try to address this abstract question in a concrete manner by drawing out lessons from the 2003-2011 U.S. experience in Iraq. Among all of America's military adventures, the Iraq intervention was the costliest in terms of blood and treasure. The conflict was also exceedingly complex. In my present research on the Iraq conflict, I identify how the United States employed five different military strategies at different times and different places: warfighting, clear/hold/build, decapitation, community mobilization, and homogenization. Instead of making blanket statements about military intervention, we can better understand the trajectory of U.S. military intervention by examining the nature of success and failure of these particular strategies during 2003-11 in Iraq. Which of these

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Always at the ready

strategies have seen continuation in the ten years after U.S. withdrawal from Iraq? Which have become the basis for action moving forward? Which have truly been discarded?

WARFIGHTING.

As the term "warfighting" suggests, this strategy is about fighting a war—soldiers act to "kill the enemy, not to win their hearts and minds," in the words of Major Christopher Varhola, a U.S. Army Reserve civil affairs specialist summarizing the position of a commanding officer in the early days of the occupation of Iraq. The primary methods are firepower

and mobility. Obviously, an invasion uses these warfighting tools. However, many American practitioners continued to engage in warfighting against insurgents long after the invasion. They persisted in the use of armor, indirect artillery shelling, cordon and sweep operations, large scale detention, and displays of force as a deterrent.

In the form of invasion, America's warfighting success was stunning. U.S.-led armored forces took Baghdad in a matter of weeks; major combat operations lasted only 26 days; coalition casualties were minimal. The lesson learned from the First Iraq War was

reinforced: no force in the world can match the United States in mobility or firepower. In the form of counterinsurgency, on the other hand, warfighting left much to be desired. In contests where information is critical, armored “presence patrols” are essentially worthless.

In struggles where legitimacy is important, collateral damage from indirect fire and large scale sweeps rounding up large numbers of detainees are detrimental. Fairly early in the war, many U.S. soldiers

came to believe that warfighting alone was not likely to bring about a stable Iraq. Even before the dissemination of Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency (FM 24), first published in December 2006, officers in the field were moving to more nuanced counterinsurgency strategies in their localities.

If American soldiers learn, so do their opponents. Above all, they have learned not to provoke an invasion. The United States is so good at the conventional warfighting game that adversaries know not to play it. Opponents also know that while America has unchallenged military power, it also operates under heavy political constraints. Given these conditions, actors will engage in what David Kilcullen has termed “liminal maneuver”

as defined as “taking sufficiently few and ambiguous actions to achieve core political objectives, but not enough to trigger a military reaction.” Furthermore, if the U.S. were to invade and conduct warfighting, opponents

around the world have also learned (not the least from the Iraq case) how to exploit that strategy’s shortcomings.

For the near future, the United States will be able to use its military superiority to “break things.” America can

invade and overthrow governments if it wishes. This brings us to the famous “Pottery Barn” axiom of Colin Powell. In the discussion of the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq, Powell argued that the United States would inevitably become responsible for the consequences of that invasion. As in the policy of the Pottery Barn store: “you break it, you own it.” But what if that is not true? Looking back at the Iraq case, what if the United States “broke it,” removed Saddam Hussein and just left? The larger question is whether America can go around “breaking” its enemies through relatively cheap means and then leave.

Despite these theoretical musings, the bottom line is that unless international norms (and public opinion)

The bottom line is that unless international norms (and public opinion) change, the United States is not likely to engage in breaking things anytime in the near future.

change, the United States is not likely to engage in breaking things anytime in the near future.

CLEAR/HOLD/BUILD.

While warfighting is about breaking things, the counterinsurgency strategy of clear/hold/build focuses on building things. In December 2006, following the lead of General David Petraeus, the U.S. Army published FM 24, essentially a blueprint for the strategy. The strategy contains three interlocking tasks. First, insurgent sympathizers and neutrals must be moved into the role of government supporters. For the strategy to be successful individual citizens must be willing to provide information to the state-aligned forces about the actions and whereabouts of insurgents. While building support from the population, the counterinsurgent must recruit and train indigenous military forces. State forces must be able to use the information flowing from the population to hunt down and kill or capture mobile insurgent forces. As opposed to warfighting and other counterinsurgency strategies, clear/hold/build sees the general population as the Clausewitzian center of gravity. The most crucial step is creating supporters able and willing to provide information. This feature underlies the definitional core of the mission as “population-centric” and associates the strategy with “winning hearts and minds.”

In terms of resources, clear/hold/build is troop intensive. There must be a sufficient number of “boots on the ground” to “clear” insurgents from their strongholds. Then those troops must move out of large Forward Operating Bases to neighborhood Command Outposts to “hold” the area from a relapse into violence and “build” legitimate institutions. Success builds on success as the “oil spot” of stability spreads.

At a more general level, the “build” is about state-building. The strategy aims at accomplishing two ambitious tasks simultaneously. First, the creation of loyal citizens who will provide information and participate in governance. Second, the creation of loyal soldiers capable of protecting the citizenry. Following the work of Charles Tilly, the state forms from this “loyalty for security” dynamic. The only problem is that Tilly’s work outlines how this bargain evolved over decades or centuries in the West.

Nonetheless, the United States was intent on state-building in Iraq. Consider the words of both President George W. Bush, introducing the surge (with its underlying clear/hold/build strategy), and President Barack Obama announcing an American military wind-down.

First, to quote President Bush from a speech on 10 January 2007:

Victory will not look like the ones our fathers and grandfathers achieved. There will be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship. But victory in Iraq will bring something new in the Arab world: a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people. A democratic Iraq will not be perfect. But it will be a country that fights terrorists instead of harboring them, and it will help bring a future of peace and security for our children and grandchildren.

Next, to quote President Obama from a speech on 27 February 2009:

Today, I can announce that our review is complete, and that the United States will pursue a new strategy to end the war in Iraq through a transition to full Iraqi responsibility. This strategy is grounded in a clear and achievable goal shared by the Iraqi people and the American people: an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant. To achieve that goal, we will work to promote an Iraqi government that is just, representative, and accountable, and that provides neither support nor safe-haven to terrorists. We will help Iraq build new ties of trade and commerce with the world. And we will forge a partnership with the people and government of Iraq that contributes to the peace and security of the region.

Despite the rhetoric about freedom and democracy, at the core of these passages is the three-word phrase of Obama— “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant.” These are the attributes that define a functioning state. In the years following the American withdrawal in 2011, Iraq performed poorly on all three of these measures.

If sovereignty and stability have any meaning, it involves a measure of control over the territory of the state. The Iraqi state lost control of one-third of Iraq’s territory to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, not long after the American departure. Essentially, a relatively small militant religious group seized command of governing authority in Mosul, Ramadi, Tikrit, and other major Iraqi cities. The Iraq Army crumbled in the face of relatively small numbers of ISIS forces. Baghdad itself was threatened. For the first time in one hundred years, the supreme religious leader of Iraq’s Shia faithful issued a fatwa calling on individuals to mobilize in the face of a threat to the country. Non-state armed militias came to the defense of the Iraqi state.

Furthermore, the Iraqi state is not self-reliant. At the outset of the invasion in March 2003, major policymakers were not concerned with the Iraq state’s ability to fund itself. As often quoted, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz told Congress that due

to its oil revenues “we’re really dealing with a country that could finance its own reconstruction.” Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld made similar claims at the time. The reality was that during 2003-2011, the United States spent approximately \$60 billion on reconstruction alone above and beyond war costs. In February 2018, in the wake of ISIS, donors pledged \$30 billion for reconstruction, a number far short of the \$88 billion that Iraqi leaders were seeking. Iraq managed a per capita GDP of less than \$10,000 in 2017. In the intervening period, those numbers have not changed significantly. The government and economy suffer from major corruption. In January 2021, Transparency International ranked Iraq 160th out of 179 states on its Corruption Perception Index. Moreover, with nearly 47 percent of the population under the age of 20, the “youth bulge” will likely make matters worse.

Robert Gates famously told an Assembly of Army cadets back in February 2011, “In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined.’” No doubt, American policymakers in 2021 likely concur with Gates. For many, the Iraq case shows that “nation-building is impossible” and that military interventions are not worth the effort

and usually turn into “endless wars.” Moreover, the problem in Iraq was not just that America could not achieve the lofty goals of democracy; rather, the United States, despite tens of billions of dollars spent and the work of thousands of trainers, could not build a functioning Iraqi Army, an essential part of the clear/hold/build strategy.

The Iraq case points out something broader than simply an American failure to rebuild a strong and well-functioning Iraqi state. The very nature of the Iraq state that has developed is also telling. Even though Iraq is a very weak state, it does manage to govern itself. In fact, it has managed to make some progress in terms of democratization. In its 2021 evaluations, Freedom House gives Iraq a 29/100 score. Here are the scores of other states in the region: Syria 1, Jordan 34, West Bank 25, Lebanon 43, Iran 16, Saudi Arabia 7, Yemen 11, Oman 23, UAE 17, Qatar 25. By regional standards, Iraq is above average and the report indicates it “holds regular, competitive elections.” In a sense, one could say that it qualifies as an “electoral democracy”—a term that Freedom House used in the recent past to describe the country.

Iraq has managed to achieve some level of resiliency, but it has done so through sectarian bargaining, reliance for security on non-state actors including militias taking orders from Iran,

and the social services practice of religious organizations. In short, Iraq had taken on many of the characteristics of Lebanon. That is not what American interveners had envisioned when they set off on their state-building mission.

The broader problem for Western state-building projects is that for much of the world, states are no longer states in the Weberian sense. States increasingly lack control of the legitimate means of violence and the means to project centralized

power. Correspondingly, Western interveners may not wish to launch state-building strategies in an environment they cannot predict, shape, or fully understand.

Perhaps the biggest reason we will not see the Iraqi surge model of clear/hold/build again is that we saw it not just once, but twice. In February 2009, President Obama ordered a surge in Afghanistan sending 17,000 more troops to the 32,000 U.S. forces and 38,000 NATO personnel already there. As with the Iraqi surge, the change involved not only more troops but also a move to a population-centric strategy seen in Iraq's clear/hold/build. The consensus view is that the move failed to reach its objectives in Afghanistan as well.

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Even if liberal interventionists continue to hold power in Democratic Party controlled administrations—even if the Responsibility-to-Protect (R2P) lobby sustains its presence—we are unlikely to see military-led troop intensive state-

building projects like clear/hold/build in the foreseeable future.

DECAPITATION

For those who would give up on state-building interventions, decapitation offers an alternative. I want to underline that I use

the term “decapitation” loosely here to describe targeted raids against both broader mid-level network leadership (often described as counter-network operations) and smaller numbers of killings of senior leaders (usually termed decapitation and sometimes assassination). Decapitation calls for going after insurgent organizations directly by enhancing the acuity and coverage of surveillance and the speed and precision of strike forces.

When manhunts are coupled together such that intelligence from detainees and materials gathered from one raid provides leads for new raids, then decapitation efforts are often called “counter-network operations” or simply “counterterrorism.” U.S. Special Operations Forces describes this cyclic

methodology as “find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze” (F3EA). Whereas “clear, hold, build” attempts to address grievance as the root cause of insurgency, F3EA aims to liquidate the clandestine organizations that insurgency requires, whatever its cause. The population's hearts and minds and its factions are not major concerns. Nor is the provision of goods to the population a part of the equation. The strategy's goal is simply to kill or capture senior and mid-level insurgent commanders faster than they are able to regenerate in order to sow fear and confusion and ultimately to cause the network to collapse.

Both decapitation and warfighting wish to use military means to go after mobile insurgents. The differences between the two strategies are large though. Decapitation is selective violence; it tries to avoid interacting with the population much at all by seeking reliable intelligence to trigger a raid and by keeping a discrete footprint. In some ways, the strategy is the polar opposite of warfighting with its highly visible and indiscriminate tactics of “cordon and search,” “harassment and interdiction” bombing, and “search and destroy.”

The primary “executioners” who conduct decapitation can be found in the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). JSOC was officially formed shortly after the attempted hostage

rescue disaster of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran during the Carter Administration. It draws from the military's most elite units—75th Army Rangers, Delta Force, and SEAL Team 6. The original intent was to create an elite force that would report directly to the president. As described by General Hugh Shelton, JSOC was meant to be “the ace in the hole. If you were a card player, that's your ace that you've got tucked away.” In the 1990's, JSOC pursued war criminals in the former Yugoslavia and targeted members of the emerging al Qaeda organization. It also set up shop in the 1990's in Iraqi Kurdistan with Task Force 20. After 9/11, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld greatly expanded JSOC's mission and, correspondingly, JSOC's capabilities. In September 2003, Stanley McChrystal became JSOC Commander for the next five years. With Iraq's most wanted portrayed on a deck of cards, McChrystal and JSOC went to work. As insurgent networks proliferated, the target set expanded exponentially.

As mentioned above, counterterrorism operations run on a cycle represented by F3EA. With experience under its belt, JSOC dramatically increased the speed of this cycle. Once a target was found, drones helped fix that target's location. Combat teams finished the target (capturing or killing) but now specialists accompanied the combat team and immediately exploited the

information found on laptops, flash drives, and cell phones. With ever expanding data, a rapid analysis of the new information created the abilities to immediately seek new targets. The cycle was reduced from days to hours.

These capabilities expanded again during the war against ISIS. Starting in full force in September 2014, U.S. operations against ISIS exhibited truly astounding technical capabilities. Multiple digitally streamed video from drone feeds fill screens at strike centers. Infrared technology heightens targeting specificity. Information funneled through multiple sources makes it way to Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC). The JTAC, in conjunction with Collateral Damage Analysts, chooses among a menu of strike options including laser guided 300-pound Maverick missiles, F/A18 500 pound bombs, AC-130 30mm cannon fire, Predator drone 100-pound Hellfire missiles. There are selectable fuse options for some munitions that allow a choice between contact blast or air blast.

