

Fair Observer

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Is China's Belt and Road Initiative Strategic Genius, Arrogant Overreach or Something Else?

Atul Singh

September 4, 2019

The Belt and Road Initiative is China's bold and risky response to internal tensions and external pressure, but it is not backed by an inspiring idea.

President Xi Jinping, the modern-day emperor of China, clearly has a deep sense of history. On September 8, 2013, he gave a speech at Nazarbayev University in Almaty at the invitation of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Xi quoted a Chinese saying — “[A] near neighbor is better than a distant relative” — and referred to Chinese envoy Zhang Qian.

Apparently, this legendary envoy of the Han dynasty came to Central Asia 2,100 years ago. In the words of Xi, Zhang's “mission of peace and friendship” led to the “ancient Silk Road linking east and west, Asia and Europe.” Xi reminded the audience that his home province of Shaanxi was the starting point for this legendary trade route and Almaty was on it too. And he called for a modern reincarnation of the ancient Silk Road.

In what will go down as a historic speech, Xi promised to create an “economic belt along the Silk Road” that would benefit “the people of all countries along the route.” Thus was born the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its five prongs included increased policy communication, improved connectivity across Asia, unimpeded trade, enhanced monetary circulation and better understanding among people of different countries.

Less than a month later, Xi gave another speech in Indonesia. Again, he invoked old ties

going back to the Han dynasty. Importantly, he also invoked the 15th-century Chinese admiral Zheng He. This sailor from the era of the Ming dynasty made seven voyages and visited many key islands of Indonesia.

Replete with references to literature and shared memories of independence struggles, Xi quoted another of those proverbs for which his country is rightly famous: “[A] bosom friend afar brings a distant land near.” In a land still scarred by the shock therapy that the International Monetary Fund inflicted upon the country in 1997, Xi emphatically rejected the “one-size-fits-all development model,” reassuringly promising to respect the path Indonesia takes for its economy, politics and society. Instead of inflicting policy prescriptions like the IMF, President Xi promised China would “share opportunities for economic and social development with ASEAN, Asia and the world.”

What Is the BRI?

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) calls the BRI “the most ambitious infrastructure investment effort in history.” This effort involves “creating a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, both westward—through the mountainous former Soviet republics—and southward, to Pakistan, India, and the rest of Southeast Asia.”

ChinaPower, an effort by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to unpack the complexity of China's rise, captures the stupendous figures involved. About 4.4 billion people live in countries that have signed up for the BRI. They comprise 62% of the world population. The GDP of these countries is \$23 trillion. Trade between BRI countries and China amounted to \$3 trillion between 2014 and 2016. In the first half of this year, as per Bloomberg, “Beijing signed about \$64 billion in new, mostly

construction contracts, a jump of 33% from 2018.” What is this construction spree all about?

To understand China’s construction frenzy, it is important to remember that there are two prongs to BRI. One is rooted in China’s outreach to Central Asia. It aims to bring about a renaissance of the ancient Silk Route. The other is to build upon Zheng’s maritime voyages and create a network of ports that link China to the rest of the world. Asia and Africa are to be a particular focus. In addition to physical infrastructure, the Middle Kingdom will create 50 special economic zones à la Shenzhen, the first such zone established in 1980 as a result of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms of 1978.

Although a chemical engineer by training, Xi is a keen student of history. He remembers a time when China was the world’s largest economy in the world. Chinese silk, spices, jade, porcelain and other goods went West, while gold, silver, ivory, glass and various items came East. According to many analysts, the BRI seeks to create the infrastructure and system of trade that makes China top dog again.

Emulating their American counterparts, the Chinese speak of the BRI as benefiting everyone involved. If one is to believe Wang Yiwei of Renmin University, the Middle Kingdom seeks to “promote lasting peace, common security, common prosperity, openness and inclusiveness, and shared and sustainable development.” He argues that China would share “its development experience, but it will not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries.”

Wang claims the Chinese model “aims to promote a perfect combination between a functioning government and an efficient market, in which the visible and invisible hands both play their roles.” He asserts that ultimately the market would play a decisive role, but countries where the market economy has not developed would have an alternative to the failed free-

market model peddled by the IMF, the US and the West.

Even as Wang reassures the world about the Belt and Road Initiative, many shudder in horror at its scale, scope and speed of the project. The CFR worries whether the BRI is “a plan to remake the global balance of power.” Could the BRI be “a Trojan horse for China-led regional development, military expansion, and Beijing-controlled institutions?”

So, what is the real story? Is the Belt and Road Initiative the benign win-win that Wang paints it to be, or is it a sinister plot for world domination by a secretive, authoritarian regime?

The Chinese Rise and the Americans Respond

Since 1978, China has experienced the biggest and fastest transformation in history. Its economy has grown exponentially. Deng’s experimentation with reforms has paid off handsomely. With its vast supply of labor, entrepreneurial energy and national ambition, China has come back with a bang on the world stage after two centuries in the shadows.

China’s economic rise is based on mass industrialization. Data from the World Bank tells us that exports went up from a mere 4.5% of GDP in 1978 to 36% in 1996. Since the glory days of 2006, Chinese exports have fallen to 19.5% of GDP as per 2018 figures, but even this diminished percentage tells us that much of the production of China’s factories is still shipped overseas. This export-led model has served the country well and, for the last few years, it has become the workshop of the world. This workshop has supplied the planet’s biggest market: the US. Access to this market has been critical to China’s rise.

So, why was the US happy to import from China? Part of the answer lies in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. American imports fueled the rise of South Korea, Taiwan and Japan after

World War II. The free-trade order that Uncle Sam created locked its allies firmly into its own orbit. Countries that stayed out of the American solar system such as India, Vietnam and China remained poor.

When China took to reforms in 1978, the US was itching to wean the Middle Kingdom away from the Soviet Union's bosom. In 1991, when the dysfunctional regime in Moscow completely collapsed, the US still saw benefits in incorporating China into its orbit. Uncle Sam was even willing to overlook the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests because its high priests bet that economic transformation would lead to political change in China's timeworn land. Eventually, prosperity would make the Middle Kingdom more open, plural and democratic.

Thanks to this assumption, the US supported China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. There was another reason for getting the Chinese into the WTO. Importing from the Middle Kingdom improved Walmart's bottom line because Chinese goods were inevitably cheaper. After all, wages in this country of over a billion were less than in the US. Not only shareholders of Walmart but also American consumers were happy. After all, who does not want to buy more for less?

Not everyone won because of this arrangement. Many American workers lost their jobs when production moved to China or Mexico. The wise men in charge of the US economy told them that their pain was short term. Broad, uplit sunlands were just around the corner. Oracles like Bob Rubin and Larry Summers proclaimed that a more integrated world economy with freer movement of capital would lead to cheaper products, better paid jobs and a cleaner environment. In 1991, when Summers was at the World Bank, he proposed that many poorer countries were under polluted and toxic industries could move there from the first world.

When this memo was leaked in 1992, it caused a minor furor but most Americans bought into the gospel of trade. Even then there were some curmudgeons like Ross Perot, the populist 1992 presidential candidate. He inconveniently warned that wages would decline because of overseas competition. Even then, Americans were worried about fair and unfair competition. Perot saw "one-way trade deals" leading to a "giant sucking sound" of jobs going south. Unsurprisingly, this Texan billionaire's warning was pooh-poohed away by economists at places like Harvard, Yale and Chicago. Even as Perot made his comment in the pre-election debate, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton proclaimed that trade was a win-win and smiled on.

Economists, the new temple priests of globalization, also said trade was a win-win. Clinton bought into this prophecy with the zeal of a new convert. In 1994, this Arkansas boy claimed trade would allow "all to reap the benefits of enhanced specialization, lower costs, greater choice, and an improved international climate for investment and innovation." If greed was good in the era of Ronald Reagan, globalization was glorious in the age of Clinton.

In 2001, China's entry into the WTO gave it an autobahn with no speed limit to zoom ahead. As the US got embroiled in Iraq, the Middle Kingdom dutifully followed Deng's maxim: "[H]ide your strength, bide your time." It industrialized much as the US did in the 19th century, by stealing industrial secrets, protecting key sectors and providing manufacturing with steroids such as massive infrastructure spending and cheap credit.

Eventually, China's growth started making Americans nervous. Some started to worry about rising US current account deficits. Inevitably, the top dog was bound to push back and it duly did. After years of negotiations, Barack Obama signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in

2016, shutting out China from a gargantuan trade deal. Through the TPP, the US sought to seduce the Asian giant's troubled neighbors away from its sinewy arms. This trade deal was a part of the Obama doctrine, which envisaged the US pivoting to Asia from the Middle East. Naturally, it caused China much concern.

If Obama chose jujitsu, President Donald Trump has opted for a bar fight. As this author observed in 2018, Trump has declared economic war on China. Under his administration, the mood in Washington has turned sharply against the Middle Kingdom. Thomas Friedman, the celebrity columnist of The New York Times, has declared that China deserves Trump. Now, China is no longer just making "toys, T-shirts, tennis shoes, machine tools and solar panels." It is competing with the US in "supercomputing, [artificial intelligence], new materials, 3-D printing, facial-recognition software, robotics, electric cars, autonomous vehicles, 5G wireless and advanced microchips."

In brief, Friedman agrees with Trump that China is now a rival. Its "subsidies, protectionism, cheating on trade rules, forced technology transfers and stealing of intellectual property since the 1970s [have become] a much greater threat." In the old days, Friedman argues it did not matter if the Chinese were "Communists, Maoists, socialists — or cheats" but, now that it is a competitor, "values matter, differences in values matters, a modicum of trust matters and the rule of law matters." Tellingly, a Democrat trumpeter is giving a clarion call for a new Cold War unleashed by a much-despised Republican president. To modify the words of a Nobel laureate, the times indeed are a-changin'.