In the war against ISIS, U.S. forces made thousands of strikes that killed up to 300 ISIS fighters a week. These same

capabilities could be used in a more precise way as seen in the assassination of Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020. There is little doubt that decapitation will remain a major part of American strategy, both in counter-terrorism and

There is little doubt that decapitation will remain a major part of American strategy, both in counter-terrorism and in counterinsurgency. Among possible strategies, decapitation is the cheapest in cost and manpower and the least intrusive in terms of a "footprint."

in counterinsurgency. Among possible strategies, decapitation is the cheapest in cost and manpower and the least intrusive in terms of a "footprint." Operations are carried out either by unmanned drone strike or by small groups of Special Forces in precisely targeted raids. Even if one thinks the benefits of the strategy are not that high, at least the costs appear very low. President Obama did not hesitate to use decapitation.

While decapitation is likely to play a role in future U.S. military interventions, its more exact future is not clear. The ISIS war suggests a range of possibilities, some expansive. As mentioned above, despite massive U.S. training and investment, the Iraqi regular army exhibited neither professionalism nor patriotism when confronted by ISIS. In the ISIS war, the United States did find professional partners in the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service and some Peshmerga units. This experience

suggests that America could downplay military-military relationships with partners around the world and instead build close relationships between U.S. special forces and partner state special forces. The U.S. military could select and train these partner special forces to act as the eyes and ears for American decapitation.

The Israelis have a phrase for the constant killing of militant opponents: "mowing the lawn." Due to the nature of Israel's region, militants and terrorists are as inevitable as grass growing in the front yard. All a state can do is develop a machinery to cut the grass, a lawn mower so to speak. In a similar fashion, the United States could forego state-building, develop relationships with special forces communities in allied states around the world, and engage in "lawn-mowing" on a global scale. The Iraq wars showed that America has a machine to do so. For some, the business of the United States—given what has been learned from the Iraq and Afghanistan examples—is counterterrorism, not state-building. Putting the results of Iraq in context, all the United States should hope for is short-term successes, and decapitation is the most cost-efficient way to accomplish them.

There are questions of efficacy, legality, and morality. Decapitating leaders of established organizations often has

limited effects. For example, U.S. forces killed the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, al-Zarqawi, in June 2006. Yet, AQI still thrived. By this point AQI was built to survive decapitation. In Weberian terms, the charismatic founder of AQI created a formal-rational organization that was able to replace him with new charismatic leaders. There is also the issue of collateral damage, although some argue that the incredible precision of current weapons, combined with oversight by legal teams, has confronted this problem.

There is also the gut emotional reaction to making decapitation central to U.S. military intervention. One Joint Terminal Attack Controller operating in the third Iraq war described his reaction after a strike:

The smoke slowly cleared in light winds. Soon we distinguished bodies strewn all over the west side of the berm—some with limbs separated and others in contorted positions. Those were always solemn moments, but ones we were conditioned to appreciate as warfighters battling a blood-thirsty enemy. As strange as it may seem to some, for guys like us it was a scene of somber beauty to see our enemy cut down and lying in pieces on the ground in front of us.

Whether the world can become "conditioned" to appreciate this style of military intervention is an open question.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

With community mobilization, the counterinsurgent interacts with groups of individuals who have been knit together through networks, family ties, or organizational history. The goal is to bring whole collectives into supportive roles both in terms of intelligence provision and as a source of manpower for the police and security organs. The strategy can also involve “flipping” an entire community-based militia from support of the insurgent over to support of the state.

While clear/hold/build stresses the importance of regular engagement with local elites, the role of those local elites is limited. Community mobilization, on the other hand, calls for basically allying with local elites and bringing in their organizations intact. Although there may be plans to break up or integrate these organizations into the state, the strategy simply calls for making a deal to bring the support of the organization over to the counterinsurgent’s side. Clear/hold/build does not see such alliances as the way forward, especially in terms of state-building. Accordingly, as outlined in FM 3-24, irregular units always pose a potential threat. As the Field Manual concludes: “If militias are outside the [host nation] government’s control, they can often be obstacles to ending an insurgency.”

Despite the objections in the U.S. field manual, the American experience in Iraq provides a paradigmatic case of community mobilization with the “flipping” of Bedouin tribes from cooperation with AQI to alliance with the United States. This alliance produced a dramatic drop in violence in the region. In September of 2006, violence in Anbar peaked at nearly 2000 incidents a month, more than in any other province in Iraq. Remarkably, the rate plunged to just 155 incidents in January 2008, as reported by Anthony H. Cordesman in a Center for Strategic and International Studies. One of the most violent provinces had become the most peaceful. The local tribes became indignant over the brutal extremism and economic usurpation of AQI and also found themselves in an ever declining strategic position vis-à-vis ascendant Shia factions. Their decision to cooperate with the U.S. military provided intelligence and manpower to defeat AQI. The American victory over AQI occurred first in al-Qaim on the Syrian border in late 2005, then in Ramadi in late 2006, in Fallujah in early 2007. The success in Anbar led to Sons of Iraq alliances being formed throughout much of Iraq.

Whether the strategy produces long-term success is more questionable. Many U.S. practitioners envisioned community mobilization as a way to fold Anbar’s Sunni tribesmen into the

security system of the Iraqi state. While community mobilization empowered tribes in the short run, the Maliki regime did little to integrate significant numbers into the Army and other state security organizations. After the withdrawal of the United States in 2011, Sunni relations with the Maliki controlled Iraq state soured. Protests led to violence. With the situation in Sunni majority areas festering like an old sore, many tribes allied with ISIS when they swept into Anbar.

The United States is likely to continue practicing forms of community mobilization in the near future, but the nature of this game is usually opportunistic and ad hoc.

Community mobilization allows groups to retain autonomy. However, that autonomy means that “flipped” groups can “flip” back to oppose the state. These groups can work both sides changing back and forth and always looking for a better deal. Furthermore, even if the group does not completely “flip” into opposition, these non-state organizations will have incentives to seek their own goals rather than the state’s. They may be allying with the state to protect revenue streams gained from smuggling or criminal or semi-criminal practices.

Whereas FM 3-24 assumes that the solution to civil war anarchy is a Weberian monopoly of violence invested in the state, the community mobilization

strategy may give rise to a stable truce among an oligopoly of feudal warlords (or party bosses, mafia dons, tribal patriarchs, or whatever the polite term might be). How and whether these can be consolidated into the central state is

a major research area in comparative politics, but historically the process has been both lengthy and violent.

The United States continued to play forms of the community mobilization strategy in Syria even if they did not openly admit doing

so. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces are less “democratic” and more a collection of community/ethnic groups dominated by the Kurdish Peoples Protection Group (YPG). As could be expected, the agendas of these community-based proxy groups differed from their American sponsor.

The United States is likely to continue practicing forms of community mobilization in the near future, but the nature of this game is usually opportunistic and ad hoc. In Iraq, it was the tribes that approached the United States to make a deal after interests changed and aligned. In Syria, the United States was looking for on-the-ground short-term partners to help eliminate ISIS. In practice, community mobilization often has

idiosyncratic origins and unpredictable trajectories. It is unlikely to be the basis of consistent American policy.

HOMOGENIZATION

When ethnic war breaks out in a state with highly mixed populations, political scientists like Chaim Kaufmann argue that the best way to end ethnic violence is to allow, or even encourage, physical separation of the warring sides. With interspersed populations, the dynamics of the security dilemma can come into play—one side can quickly attack the other, there is little way to distinguish defensive preparations from offensive ones, there can be an urgency to quickly attack to rescue pockets of vulnerable co-ethnics. However, if all co-ethnics can demographically concentrate behind a defensible boundary, the opposing sides can both effectively shield themselves from attack and signal defensive intentions. If the ability for quick and easy strikes are eliminated, incentives to engage in ceasefires and negotiations appear.

There are good examples where ethnic homogenization led to a decrease in violence. Consider the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-1995. Ethnic separation during the war had

drastically reduced the number of demographically mixed, contestable, and potentially violent hot spots. At the end of the war, the non-Serb population living in Republika Srpska fell from a pre-war 46 percent to 3 percent. Likewise, the Serbian population in the territory of the Federation had fallen

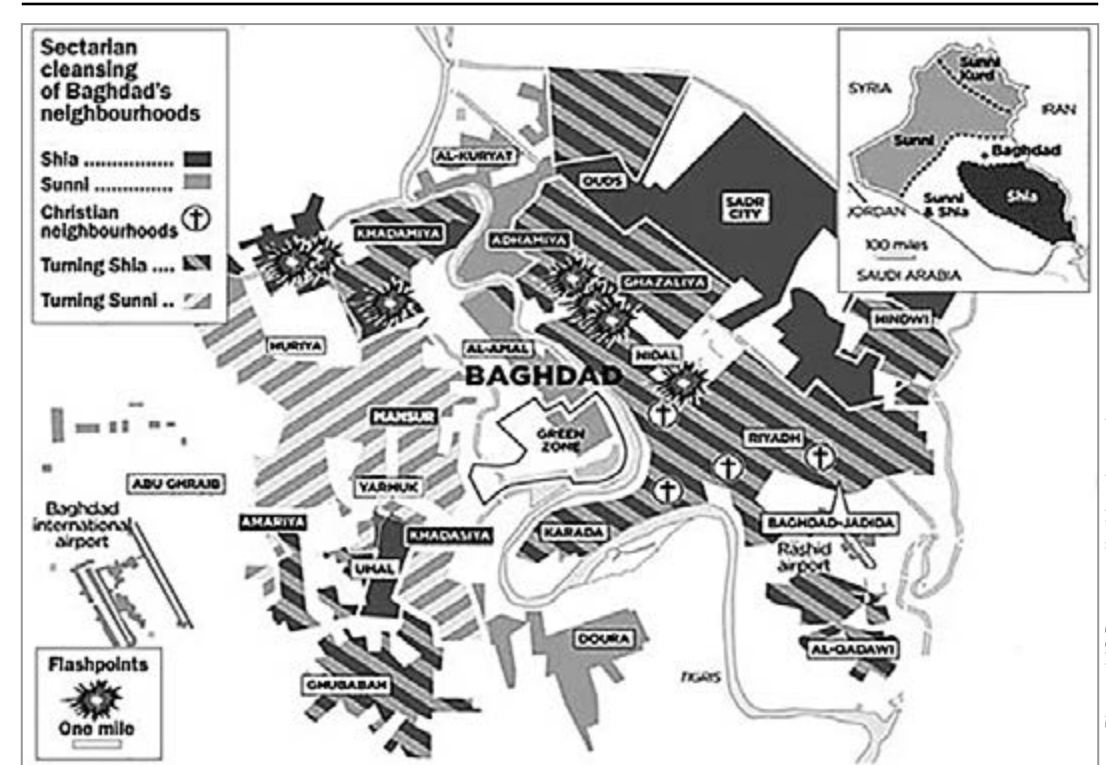
from 17 percent to 3 percent. Without this separation, the Dayton Accords may not have been possible.

The civil war in Iraq during 2005-2007 witnessed a similar separation among

Sunni and Shia in Baghdad. Consider the U.S. military map from this period illustrating Baghdad's sectarian cleansing. Given that this is a military map, the U.S. military was obviously aware of the homogenization of Baghdad and aware of the "flashpoints of violence" marked on the map.

Consciously or not, U.S. forces constructed concrete T-walls that reinforced the new ethnic demographic lines. In effect, although the U.S. military could not stop the homogenization process, it did facilitate the creation and continuation of homogenous neighborhoods. In the debate about the causes of the dramatic decline in violence in Baghdad, one of the major points of contention is the causal role

In the absence of American will to military intervene, homogenization may become an unstated policy in many of the world's most violent ethnic conflicts.



A U.S. military map circa 2005-2007 illustrating Baghdad's sectarian cleansing

of homogenization. Because sectarian cleansing and the surge (as well as community mobilization and JSOC's decapitation for that matter) took place at roughly the same time, it is difficult to separate out their respective effects.

Governments and occupying forces do not usually choose ethnic homogenization as a strategy; it is normatively too close to ethnic cleansing. Governments may turn a blind eye to the process, or they may work with the result of ethnic cleansing to maintain peace. On the basis of interviews I conducted in the region a few years ago, many in

the Middle East believe that the United States allowed homogenization of warring communities in Syria.

In the absence of American will to military intervene, homogenization may become an unstated policy in many of the world's most violent ethnic conflicts.

THE FUTURE

The U.S. intervention and war in Iraq has been the most important conflict of the twenty-first century so far, but it will almost certainly not be the last U.S. military intervention.

Photo: USG as supplied by the author

Members of the U.S. military may want to get out of the post-war reconstruction business and emphasize kinetic warfighting and deterrence operations but given their experience and resources they are unlikely to be able to extract themselves from the increasingly complicated nature of violent conflicts in today's world.

What has the exercise here, based on examination of American practice in Iraq and the following period, suggested about the near and medium term future?

There are good examples where ethnic homogenization led to a decrease in violence.

(counter-network operations) in the Middle East and Africa.

Then there is the form of decapitation that

Venezuela have moved American policymakers toward serious consideration of large scale military intervention.

Third, there will almost certainly be a role for decapitation. The technology, as seen at work in Iraq, is too seductive. The United States, perhaps relying on transnational relationships among special forces, will likely use decapitation to erode insurgent organizations

targets only the very top leadership. The shadow of the 2011 NATO Operation Unified Protector in Libya remains as a powerful cautionary tale for that strategy. Although NATO denied it was employing a decapitation strategy, the bombing campaign clearly targeted command and control centers and Qaddafi personally. The head of the snake was indeed cut off. In the famous words of then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "we came, we saw, he died." But the decapitation of Qaddafi and the deaths and defections of his leading generals was followed by political and social chaos, the murder of the U.S. Ambassador, and the rise of Islamist militants. President Obama summarized the progression of events as a "shit show." A 2014 RAND report written by Christopher Chivvis and Jeffery Martini

Second, to echo Robert Gates, troop intensive state-building military interventions will be unlikely. There is no political will for them after Iraq and Afghanistan. Given recent events in the United States, the effective slogans, and likely policies, will concern building democracy at home rather than abroad. Neither the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar nor state collapse in

estimated that a stabilization force of only 13,000 troops could have changed the course of events, but in the wake of Iraq the Western powers were in no mood for even this relatively low level of deployment. R2P advocates originally hailed the multinational UN-sanctioned military intervention in Libya as a low cost and effective model for future humanitarian interventions. In the longer term, Libya became a symbol of humanitarian hubris and wishful thinking.

Fourth, there is no end in sight for opportunistic community mobilization. If the United States is involved in a conflict, why not take advantage of able and armed communities ready to provide manpower and intelligence to complement American firepower and organization? The Iraq experience has shown, however, that these short term military synergies are not always compatible with longer term political goals.

Fifth, given the overall reticence to engage in large scale military intervention,

we can expect the United States, and the Western powers as a whole, to allow more and more conflicts to burn on. Some of these conflicts will produce homogenization, defensible boundaries between warring groups,

R2P advocates originally hailed the multinational UN-sanctioned military intervention in Libya as a low cost and effective model for future humanitarian interventions. In the longer term, Libya became a symbol of humanitarian hubris and wishful thinking.

and eventual hurting stalemates. In these cases, the international community may step in to negotiate peace. In other cases, as in Syria, the war will rage on spewing death until one side gains victory.

The Iraq war was traumatic. Few wish to think about it. Most wish to dismiss the conflict with predictable general statements. But

the Iraq case presents us with incredible fields of variation in violence, state-building, U.S. strategies, and opponent counterstrategies. This article has drawn on some of that variation to understand the possible future trajectory of U.S. military intervention. No doubt some of these conclusions will be wrong, but hopefully they do some justice to the sacrifice and suffering of both civilians and soldiers witnessed during the U.S. intervention in Iraq. ●

NATO IS FOCUSING ON CHANGE

Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo

WE are well-aware that the international scene is evolving in a manner that few people would have anticipated a few years ago. We also understand that it is essential to embrace change in order to survive in an increasingly difficult environment—that we need a clever reading of facts and good analysis to come to grips with the changes all around us.

If we look at NATO, the first thing to notice is that the Atlantic Alliance now has a membership of 30 sovereign states; the second is that such a large number makes it more difficult to find a consensus on shared priorities than was the case during the Cold War (at the end of which we were 16 member-states). At that time, the world was clearly divided into two blocs. This is no longer the case today, and it appears highly unlikely that it will be the case in the 2020s.

Today, there are different threat perceptions, and they make internal cohesion more problematic than in the past when the international situation was easier to understand. The consequence is that there is a common perception that reforms have to be made and that the time has come for such a complex exercise. This is not going to happen for the first time in the history of NATO—in fact, NATO's longevity and success to date have been rooted in its ability to adapt to changing strategic circumstances.

The Treaty of Washington—NATO's founding act—was signed in 1949, at the beginning of the long period of the Cold War that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But it was only afterwards, during the troubled dissolution of Yugoslavia, that NATO had to prove for the first time its crisis management capacity. Then, in 2003, the Alliance

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NATO's iconic emblem in the foreground of its headquarters in Brussels

Photo: CIRS

was deployed far away to Afghanistan in an unexpected operation against international terrorism. A difficult out of area experience undertaken without any previous knowledge of this kind of challenge. A decade later, in 2014, Russia occupied Crimea, which created a new set of questions about the role of NATO, notwithstanding the fact that Ukraine is not a member of the Atlantic Alliance. The clock has been readjusted to a semi-Cold War hour, and a low-medium intensity confrontation is still on-going. Looking ahead to the 2020s, such facts look obsolete from an historic point of view because the future of the security of the planet lies elsewhere.

In the past few years, the Trump Administration had not helped, as the American president maintained an aggressive attitude towards the Atlantic Alliance. His points are well known. He claimed that the United States was contributing a disproportionate amount of resources to protect its European allies, which are profiting from this situation. Had he been reelected last November, it is quite possible that the United States would have left NATO.

In the meantime, NATO has continued to adapt and modernize from a military point of view. On the other hand, a unified political dimension

seems to be lacking due to the fact that members have different priorities. Political cohesion has become difficult; this is unsurprising given that our membership goes from Estonia and Portugal to Iceland and Greece. The weight of the Baltics and Poland has been prevailing in the past few years, extending the military arm of the Alliance to the east to confront Russian ambitions.

Will this policy continue to prevail in the future? It is difficult to say because threats from the south are also relevant, both in terms of instability and international terrorism.

All these are familiar scenarios, but today there is a new call to “project security” far away, in the Indo-Pacific. We have seen a U.S.-China confrontation unfolding before our eyes, especially in terms of technology and trade. We don’t know the parameters of a possible NATO involvement and we can presume that it will be discussed at the next NATO Summit, scheduled for later this year. All in all, NATO finds itself in uncharted waters with no clear direction.

The point is that a deep political discussion is required: there are many issues at stake and they need to be carefully considered in order to give NATO a

new political approach and a fresh look into its decisionmaking process. Thankfully, this process of reform has already begun. It started in December 2019 with the establishment of an independent Reflection Group, co-chaired by Thomas de Maizière and A. Wess Mitchell. It

began its work in April 2020 and in late November of that year released a 65-page report entitled *NATO 2030: United for A New Era*.

The realization that more reform is necessary is not bad news, because it shows the vitality of the organization: a political-military alliance that has proven more than once to be able to adapt to a changing political environment.

Having said that, let’s have a look at NATO and consider the Alliance in terms of its added value. First, it maintains a solid civilian-military relationship. This means, in substance, that military advice cannot be influenced by external considerations; it also means that it is the civilians who are going to make the final political decisions.

A second basic feature is the interoperability of the armed forces of its member-states, which is without parallel in the world. This has been proven in various operations, ranging from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Afghanistan,

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NATO finds itself in uncharted waters with no clear direction.

whereby NATO has managed to put together, in a coordinated way, forces from up to 40 different nationalities.

Thirdly, NATO also has the unique capacity to be able to launch large-scale operations at long distances. This is made possible by the military expertise existing at its headquarters in Brussels and at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), located near Mons in Belgium. And of course the expertise of the militaries of its member-states who are used to working together.

In other words, we are speaking of a pragmatic organization, one that is very operational and attuned to the importance of crisis management. The decisions NATO takes are essentially political. They are taken by consensus in sessions of the North Atlantic Council, whereby an extensive and discreet consultation takes place before a decision is announced. Consensus, it has to be noted, does not mean formal unanimity; rather, it is a softer concept that has worked well in practice.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that NATO has a clause allowing for reciprocal assistance in case of aggression. In other words, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty legitimizes an allies intervention in support of another ally under

attack on the European Continent or in North America.

Moreover, it should be noted that NATO has a minimal common budget. The civilian budget covers only basic expenses, while practical activities are financed directly by states, whereby every member bears its own costs.

The principle of “costs lie where they fall” is important for both political and financial reasons. In practice it means that every member-state takes its own responsibilities on the role that it plays in an operation. This approach differs in a substantial way from the European Union, which disposes of a large common budget from which every member-state tries to maximize its benefit.

Looking back, we may recall once more that NATO was born in relation to the advent of the Cold War. It lasted in that context for two generations. Especially near the end of that first phase, deterrence was conceived as a mix of dialogue and engagement.

In the second phase of its life, the Alliance was engaged in crisis management beyond the borders of its member-states, starting with the unexpected wars accompanying the dissolution of Yugoslavia. This began in Bosnia and

Hercegovina, where NATO made a difference both from a political and military point of view. The success of the 1995 Dayton Agreement has been recorded. It certainly was not perfect but the accords represented the only way, at the time, to stop a bloody conflict. After that, we witnessed the 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia over Kosovo, well-known in its causes, that lasted for 78 days and produced a regrettable heavy toll of human suffering.

Finally, in 2001 a third operation took place in the Western Balkans—this time in North Macedonia—in order to prevent the onset of a civil war. This effort was successful overall, notwithstanding its difficult political context.

History never unfolds in an orderly way and the 9/11 attacks orchestrated by Osama bin Laden cancelled all the previous books, so to speak. One consequence was that in 2003 NATO went to Kabul in order to fight international terrorism under the auspices of the UN Security Council. This operation ended on December 31st, 2014 but was followed by a “train and equip” operation that is still ongoing. Its purpose is to prepare the Afghan security forces and the country’s military, and does not involve any combat role. We still don’t know at present if a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban will end up being reached; nor do we know what this would mean for NATO.

Now we can come to discuss the 2011 Libya operation. It is a special case for various reasons, including the fact that, for the first time, not all NATO member-states took part in it. It is also special because the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council gave their formal approval to the operation, which included an active role of some Arab countries. The NATO air campaign over Libya was decided hurriedly after the failure of the intervention decided by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy. With a few exceptions—Russia being a notable example—the international community was not hostile to the operation: Muamar Ghaddafi, the country’s longtime leader, did not enjoy much international sympathy at that time.

The Libya operation also represented a moment of confusion, because the objective of the NATO air campaign was not meant to be “regime change,” but things developed in a different way.

A debated issue centers on the fact that, after the fall of the Ghaddafi regime, the Atlantic Alliance did not follow up with the provision of support for the reconstruction of the nation—not even its security institutions. There was never a consensus on this issue.

Let’s next turn to examining the present. NATO is now entering a new chapter of its history. The pandemic took everyone in the Alliance by

surprise, and we still don’t know what will follow. Who can seriously answer the following two questions with any degree of certainty: What kind of world order will emerge in the post-pandemic era? What will the end of the 2020s look like?

The first indications show that resilience prevailed in most of the important Asian countries, and that many of these demonstrated a capacity to recover from the economic crisis. This has nothing to do with democracy and human rights. On the contrary, we have the impression that in cases like COVID-19, authoritarian rule works more efficiently than democratic rule, where citizens are often critical of restrictions.

We have the impression that in cases like COVID-19, authoritarian rule works more efficiently than democratic rule, where citizens are often critical of restrictions.

In any case, China has emerged in the last decade as a challenger to the traditional balance of power; and its government’s attitude and public stance is now very different from what it used to be. Why has this become the case? The country no longer consider itself to be a developing state; and Beijing’s present leaders think China is a great power, ready to oppose and challenge those who refuse to recognize this new posture.

In the past few years, commercial disputes have emerged, and this has resulted in a serious U.S.-China confrontation

over tariff duties (subsequently this confrontation has widened and likely deepened). The Biden Administration now has to decide on a new political line. Consider in this context that in early March 2021, Secretary of State Tony Blinken described

China as the “only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system,” adding that handling China represents the “biggest geopolitical test of the

twenty-first century.” We should also add that, like it or not, the COVID-19 virus originated in China, and of course this reality has not helped Beijing attract sympathy towards itself.

How does all this affect NATO? The answer is that we simply don’t know yet. A heads of state and government summit, featuring the new American president, is likely to take place in a few months’ time, and the China issue will be on the table. What I think we can expect is a reinforcement of ties with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea; regular consultations can easily be foreseen to involve some kind of new partnership. But it is too soon to say anything beyond that. Nevertheless, some people are speaking of a global NATO, although it would be better to speak of NATO with global partners.

This is only one aspect of the anticipated reform of the organization. The aforementioned Reflection Group worked extensively on their final report; and they worked with the declared purpose of enhancing the political dimension of NATO. Many of us remember that the Emmanuel Macron had declared in an interview that NATO was brain dead.

Next, we should note that the military side of the organization has

evolved regularly over the years whilst keeping its efficiency, political consultations have lost their momentum. A question has arisen regarding NATO's priorities; another regarding improvements to the decisionmaking process; and a third on the political tools at the disposal of the Alliance.

The issue is of course very difficult because it implies a process of deep reforms. The process of consultations on reform is now to be pursued directly by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg under the overall theme of "keeping the Alliance as a strategic anchor in uncertain times" and in accordance with the assessment made by the independent Reflection Group that "NATO remains indispensable." Stoltenberg has promised to make proposals to the NATO heads of state and government

by the end of 2021. A proof of good will, certainly, but it is more easily said than put into practice.

At this moment, the declared assumption in Brussels is that the fundamental purpose of NATO is "more demonstrably clear today than it has been for decades"—in the words of the report issued by the aforementioned Group. This is quite an ambitious statement and some comfort can be

drawn from the Alliance's demonstrated ability to adapt in times of historical change and transformation. The same report states that "today, NATO stands as history's most successful alliance, encompassing nearly a billion people and half of global GDP across a space that stretches from the Pacific coast of North America to the Black Sea." This should be read alongside the preamble to the Washington Treaty, which states that NATO's member-states "seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area."

If we look at the report of the Reflection Group we see an ambitious vision for NATO in 2030—an "Alliance defined by vitality, utility, relevance, and endurance. By the end of the decade, no matter the strategic environment," the Report says, NATO will need to:

The military side of the organization has evolved regularly over the years whilst keeping its efficiency, political consultations have lost their momentum.