Chinese Counter Response

Even as the US has struck to chop down the Chinese tall poppy, the Middle Kingdom has played its own set of cards. To counter Obama's China containment policy, Xi did two big things.

First, he launched Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Second, his administration formulated a new "Made in China 2025" industrial policy in 2015. Seeking to avoid the middle-income trap and just make toys or tennis shoes for Friedman's grandchildren, the Chinese decided to embrace high-tech manufacturing. Their policy sets out 10 high-tech industries as a national focus, including electric cars, advanced robotics and artificial intelligence.

In an earlier article, this author pointed out how high-tech manufacturing in brainbelts was putting the US and Europe back on the map. China seems to be aware of this trend. Hence, it is making sure that it does not get stuck in low value-added, low wage manufacturing. China has set targets, is providing subsidies and making foreign acquisitions to close the gap with the West. Its government has also forced foreign companies operating in China to share their intellectual property and intellectual know-how. Tellingly, intellectual and industrial espionage remains part of the Middle Kingdom's modernization toolkit.

The Middle Kingdom still has a long way to go. People often forget that China's per capita annual income is still a measly \$8,000, much below the US figure of \$56,000. China may have grown dramatically in the last four decades, but it is still markedly poorer than the US. And for years, this poor country has lent the rich one money. Over the years, China has accumulated huge dollar reserves. In part, it has done so to depress its currency, keep exports cheap and its factories humming. Yet this imbalance was never sustainable.

A few months before the financial crisis of 2007-08, this author argued that Americans could not keep consuming on Chinese debt. The "Yankee Doodle and Dragon Dance" had to end. That end is nigh for three reasons. First, American sanctions have dampened demand for Chinese goods. Second, high-tech smart

manufacturing is making supply lines shorter and bringing back factories to the US. Third, an energy revolution has quietly transformed the US. It is the largest natural gas producer in the world with prices staying below \$3.00 per million British thermal unit (Btu) since 2015. Cheap energy costs mean that many energy-intensive industries can move back to America. The savings in labor costs are outweighed by cheap gas.

David Petraeus, a retired general and former spymaster, put this figure into context by pointing out that the price for natural gas for America's competitors is much higher. In 2014, he observed that the Japanese were paying \$16-17, the Chinese \$10-12 and the Europeans \$9-12 in contrast to the Americans who were then paying around \$3.70 to \$3.80 per million Btu for natural gas. Since then, prices have declined and the "extraordinary comparative advantage" of the US has only increased. Bit by bit, the US is going to produce more and import less. So, China has no alternative but to try something else.

With so much excess capacity, the Middle Kingdom has come out with its version of the Marshall Plan. It is trying to create an Afro-Eurasian economic and trading area to rival the US-dominated transatlantic one. China's big hope is that the BRI will create new markets for its goods. The country would be able to supply cement, steel and other goods as well as find useful activity for its high-speed rail firms. Just as British firms once built railways, roads and ports in Africa and India, Chinese ones are doing the same in Africa and Central Asia. These projects would remove infrastructural bottlenecks to trade and provide a big economic stimulus not only to China but to the wider region.

This investment is also a way to diversify China's assets. For too long the Middle Kingdom stockpiled gargantuan dollar reserves and got little in return for its investment. Now, the

country is investing its foreign exchange reserves in projects with greater risk but potentially higher return. It is choosing infrastructure because that is what it has the most experience with. After all, infrastructure investments worked in China. Why should they not work elsewhere?

There is another factor at play. Like Germany, China has contributed to what the Federal Reserve's former chairman, Ben Bernanke, has called a "global savings glut." Simply put, this means that desired saving exceeds the desired investment. China is using its excessive savings to stimulate domestic demand and invest abroad through the BRI.

China's Three Big Fears

A two-part Deutsche Welle documentary chronicles how the new Silk Road is moving across high mountains in Asia and other exotic locations right into the heart of Europe. It compares China's construction of roads, railways, bridges, tunnels and ports to Rome's imperial roads. If one was to believe the Germans, China is a supremely confident power with a vision and energy to become the preeminent global power as it was for most of its history.

The Chinese do not quite have the same view as the Germans. When this author speaks to Chinese friends, he finds anxiety inextricably intermingled with pride. They have three big fears. Importantly, Chinese fears are reminiscent of the Japanese before World War II, who had built up industrial might but did not have captive markets in the form of colonies or sources of energy at home unlike the British.

China's first fear is running short of energy. The Middle Kingdom might have coal, but it relies on the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia for oil and gas. The US Navy could block the Straits of Malacca in hours, bringing Chinese cars, trucks, trains and planes to a halt. Pipelines

from Central Asia and Russia are plays to secure energy supplies. So are ports that China is building in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Centuries after Zheng He embarked on his legendary voyages, the Middle Kingdom is also belatedly investing in a modern navy. It has no choice. China is now a major trading nation in much the same manner as the US.

China's second fear is unrest in Xinjiang. Throughout its history, the Middle Kingdom has experienced rebellions in restive regions and challenges to the unity of the country. It fears that the Muslim Uyghur minority might demand secession from the country and agitate for it. Therefore, Chinese authorities have launched a brutal crackdown and the region is under virtual lockdown. Approximately a million Uyghurs are estimated to be in reeducation camps.

Apart from the stick of repression, China is using the carrot of development to bring its restive region to heel. The BRI hopes to trigger economic growth in Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan so that Xinjiang prospers as well. It also hopes that close ties with Central Asian countries will dampen separatist instincts. In the words of Suhasini Haidar, Xinjiang is "both at the heart of China's biggest worries and is one of its greatest hopes."

China's third fear is that the US and its European allies might put in glass ceilings to stop its rise. Meng Wangzou, a top executive in Huawei, was arrested in Canada at the behest of the US, giving proof to this thesis. Intelligence agencies in the US, Britain and elsewhere have warned against the potential security risk that Huawei and other Chinese companies pose. Chinese investment, once welcomed, now causes disquiet in Europe and the US. In the battle of narratives, China believes that the West has painted its face jet-black to stymie its progress.

Many Chinese genuinely believe that Western media and intelligence agencies are fomenting discord in Hong Kong and resentment in places like Kenya or Sri Lanka. They believe that the West resents their rise and will do what it takes to stop it. Some of this fear is paranoia but some of it is real. There is a new wind blowing across the US. Like Friedman, many Americans do want to rub Chinese noses in the dirt and some of them work in the highest echelons of government. By investing in the BRI, the Chinese are taking out insurance against Western blowback.

In his own way, President Xi is trying to reassure not only the West but also the rest of the world. Even as Trump embraced protectionism, Xi's 2017 speech in Davos sang paeans to economic globalization. He also proclaimed it had to become "more inclusive and more sustainable." Xi sounded almost American when he spoke about "growing an open global economy to share opportunities and interests through opening-up and achieve win-win outcomes." He repeated this message four months later when the inaugural global BRI Forum gathered in Beijing.

For China, the Belt and Road Initiative is not only about economics but also geopolitics. The BRI is part of a strategy to engage more deeply with the outside world. It expands the arc of Chinese influence and counters the anti-Chinese measures of the US.

Rivals and Risks

China's BRI is causing unease not only in the West, but also in countries like Japan, Vietnam and India. All three have been involved in conflict with their larger neighbor. Just as China fears containment by the US with its bases in Japan, South Korea and across Southeast Asia, India is terrified of being encircled by China's "string of pearls." This term refers to the ports

that China is building, which India suspects have not only a commercial but also a naval purpose.

Japan is taking the lead in countering the BRI. It has stepped in to replace the US with the collapse of the TPP. Japan has also teamed up with India to launch a \$200-billion infrastructure plan for the broader Indian Ocean area. Funding power plants, railways, roads and ports as well as flexing military muscle seems to be Japan's response to BRI.

Even in countries where China has invested big in BRI projects, there is resentment and, sometimes, backlash. In Pakistan, a suicide attack killed Chinese engineers in Baluchistan last year. In this allied country, the Chinese work and live under police protection. In Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Hungary and elsewhere, China almost invariably faces criticism for pricing projects too high, disregarding local laws and importing labor instead of boosting local employment. Allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy" refuse to go away. The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota is used as a classic example of this diplomacy. Apparently, China won a 99-year lease for writing off Sri Lankan debt.

Along with rivals and resentment, China has to deal with turf wars at home. Just as different agencies and departments squabble in Washington, reports of fighting between foreign, commerce and defense ministries are rife in Beijing. China's planning commission and provinces are also part of the fight club. Conflicts of interests are emerging between different companies involved in far-flung projects and the government. It might be fair to say that there is a certain incoherence to the sprawling efforts involved in the BRI.

Beijing is also having to balance divergent imperatives. One of the BRI's aims is to gain better returns on China's foreign exchange reserves. However, there are few profitable projects in Central Asia, Southeast Asia or Africa. Another aim is to plant the flag in key

geostrategic locations. The Chinese have little experience in evaluating such locations. As a result, the BRI might be constructing too many white elephants with little economic or strategic value.

Yasheng Huang, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, fears that the BRI has huge risks of debt default. Most countries do not have the cash to pay China back. They will ask for debt forgiveness and write-offs. China's already burdened savers will ultimately be left with the bill. Apparently, only 28% of BRI investments in the first half of 2018 came from private sources, down from 40% for the same period in 2017. The fall in private money for the BRI shows that China's policymakers, not business leaders, are making most big investment decisions, increasing risks to the taxpayer.

Like the former Soviet Union, communist China is still struggling to deal with religion. Most societies, democratic or authoritarian, accord a certain sanctity to religious belief. Some like Saudi Arabia use religion as soft power and profit enormously from being the custodian of holy sites. Every American politician invokes god in a supposedly secular country. The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in the constitutions of many countries such as Germany, South Africa and India. China's treatment of Buddhist Tibetans might gain an occasional mention or fire up Hollywood celebrities, but its persecution of Muslim Uyghurs is capturing more global attention.

In particular, it is making Muslims around the world unhappy. This author has met many Arab, Iranian and Indian Muslims who seethe at China's injustices against people who share their faith. Some of them talk of boycotting all Chinese goods. This creates tricky situations for China's allies. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan might claim that he does not know "the exact situation of the Uyghurs," but Pakistani

publications cover China's actions regularly. China's actions in Xinjiang might be increasing risks of attacks on its workers and engineers in Pakistan and elsewhere. Like the US, China might be able to work with elites, but it might lose public support in Muslim countries, weakening the intended impact of the BRI.

Even if Thomas Cavanna is right about the Belt and Road Initiative being "more coherent, potent, and resilient than many believe," China suffers a gigantic disadvantage. For instance, it is building ports, railways and roads in Kenya, but it has little impact on the country's culture. English is the language of government, people watch the English Premier League and most Kenyans pray to a white Jesus Christ. Despite one in three black men ending up in jail once in their lifetime, Kenyans dream of immigrating to the US, not China. This means that once the BRI projects are completed, the Chinese might vanish from Kenya like their medieval admiral Zheng He.

Finally, many Chinese themselves still look up to the West. Christian Dior and Christianity save their bodies and souls. Xi's own daughter did her undergraduate degree at Harvard. Far too many Chinese are still desperate to emigrate for a better life. The rich still move heaven and earth to get their wealth out of the Middle Kingdom. In contrast, the US attracts talent and wealth from around the world.

The Belt and Road Initiative might have energy, ambition and even vision, but it is not backed by an inspiring idea. That is its biggest limitation.

Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. He studied philosophy, politics and economics at the

University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School. Singh worked as a corporate lawyer in London and led special operations as an elite officer in India's volatile border areas where he had many near-death experiences.

As the Amazon Burns, It's Time to Roll Up Our Sleeves

Derrick Jensen

September 5, 2019

Right now, we are facing the end of the world, says Derrick Jensen. We have the opportunity and the honor to protect the planet that gave us our lives.

The Amazon is burning. This is what the end of the world looks like. Oh, and there'll be more forests burn, more forests felled by chainsaws, more wetlands drained, more rivers dammed, more grasslands plowed, oceans further toxified and emptied of fish.

And each of these is what the end of the world looks like.

The end of the world looks like factory trawlers pulling in net after net full to bursting with fish — the fish's eyes popping out from the pressure of all those bodies squeezed together. It looks like puffins starving to death. It looks like emaciated polar bears. It looks like whales washing up on shore and walruses not finding ice on which to rest.

The end of the world looks like plows digging into grasslands, turning over soil and killing all who live there, even down to bacteria. It looks like rows of monocrops, as far as the eye can see.

The end of the world looks like humans staring at screens, clucking their tongues at the destruction of forests far away, never noticing that they themselves — whether they're in London, New York, Paris, Rome, Athens, Beirut, Beijing or Baghdad — are standing in clear-cuts.

The end of the world looks like cities, with most of their residents never giving a thought to who and what was killed to build that city, never giving a thought to who and what was killed to mine, manufacture and move everything they consider necessary to their lives, and never thinking about what is necessary to life and what is not.

The end of the world looks like humans turning the planet to human use. Or rather attempting to, because it's not possible to turn this wild and fecund Earth totally to human use, and this attempting is itself what is causing the end of the world.

From the beginning of this culture, it has been so. When you think of Iraq, is the first thing you think of cedar forests so thick that sunlight never touches the ground? That's what it was like, prior to the beginning of this culture. The first written myth of Western civilization is Gilgamesh deforesting the hills and valleys of Iraq to make a great city.

Have you heard of Mesopotamian elephants? Most of us haven't. They were exterminated to make way for this culture. And when you think of the Arabian Peninsula, do you think of oak savannas? These forests were cut for export to fuel the economy, to build cities.

The Near East was heavily forested. We've all heard of the cedars of Lebanon. They still have one on their flag. The great forests of North Africa were felled to make the Phoenician and Egyptian navies. Greece was heavily forested. So was Italy. So was France. The great forests of Britain came down to make the navy that allowed the sun never to set on the British Empire.

This is what this culture does. Forests precede us and deserts dog our heels.

The end of the world was not written into human existence. For most of our species' time on Earth, we've lived sustainably. The Tolowa Indians lived where I live now for at least 12,500 years, and when the dominant culture arrived, salmon still ran so thick they turned entire rivers "black and roiling" with their bodies. There was no such thing as "ancient redwood forests." There was only "home" — a home filled with trees thousands of years old, a home filled with nonhumans in abundance most of us literally cannot conceptualize.

Can you imagine — and this moves us across the continent — flocks of passenger pigeons so large they darken the sky for days at a time, flying 60 miles per hour and sounding like rolling thunder? Can you imagine so many whales that the air looks foggy, just from their breath? Can you imagine fish in such abundance that they slow the passage of ships? Can you imagine entire islands so full of great auks that one European explorer said they could load every ship in France and it would not make a dent? Well, they did, and it did, and the last great auk was killed in the 19th century.

How did the world get to be so full of life in the first place? By each creature making the world richer by living and dying. Salmon make forests stronger by their lives and deaths. Redwood trees do the same. Buffalo make grasslands stronger by their lives and deaths. Wolves do the same. And humans can do the same. But not living the way we do.

The Tolowa were not alone in their sustainability. There have been sustainable cultures the world over. The San of southern Africa, for example, evolved in place. They have lived there, in human terms, forever.

And how have humans lived sustainably in place? Simple. By not destroying the places where they lived, and by not destroying other

places either. By improving the habitat on its own terms by their presence. The Tolowa made land-use decisions, just as all other beings on the land do, and just as we make land-use decisions. But the Tolowa made these land-use decisions on the assumption they would be living in a place for the next 500 years. That assumption changes everything about how you make decisions and how you live. It is the difference between life and death, between sustainability and the end of the world.

The end of the world was not written into human existence. It was, however, written into the story of Gilgamesh. The end of the world is written into this way of life of converting the Earth solely to human use. It was written into existence with the plow, and with the cities the plow makes possible.

The logic is simple and inescapable. If you convert the land that previously grew bushes and trees that fed elephants into wheat that feeds humans, you can grow more humans per hectare. Many of these humans can become a standing army. And you can use those trees you cut down to build ships of war. You now have a competitive military advantage over those who live sustainably, over those who do not destroy their land base. Further, because you've degraded your own land base, you must expand into other land bases. But fortunately for you, you've got a standing military.

This is the last 6,000 years of history. This is the story of the end of the world.

More than 90% of forests on the planet have been destroyed. The same is true for wetlands, grasslands, seagrass beds, large schools of fish, wildlife populations in general.

This culture is killing the planet. It doesn't have to be this way. Not every culture has lived this way. Not every culture has killed the planet.

Recently, more and more people are talking about the possibility of human extinction. That possibility has entered our consciousness

enough that, in December 2018, The New York Times published an op-ed asking whether it would be better for the Earth if humans went extinct.

As the Amazon burns, here's the thing that haunts me. How is it that this culture can contemplate the end of the Amazon rainforest, contemplate the end of elephants, great apes, insects, fish in the oceans? How is it that it can blithely destroy life on Earth? How is it that it can with not much horror contemplate human extinction, but cannot contemplate stopping this way of life?

If aliens came from outer space and did to Earth what this culture is doing — change the climate; burn the Amazon; deforest the planet; vacuum the oceans and put dioxin in every mother's breastmilk; and bathe the world in plastics, endocrine disrupters and neurotoxin — we would know exactly what to do. We would resist. We would fight as though our lives depend on it. We would destroy the aliens' infrastructure that allows them to wage war on the planet that is our only home.

Or, put another way, if the Amazon could take on human manifestation, what would it do? If salmon could take on human manifestation, how long would dams stand? If humans from the future could come to our time, how would they act?

As the writer Lierre Keith often says, "If there are any humans left 100 years from now, they are going to ask what the fuck was wrong with us that we didn't fight like hell when the world was going down."

Many of us who know history might have fantasies of how we would have acted were we alive under German occupation in World War II or under British colonial rule. Right now, we are facing the end of the world. We have the opportunity and the honor to protect the planet that gave us our lives.

The time is now. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. Life on this planet needs you.

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How Revolutionary Is the Fourth Industrial Revolution?

Ayan Rakshit

September 12, 2019

Many trends of the Fourth Industrial Revolution may leave the have-nots worse off than before.

Around 20 years into the new millennium, everything about our lives and surroundings is changing at an incredible pace. The ways we work, play, study, communicate, spend and earn are rapidly evolving to bear little resemblance to how we've lived through most of modern times, let alone history. Experts call this the Fourth Industrial Revolution, expecting it to change the world in ways mass production of steam engines, steel, automobiles and electronics did over the past two centuries.

These innovations drastically altered societies that pioneered them, both physically as well as socio-economically. Changes such as growth of factories and cities, lengthening of lifespans and the irreversible damage to the environment befit the term "revolution" for each of their respective periods. Now, on the brink of something equally massive, we must ask ourselves who will be affected by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and how? Can we call this

phase a revolution too, or is it different this time around?