- Uphold its role as the bedrock of peace, stability, and the rule of law in the Euro-Atlantic area;
- Remain the strategic center of gravity for collective defense of all its members on the basis of an up-to-date Strategic Concept;
- Strengthen its role as the unique and essential forum to which Allies turn on all major national security challenges, proactively seeking to forge consensus and build common strategies for dealing with common threats;
- Play a larger part in an international order in which open societies can flourish and be secure and prosperous; a world in which a plurality of worldviews and fundamental differences of opinion are no obstacle to dialogue and cooperation;
- Enjoy deeper strategic and mutually reinforcing connections with partners that share these principles and aspirations, affirming the Helsinki Final Act principle that all states have the right to choose their security arrangements; and, where partnership is not possible, a commitment to work towards shared security on the basis of mutual respect;
- Possess a stronger relationship and intensify consultation on issues of common concern with the European Union built on the foundations of cooperation, with a view to taking advantage of different capabilities and toolkits.

This six-point vision for 2030 is predicated on an awareness of the fact that the external security environment has changed dramatically since the present Strategic Concept was made public in 2010. The report of the Reflection Group recommends writing a new one, which will not be an easy task. So far, the only consensus is that such a new document should be based on collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Those three priorities, which are also the cornerstones of the present Strategic Concept, will be maintained, but it looks as though these will remain the only elements of continuity.

At this juncture, it seems to me that emphasis will be placed on climate change and green defense, and also on security issues linked to natural disasters and pandemics. Terrorism, the report of the Reflection Group tells us, should also be incorporated more fully into NATO's core tasks. The list is a long one and quite impressive: arms control and nuclear deterrence, artificial intelligence, outer space, political cohesion and unity, decisionmaking, cooperation, and enhanced political consultation with the European Union.

In addition, there is a solid view that emerging and disruptive technologies will change the nature of warfare and enable new forms of attacks with hypersonic missiles and hybrid operations.

Therefore a special focus will almost certainly be dedicated to this complex and very innovative area.

As NATO looks to 2030, it will also need to address the issue of relations with Russia. Here, the strategic direction will likely remain based on the “dual-track approach of deterrence and dialogue,” as the report of the Reflection Group indicates. This is of course not new and it basically means that things will remain, more or less, as they are presently.

Of no less importance is China. Here the report of the Reflection Group states that “NATO must devote much more time, political resources, and action to the security challenges posed by China.” The new Strategic Concept, the report concludes, will need to develop a “political strategy for approaching a world in which China will be of growing importance through to 2030.”

The ongoing discussions with regards to the new NATO Strategic Concept also touches upon the reinforcement of partnerships and the necessity to have a clear and coherent approach to its southern, Mediterranean flank. No detailed program has been proposed to date, except the recommendation to strengthen the “Hub for the South at JFC Naples,” as the Reflection Group’s report puts it. This is not much to go on, as yet, although it is obvious that

the proposed posture towards NATO’s eastern flank is different than the one proposed for the South. With regards to the latter, emphasis is placed on the best way to support fragile governments exposed to threats coming from instability, international terrorism, and non-state actors.

How the governments of the NATO member-states will be able to reach conclusions remains to be seen. It is an easy prediction to make that it will be difficult to reach consensus on so many things, while at the same time change continues to take place before our eyes—deep-seated change that NATO will necessarily have to embrace.

I think that for an international reader it is relevant to perceive the present attitude of the Atlantic Alliance with regards to the question of new membership. The answer is that in all relevant documents issued by NATO—including the conclusions of the Reflection Group’s report—the Alliance’s Open Door Policy is reconfirmed: the terms used in the report are “upheld and reinvigorated.” This same document explicitly states that the “door should remain open to all European democracies that aspire to join NATO structures and who are able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership and contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area.”

We should note that in the past decade, NATO has enlarged exclusively in the Balkans: Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. Serbia remains the most important country in South-east Europe. There is a special history here that justifies the present situation, and we know and understand that the weight of the past does not go away easily. However, the time has come to review old memo-

The time has come to review old memories and to turn a new page. Historical countries like Serbia cannot remain behind history.

ries and to turn a new page. Historical countries like Serbia cannot remain behind history. I well remember December 2006 when I opened for the first time a NATO military office in Belgrade thanks to a joint decision between the Alliance and the Serbian government led by Boris Tadić—the country’s first ever democratically-elected president. I was happy to be there and I thought that it was a good decision, being convinced that an historical country like Serbia deserved a special attention. Since that time, a fruitful dialogue has developed, and it should continue.

Like every other geopolitical actor in the 2020s, NATO will be kept busy in a challenging and turbulent time. We live in a fluid epoch whereby change is happening in all directions. Right now, little is certain. We don’t even know the kind of world that awaits us in the immediate aftermath of the end of the COVID-19 pandemic—much less what the planet will look like at the end of the decade.

This is something that’s visible and obvious to pretty much any ordinary citizen anywhere in the world. As for NATO, I think it’s clear that we cannot remain where we were without doing something to be in tune with visible changes; this is also obviously true for international security in general. NATO wishes to adapt, as other actors do, and the process will move forward. The Atlantic Alliance is far from being perfect, but it remains the most valid political-military tool in the arsenal of the international community, with its members being comprised of vital democracies in tune with our times. ●

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CIRSD TWO-DAY SEMINAR

Inaugural Youth Panels “The World in 2021 and Beyond”

*In late February 2021, the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD) organized a two-day seminar of youth panels. Keynote speakers included world-renowned scientist, researcher, and immuno-oncology pioneer **Dr. Samir Khleif**, and **John W. Rendon**, President and CEO of The Rendon Group, a global strategic communication consultancy that has worked in more than 100 countries.*

“We absolutely can go back to normal, but we need herd immunity. This means that the virus cannot spread from one person to another and it eventually dies off. To reach this, we need between 80 and 85 percent of the world to have immunity.”

– Dr. Samir Khleif

“I think that in the future there will be cooperation and harmonious competition between the world’s two leading superpowers, the United States and China.”

– John Rendon



Sixty brilliant university students and recent graduates participated in this invitation-only online event. They hailed from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Croatia, Ethiopia, Germany, Montenegro, Serbia, and the United States.

The event was put together by participants in the CIRSD internship program. They took the lead in initiating, conceiving, organizing, and executing this new initiative. CIRSD’s current crop of interns come from China, France, Serbia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

“We’re all incredibly proud of our interns for working together across nine time zones and three continents to make this event a reality.”

– Anja Jević,
CIRSD Policy Analyst
and Intern Coordinator

BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF ISLAM

SPOTLIGHT ON THE GAP BETWEEN REGIMES AND POPULATIONS

James M. Dorsey

TROUBLE is brewing in the backyard of Muslim-majority states competing for religious soft power and leadership of the Muslim world in what amounts to a battle for the soul of Islam. Shifting youth attitudes towards religion and religiosity threaten to undermine the rival efforts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and, to a lesser degree, the United Arab Emirates, to cement their individual state-controlled interpretations of Islam as the Muslim world's dominant religious narrative. Each of the rivals see their efforts as key to securing their autocratic or authoritarian rule as well as advancing their endeavors to carve out a place for themselves in a new world order in which power is being rebalanced.

Research and opinion polls consistently show that the gap between the

religious aspirations of youth—and, in the case of Iran other age groups—and state-imposed interpretations of Islam is widening. The shifting attitudes amount to a rejection of Ash'arism, the fundament of centuries-long religiously legitimized authoritarian rule in the Sunni Muslim world that stresses the role of scriptural and clerical authority. Mustafa Akyol, a prominent Turkish Muslim intellectual, argues that Ash'arism has dominated Muslim politics for centuries at the expense of more liberal strands of the faith “not because of its merits, but because of the support of the states that ruled the medieval Muslim world.”

Similarly, Nadia Oweidat, a student of the history of Islamic thought, notes that “no topic has impacted the region more profoundly than

religion. It has changed the geography of the region, it has changed its language, it has changed its culture. It has been shaping the region for thousands of years. [...] Religion controls every aspect of people who live in the Arab world.”

The polls and research suggest that youth are increasingly skeptical towards religious and worldly authority. They aspire to more individual, more spiritual experiences of religion.

Their search leads them in multiple directions that range from changes in personal religious behavior that deviates from that proscribed by the state to conversions in secret to other religions even though apostasy is banned and punishable by death, to an abandonment of organized religion all together in favor of deism, agnosticism, or atheism.

“The youth are not interested in institutions or organizations. These do not attract them or give them any incentive; just the opposite, these institutions and organizations and their leadership take advantage of them only when they are needed for their attendance and for filling out the crowds,” said Palestinian scholar and former Hamas education minister Nasser al-Din al-Shaer.

Trouble is brewing in the backyard of Muslim-majority states competing for religious soft power and leadership of the Muslim world in what amounts to a battle for the soul of Islam.

Atheists and converts cite perceived discriminatory provisions in Islam's legal code towards various Muslim sects, non-Muslims, and women as a reason for turning their back on the faith. “The primary thing that led

me to atheism is Islam's moral aspect. How can, for example, a merciful and compassionate God, said to be more merciful than a woman on her baby, permit slavery and the trade of slaves in slave markets? How come He permits rape of women simply be-

cause they are war prisoners? These acts would not be committed by a merciful human being much less by a merciful God,” said Hicham Nostic, a Moroccan atheist, writing under a pen name.

REVIVAL, REVERSAL

The recent research and polls suggest a reversal of an Islamic revival that scholars like John Esposito in the 1990s and Jean-Paul Carvalho in 2009 observed that was bolstered by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the results of a 1996 World Values Survey that reported a strengthening of traditional religious values in the Muslim world, the rise of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the initial Muslim Brotherhood electoral victories in Egypt and Tunisia in the wake of the 2011 popular Arab revolts.

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“The indices of Islamic reawakening in personal life are many: increased attention to religious observances (mosque attendance, prayer, fasting), proliferation of religious programming and publications, more emphasis on Islamic dress and values, the revitalization of Sufism (mysticism). This broader-based renewal has also been accompanied by Islam’s reassertion in public life: an increase in Islamically oriented governments, organizations, laws, banks, social welfare services, and educational institutions,” Esposito noted at the time.

Carvalho argued that an economic “growth reversal which raised aspirations and led subsequently to a decline in social mobility which left aspirations unfulfilled among the educated middle class (and) increasing income inequality and impoverishment of the lower-middle class” was driving the revival. The same factors currently fuel a shift away from traditional, Orthodox, and ultra-conservative values and norms of religiosity.

The shift in Muslim-majority countries also contrasts starkly with a trend towards greater religious Orthodoxy

in some Muslim minority communities in Europe. A 2018 report by the Dutch government’s Social and Cultural Planning Bureau noted that the number of Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan descent who strictly observe traditional religious precepts had increased by approximately eight percent. Dutch citizens of Turkish and Moroccan descent account for two-thirds of the country’s Muslim community. The report suggested that in a pluralistic society in which Muslims are a minority, “the more personal, individualistic search for true Islam can lead to youth becoming more strict in observance than their parents or environment ever were.”

Changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity that mirror shifting attitudes in non-Muslim countries are particularly risky for leaders, irrespective of their politics, who cloak themselves in the mantle of religion as well as nationalism and seek to leverage that in their geopolitical pursuit of religious soft power. The 2011 popular Arab revolts as well as mass anti-government protests in various Middle Eastern countries in 2019 and 2020 spotlighted the subversiveness of the change. “The Arab Spring was the tipping point in the shift [...]. It was the

Changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity that mirror shifting attitudes in non-Muslim countries are particularly risky for leaders, irrespective of their politics, who cloak themselves in the mantle of religion as well as nationalism and seek to leverage that in their geopolitical pursuit of religious soft power.

epitome of how we see the change. The calls were for ‘dawla madiniya,’ a civic state. A civic state is as close as you can come to saying [...], we want a state where the laws are written by people so that we can challenge them, we can change them, we can adjust them. It’s not God’s law, it’s madiniya, it’s people’s law,” Oweidat, the Islamic thought scholar, said.

Akyol went further, noting in a journal article that “too many terrible things have recently happened in the Arab world in the name of Islam. These include the sectarian civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where most of the belligerents have fought in the name of God, often with appalling brutality. The millions of victims and bystanders of these wars have experienced shock and disillusionment with religious politics, and more than a few began asking deeper questions.”

The 2011 popular Arab revolts reverberated across the Middle East, reshaping relations between states as well as domestic policies, even though initial achievements of the protesters were rolled back in Egypt and sparked wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a 3.5 year-long diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar in part to cut their youth off from access to the Gulf state’s popular Al Jazeera

television network that supported the revolts and Islamist groups that challenged the region’s autocratic rulers. Seeking to lead and tightly control a social and economic reform agenda driven by youth who were enamored by the uprisings, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman “sought to recapture this mandate of change, wrap it in a national mantle, and sever it from its Arab Spring associations. The boycott and ensuing nationalist campaign against Qatar became central to achieving that,” said Gulf scholar Kristin Smith Diwan.

Referring to the revolts, Moroccan journalist Ahmed Benchemsi suggested that “the Arab Spring may have stalled, if not receded, but when it comes to religious beliefs and attitudes, a generational dynamic is at play. Large numbers of individuals are tilting away from the rote religiosity Westerners reflexively associate with the Arab world.”

Benchemsi went on to argue that “in today’s Arab world, it’s not religiosity that is mandatory; it’s the appearance of it. Nonreligious attitudes and beliefs are tolerated as long as they’re not conspicuous. As a system, social hypocrisy provides breathing room to secular lifestyles, while preserving the façade of religion. Atheism, per se, is not the problem. Claiming it out loud is. So those who publicize their atheism in the Arab world are fighting less for

freedom of conscience than for freedom of speech.” The same could be said for the right to convert or opt for alternative practices of Islam.