Disruptive Innovation

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is being propelled by two fundamentals: powerful, accessible computing and promising new materials. Scientists and engineers have leveraged these fundamentals to build new approaches to solving problems, such as additive manufacturing, machine learning and big data, artificial intelligence, automation, the "internet of things," etc. Technologists and entrepreneurs have purposed these approaches into innovations that are changing our lives, such as facial and gait recognition, e-learning, CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing technology, electric vehicles and smart homes, among numerous others.

Previous waves of innovation benefitted humans by increasing savings of time and energy across occupations. For instance, steam engines became widely adopted because they gave greater outputs than human or animal labor for a fixed supply. Electronic components became widespread because their utilization of energy was more efficient than that of mechanical machinery. Modern medicine was successful because, along with lengthening lifespans, it also made humans more capable and productive.

Hence even when these innovations replaced human labor, they brought newer possibilities for the workforce with newer skills to exploit. Countries that nurtured robust systems to develop human capital, such as Germany and Japan, benefitted from multiple waves of innovation as they could efficiently retrain the labor force. Others that relied on abundance of resources, such as Argentina, lost their importance in a world economy that started prizing new-age goods over age-old requirements.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, is purposed to unlock newer possibilities

for consumption. The workforce doesn't need to facilitate the transition from a 20th-century lifestyle to a 21st-century fantasy, because the motivation for innovation doesn't arise from human vocations. Due to its radically disruptive nature and breakneck speed, it can be understood by the select few who are at the frontiers of science and technology.

Conversely, because it doesn't primarily seek to augment occupational abilities of humans, it doesn't require much contribution from those who can't grasp it. Hence, the Fourth Industrial Revolution brings new goods and services to consume without developing the ability to consume them.

Boons to the Blessed, Despair to the Rest

To a large extent, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is guided by the changing societal and environmental conditions of the 21st century. For instance, research on electric vehicles is strongly motivated by concerns over CO2 emissions accelerating climate change. Research on biodegradable plastics is driven by the realization that plastic waste is contaminating marine life and food chains. However, despite the necessity of these measures, aggressive technological solutions to complex problems may risk widening the gap between developed and underdeveloped societies. For the greater purpose of solving global problems, many trends of the Fourth Industrial Revolution may leave the have-nots worse off than they were before.

Stories about the social and environmental impacts of the surge in mining of rare materials such as lithium, cobalt and graphite due to demand from new technologies have already been well documented. Despite supporting solutions that help mitigate climate change, these technologies are hurting people who are at the very beginning of their supply chains. In allowing for unsafe working conditions, child labor, land grabs and water acquisition, and

permanent damage to public health, the Fourth Industrial Revolution does not offer enough benefits to offset such losses.

Even companies that promise to source their materials sustainably acknowledge that present-day supply chains are too convoluted to avoid these realities. After all, most supplies are dictated by large European, British or Chinese companies whose operations test regulations and lack transparency in countries that give little room for corrective political measures. From their perspective, such functioning keeps new technology affordable and better equipped for solving global challenges. Despite this, corporations do little to solve problems faced by those who find themselves in circumstances that the rest of the world has already overcome.

Back to the Future

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is coming at a time of a major global realignment. East Asian companies are consistently pioneering innovations in several fields, ahead of their Western counterparts. Chinese government-funded advances in technology, both in China and beyond, have made the news headlines. This gives the impression of a new beginning, with a new world order to look forward to. However, upon careful examination, this change of the centers of power doesn't seem quite so revolutionary.

For thousands of years leading up to the First Industrial Revolution, China, India and other East Asian countries were the world's leading economies. Their finished products, natural resources and scientific advancements fueled centuries of trade, discovery and conquest in Europe and the Middle East. The First Industrial Revolution inverted these scales of balance in favor of smaller Western societies that explored boldly, collaborated efficiently and competed ruthlessly to overwhelm far more resourceful empires. Their focus, organization and planning

triumphed over millennia of glory and pomp rooted in richer fortunes.

The return of the center of gravity of global trade, technology and scientific advances to East Asia is not the same story retold centuries later. It is happening because after centuries of humiliation, these countries are reindustrializing with a vengeance. Physical factors already favor this, with large, but not necessarily overpopulated, demographics, plentiful natural resources and competitive, but also collaborative, cultural and trade relations. Judicious administration and planning have indeed accelerated this comeback much faster than the Western world would've anticipated a few generations ago. Colleges are excelling, new roads and trains are glittering, and internet connections are exploding across Asia today.

But the underlying agents always favored this as an inevitable fate. Even in a world of slower growing economies, China's tech giant Huawei was destined to make better phones than Apple eventually. This is rooted in a society that is materially more prosperous.

A Brave World, But Not a New One

Much more than mere technological change, industrial revolutions are known to transform the paradigm of dynamics and interactions between different societies around the world. Technological innovation has been a continuous process where different groups have taken a lead at different times throughout history. The word revolution, true to its definition, finds its place in the dictionary because of the ability of technology to disrupt the existing order and produce new champions.

The First Industrial Revolution shifted the center of gravity of the world's technological, economic and political powers from Asia to Western Europe. It gave people in small countries guns, ships and wealth to bring huge empires to their knees and vanquish tribes. The

Second Industrial Revolution redefined millennia-old relations between employers and laborers. It made lives longer and occupations more productive and interdependent on each other. People became more conscious of and dedicated toward collective identities, thus giving deprived groups more power to negotiate.

The next wave of innovation made the world a smaller place, with easier travel and more rapid and accessible communication. It made merit and excellence more substantive than privilege by birth and established the basis of our modern knowledge-based society.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution might not produce new champions. It favors sparsely populated societies, most of which are more developed due to a focus on reducing reliance on humans rather than augmenting their abilities. Problems unique to overpopulated societies, most of which are less developed than the global average, don't find direct solutions from approaches of this wave of innovation. Hence, there are risks of increasing inequality rather than bringing different societies to a level field and changing the balance of power.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution also demands radically new knowledge and skills that existing systems can offer only to those who are able to grasp it. Its technology arises from dedicated scientific research on a massive scale. This is different from previous instances of innovation, where tinkering produced technological solutions and motivated scientific research to optimize and seek explanations. This present wave of innovation does not give garage mechanics too many opportunities to compete with mammoth firms. In some sense, Schumpeter's words have struck true: Innovation in the fourth industrial age may be dominated by the privileged, not revolutionaries who can upend the existing order.

The fourth wave of industrialization hence falls short of being a true revolution. It neither

changes the dynamics between people and societies, nor does it offer prosperity to those who haven't found their place in the sun yet. Should we still stick by its name, we must find ways to extend its success beyond these limitations.

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Why Kangana Ranaut Is No Longer the “Empowered” Woman India Needs

Ankita Rathour

September 18, 2019

Is real women empowerment only possible through advertising partisan politics and masculine nationalism?

Beware of who you follow, my mother always said, because not everyone has your best interests in mind. I must have forgotten this advice those couple of years when I considered Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut to be a female empowerment idol in India. Anyone who follows Bollywood is aware of the stir that Ranaut caused in the male-dominated film industry. An important one. A long overdue one.

I started following Ranaut after her appearance on the talk show, “Aap Ki Adalat” (Your Court), where she narrated her controversial affair with one of Bollywood’s male

superstars, Hrithik Roshan. Like any other woman in the world, I could relate to the sexist and judgmental limelight that Ranaut found herself in. I could relate to a patriarchal culture’s impulse to side with the popular married man (Roshan) who held more power over her, not only in terms of Bollywood lineage, but also gender. I could relate to her discomfort from being in a relationship with an unreliable and controlling heterosexual man.

That was September 2017, and Ranaut’s testimony became the talk of the town. Right around the time of her next film’s release, she decided to clarify some things like the legal notices she and Roshan had filed against each other. Kangana’s revelations were shocking but nonetheless crucial to engage with. She needed to be heard. As a woman, it was essential for me to hear another woman without prejudice.

I was enthralled by Ranaut’s articulate demeanor, her logical and accurate timeline of events. Dressed in a simple saree, she held her calm, was funny, snarky and familiar. There was ample evidence to investigate and hold Roshan accountable for his deeds. The Indian Express called her act “bold,” “daring” and “confident.” The Indian feminist consciousness saw a strong ally in a popular actress like her.

I was ecstatic too. A woman from a small town in Himachal Pradesh, a self-made woman who started building the career of her choice since she was 16 years old, Ranaut was speaking truth to power. She was talking about the glaring discrimination and harassment within the glamorous Indian film industry.

Ranaut was the unabashed voice we were waiting for. She represented change. Given the cultural capital she had as an actor, she kick-started a new wave of feminism. About Roshan, she said: “He didn’t know that the flop actress he was dating would become a star after Queen and a superstar after Tanu-Manu. He didn’t realize that she would have a long journey, and nobody

would listen to him.” Ranaut’s reclaiming of power in a hyper-masculine Bollywood industry with no star lineage was a breath of fresh air.

But public consciousness was divided. People called her a crazy control freak. They called her a maniac. Her ex-boyfriend, Adhyayan Suman, chimed into this “mad woman” rhetoric too. In an interview with the Indian newspaper DNA, he alleged that Ranaut had abused and performed “black magic” on him during their year-long courtship. This was nothing new. Women have been called crazy every time they have garnered the courage to speak out against sexism or harassment or simply the right to be treated as humans. Ranaut was no exception, and she took all the criticism with ease.

And then things began to change. In less than two years, Ranaut started misusing all the cultural capital she had earned. Amongst her important criticism of Bollywood culture, one could detect traces of Hindu nationalist jargon. She became self-righteous. She propped herself up by putting others down without evidence. Ironically, within a year, she began to resemble her oppressor: patriarchy.

From Truth to Power Abuse

Now, almost two years after Ranaut’s spill-it-all interview, I do not recognize her at all. The Ranaut of today is a patriarchal ally who has bargained her emboldened voice for Hindutva favors. This ideology seeks to establish the hegemony of Hindus in India, and Ranaut has become the darling of the Hindutva radical right-wing movement.

She recently lashed out against journalist Justin Rao at a promotional event, accusing him of a negative film review. She has criticized Bollywood veterans like Shabana Azmi, calling them “anti-nationals.” She has shamed a young actress, Alia Bhatt, for her relationship with an older actor, Ranbir Kapoor, proudly saying that at Bhatt’s age (27), she was busy writing dialogs

for her movie, “Queen.” She further said that her mother had three children at Bhatt’s age. Ranaut has called for the destruction of Pakistan after cross-border terror attacks by Pakistani militants. She has threatened Bollywood openly, saying: “Now, I will teach them a lesson. They have ganged up on me.”

Her sister, Rangoli Chandel, has jumped on board. As has the nearly forgotten Bollywood beauty, Payal Rohatgi. If taken in isolation, Ranaut’s reaction on the cross-border terrorism is understandable, as Indians get emotionally charged over their country’s security. However, armed with their new-found nationalism, Ranaut, Chandel and Rohatgi are amplifying a very sensitive national issue to strengthen partisan attitudes nationwide. With the cultural power they possess, one must be wary of what they say and how they say it. Sadly, their social media tone is further widening the religious, caste-based chasm that common Indians have grappled with for years.

Cross-border terrorism is a complicated matter. Cries for the destruction of a neighboring country is calling for genocide. Anti-Pakistan sentiment coupled with attacks on Islam leads these women to even exoticize an inhuman, regressive practice of Sati, the burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her late husband. Historical heroes like Raja Ram Mohan Roy — regarded as the father of the Indian renaissance — are not spared either, and neither are fellow Indian women. Everything goes hand in hand. If that isn’t the case, then we haven’t been lucky enough to hear Ranaut and the others clarify their stance.

As a woman, I struggle to make sense of the mockery these women make of female empowerment. And then, a bigger question arises: Is the realignment of their beliefs with radical right-wing sentiment an attempt to re-brand themselves as “sane” and capture a nationalist-masculine consciousness?

Interestingly, a right-wing repackaging has helped them gain mass support from right-wing men. There was a time when scrolling through Facebook, one could see men calling out Ranaut as “psychotic” among several other terms that I choose not to mention for my own mental sanity. Today, such men are calling her heroic. Famous nationalists like actor Anupam Kher call her a “real example of women empowerment.”

But is real women empowerment only possible through advertising partisan politics and masculine nationalism? Can there be a way for women to be accepted regardless of a nationalist, minority-hating fervor? Can women be feminist without practicing divisive nationalism? Is our rage, anger and frustration as victimized women only sanctioned if we repackage ourselves as aggressive right-wing women?

The Masculine Rage

In her book, “Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger,” Rebecca Traister chronicles how rage doesn’t work the same way for women as men. While talking to journalist Ezra Klein on his podcast, “The Ezra Klein Show,” she investigates the unifying effect of women’s rage for dismantling patriarchal practices. She rightly says that “women’s anger invalidates their experience.” Women are not encouraged to be angry. “Their anger undermines the credibility of their stories.”

Anger in men is sexy, erotic. With women, anger should not be openly demonstrated and certainly not while calling out male harassers. It is not pretty. Christine Blasey Ford and Anita Hill must remain calm while narrating their harassment in courtrooms. However, Brett Kavanaugh can scream, cry, whine and still make his way to the US Supreme Court.

Similarly, Indian women’s anger has not been promoted and glorified except in images of Hindu goddesses. Kali and Durga are the females

exoticized and celebrated for their anger. The sad case of Kangana Ranaut and those like her is similar. These women have realized the cruel reality of the weakness of their feminist anger in a patriarchal culture and may have tactfully partnered with the current, pervasive Hindutva masculine rage.

Rohatgi says Sati was a woman’s choice. Defaming social reformer Roy, she tweets: “No he was a chamcha [sycophant] to Britishers who used him to defame the Sati tradition. Sati tradition was not compulsory but was introduced to prevent the prostitution of Hindu wives by the hands of Mughal invaders. It was the woman’s choice. #FeministsofIndia Sati was not regressive.”

These women are effectively abusing vulnerable Indian emotion. It saddens me. I should be able to trust women like Ranaut and Rohatgi who were among the very first voices of dissent against sexual harassment in Bollywood. Today, not only do I fear these women who glorify hyper-nationalism and practice selective feminism, but I also fear that this would potentially crush our vision of a national sisterhood. Their vehement right-wing political identity divides the common Indian sensibility further.

Time to Pay Heed

Before I finish, let me clarify. Just because I am critiquing another woman, it is not for men to celebrate and say: See, feminism is a cancer. No matter what, Kangana Ranaut, Rangoli Chandel and Payal Rohatgi’s transformation into powerful religious bigots does not mean that all women are like them. It is not similar to the power that men have been bestowed upon historically, merely on the basis of their sex. These women’s right-wing patriarchal alliance is a symptom of a bigger problem.

Even after 72 years of independence, we as an Indian society have not provided our women

with effective options for self-actualization and empowerment. Hence, their survival still lies in mirroring the regressive patriarchy in identity.

This article is not meant for readers to conclude that criticizing women means one is not a feminist. This is a much-needed intervention in India's growing feminist culture. Rather, this is a call to stop and reflect on what could possibly go wrong when we are fighting for a fairer society. This is a request to be ready to critique one of our own: patriarchal women.

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Another Middle East War Is Internationalized

Gary Grappo

September 18, 2019

The attack on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, the consequent impact on oil markets and the effect on the global economy mark the third Middle East conflict to become internationalized in the last decade.

“If we don't go to the Middle East, the Middle East will come to us.” That prophetic comment was once shared with me by an American general defending US policy — now questioned by many in the country, including President Donald Trump — to remain actively engaged actively in the Middle

East not only to defend and pursue US interests, but also keep in check the region's many tensions. To be sure, it has been a costly policy in terms of American and Arab lives, resources and the United States' image, and it has not always been successful.

The general's comment comes to mind with the recent drone — perhaps cruise missiles as well, according to reports — attack on two major oil facilities in the heart of Saudi Arabia's oil-producing area in the eastern part of the country. Houthi rebels have been engaged in a four-year-plus civil war in Yemen, in which Saudi Arabia has played a major role. The latter's airstrikes have been blamed for a fair portion of the death toll of 100,000. The Saudis and Houthis as well as other participants — the United Arab Emirates, Yemeni government forces and al-Qaeda — have also been blamed for human rights abuses by the UN Human Rights Council.

Negotiations to end the conflict have been fitful and the most recent ceasefire fell apart months ago, just as did previous agreements to stop fighting.

Which brings us to the latest attacks on September 14. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attacks, but the US is pointing the finger at Iran, though definitive evidence for their claims remains lacking. Nevertheless, their accusations have a certain ring of truth since it is unlikely that the technology to carry out such a long-range attack from Yemen could be obtained by the Houthis without Iranian assistance. The Saudis assert that the drones and cruise missiles were actually Iranian.

Moreover, the Saudis also now contend, as did Secretary Pompeo shortly after the attacks, that they did not originate in Yemen. Predictably, Iran denies all allegations of responsibility for the attacks.

The World Feels Yemen's Pain

Regardless of the specifics of the attacks in Saudi Arabia, which remain important, the incident marks the third Middle East civil war — after Libya and Syria — that has been internationalized. With the prior two, it was the mass exodus of refugees, first to surrounding countries but then to Europe that sparked blowbacks in the European Union, the US and elsewhere against immigration. The immigration debate doubtlessly played a major role in Britain's decision in 2016 to withdraw from the EU.

Yemen presents a major challenge to would-be refugees. It is surrounded by one of the world's most inhospitable deserts — mostly in Saudi Arabia where these refugees are hardly welcome — and by an equally perilous Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Instead, the allegedly Houthi attacks on two large oil facilities — Abqaiq, one of the world's biggest that is capable of processing seven million barrels of oil per day — caused tumult in the global oil market, sparking the largest one-day rise in prices in recent memory. The two facilities — Khurais is the other — account for almost 10% of the global oil supply. The Saudis are now expected to bring a significant portion of the oil processed at these two installations back online fairly soon, though not immediately.

Nevertheless, markets remain roiled. A relatively simple weapon, a drone, has rendered the world's largest oil exporter's oil-producing infrastructure seemingly defenseless. Recall, also, that Saudi Arabia is the third-highest defense spender in the world after the US and China. Oil buyers are now likely to add an additional risk premium to world oil prices as a result. So, prices seen at the close of business the day before the attacks, around \$60 per barrel, may not return for some time unless OPEC producers, Russia, the US and others ramp up production. The OPEC-plus countries — OPEC

and Russia — have been reluctant to do that to date in order to maintain a floor price for their exports.

Is Yemen a Factor?

The larger issue, however, is what actions the international community is prepared to take to end this conflict. Judging from its predecessors in Libya and Syria, probably not much. There seems to be no will. That's especially true of the US, which, under both Barack Obama and Donald Trump, has supplied the Saudis with the weapons used in its aerial bombardment campaign in Yemen. And under Trump, the US voice for ending the conflict has been largely muted.

In fact, since the attacks, it has been the US and Saudi Arabia against Iran. Yemen appears to be barely a second thought, its millions of people all suffering but forgotten in the swirl of accusations and counter-accusations between these three powers. So, the civil war will continue and oil consumers around the world will pay a price for their leaders' inability to end it — just like Libya and Syria, whose civil wars rage on too.