Syrian journalist Sham al-Ali recounts the story of a female relative who escaped the civil war to Germany where she decided to remove her hijab. Her father, who lives in Turkey, accepted his daughter’s decision but threatened to disown her if she posted pictures of herself uncovered on Facebook. “His issue was not with his daughter’s abandonment of religious duty, but with her publicizing that before her family and society at large,” Al-Ali said.

NEO-PATRIARCHISM

Neo-patriarchism, a pillar of Arab autocratic rule, heightens concern about public appearance and perception. A phrase coined by American-Palestinian scholar Hisham Sharabi, neo-patriarchism involves projection of the autocratic leader as a father figure. Autocratic Arab society, according to Sharabi, was built on the dominance of the father, a patriarch around which the national as well as the nuclear family are organized. Relations between a ruler and the ruled are replicated in the

relationship between a father and his children. In both settings, the paternal will is absolute, mediated in society as well as the family by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion.

Neo-patriarchism heightens concern about public appearance and perception: it involves projection of the autocratic leader as a father figure, a patriarch around which the national as well as the nuclear family are organized.

As a result, neo-patriarchism often reinforces pressure to abide by state-imposed religious behavior and at the same time fuels changes in attitudes towards religion and religiosity among youth who resent their inability to chart a path of their own. Primary and secondary schools have emerged as one frontline in the struggle to determine the bound-

aries of religious expression and behavior. Recent developments in Egypt, a brutal autocracy, and Indonesia, the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy, offer contrasting perspectives on how the tug of war between students and parents, schoolteachers and administrations, and the state plays out.

Mada Masr, Egypt’s foremost independent news outlet, documented how in 2020 Egyptian schoolgirls who refused to wear a hijab were being coerced and publicly shamed in the knowledge that the education ministry was reluctant to enforce its policy not to mandate the wearing of a head-

dress. “The model, decent girl is expected to dress modestly and wear a hijab to signal her pride in her religious identity, since hijab is what distinguishes her from a Christian girl,” said Lamia Lotfy, a gender consultant and rights activist. Teachers at public high schools said they were reluctant to take boys to task for violating dress codes because they were more likely to push back and create problems.

In sharp contrast, Indonesian Religious Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas issued in early 2021 a decree together with the ministers of home affairs and education threatening to sanction state schools that seek to impose religious garb in violation of government rules and regulations. The decree was issued amid a public row sparked by the refusal of a Christian student to obey her school principal’s instructions requiring all pupils to wear Islamic clothing. Qoumas is a leader of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim movement and foremost advocate of theological reform in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “Religions do not promote conflict, neither do they justify acting unfairly against those who are different,” Qoumas said.

A Muslim nation that replaced a decades long autocratic regime with a democracy in a popular revolt in 1998,

A Muslim nation that replaced a decades long autocratic regime with a democracy in a popular revolt in 1998, Indonesia is Middle Eastern rulers’ worst nightmare.

Indonesia is Middle Eastern rulers’ worst nightmare. The shifting attitudes of Middle Eastern youth towards religion and religiosity suggest that experimentation with religion in post-revolt Indonesia is a path that it would

embark on if given the opportunity. Indonesia is “where the removal of constraints imposed by an authoritarian regime has opened up the imaginative terrain, allowing particular types of religious beliefs and practices to emerge [...].

The Indonesian cases study [...] brings into sharper relief processes that are happening in ordinary Muslim life elsewhere,” said Indonesia scholar Nur Amali Ibrahim.

A 2019 poll of Arab youth showed that two-thirds of those surveyed felt that religion played too large a role in their lives, up from 50 percent four years earlier. Nearly 80 percent argued that religious institutions needed to be reformed while half said that religious values were holding the Arab world back. Surveys conducted over the last decade by Arab Barometer, a research network at Princeton University and the University of Michigan, showed a growing number of youths turning their backs on religion. “Personal piety has declined some 43 percent over the past decade, indicating less than a quarter of

the population now define themselves as religious,” the survey concluded.

With the trend being the strongest among Libyans, many Libyan youth gravitate towards secretive atheist

Facebook pages. They often are products of the UAE’s failed attempt to align the hard power of its military intervention in Libya with religious soft power. Said, a 25-year-old student from Benghazi, the stronghold of the UAE and Saudi-backed rebel forces led by self-appointed Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar,

turned his back on religion after his cousin was beheaded in 2016 for speaking out against militants. UAE backing of Haftar has involved the population of his army by Madkhalists, a branch of Salafism named after a Saudi scholar who preaches absolute obedience to the ruler and projects the kingdom as a model of Islamic governance. “My cousin’s death occurred during a period when I was deeply religious, praying five times a day and studying ten new pages of the Qur’an each evening,” Said said.

A majority of respondents in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran said in a 2017 poll conducted by Washington-based John Zogby Associates that they wanted religious

movements to focus on personal faith and spiritual guidance and not involve themselves in politics. Iraq and Palestine were the outliers with a majority favoring a political role for religious groups.

Honor killings may be the one area where attitudes have not changed that much in recent years. In most countries polled, young Arabs appeared more likely than their parents to condone honor killings.

The response to polls in the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century contrasts starkly with attitudes expressed in a survey of the world’s Muslims by the Pew Research Center several years earlier. Pew’s polling suggested that ultra-conservative attitudes long promoted by

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar that legitimized authoritarian and autocratic regimes remained popular. More than 70 percent of those surveyed at the time in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa favored making Sharia the law of the land and granting Sharia courts jurisdiction over family law and property disputes.

Those numbers varied broadly, however, when respondents were asked about specific issues like apostasy and corporal punishment. Three-quarters of South Asians favored the death sentence for apostasy as opposed to 56 percent in the Middle East and only 27 percent in Southeast Asia, while 81 percent in South Asia supported

physical punishment compared to 57 percent in the Middle East and North Africa and 46 percent in Southeast Asia. South Asia emerged as the only part of the Muslim world in which respondents preferred a strong leader to democracy while a majority of the faithful in all three regions viewed religious freedom as positive. Between 65 and 79 percent in all regions wanted to see religious leaders have political influence.

Honor killings may be the one area where attitudes have not changed that much in recent years. Arab Barometer’s polling in 2018 and 2019 showed that more people thought honor killings were acceptable than homosexuality. In most countries polled, young Arabs appeared more likely than their parents to condone honor killings. Social media and occasional protests bear that out. Thousands rallied in early 2020 in Hebron, a conservative city on the West Bank, after the Palestinian Authority signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Nonetheless, the assertions by Saudi Arabia that projects itself as the leader of an unidentified form of moderate Islam that preaches absolute obedience to the ruler and by advocates of varying strands of political Islam such as Turkey and Iran ring hollow in light of the dramatic shift in attitudes towards religion and religiosity.

ACKNOWLEDGING CHANGE

Among the Middle Eastern rivals for religious soft power, the United Arab Emirates, populated in majority by non-nationals, may be the only one to emerge with a cleaner slate. The UAE is the only contender to have started acknowledging changing attitudes and demographic realities. Authorities in November 2020 lifted the ban on consumption of alcohol and cohabitation among unmarried couples. In a further effort to reach out to youth, the UAE organized in 2021 a virtual consultation with 3,000 students aimed at motivating them to think innovatively over the country’s path in the next 50 years.

Such moves do not fundamentally eliminate the risk that the changing attitudes may undercut the religious soft power efforts of the UAE and its Middle Eastern competitors. The problem for rulers like the UAE and Saudi crown princes, Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman, respectively, is that the loosening of social restrictions in Saudi Arabia—including the emasculation of the kingdom’s religious police, the lifting of a ban on women’s driving, less strict implementation of gender segregation, the introduction of Western-style entertainment and greater professional opportunities for women, and a degree of genuine religious tolerance and pluralism in the UAE—are only first steps in responding to youth aspirations.

“People are sick and tired of organized religion and being told what to do. That is true for all Gulf states and the rest of the Arab world,” quipped a Saudi businessman. Social scientist Ellen van de Bovenkamp

describes Moroccans she interviewed for her PhD thesis as living “a personalized, self-made religiosity, in which ethics and politics are more important than rituals.”

Nevertheless, religious authorities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, and Morocco continue to project interpretations of the faith that serve the state and are often framed in

the language of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue but preserve outmoded legal categories, traditions, and scripture that date back centuries. Outdated concepts of slavery, who is a believer and who is an infidel, apostasy, blasphemy, and physical punishment that need reconceptualization remain in terms of religious law frozen in time. Many of those concepts, with the exception of slavery that has been banned in national law yet remains part of Islamic law, have been embedded in national legislations.

While Turkey continues to, at least nominally, adhere to its secular republican

origins, it is no different from its rivals when it comes to grooming state-aligned clergymen, whose ability to think out of the box and develop new interpretations of the faith is impeded by a religious education system that stymies critical

thinking and creativity. Instead, it too emphasizes the study of Arabic and memorization of the Qur’an and other religious texts and creates a religious and political establishment that discourages, if not penalizes, innovation.

Widening the gap between state projections of religion and popular aspirations is the fact that governments’

subjugation of religious establishments turns clerics and scholars into regime parrots and fuels youth skepticism towards religious institutions and leaders.

“Youth have [...] witnessed how religious figures, who still remain influential in many Arab societies, can sometimes give in to change even if they have resisted it initially. This not only feeds into Arab youth’s skepticism towards religious institutions but also further highlights the inconsistency of the religious discourse and its inability to provide timely explanations or justifications to the changing reality of today,” said Gulf

Religious authorities continue to project interpretations of the faith that serve the state and are often framed in the language of tolerance and inter-faith dialogue but preserve outmoded legal categories, traditions, and scripture that date back centuries.

scholar Eman Alhusein in a commentary on the 2020 Arab Youth Survey.

Pooyan Tamimi Arab, the co-organizer of an online survey in 2020 of Iranian attitudes towards religion that revealed a stunning rejection of state-imposed adherence to conservative religious mores as well as the role of religion in public life noted the widening gap “becomes an existential question. The state wants you to be something that you don’t want to be [...]”. “Political disappointment steadily turned into religious disappointment [...]. Iranians have turned away from institutional religion on an unprecedented scale.”

In a similar vein, Turkish art historian Nese Yildiran recently warned that a fatwa issued by President Erdogan’s Directorate of Religious Affairs or Diyanet declaring popular talismans to ward off “the evil eye” as forbidden by Islam fueled criticism of one of the best-funded branches of government. The fatwa followed the issuance of similar religious opinions banning the dying of men’s moustaches and beards, feeding dogs at home, tattoos, and playing the national lottery as well as statements that were perceived to condone or belittle child abuse and violence against women.

Although compatible with a trend across the Middle East, the Iranian survey’s results, which is based on 50,000 respondents who overwhelmingly said they resided in the Islamic

republic, suggested that Iranians were in the frontlines of the region’s quest for religious change.

Funded by Washington-based Iranian human rights activist Ladan Boroumand, the Iranian survey, coupled with other research and opinion polls across the Middle East and North Africa, suggests that not only Muslim youth, but also other age groups, who are increasingly skeptical towards religious and worldly authority, aspire to more individual, more spiritual experiences of religion.

Their quest runs the gamut from changes in personal religious behavior to conversions in secret to other religions because apostasy is banned and, in some cases, punishable by death, to an abandonment of religion in favor of agnosticism or atheism. Responding to the survey, 80 percent of the participants said they believed in God but only 32.2 percent identified themselves as Shiite Muslims—a far lower percentage than asserted in official figures of predominantly Shiite Iran.

More than one third of the respondents said that they either did not belong to a religion or were atheists or agnostics. Between 43 and 53 percent, depending on age group, suggested that their religious views had changed over time with 6 percent of those saying that they had converted to another religious orientation.

In addition, 68 percent said they opposed the inclusion of religious precepts in national legislation. Moreover 70 percent rejected public funding of religious institutions while 56 percent opposed mandatory religious education in schools. Almost 60 percent admitted that they do not pray, and 72 percent disagreed with women being obliged to wear a hijab in public.

An unpublished slide of the survey shows the change in religiosity reflected in the fact that an increasing number of Iranians no longer name their children after religious figures.

A five-minute YouTube clip uploaded by an ultra-conservative channel allegedly related to Iran's Revolutionary Guards attacked the survey despite having distributed the questionnaire once the pollsters disclosed in their report that the poll had been supported by an exile human rights group.

"Tehran may well be the least religious capital in the Middle East. Clerics dominate the news headlines and play the communal elders in soap operas, but I never saw them on the street, except on billboards. Unlike most Muslim countries, the call to prayer is almost inaudible [...]. Alcohol is banned but home delivery is faster for wine than for pizza [...]. Religion felt frustratingly hard to locate and the truly religious seemed sidelined, like a minority,"

wrote journalist Nicholas Pelham based on a visit in 2019 during which he was detained for several weeks.

In yet another sign of rejection of state-imposed expressions of Islam, Iranians have sought to alleviate the social impact of COVID-19 related lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face human contact by acquiring dogs, cats, birds, and even reptiles as pets. The Islamic Republic has long viewed pets as a fixture of Western culture. One of the main reasons for keeping pets in Iran is that people no longer believe in the old cultural, religious, or doctrinal taboos as the unalterable words of God. "This shift towards deconstructing old taboos signals a transformation of the Iranian identity—from the traditional to the new," said psychologist Farnoush Khaledi.

Pets are one form of dissent; clandestine conversions are another. Exiled Iranian Shiite scholar Yaser Mirdamadi noted that "Iranians no longer have faith in state-imposed religion and are groping for religious alternatives."

A former Israeli army intelligence chief, retired Lt. Col. Marco Moreno, puts the number of converts in Iran, a country of 83 million, at about one million. Moreno's estimate may be an overestimate. Other studies in put the figure at between 100,000 and 500,000. Whatever the number is, the conversions

fit a trend not only in Iran but across the Muslim world of changing attitudes towards religion, a rejection of state-imposed interpretations of Islam, and a search for more individual and varied religious experiences. Iranian press reports about the discovery of clandestine church gatherings in homes in the holy city of Qom suggest conversions to Christianity began more than a decade ago. "The fact that conversions had reached Qom was an indication that this was happening elsewhere in the country," Mirdamadi, the Shiite cleric, said.

We see a trend not only in Iran but across the Muslim world of changing attitudes towards religion, a rejection of state-imposed interpretations of Islam, and a search for more individual and varied religious experiences.

Seeing the converts as an Israeli asset, Moreno backed production of a two-hour documentary, *Sheep Among Wolves Volume II*, produced by two American Evangelists, one of which resettled on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, that asserts that Iran's underground community of converts to Christianity is the world's fastest growing church.

"What if I told you the mosques are empty inside Iran?" said a church leader in the film, his identity masked and his voice distorted to avoid identification. Based on interviews with Iranian converts while they were travelling abroad, the documentary opens with a scene

on an Indonesian beach where they meet with the filmmakers for a religious training session.

"What if I told you that Islam is dead? What if I told you that the mosques are empty inside Iran? [...] What if I told you no one follows Islam inside of Iran? Would you believe me? This is exactly what is happening inside of Iran. God is moving powerfully inside of Iran?" the church leader added. Unsurprisingly, given the film's Israeli backing and the filmmaker's affinity with Israel, the documentary emphasizes the converts'

break with Iran's staunch rejection of the Jewish State by emphasizing their empathy for Judaism and Israel.

REDUCED RELIGIOSITY

The Iran survey's results as well as observations by analysts and journalists like Pelham stroke with responses to various polls of Arab public opinion in recent years and fit a global pattern of reduced religiosity. A 2019 Pew Research Center study concluded that adherence to Christianity in the United States was declining at a rapid pace.

The Arab Youth Survey found that, despite 40 percent of those polled

defining religion as the most important constituent element of their identity, 66 percent saw a need for religious institutions to be reformed. “The way some Arab countries consume religion in the political discourse, which is further amplified on social media, is no longer deceptive to the youth who can now see through it,” Alhussein, the Gulf scholar, said.

A 2018 Arab Opinion Index poll suggested that public opinion may support the reconceptualization of Muslim jurisprudence. Almost 70 percent of those polled agreed that “no religious authority is entitled to declare followers of other religions to be infidels.” Similarly, 70 percent of those surveyed rejected the notion that democracy was incompatible with Islam while 76 percent viewed it as the most appropriate system of governance.

What that means in practice is, however, less clear. Arab public opinion appears split down the middle when it comes to issues like separation of religion and politics or the right to protest.

Arab Barometer director Michael Robbins cautioned in a commentary in the *Washington Post*, co-authored with international affairs scholar Lawrence

Rubin, that recent moves by the government of Sudan to separate religion and state may not enjoy public support.

The transitional government brought to office in 2020 by a popular revolt that topped decades of Islamist rule by ousted President Omar al-Bashir agreed in peace talks with Sudanese rebel groups to a “separation of religion and state.” The government also ended the ban on apostasy and consumption of alcohol by non-Muslims and prohibited corporal punishment, including public flogging.

Robbins and Rubin noted that 61 percent of those surveyed on the eve of the revolt believed that Sudanese law should be based on the Sharia or Islamic law defined by two-thirds of the respondents as ensuring the provision of basic services and lack of corruption. The researchers, nonetheless, also concluded that youth favored a reduced role of religious leaders in political life. They said youth had soured on the idea of religion-based governance because of widespread corruption during the region of Al-Bashir who professed his adherence to religious principles.

“If the transitional government can deliver on providing basic services to the country’s citizens and tackling

Arab public opinion appears split down the middle when it comes to issues like separation of religion and politics or the right to protest.

corruption, the formal shift away from Sharia is likely to be acceptable in the eyes of the public. However, if these problems remain, a new set of religious leaders may be able to galvanize a movement aimed at reinstating Sharia as a means to achieve these objectives,” Robbins and Rubin warned.

Writing at the outset of the popular revolt that toppled Al-Bashir, Islam scholar and former Sudanese diplomat Abdelwahab El-Affendi noted that “for most Sudanese, Islamism came to signify corruption, hypocrisy, cruelty, and bad faith. Sudan is perhaps the first genuinely anti-Islamist country in popular terms. But being anti-Islamist in Sudan does not mean being secular.”

It is a warning that is as valid for Sudan as it is for much of the Arab and Muslim world.

Saudi columnist Wafa al-Rashid sparked fiery debate on social media after calling in a local newspaper for a secular state in the kingdom. “How long will we continue to shy away from enlightenment and change? Religious enlightenment, which is in line with reality and the thinking of youth, who rebelled and withdrew from us because we are no longer like them. [...] We no longer speak their language or understand their dreams,” Al-Rashid wrote.

Asked in a poll conducted by The Washington Institute of Near East

Policy whether “it’s a good thing we aren’t having big street demonstrations here now the way they do in some other countries”—a reference to the past decade of popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan—Saudi public opinion was split down the middle. The numbers indicate that 48 percent of respondents agreed and 48 percent disagreed. Saudis, like most Gulf Arabs, are likely less inclined to take grievances to the streets. Nonetheless, the poll indicates that they may prove to be more empathetic to protests should they occur.

Tamimi Arab, the Iran pollster, argued that his Iran survey “shows that there is a social basis” for concern among authoritarian and autocratic governments that employ religion to further their geopolitical goals and seek to maintain their grip on potentially restive populations. His warning reverberates in the responses by governments in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the Middle East to changing attitudes towards religion and religiosity. They demonstrate the degree to which they perceive the change as a threat, often expressed in existential terms.

Mohammad Mehdi Mirbaqeri, a prominent Shiite cleric and member of Iran’s powerful Assembly of Experts that appoints the country’s supreme leader, described COVID-19 in late 2020 as a “secular virus” and a

declaration of war on “religious civilization” and “religious institutions.”

Saudi Arabia went further by defining the “calling for atheist thought in any form” as terrorism in its anti-terrorism law. Saudi dissident and activist Rafi Badawi was sentenced on charges of apostasy to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for questioning why Saudis should be obliged to adhere to Islam and asserting that the faith did not have answers to all questions.

Analysts, writers, journalists, and pollsters have traced changes in attitudes in the Middle East and North Africa as well as the wider Muslim world for much of the past decade, if not longer. A Western Bangladesh scholar resident in Dacca in 1989 recalled Bangladeshis looking for a copy of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* as soon as it was banned by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, who condemned the British author to death. “It was the allure of forbidden fruit. Yet, I also found that many were looking for things to criticize, an excuse to think differently,” the scholar wrote.

Widely viewed as a bastion of ultra-conservatism. Malaysia’s top religious regulatory body, the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (Jakim), which responsible for training Islamic teachers and preparing weekly state-controlled Friday sermons, has long

portrayed liberalism and pluralism as threats, pointing to a national fatwa that in 2006 condemned liberalism as heretical. “The pulpit would like to state today that many tactics are being undertaken by irresponsible people to weaken Muslim unity, among them through spreading new but inverse thinking like Pluralism, Liberalism, and such. The pulpit would like to state that the Liberal movement contains concepts that are found to have deviated from the Islamic faith and shariah,” read a 2014 Friday sermon drafted and distributed by Jakim.

The fatwa echoed a similar legal opinion issued a year earlier by Indonesia’s semi-governmental Council of Religious Scholars (MUI) labelled with SIPILIS as its acronym to equate secularism, pluralism, and liberalism with the venereal disease. The council was headed at the time by current Vice President Ma’ruf Amin, a prominent Nahdlatul Ulama figure.

Challenging attempts by governments and religious authorities to suppress changing attitudes rather than engage with groups groping for greater religious freedom, Kuwaiti writer Sajed al-Abdali noted in 2012 that “it is essential that we acknowledge today that atheism exists and is increasing in our society, especially among our youth, and evidence of this is in no short supply.”

Al-Abdali sounded his alarm three years prior to the publication of a Pew Research Center study that sought to predict the growth trajectories of the world’s religions by the year 2050. The study suggested that the number of people among the 300 million inhabitants of the Middle East and North Africa that were unaffiliated with any faith would remain stable at about 0.6 percent of the population.

Two years later, the Egyptian government’s religious advisory body, Dar al-Ifta Al-Missriya, published a scientifically disputed survey that sought to project the number of atheists in the region as negligible. The survey identified 2,293 atheists, including 866 Egyptians, 325 Moroccans, 320 Tunisians, 242 Iraqis, 178 Saudis, 170 Jordanians, 70 Sudanese, 56 Syrians, 34 Libyans, and 32 Yemenis. It defined atheists as not only those who did not believe in God but also as encompassing converts to other religions and advocates of a secular state. A poll conducted that same year by Al Azhar, Cairo’s ancient citadel of Islamic learning, concluded that Egypt counted 10.7 million atheists. Al Azhar’s Grand Imam, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, warned at the time on state television that the flight from religion constituted a social problem.

A 2012 survey by international polling firm WIN/Gallup International reported that 5 percent of Saudis—or more than

one million people—identified themselves as “convinced atheists” on par with the percentage in the United States; while 19 percent described themselves as non-religious. By the same token, Benchensi, the Moroccan journalist, found 250 Arab atheism-related pages or groups while searching the internet, with memberships ranging from a few individuals to more than 11,000. “And these numbers only pertain to Arab atheists (or Arabs concerned with the topic of atheism) who are committed enough to leave a trace online,” Benchensi said, noting that many more were unlikely to publicly disclose their beliefs.

The picture is replicated across the Middle East. The number of atheists and agnostics in Iraq, for example, is growing. Iraqi writer and one-time Shiite cleric Gaith al-Tamimi argued that religious figures have come to represent all that’s inherently wrong in Iraqi politics society. Iraqis of all generations seek to escape religious dogma, he says, adding that “Iraqis are questioning the role religion serves today.” Fadhil, a 30-year-old from the southern port city of Basra complained that religious leaders “overuse and misuse God’s name, police human bodies, prohibit extramarital sex, and police the bodies of women.” Changing attitudes towards religion figured prominently in mass anti-government protests in Iraq in 2019 and 2020 that rejected sectarianism and called for a secular national Iraqi identity.

Even in Syria, a fulcrum of militant and ultra-conservative forms of Islam that fed on a decade of brutal civil war and foreign intervention, many concluded in the words of Al-Ali, the Syrian journalist, that “religious and political authorities are ‘protective friends one of the other,’ and that political despotism stems from religious absolutism. [...] In Syria, the prestige sheikhs had enjoyed was undermined alongside that of the regime.” Religion and religious figures’ inability to explain the horror that Syria was experiencing and that had uprooted the lives of millions drove many forced to flee to question long-held beliefs.

Multiple Turkish surveys suggested that Erdogan’s goal of raising a religious generation had backfired despite pouring billions of dollars into religious education. Students often rejected religion, described themselves as atheists, deists, or feminists, and challenged the interpretation of Islam taught in schools. A 2019 survey by polling and data company IPSOS reported that only 12 percent of Turks trusted religious officials and 44 percent distrusted clerics. “We have declined when religious sincerity and morality expressed by the people is taken into account,” said Ali Bardakoglu, who headed Erdogan’s Religious Affairs Department or Diyanet from 2003 to 2010.

Unaware that microphones had not been muted, Erdogan expressed concern a year earlier to his

education minister about the spread of deism, a belief in a God that does not intervene in the universe and that is not defined by organized religion, among Turkish youth during a meeting of his party’s parliamentary group. “No, no such thing can happen,” Erdogan ordained against the backdrop of Turkish officials painting deism as a Western conspiracy designed to weaken Turkey. Erdogan’s comments came in response to the publication of an education ministry report that, in line with the subsequent survey, warned that popular rejection of religious knowledge acquired through revelation and religious teachings and a growing embrace of reason was on the rise.

The report noted that increased enrollment in a rising number of state-run religious Imam Hatip high schools had not stopped mounting questioning of orthodox Islamic precepts. Neither had increased study of religion in mainstream schools that deemphasized the teaching of evolution. The greater emphasis on religion failed to advance Erdogan’s dream of a pious generation that would have a Qur’an in one hand and a computer in the other. Instead, reflecting a discussion on faith and youth among some 50 religion teachers, the report suggested that lack of faith in educators had fueled the rise of deism. Teachers were unable to answer the often-posed question: why does God not intervene to halt evil and why does he

remain silent? The report’s cautionary note was bolstered by a flurry of anonymous confessions and personal stories by deists as well as atheists recounted in newspaper interviews.

Acting on Erdogan’s instructions, Ali Erbas, the director of Diyanet, declared war on deism. The government’s top cleric, Erbas blamed Western missionaries seeking to convert Turkish youth to Christianity for deism’s increased popularity. Erbas’ declaration followed a three-day consultation with 70 religious scholars and bureaucrats convened by the Directorate that identified “Deism, Atheism, Nihilism, Agnosticism” as the enemy. Erdogan’s alarm and Erbas’ spinning of conspiracy theories constituted attempts to detract attention from the fact that youth in Turkey, like in Iran and the Arab world, were turning their back on orthodox and classical interpretations of Islam on the back of increasingly authoritarian and autocratic rule. Erdogan thundered that “there is no such thing” as LGBT and added that “this country is national and spiritual, and will continue to walk into the future as such” when protesting students displayed a poster depicting one of Islam’s holiest sites, the Kaaba shrine in Mecca, with LGBT flags.