Other questions surround the attack on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities. How could such an attack occur in the heart of the world's largest oil exporter who, despite its outsized defense spending, was unable to protect its most critical asset? While Iran undoubtedly played a role, did it play a direct one?

It is difficult to believe that such an attack by the Houthis, who have received Iranian support over the course of much of the war, on its foe's most vital strategic facility could have taken place without the knowledge and likely approval of Tehran. And, as the two facilities are some 500 miles from Yemen, is it possible for them to have launched these attacks from that country or might they have originated elsewhere,

including Iran or from within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia itself?

These are hardly academic questions. Their answers will determine the next moves by the US and Saudi Arabia. President Trump has announced stepped-up sanctions on Iran, whose economy is already reeling from existing sanctions imposed after the US withdrew from the nuclear accord in May 2018.

Confrontation, Escalation and Diplomacy

One question on the minds of many is that of military confrontation. On that, two considerations must be taken into account. First, Donald Trump campaigned in 2016 against US involvement in “wasteful, never-ending” US wars in the Middle East. That would pretty much describe a US-Iran conflict.

Perhaps an even more important consideration, however, is that no American lives were lost — no Saudis were killed either — and no US assets were touched in the attacks. So, in the minds of most Americans and probably in that of Trump, where’s the *casus belli*? Why should Americans risk their lives for a Saudi oil facility, especially when US reliance on imported oil from anywhere outside Canada and Mexico is minimal?

That leaves the Saudi response. Riyadh will certainly respond with reprisal attacks against Yemen, though locating the responsible Houthis will be problematic. Depending on the actual Iranian role and what can be proved, it might decide to launch airstrikes against Iran’s equally vulnerable Gulf-based oil facilities. But that would set both countries on a treacherous path of escalation whose end is unknown.

Such an attack by the Saudis is unlikely without American assent, given the ramifications and likelihood of an Iranian reaction. No one — not the US, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the other Gulf states or the international community — wants or can afford a major war in the Middle East.

With the religious overtones (Shia versus Wahhabi Sunni), rocket arsenals of both sides making populations in both countries dangerously exposed, and the critical importance of the Gulf to global oil flows and the global economy, such a conflict ought to be unthinkable. So, why would Iran permit such an attack at all knowing the predictable reaction?

Diplomacy might seem the preferred course now. Indeed, Trump has offered to meet Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani. One possibility might have been at next week’s UN General Assembly, which both leaders are expected to attend. That is probably off the table now.

Nevertheless, some quiet and purposeful diplomacy has never been more necessary. And the place to start may be Yemen’s civil war.

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The Great Firewall of China

Christina Maags

September 23, 2019

The so-called “Great Firewall” of China blocks citizens’ access to the outside world and to each other. Will the virtual blockade end up undermining the communist party’s own goals?

Over time, empires and nation-states have erected walls to protect their people and limit their interaction with the “outside world.” Now, walls are not only built in stone, but also in the digital world. For instance, while the Chinese were long shielded by the Great Wall, today they are additionally surrounded by the “Great Firewall” — a digital wall that limits internet users’ access to the World Wide Web from within the People’s Republic of China.

Just like a physical wall, the Great Firewall constitutes a barrier that limits the flow and exchange of information. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Dropbox and foreign websites, particularly news agencies such as the BBC or Reuters, are all inaccessible to a Chinese internet user. Instead, Beijing has supported the development of Chinese providers, most importantly Baidu, a Chinese equivalent of Google, or WeChat, a social media platform. In contrast to foreign companies, these national providers fully cooperate with Chinese authorities.

Ubiquitous Censorship

In addition to limiting information flow across the wall, Chinese authorities restrict the information exchange between people living within the wall. Censorship is pervasive. The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) propaganda

department sends out memos to radio, TV and newspaper agencies informing them on how to report on certain incidents.

Although the privatization of Chinese media has reduced the official grip on the broadcasting of information, media outlets practice “self-censorship,” attempting to anticipate what might be censored so as to not be fined or closed down by authorities. Private websites, blog articles and social media accounts of citizens are similarly censored if the party-state regards them as too critical or as having the potential of stirring too much public debate.

As a consequence, the “Great Chinese Firewall” severely hampers access to information and freedom of expression. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2018 survey on China, for instance, rates Chinese citizens’ freedom of expression at two out of a possible 10 points (whereby one is the worst and 10 the best). This rank is only worse in countries such as North Korea or Oman, which have a ranking of one point. Since 2016, censorship has been tightened even further, increasing the amount of foreign and domestic websites blocked on the Chinese internet.

Information Propagates the Official Line

The Great Firewall and domestic censorship limits information flow across and within China and also shapes and directs public opinion, and thereby influences how information that contradicts the official “line” is perceived. Information is not only censored but tailored to promote a specific view on Chinese history, the CCP and foreign countries, aiming to foster nationalist sentiments.

Student textbooks, for instance, teach Chinese children to be patriotic and critical of “the West,” whose arrival in the 19th century has resulted in “100 years of humiliation” of the “great Chinese civilization.” Chinese citizens encounter these views and praise of the CCP in

the form of billboards and posters in streets, public transport or at the workplace. Public opinion is also shaped in a more subtle manner by governmental social media accounts or the so-called “50-cent army” — state-employed bloggers who influence opinion online by posting positive comments and news about the government.

Thus, the Great Firewall creates a certain space in which information is limited and targeted in a way so as to direct public opinion and indirectly preempt the potential impact of critical information.

This is not to say that Chinese citizens blindly believe and follow official propaganda. Many have become wary of official media outlets and propaganda posters. Foreigners and Chinese alike use virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent the Great Firewall and access uncensored information. Others circumvent official censorship by using code words and metaphors to criticize the government and the lack of freedom of speech. When the true meaning of these puns is discovered, new ones are invented.

Crackdown Underway on Opposition

Nevertheless, despite these efforts, the Great Firewall and official censorship can only be circumvented and not directly opposed. Specialized or insider knowledge is needed, for example, to access VPNs and understand coded language.

With an increased crackdown on both — VPNs and critical bloggers — the already limited freedom of expression and access to uncensored information has been reduced. Moreover, the party-state is becoming increasingly savvy in their efforts to more subtly influence public opinion, potentially becoming more successful in shaping Chinese citizens’ perceptions and interpretation of information.

The Great Chinese Firewall, therefore, not only constitutes a barrier between the outside world and China, but it simultaneously creates a space in which the party-state can flexibly influence public opinion. With the tightening of control under President Xi Jinping, the space for freedom of expression and critical thinking will further shrink in the future. However, despite its potential to indoctrinate Chinese citizens, it is yet to be seen whether this strategy can promote the two main objectives of the party-state: economic development and social stability.

Expressing criticism lets off steam that may otherwise be channeled into open protests. Critical thinking and free access to information are needed to be innovative — a key skill the party-state needs for economic development. This means that Beijing will need to find the right balance between allowing and censoring information and freedom of speech to meet its key goals for the future.

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Tensions Mount in the Gulf as World Leaders Gather at UN

Maya Yang

September 23, 2019

If anything, the UN will most likely just pay lip service to the mounting tensions in the Gulf.

On the morning of May 12, unidentified perpetrators attacked four oil tankers off the Fujairah port in the Gulf of Oman. Two of the tankers belonged to Saudi Aramco, the national oil company of Saudi Arabia. The attacks occurred during Japanese Prime Minister Abe's state visit to Tehran, which was intended to ease regional tensions.

The international response was swift. The United Arab Emirates described the incident as a "sabotage attack," while the United States immediately blamed Iran. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Norway launched a joint investigation into the attack, concluding that a "state actor" was behind it.

The events triggered a series of dangerous incidents around the Gulf, including two further attacks on tankers in June, the US and Iran shooting down each other's drones, and the detention of Iranian and European tankers by both sides. Most recently, on September 14, oil facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia were struck in drone and cruise missile attacks. Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility, but the US and Saudi Arabia blame Iran. The Iranians deny any involvement in the attack.

The UN General Assembly

As world leaders gather in New York for the 74th United Nations General Assembly, tensions remain high in the Gulf as Iran continues waging

its campaign of "maximum resistance" against the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" agenda that a handful of other Western states have been behind to varying degrees. Despite nuclear disarmament and arms control being key aspects of the General Assembly's agenda, the UN is unlikely to play an integral role in reducing tension between the US and Iran, given the strong-willed nature of these countries.

Nevertheless, it remains the vital interest of all parties to prevent US-Iran brinkmanship from erupting into war, especially one that so directly involves some of the world's most powerful militaries and has been playing out around the Strait of Hormuz, a highly-strategic chokepoint in the Gulf through which one-fifth of the world's oil passes. Any interruption of international shipping through this narrow strait would have a seismic impact on the global economy, as well as a drastic rise in oil prices.

Since May 2018, when the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) over a host of issues, including non-nuclear ones like Iranian conduct in the Middle East (i.e., support for Lebanon's Hezbollah, Houthi rebels in Yemen and the Syrian regime) and its ballistic missile activity, the US has re-imposed sanctions on Iran. Such sanctions threaten European businesses that deal with Iran and have resulted in European firms pulling out of the Islamic Republic despite their keenness to enter Iranian markets after the JCPOA's watershed passage and implementation in mid-2015 and early 2016, respectively.

The Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign has strained the Iranian economy. With the reimposition of US sanctions, Iran's GDP contracted by 3.9% in 2018. Additionally, at the start of last year, Iran's crude oil production peaked at 2.8 million barrels per day (bpd). By March 2019, that dropped to 1.1 million bpd.

Although Tehran stuck to its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA by practicing a policy of “strategic patience” that rested on the assumption that European countries could circumvent US sanctions from excessively harming Iran’s interests, Iranian officials have concluded that such an approach has not succeeded. Consequently, Iran has gradually pulled back from its commitments under the nuclear deal. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani recently announced that Iran has begun working on “all kinds” of faster centrifuges, a direct violation of the deal.