“There is a dictatorship in Turkey. This drives people away from religion,” said Temel Karamollaoglu, the leader of the Islamist Felicity Party that opposes

Erdogan’s AKP because of its authoritarianism. Turkey scholar Mucahit Bilici described Turkish youths’ rejection of Orthodox and politicized interpretations of Islam as “a flowering of post-Islamist sentiment” by a “younger generation (that) is choosing the path of individualized spirituality and a silent rejection of tradition.”

Saudi authorities view the high numbers in the WIN/Gallup International as a threat to the religious legitimacy that the kingdom’s ruling Al-Saud family has long cloaked itself in. The groundswell of aspirations that have guided youth away from the confines of ultra-conservatism highlight failed efforts of the government and the religious establishment going back to the 1980s. The culture and information ministry banned the word ‘modernity’ at the time in a bid to squash an emerging debate that challenged the narrow confines of ultra-conservatism as well as the authority of religion and the religious establishment to govern personal and public life.

FALSE EQUATION

The threat perceived by Saudi and other Middle Eastern autocrats and authoritarians as well as conservative religious voices is fueled by an implicit equation of atheism and/or rejection of state-imposed conservative and ultra-conservative strands of the faith with anarchy.

“Any calls that challenge Islamic rule or Islamic ideology is considered subversive in Saudi Arabia and would be subversive and could lead to chaos,” said Saudi ambassador to the United Nations Abdallah al-Mouallimi. Echoing journalist Benchemsi, Muallimi argued that “if (a person) was disbelieving in God, and keeping that to himself, and conducting himself, nobody would do anything or say anything about it. If he is going out in the public, and saying, ‘I don’t believe in God,’ that’s subversive. He is inviting others to retaliate.”

Similarly, Sheikh Ahmad Turki, speaking as the coordinator of the anti-atheism campaign of the Egyptian Ministry of Endowments, asserted that atheism “is a national security issue. Atheists have no principles; it’s certain that they have dysfunctional concepts—in ethics, views of the society and even in their nationalistic affiliations. If [atheists] rebel against religion, they will rebel against everything.”

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have sought to experiment with alternatives to orthodox and ultra-conservative strands of Islam without surrendering state control by encouraging Al Azhar to embrace legal reform that is influenced by Sufism, Islam’s mystical tradition. “There is a movement of renewal of Islamic jurisprudence. [...] It’s a movement that is funded by the wealthy Gulf countries.

Don’t forget that one reason for the success of the Salafis is the financial power that backed them for decades. This financial power is now being directed to the Azharis, and they are taking advantage of it. [...] Don’t underestimate what is happening. It might be a true alternative to Salafism,” said Egyptian Islam scholar Wael Farouq.

By contrast, Pakistan, a country influenced by Saudi-inspired ultra-conservatism, has stepped up its efforts to ringfence religious minorities. In an act of overreach modelled on American insistence on extra-territorial abidance by some of its laws, Pakistan laid down a gauntlet in the struggle to define religious freedom by seeking to block and shut down a U.S.-based website associated with Ahmadis on charges of blasphemy.

Ahmadis are a minority sect viewed as heretics by many Muslims that have been targeted in Indonesia and elsewhere, but nowhere more so than in Pakistan where they have been constitutionally classified as non-Muslims. Blasphemy is potentially punishable in Pakistan with a death sentence.

The Pakistani effort was launched at a moment that anti-Ahmadi and anti-Shiite sentiment in Pakistan, home to the world’s largest Shia Muslim minority, was on the rise. Mass demonstrations denounced Shiites as “blasphemers” and “infidels” and called for their

beheading as the number of blasphemy cases being filed against Shiites in the courts mushroomed.

Shifting attitudes towards religion and religiosity raise fundamental

chicken and egg questions about the relationship between religious and political reform, including what comes first and whether one is possible without the other. Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama argues that religious reform requires recontextualization of the faith as well as a revision of legal codes and religious jurisprudence.

The only Muslim institution to have initiated a process of eliminating legal concepts in Islamic law that are obsolete or discriminatory—such as the endorsement of slavery and notions of infidels and dhimmis or People of the Book with lesser rights—Nahdlatul Ulama, a movement created almost a century ago in opposition to Wahhabism, the puritan interpretation of Islam on which Saudi Arabia was founded, is in alignment with advocates of religious reform elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Said Mohammed Sharour, a Syrian Quranist who believed that the Qur’an was Islam’s only relevant text, dismissed the Hadith—the compilation of the

Prophet’s sayings and the Sunnah, the traditions, and practices of the Prophet that serve as a model for Muslims: “The religious heritage must be critically read and interpreted anew. Cultural and religious reforms are more important

Shifting attitudes towards religion and religiosity raise fundamental chicken and egg questions about the relationship between religious and political reform, including what comes first and whether one is possible without the other.

than political ones, as they are the preconditions for any secular reforms.” Shahrour went on to say that the reforms, comparable to those of 16th century scholar and priest Martin Luther’s reformation of Christianity, “must include all those ideas on which the people who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks based their interpretations of

sources. [...] We simply have to rethink the fundamental principles. It is [...] said that the fixed values of religion cannot be rethought. But I say that it is exactly these values that we must study and rethink.”

The thinking of Nahdlatul Ulama’s critical mass of Islamic scholars and men like Shahrour offers little solace to authoritarian and autocratic leaders and their religious allies in the Muslim world at a time that Muslims are clamoring not only for political and religious change. If anything, it puts them on the spot by offering a bottom-up alternative to state-controlled religion that seeks to ensure the survival of autocratic regimes and the protection of vested interests. ●

VILLAGE COMMUNITIES AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

HENRY SUMNER MAINE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Roger B. Myerson

TO get a broader perspective on the decade ahead, it can be helpful to reconsider the long trends in history that led us to where we are now. This essay offers a review of historical development to show the vital role of communities and local government in the foundations of the modern global institutions on which future prosperity will depend.

A 2016 World Bank policy report entitled *Making Politics Work for Development* observes that “not only are local governments the last mile of [public] service delivery, which national leaders might want to improve, but they are also the ‘first mile’ at which citizens determine the platforms on which leaders are selected and sanctioned.” That is, local government can be vital for economic development in two

different ways. First, local government is responsible for providing local public goods and services that are essential for a prosperous community. But second, local government can be a basic point of entry into the political system.

The significance of this latter point should be evident to economists who understand that lower entry barriers can improve performance in any competitive system. Local leaders who provide good public service in local government can be recognized as strong qualified candidates for higher offices, and so democratic local government can increase competitive incentives for better public service at all levels of government. Successful democratic development in a nation depends on an ample supply of leaders with good reputations for managing public resources

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Photo: nobelprize.org

Roger B. Myerson accepting the 2007 Nobel Prize for Economics

responsibly in public service. (This supply could be called *public political capital*.) Autonomous institutions of local government can be a primary source of such trusted leadership.

Thus, I would argue, development economics is incomplete when comparative local politics is ignored. Theories of economic development should be based on a general understanding of how communities have been organized in traditional societies. For such a foundation, this paper draws from some deeply insightful observations about traditional autonomous villages and feudal manors by Henry Sumner

Maine, a nineteenth-century British jurist who studied the history of Western law and problems of law in India under British rule. From this perspective, I want to argue that local leadership has had a vital role at every stage of global development in the long history of humanity. But before turning to Maine's observations, let me start with a broad theoretical and historical overview.

LOCAL COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

WE may interpret the folk theorem of repeated games as a fundamental model of how people who live together in a small community

can discipline themselves to maintain virtually any pattern of behavior that may be adaptive for their survival. The folk theorem is proven by strategies in which anyone who deviated from his or her prescribed proper behavior would then suffer an adverse change of status in the community and so would be treated worse by others in the community thereafter. I would conjecture that some aspects of such strategies might be hard-wired in our human brains, such as an inclination to judge the propriety of the behavior of others in our community, and a reciprocal fear of losing status in their eyes.

In particular, trusted public leadership depends on a reputational equilibrium where an individual expects that the community will recognize him as a leader and will accord him special powers and benefits of this high status as long as he uses these powers properly to provide certain public goods or services. If he acts otherwise then he could lose this privileged status. To motivate proper leadership, it must entail expected rewards which are not less than the benefits (or *moral-hazard rents*) that the leader could get by abusing the powers of his position. Successful societies must be able to get people focused on such equilibria with some generally accepted leaders, who

can take responsibility for essential public goods that require coordination or management by one person.

Such problems had to be solved among hunter-gatherer bands when our species first spread out of Africa to transform the world about 100,000 years ago. We may conjecture that some of the first uses of human language were for a band's leader to assign roles in a hunt or battle and then to distribute shares of any rewards from success, but also for others in the band to gossip about whether their leader had exercised his coordinating power appropriately.

Then from about 10,000 years ago, the great transformative development of agriculture depended not just on some basic understanding of plants, but, as Douglas North wrote in 1981, also on the ability of people in farming communities to defend their rights to benefit from the crops that they had worked to plant and cultivate. Before the rise of states that could provide law and order over extensive regions, each village must have had the necessary leadership to fight for the defense of its territory against its neighbors, and to negotiate agreements and alliances with them. (Here it may be useful to note that, as Bernard Chapais argued in *Primeval Kinship* (2008), marriages have helped to form bonds of kin-

Development economics is incomplete when comparative local politics is ignored.

ship between neighboring communities. So people could have membership both in a clan and a community, neither one of which necessarily subsumed the other. But the local community would necessarily have primary responsibility for defining and sustaining property rights in the territory that it occupied.)

Pre-modern states were typically established by an elite group who specialized in fighting and collecting tribute. The development of writing about 4,000 years ago was essential for these proto state-builders, so that they could maintain networks of trust among themselves even when they dispersed to supervise the village-communities under their protection.

Now the latest global transformation—modern economic development—has been catalyzed by the discovery of an amazingly high long-run elasticity of national output with respect to political reforms that extend legal and political rights broadly throughout the population. Here I might add that this elasticity was probably much smaller before modern advances in public health—which depended on scientific understanding of microbes—enabled more of the population to be concentrated in large cities and metropolitan areas. And the representative governments that enabled broad popular political participation in geographically extensive nations depended on nineteenth-century

improvements in transportation and communication technology that allowed representatives of remote communities to commute regularly between their constituents and the national capital, as David Stasavage wrote in *States of Credit* (2011). By such technological advances and political reforms, people have been empowered to demand better public services and so have been encouraged to make greater private investments.

A change in the relationship between local and national politics has been integral to this transformation. In successful modern states, national leaders are regularly accountable to the general population, voting in their communities, and trusted local leaders can regularly rise into national politics. But traditional states generally depended on an exclusive national nobility, who as a class had responsibility for supporting and maintaining the state, and so the state's protection of property rights was designed largely for the benefit of this national political elite. As a guide to the local institutional structures of such traditional systems, between the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution, let us turn now to the writings of Henry Sumner Maine.

TRADITIONAL VILLAGE LAW

Henry Sumner Maine was a great British scholar of the history of law who in 1861 published a successful book entitled *Ancient Law*. Then he

went to India to serve as a senior legal advisor to the British imperial government, where he studied legal problems from traditional Indian communities with a sensitivity that was rooted in his long study of the laws of ancient Rome and medieval Europe. On his return to England, he gave a series of lectures to describe a conceptual framework which he found to fit both European history and contemporary Indian developments. This remarkable synthesis was published in 1871 as *Village-Communities in the East and West*.

Maine did not try to rule out the possibility that some similarities between villages in colonial India and in pre-feudal Europe might be derived from ancient Indo-European traditions that both groups shared across thousands of years. But clearly the broad similarities that Maine found in traditional village-communities of East and West must be understood as elements of a stable adaptive strategy for a farming community to sustain itself without protection from a greater regional government.

The major organizational features that nineteenth-century Indian villages shared with medieval Teutonic villages were summarized by Maine as follows: the territory of the community would be divided into the cultivated area, and the areas of common fields or waste, and the residential area of

the village. The cultivated land would be divided among the village households, but they had to cultivate their plots in a coordinated manner according to village rules, while the fields and waste areas were used in common by the whole village. In the village, each household was ruled by the recognized head of the family. Common economic transactions among the villagers were expected to be at customary prices. Disputes among the households would be resolved according to customary rules as defined by a village council or assembly. When its peaceful order was disturbed, the village would rely on the head of one preeminent family for leadership.

Here it is important to add that Maine saw economists' concept of market price as a modern development, depending implicitly on an assumption that people have a right to trade with whoever offers the best price. But when property rights exist only as defined by the community, we should not expect a traditional village-community to support such an economic right. Then if a villager refused to trade with his neighbors at the customary price when outsiders offered better terms, he would weaken his relationships in the community on which all his rights ultimately depend. The option to buy from him at a low customary price helps to give other villagers a stake in his property.

In his first book, *Ancient Law*, Maine had observed that, before the growth of the Roman state, the laws of Rome were applied not to individuals, but to families; and each family was ruled by a *pater familias* who held despotic power over everyone else in the household. Relationships were regulated by people's generally recognized status, not by bilateral contracts. In *Village-Communities in the East and West*, Maine saw that these communitarian principles were general characteristics of traditional villages in both ancient Europe and his contemporary India.

Economists generally see advantages in assuming that any individual can own property. But we should recognize that, in regions where no government exercises effective control, the property rights to land that are essential for agricultural development may not be enforceable without support from an entire community. Thus, before the establishment of an effective state, we should not be surprised to find communal property rights to be the norm in traditional autonomous villages. An individual might find it difficult to enforce a claim to valuable property alone, that is, without the support of other family members who share an interest in the claim. And a poor village, which could hardly afford to offer public adjudication for arbitrary contracts, might naturally limit its civil protection to the rights of social status recognized by the community.