Within this context, Iran has left the West worried over its nuclear plans as it looks East to Asian countries to export its oil. Giorgio Cafiero, the CEO of Gulf State Analytics, a Washington, DC-based political risk consultancy group, describes the strategy’s economic aspect, saying, “Given that a number of countries, most importantly China, are still buying Iranian oil, it seems difficult to imagine the US policy aimed at bringing Iran’s oil exports to zero as proving successful.” As many experts see it, Washington’s maximum pressure agenda maxed out over the summer, raising questions about what else the US could do outside of military action to pressure Iran into changing its conduct.

With the Iranian government undeterred by US actions, the burden of maintaining what is left of the nuclear deal rests with European partners and their efforts to ease the blow of US sanctions on Iran. This comes at an especially difficult time as the United Kingdom deals with the Brexit saga and right-wing, populist and nationalist governments in mainland Europe challenge the EU’s capacity to promote global cooperation.

The efforts to incentivize Iran to uphold its end of the bargain under the JCPOA have been unsuccessful, given the country’s recent nuclear developments. Addressing the European role in the tensions since the 2018 pullout, Cafiero says,

“Because the US dominates the global banking industry, European states have been unable to chart an independent course in relation to Iran and the nuclear deal.”

A War of Words

With rising tensions between the US, Europe and Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members have effectively found themselves in the crossfire during this summer’s series of detained and attacked tankers. That said, it is important to recognize that Saudi Arabia’s approach vis-à-vis Iran has not been subdued.

Last year at the 73rd UN General Assembly, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir condemned Iran, stating: “Iran continues its terrorist activities and hostile behavior. The kingdom expresses its support to the new American strategy in dealing with Iran ... Achieving peace and stability in the Middle East requires deterring Iran’s expansionist and subversive policies.”

Similarly, UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed cited Iran’s “nefarious” interventionist policies, attributing it to the region’s escalation in violence. In his address last year, he said, “Certain countries, particularly Iran, are prone to attacking the security of the region, spreading chaos, violence and sectarianism.”

The Iranian side also traded bellicose rhetoric at last year’s General Assembly, foreshadowing the rise in tensions that erupted a year later. President Rouhani delivered harsh statements directed at the United States. He said that “by violating its international commitments, the new US administration only destroys its own credibility and undermines international confidence in negotiating with it.” He also condemned the rhetoric launched against the Iranian regime, describing it as “ignorant, absurd and hateful ... filled with ridiculously baseless allegations.”

As the parties gather for this year's UN General Assembly, the rhetoric and addresses are somewhat unpredictable, especially after US President Donald Trump recently fired John Bolton, his third national security adviser since 2017. Bolton, known for his hawkish foreign policy on Iran — which included pushing for regime change and war — was a chief proponent of the maximum pressure strategy. However, according to a source close to Bolton, Trump and his now-former national security adviser were at odds over the president's apparent suggestion of lifting sanctions on Iran as a negotiating incentive.

With Bolton's departure, Washington's foreign policy toward Iran might become less hawkish. Additionally, there is the possibility of American and Iranian diplomats coming together at the negotiating table, with speculation about Trump meeting with Rouhani.

That said, the recent attacks targeting Aramco facilities in eastern Saudi Arabia, which resulted in the state-owned oil company's production being halved, may cut the prospects for diplomatic outreach between Washington and Tehran. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's tweet attributing the strikes to Iran raises questions about whether hardline figures in the Iranian regime may have provoked the perpetrators to carry out these attacks, with the aim of derailing any potential diplomatic outreach between the US and Iran in the aftermath of Bolton's ouster.

The Iranian leadership's rhetoric at the General Assembly will be highly informative in terms of understanding Tehran's approach to dealing with the Trump administration. Depending on if and how US foreign policy shifts, as well as how suspicious Tehran regards any potential change in Washington's Iran strategy, the Islamic Republic may continue its criticism of the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as it has done during previous UN gatherings.

Moreover, the other address to keep a close eye on at this year's assembly is the UAE's, given its recent scaling down of support for Trump's maximum pressure campaign. This comes at its realization that continued backing of the increasingly hostile US approach toward Iran may lead to a war in the Gulf, in turn jeopardizing the UAE's own regional interests.

Notable examples of Abu Dhabi's shift in Iranian foreign policy include its cautious response to the May 12 tanker attacks, labeling them as "sabotage" by a "state actor" but not directly pointing fingers at Iran. Additionally, the UAE initiated diplomatic outreach to Iran in July. Whether or not these shifts will be reflected publicly at the UAE's General Assembly address remains to be seen.

Overall, with this buildup of tensions involving such strong-willed countries that lack permanent status in the UN Security Council (UNSC), it is unlikely that the United Nations will be able to foster any sort of multilateral rapprochement.

If anything, the UN will most likely just pay lip service to the mounting tensions in the Gulf and verbally demand a de-escalation.

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What Happens When We Ban Abortion?

Wanida Lewis

September 25, 2019

If the United States succeeds at revoking women's rights to abortion, the social climate will be reminiscent of another

country that made this attempt in the 1960s: Romania.

The battle over women's reproductive rights in the United States is not new. Since the Supreme Court's landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling, the lines have been drawn between pro-choice and pro-life advocates. These positions have been entrenched in US politics for decades, but have taken a sharp turn under the current Trump administration. Though data show that restricting abortion access hurts women in the workforce, the president has vigorously pursued regressive policies, contrary to his stated intentions to support economic growth for women.

In fact, these antiquated decisions will not only jeopardize the prosperity of women but also their health and safety, especially for low-income women and women of color. If the United States succeeds at revoking women's right to abortion, the social climate will be reminiscent of another country that made this attempt in the 1960s: Romania.

Early on, the Trump administration took steps to limit access to health services and family planning. Title X, a federal program that provides birth control and other reproductive health services to 4 million low-income Americans, will now prohibit referrals for abortion as a method of family planning. The final rule does not bar non-directive counseling on abortion, but the change eliminates the requirement that Title X providers offer abortion counseling and referral.

Other regulations also state that recipients of federal funding will offer "medically-approved" family planning services, as well as the option to not provide all forms of effective contraception approved by the US Food and Drug Administration. These decisions will affect not only low-income Americans but disproportionately impact women of color, who

are three times more likely to experience an unintended pregnancy.

Lessons from History

The Trump administration has frequently touted its desire to support women entrepreneurs, but not the rights of women. Copious amounts of evidence show that the administration's policies do the exact opposite of what they claim. The administration has even gone as far as to remove any reference to sexual and reproductive health, including using the term abortion itself, in international institutions such as the G-7, positioning itself as conservative in foreign policy. Policies like these, limiting women's health-care options, have shown to bring disastrous results.

Prior to 1966, Romania had one of the most liberal abortion policies in the world, that is until Decree 770 was implemented, banning abortion as well as the distribution and use of contraceptives. To compensate for the loss of the freedom to choose, incentives were provided for women to have many children, with the aim of increasing the country's population. Romania initially saw a boom in births, but this was short-lived, as women began seeking out illegal abortions, causing birthrates to dramatically fall. An estimated 10,000 Romanian women died from complications of illegal abortions or were permanently maimed. The decree disproportionately affected lower-income women and disadvantaged groups, who could not afford to bribe doctors or have contraceptives smuggled into the country.

What has happened in Romania has left a traumatic stain on the country's history. The effects of the policy convinced many Romanians that contraceptives are unreliable and unhygienic, resulting in the idea that abortion is the only sure way of avoiding parenthood. The spike in birthrates under the decree saw an unprecedented number of these children ending

up in orphanages. Although some of these offered good conditions, many were far from it and resulted in thousands of children suffering from illnesses — an estimated 500,000 living in what one of these former orphans called the “slaughterhouses of souls” before the end of the Cold War.

Romania continues to have the highest infant mortality rate and the lowest life expectancy in the EU. If similar anti-abortion laws are implemented in the US, women of color and lower-income women will face the same issues, in contrast to affluent white women. Abortion can represent a heavy financial burden for poor and low-income women who may not have insurance coverage or be able to secure money for an emergency expense.

Better for Everyone

In addition to the negative health implications, studies have shown the legalization of abortion positively impacts women’s labor participation and overall gross domestic product (GDP). The opposite happens when there are regulations for women who are seeking abortions, making it difficult to move between occupations and into higher-paying jobs. For example, abortion restrictions heavily impact women who get pregnant in college.

According to a report by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, only 8% of single mothers graduated with a college degree within six years, compared with 49% of women without children.

Roughly 2.8 million new jobs have been added to the US economy since January 2018, with 1.6 million going to women. However, the White House isn’t sharing the proportion of the population available for work. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 57.5% of working-age women are employed, or unemployed and seeking work, which is lower than the 60.3% reported in April 2000. Women

are receiving higher pay in some sectors, but are still earning roughly 82 cents to the dollar compared to men. The balance of work and family has always affected women more than men, and restricting women’s sexual and reproductive rights makes it harder, not easier, for women in work.

Romania serves as the perfect example of how oppressive abortion laws affect public health, demonstrating what can happen when a woman’s choice is taken away. If the United States wants to see a productive workforce, the government should start by advocating for women’s rights and implement policies that support tangible economic growth for women by ensuring parental leave and affordable childcare. This will encourage society to make sound economic choices, as well as pave the way for women’s advancement toward real equality.

Wanida Lewis is the 2019 gender in foreign policy fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy.

Greta Thunberg and the Youth Will Not Be Silenced

Arek Sinanian

September 26, 2019

Greta Thunberg’s speech to the UN shows us that the youth will not be quietened and, if anything, their voices will only become louder.