MAINE ON FEUDALIZATION

Maine devoted one of his six 1871 lectures to feudalization, that is, to the transition of autonomous villages into feudal manors. He was deeply familiar with the feudal system as it had developed in medieval England, because its legacy still provided some of the basic principles in English land law. From this historical perspective, Maine found it remarkable to witness a process of feudal state-building in regions of colonial India in his own time.

When traditional autonomous villages come under the regional power of a sovereign state, they can gain some degree of peace from anarchic local warfare, but in exchange they must sacrifice some autonomy and submit to taxation by the state. Maine observed that, when a new province is annexed to a state, the first act of government must be to determine how much of the product from the land will be demanded by the sovereign state to defray its expenses. The result will inevitably be a redistribution of power in traditional villages, as the state must delegate some of its power to those who will serve its interests there. In particular, the problems of taxing remote villages may induce a state with limited administrative capability to concentrate local power in the hands of a few individuals who can take responsibility for keeping order and collecting taxes for the state.

Feudalism is the simplest way to integrate village-communities into a larger state system. The territory of the village-community becomes the manor of a feudal lord. The common lands become the lord's private domain, but village households become tenants who retain customary rights in the community's cultivated areas. The village council becomes the lord's court, with the lord as judge and with villagers as jurors.

In the process of medieval feudalization, many manor lordships were derived from grants by monarchs, which were granted in exchange for service to the crown. But Maine noted that local lordships could also be defined by the state's recognizing and elevating the position of an indigenous chief of a leading local family. Indeed, the distinction between a feudal manor and an autonomous village must be blurred by a recognition that autonomous village-communities regularly look to the head of one prominent family for leadership in any military action to defend the village. We should understand that a military operation requires a leader who can command people to perform dangerous actions in battle, and who can be expected thereafter to distribute appropriate rewards for good service. Such leadership inevitably must be associated with some privileges of power or moral-hazard rents for the leader.

Here it may be worth recalling a story from the thirteenth-century *Secret History of the Mongols*: a man asked a group of people if they had seen his odd-looking brother (who was a distant ancestor of Genghis Khan), and they told the man where his brother could be found. When the brothers met, they noted that the group seemed to be a remarkably egalitarian community, with no distinction between high and low; and so the brothers concluded that this group should be very easy to rob. The connection between inequality and defense is clarified later in this book, when a young Genghis Khan himself was robbed and then appealed to his overlord, who called together a great army that wreaked revenge on the robbers and their people. Thus, each vassal could be protected by his lord's ability to command all the other vassals to serve in their mutual defense, and the lord would be motivated to fulfill this coordinating role because his reputation for leadership earns him high status and privileges of power. The point here is that some form of privileged leadership may be necessary to maintain an effective mechanism for protection of property rights over an extensive region.

Maine recognized that even when feudal lordship is bestowed on the traditional war-leader or chief of a formerly autonomous community, there may be substantial historical injustice in

the conversion of communal property into private property of the lord. Most importantly, the state's recognition of the indigenous chief makes him a local lord whose position no longer depends on the community's approval of his public service. He is no longer accountable to the community.

Although the conversion of an autonomous village into a feudal manor was generally directed by the interests of the larger state, Maine urged his readers to recognize some important local benefits of this transformation. First, an autocratic manor may be able to adopt new agricultural techniques more readily than a village where the plans for cultivation each year require broad consensus among many households. Second, although traditional autonomous villages are often described as democratic, Maine argued that they should actually be considered little oligarchies, and the element of oligarchic inequality in such villages actually tends to worsen when a state provides even minimally good regional government.

To understand this effect, we must remember that local hardships have always driven some people to leave their homes and move to other communities, whether as refugees or migrants or indentured servants. Such immigrants arrive in a village with no claim to its land and resources, but they may earn a livelihood by the labor that they

can provide. If nothing compels the old village families to share the privileges of their status with newcomers, then the descendants of such immigration will eventually form a permanent landless underclass in the village. But in the primordial chaos before the establishment of a state, a village-community would regularly face existential threats of war from invaders or from neighboring villages, and such crises could motivate villagers to offer full citizenship to all residents who fought for their community. This force for inclusion is eliminated when a state protects the village in a regional peace.

Thus, if a state provides even tolerably good government while permitting traditional villages to autonomously define their own citizenship, then their local democracy can develop into an oligarchy that has all the problems of collective ownership without avoiding the problems of class inequality.

BROADENING THE DISTRIBUTION OF RIGHTS

Of course, feudalism is not the only way to integrate village-communities into a larger state. A state with weak ability to record and enforce property rights might have difficulty with the more complex alternatives, such as registering village land under the corporate ownership of a large (but not all-inclusive) group of local households, or subdividing the land

and recording the portions claimed by each household. So we can understand why weak states throughout history would opt for the simple alternative of designating individual lords for remote village-communities, thus creating a class of powerful local leaders who share a strong interest in maintaining the state. But states with a large corps of literate administrators have been able to distribute rights of ownership and responsibility for taxation more widely in the population.

In the British administration of nineteenth-century India, Maine heard from partisans of different state-building strategies. Some argued for concentrating land ownership in a native aristocracy, but others argued for recognizing peasants as the owners of the land, with responsibility for taxes distributed either to individuals or to organized village groups. That is, instead of creating a lord (*zamindar*) for each village, the state could give the responsibility for land taxes to the village council, or the state could collect taxes directly from individuals based on their registered property rights. Comparing the regions of India where each system was used, Maine noted that the greatest prosperity could be found in the southern provinces

where the government directly recognized the individual cultivators of the soil as owners and tax-payers.

Similar conclusions were found by Abhijit Banerjee and Lakshmi Iyer

Feudalism may be the simplest strategy for establishing stable political control over a wide region, but it can have serious long-term economic costs. Much of global poverty today may be a legacy of such feudal strategies of traditional and colonial state-building.

in a 2005 paper published in the *American Economic Review*. More than 130 years after Maine—and more than 50 years after the end of British rule—they still found evidence of lower agricultural productivity and higher infant mortality in areas where the British government had relied on local lords or *zamindars*. Feudalism may be the simplest

strategy for establishing stable political control over a wide region, but it can have serious long-term economic costs. Much of global poverty today may be a legacy of such feudal strategies of traditional and colonial state-building.

Maine's prior book, *Ancient Law*, focused on the transition of Rome from a traditional village-community to the center of a great state. Maine noted that, as the Roman state grew in power, there was a gradual development from collective ownership by families to ownership by individuals, and from rights defined by status in the community to rights defined by contracts. Economists understand the

costs of free-rider moral-hazard problems that can be created by collective ownership. On the other hand, we can also understand that individual ownership may become feasible only when a state's power to maintain order makes it realistic to expect that property rights can be enforced without a large group sharing an intrinsic stake in these rights.

Maine also found that, in the history of Roman law, the state itself introduced the earliest demand for individual property rights. Property acquired by an individual in military service to the

state was the first kind of property that a Roman was allowed to own as an individual, not subject to the head of his family. When the expanding Roman state needed an individual's service, he gained the right to enjoy rewards from the state without interference from his father.

At the end of his book on *Village-Communities*, Maine noted one case of communities that were established with a traditional system of collective ownership but made a transition to individual ownership within a single generation: in the seventeenth-century settlement of New England. Defense against the native tribes there initially required collective ownership. But as the frontier became

secure, small farmers could feel confident of state protection for their individual property rights, because their locally elected representatives directed the government of the province. In fact, as Mary Lou Lustig pointed out in a 2002 book, a

As the Roman state grew in power, there was a gradual development from collective ownership by families to ownership by individuals, and from rights defined by status in the community to rights defined by contracts.

scandal where commissioners demanded bribes to re-confirm settlers' land claims occurred notably in a period when a British governor had suspended the representative assembly.

ABOVE LOCAL POLITICS

States have been organized by groups of people with special-

ized administrative and military skills, whose ability to achieve coordinated action depends on a dense network of relationships of trust and leadership which bind them together like an elite village. In the simplest possible model, the founders of a state could be a band of captains with a leader whose power depends on a reputation among them for reliably rewarding their service. But the networks of trust within the state might not reach down into the local communities that are governed by the state, when leaders of the state are not locally accountable.

In much of history, when village-communities have been incorporated into

a state by an invading force, the group that organized the state may have had little or no prior connection with the communities on which their rule would be imposed. This was certainly true in colonial governments that were created by foreigners. In such cases, we should not be surprised to find a basic problem of building trust between local villagers and the government of the wider state in which they live. In his 1976 book, *The Remembered Village*, M. N. Srinivas tells of villages in colonial India where the arrival of a district magistrate would cause villagers to hide, fearing that official attention to them would be for conscription, taxation, or punishment; and so the village headman might be left alone to welcome the magistrate.

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Even in post-colonial Africa, Louise Fortmann's 1983 report to the government of Botswana entitled *The Role of Local Institutions in Rural Development* found a serious disconnection between the government and the locally trusted leadership of traditional village institutions: "it is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that those leaders who truly have followers, the traditional leaders, have weak links to the Government, and those with strong links (councillors, MPs) have few followers." Fortmann observed that the

government usually responded poorly to village development initiatives because nobody in the government was actually accountable to the villagers. She argued that villagers in rural Botswana had the skills and organizational capacity for local institutions to assume a major role in self-sustaining development, but only

if the government would let these local institutions exercise some real power to raise revenue, incur expenses, and enforce decisions.

In general, Africans under colonial rule would have had direct

contact with the bureaucratic national agencies of imperialist governments but not with the decentralized sub-national levels of domestic politics on which these imperialist governments were based. So it is not surprising that, after independence, post-colonial political elites in Africa might have viewed centralized national bureaucracy as a more "modern" way to integrate national power than the traditional institutions of local politics which were dominated by traditional chiefs.

In fact, however, traditional local institutions had vital roles in the historical process of building the strongest modern states of Europe and America. Since the fourteenth century, the institution of Parliament gave local leaders

from the towns and counties of England an influential voice in national politics. The United States was established in 1776 by thirteen provincial assemblies, each consisting of local representatives who were elected by their communities. We should understand that the national governments of Britain and America achieved unprecedented wealth and power because their political systems were constitutionally designed to share power with the local leaders of communities throughout the nation, and their national leaders could exercise power only with support from locally elected representatives.

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DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS AND COMPARATIVE LOCAL POLITICS

The point of this essay is to argue that local bands and village communities have been able to generate the trusted leadership that they needed since prehistoric antiquity, as local leadership was essential for humanity's ability to transform the world, first in the hunter-gatherer bands which spread out of paleolithic Africa, and then in the farming communities which diffused from the Neolithic Middle East. Then, in more recent historical millennia, the

growth of wider states has reduced the autonomy of village-communities, so that local authority could depend more on the external rulings of state officials and less on the internal accountability to the community.

But in less developed countries where state capacity is weak, we should expect that local community leadership would still have some importance in people's lives. Thus, when the question is how to find responsible leadership to improve the provision of essential public goods and services for a whole nation, we should not ignore the supply of leadership that is available locally.

Local governments in poor communities might not have the most modern administrative technology, and the potential constituency of some local politicians might be limited by their identification with one side of an ethnic rivalry. Local politics might not be democratic (although multi-party democracy at the national level can help to strengthen local democratic competition, as national political parties can support alternatives to established local bosses when they lose

popular support). But economic development depends on political leadership, and trusted leaders can be found in local politics. The great successes of modern economic growth began in nations where local leadership was regularly integrated into national politics.

From this perspective, we may consider Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme (NSP) to be a particularly well-designed development project. Under the NSP, a village

could get up to \$60,000 for development assistance, after the villagers met to select a public improvement project and to elect a village development commission (VDC) which would take responsibility for managing the project with the NSP funds. The elected leaders in the VDC would get full responsibility for the project, but NSP administrators ensured that the VDC spent its funds with clear public accounting to the people of the village. A careful study of the NSP published by the World Bank in 2013 has found it to be an effective way to help poor communities make public investments for better access to drinking water and electricity. The program may also have had some impact on local politics, as villagers were more likely to express critical discontent with the performance of their traditional village headman after the members of

the VDC had demonstrated their ability to manage public resources for village improvements.

But the study does not indicate whether any villages subsequently acted to elect a new headman based on his good

record of service with NSP funds. We should also ask whether any individuals have gone on to serve the public in higher offices, at the district or provincial or national levels, after first demonstrating that they could serve the public well in an NSP Village Development Commission. If not, then it might be worth asking what barriers have prevented such democratic political advancement from local to national politics, which has regularly strengthened national democratic competition in successful democracies.

Conversely, looking from the other direction at the problem of connecting the national government with local politics, we could also ask how the professional careers of government administrative officials might have been affected by an experience of working in the National Solidarity Programme. Have administrative agents become more valuable to the national government after the NSP gave them a deeper familiarity with local politics in remote villages throughout the country?

The great successes of modern economic growth began in nations where local leadership was regularly integrated into national politics.

More generally, my point is that research in development economics should regularly consider questions of comparative local politics. Whenever I hear a talk about research on the economic problems of a poor community, I hope that the speaker might take a few minutes to talk about the forms of local leadership in the community. Who adjudicates local disputes? Who manages public resources or coordinates communal efforts for local public improvements? Conversely, when we search for ways to strengthen the capacity of the state to provide essential public services for national development, we should not ignore the wide supply of trusted leadership that already exists in local communities throughout the nation.

Successful modern development depends on getting the essential fundamentals right, and the key is to recognize what is essential. The 2020 pandemic reminded everyone that modern urbanized development has implicitly depended on medical advances and government investments in public health, to defend great communities against threats of infectious disease. But we have argued here that that development economics is incomplete when comparative local politics is ignored. National governments serve people best when they share public responsibilities with locally accountable local governments. If this basic point is realized in more nations then our best hopes for global prosperity in the post-pandemic decade can be fulfilled. ●



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