I know it’s been said many times and throughout history, but we do indeed live in interesting times. And it’s not just because the most unlikely person has become president

of the most powerful nation, not because an unplanned and unreasoned proposition has won the vote for an exit from the European Union, and it's not because the world seems unable to find a workable set of solutions to an existential and, yes, wicked problem that is climate change.

My friends tell me that I can talk, and my publisher says that I can write. But I must say that for the first time in my long professional career, I struggled to write this article. I struggled to find the words that would adequately describe my reactions to some of the tweets, opinion pieces and podcasts posted and published on Greta Thunberg's speech at the UN. The words that came to mind were "staggered," "intrigued," "angered," "shocked," "saddened," "stunned." But surely, having done the research for my book, "A Climate for Denial," I should have been prepared for the reactions from all the climate deniers and the reasons for their denial and predictable responses.

But none of my understanding of the reasons for denial has prepared me for the venom, and the demeaning of the message and the messenger.

The many responses that I obtained and read carefully can be summarized in a following metaphor: A man is enjoying the grandeur of an ocean trip on a boat when his child comes running to him shouting, "Daddy, there's a leak at the other end, and water is coming into our boat!" The father looks at the child with a wry smile and thinks that his child is imagining the leak — maybe it's just a bit of wetness on the floor of the boat. The water is probably coming from within the boat and not the vast ocean. Even if there is a real leak, as unlikely as it is, surely it is a minor one, and the people at that end of the boat will see it and fix it.

Then he keeps on reasoning that even if they don't immediately see it and fix it, sooner or later they will, and everything will be fine. Children don't know much about leaks, they

don't fully understand that a small leak will not sink a boat, and that there are safety mechanisms in place on sophisticated modern boats like this to make sure we don't sink. Besides, we should be careful in dealing with a situation like this and how it might affect the passengers on the boat. What about the panic amongst the passengers this could cause?

You get the drift, and perhaps guess the rest of this hypothetical story. Unfortunately, the negative commentary goes much deeper than just analyzing and criticizing every word Thunberg used, and goes as far as mocking her, as well as her parents, even questioning her family's agenda in all of this. Wow, really?

But enough of the metaphor and generalizations. Let me unpack some of the condescending and derogatory commentary, and there's plenty to unpack. To do it simply, let me list the method by some of the commentators who wanted to discredit and even mock Thunberg and her speech by:

1. Questioning her motives
2. Questioning her state of mind and her psychology
3. Criticizing the factual basis and accuracy in her assessment of the impacts of climate change
4. Questioning her right to represent an entire generation
5. Questioning her and her team's environmental credentials and practices
6. Blaming her for virtue signaling
7. Mocking her speaking style
8. Labeling her an idealist, with an impractical position and view of the world order
9. Calling her views undemocratic
10. Calling her a puppet of false information and left-wing ideology

What the critics seem to misunderstand and misjudge is the nature of protest and a genuine and desperate cry for help. When someone runs out of a house crying, “My house is on fire,” it is totally inappropriate to reply with: “You’re exaggerating — it’s only your kitchen that’s on fire,” or “Stop being hysterical — here’s a water hose, go back in and put it out,” or “You should have been more careful with your cooking.”

Denialist Rigor

But despite all of the denialist rigor and vitriol, the momentum appears to be on the side of youth and others protesting the slow responses by world leaders. Perhaps the strength of all the negative responses is a reflection of that. The chorus of voices pleading for more urgent action has shifted, from the voices of scientific knowledge to the voices of children pointing out the generational inequity of climate change.

Ideally, the father on the boat should have taken his child’s hand and asked her to take him to the leak and assess the situation properly and then raise the alarm if necessary, to rectify the impending disaster.

What, if any, influence Thunberg’s speech and the youth movement she has generated will have on global responses to the climate emergency is difficult to tell. Maybe it will be the beginning of a wider expression of concern and then some responsive action. We’ll have to wait and see. But one thing appears certain: that the youth will not be quietened and, if anything, their voices will only become louder as more of them become involved in policymaking.

So, to all those people who are condescendingly in denial of a generation screaming for help, and on their behalf, I say: How dare you?

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change, greenhouse gas abatement and carbon accounting, and he has extensive experience in resource efficiency, waste minimization and sustainable development. He is a member of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) expert panels of the clean development mechanism (CDM) Methodology Panel and the Accreditation Panel, providing advice on new methodologies and projects for CDMs submitted for registration under the Kyoto Protocol.

Is Trump’s Impeachment Bound to Backfire?

S. Suresh

September 27, 2019

Could Trump become the first ever president to be impeached and go on to win a second term?

After months of grappling with the issue of whether US President Donald Trump should be impeached, on September 24, House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi formally launched an impeachment inquiry. Pelosi had stayed clear of impeachment talks even after earlier this March when Special Counsel Robert Mueller released the results of his investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

Mueller’s report concluded that his probe did not find sufficient evidence that the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government on election meddling. Furthermore, the report also did not find sufficient evidence that Trump committed obstruction of justice, but it stopped short of exonerating him completely. For Pelosi, the political implications of launching

impeachment proceedings without conclusive evidence on either aspect of the Mueller inquiry was a risk not worth taking.

All that changed dramatically this week when President Trump's phone conversation with the newly elected president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, came to light. In his July call with Zelensky, Trump specifically asked for his help in investigating Hunter Biden, the son of his possible 2020 Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, while alleging wrongdoings by the former vice president himself. Trump repeatedly mentioned that he would like his lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and Attorney General William Barr to call the Ukrainian president in order to get to the bottom of some issues.

The issues that the president of United States of America felt compelled to discuss were the business dealings of Biden's son and the hacking of the Democratic National Congress servers in 2016. The full transcript of the conversation released by the White House shows how uninspiring and pathetically pedestrian Trump can be, even as Zelensky tries to shamelessly humor him and massage his ego.

Blowing the Whistle

The crucial question that legal pundits will be debating is whether there was any explicit quid pro quo in the conversation. A careful reading of the transcript will show Trump asking for favors from Zelensky and vice-versa. Even as someone who is not a trained legal expert, I can see nothing incriminating in the conversation. In fact, the conversation was very much akin to two juveniles gossiping, Trump complaining about German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the former US Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, with Zelensky echoing those complaints to score a brownie point or two with Trump.

Trump's veiled suggestions to look into the Bidens' activities comes dangerously close to

soliciting a foreign leader's help against a political opponent, but there was no direct mention of aid being withheld until the favors he asked for were granted. (Trump did admit to reporters earlier this week that he did in fact withhold aid to Ukraine, but did so because of concerns of US overspending compared to other European nations.) The US president did, however, fail to demonstrate any respect or pride in the nation he leads when he trash-talked Mueller, Yovanovitch and Biden during the conversation.

Following this ill-fated call, in August, a whistleblower complaint was lodged against President Trump. The House Intelligence Committee released the seven-page document, wherein the whistleblower — whose identity has not been revealed, but who some have suggested was an officer in the intelligence services — accuses Trump of using his presidential powers to pressure foreign leaders to meddle in the 2020 elections, posing a risk to US national security.

Most of the information contained in the complaint is not the whistleblower's first-hand knowledge. Rather, it is conjecture based on various information he gleaned as a non-White House official privy to sensitive information during his interactions with several US government officials. The material contained is definitely damning to Trump's lawyer Giuliani, but not the president directly. Unlike the transcript of Trump's telephone call with Zelensky, which is easy to read and make sense of, the whistleblower complaint is involved and needs to be investigated further in order to determine who acted with impropriety. If it is Giuliani, he will likely get thrown under the bus by Trump in much the same way as his former lawyer and fixer, Michael Cohen.

That Pelosi succumbed to the growing pressure to impeach Trump based on his phone call with Zelensky and the material contained in

the whistleblower report looks like a tactical error. Removing Trump from the Oval Office is a long, drawn out process that seems farfetched at this time. Following the initial impeachment inquiry announced by Pelosi, the House Judiciary Committee chaired by Congressman Jerrold Nadler will lead the effort of overseeing the ongoing investigations of the six House committees. At the end, if the committee does decide to pursue impeachment, it will draft the articles of impeachment that will be voted in the House. It requires but a simple majority in the House to impeach him.

If Trump is indeed impeached, he will then be tried in the Senate, with Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts presiding, and the members of the Senate acting as the jury. A two-third majority in the Senate is needed to convict and remove Trump from office — a practical impossibility in the Republican-controlled Senate under Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Impeachment Imminent?

Trump is an unethical businessman who knows how to navigate the thin line between legality and committing a crime. He would never have won the election in 2016 should good ethics, morality, respect for women, regard for all human beings irrespective of their race, color, ethnicity or country of origin were mandatory requirements to be president of United States. He garnered 62 million votes in 2016 with all his character flaws. It would require a lot more than the appearance of impropriety in a conversation with a foreign political leader advancing his personal agenda to sway the opinion of Trump's voter base.

It is insufficient to have only Democrats talk about impeachment. It is imperative that the House impeachment be a bi-partisan effort with significant number of Republican Congress members sharing the view that Trump did cross a line in his dealings with the Ukrainian

president. For that to happen, incontrovertible proof from thorough investigations of the whistleblower complaint will be needed to make GOP Congress members vote against their party's president.

Proceeding along partisan lines, even if the House succeeds in impeaching Trump based on the questionable evidence seen in the whistleblower complaint, without Republican voters willing to turn away from this corrupt man in the White House, the Senate is sure to acquit him. Should that happen, Trump will remain on the 2020 ballot, and an angry Republican base will propel him to a win, making him the first ever president to be impeached and go on to win a second term.

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