

Fair Observer

Monthly



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Fair Observer^o

Fair Observer Monthly



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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

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After Afghanistan's Fall to the Taliban, Will Kashmir Be Next?

Rakesh Kaul
December 1, 2021

Fueled by jihad, opium and desperation, the Taliban have turned their sights on Kashmir as they did in the late 1990s, making the world a more dangerous place.

In my first article of this three-part series, I made the case that the victory of the Taliban would radicalize Pakistan and increase its global nuclear threat. Notably, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is not only changing its eastern neighbor, but also fundamentally altering the geopolitics and balance of power in Central Asia. Most importantly, the most immediate consequences of the Taliban triumph will be felt by India in general and Kashmir in particular. The dynamics of South Asia are about to change dramatically.

In August, President Joe Biden gave a self-serving speech blaming everyone except the US for the current situation in Afghanistan. His speech does not withstand close scrutiny, though. If anyone is to blame for the Taliban's dramatic comeback, it is Uncle Sam. Washington demonstrated breathtaking ignorance, arrogance and stupidity in handing Afghanistan from day one.

Failure to Learn From the Past

To handle Afghanistan better, the United States could have done well to dust off some history books and learn from the playbook of the British Empire. At one point, a mere 6,000 British officials ruled 250 million Indians. The key to British success was not military firepower, but an extraordinary understanding of the subcontinent. They wrote gazettes, drafted reports and charted maps that covered every nook and cranny of the landmass. When retired CIA officer Glenn Carle

was struggling to find a Pashtun village more than two decades ago, he had to turn to a colleague to pore over imperial maps in London.

In 1800, Lord Wellesley, the elder brother of the Duke of Wellington and then-governor general of India, started Fort William College, the first modern institution of learning in the subcontinent. This institution taught British officials Indian languages and prepared them to rule a landmass that the armies of the British East India Company were conquering rapidly. To this day, the best of British diplomatic and intelligence officials strive to learn local languages. The thoughtful Rory Stewart who possibly knows Afghanistan like the back of his hand is a direct heir to none other than Lawrence of Arabia. The US has never had a figure like Lawrence or Rory for good reason.

America has long been the promised land for immigrants. However, these immigrants leave their ancestral lands behind. Two oceans separate the US from the rest of the world. This superpower "maintains nearly 800 military bases in over 90 countries," but it does not have officers who go "native" unlike their British counterparts. In Afghanistan, American troops and administrators almost invariably relied on interpreters. A staggering 50,000 interpreters have worked for the American military since 2001.

This overreliance on interpreters has proved toxic. Barely 6% of Afghanistan's population speaks English. By relying on this tiny section of Afghan society, the US was cutting itself off from the vast majority of the country, much of which still lives in the remote and rugged countryside. Over time, much of this English-speaking Afghan elite proved to be self-serving and corrupt.

The classic example of this phenomenon is Ashraf Ghani. The high and mighty in Washington backed Ghani in a murky election marred by fraud and misconduct. He spoke flawless English, had worked for the World Bank and had taken up American citizenship. Sadly for the Americans, they bet on the wrong horse.

When the Taliban rolled into town, President Ghani failed to put up a fight, allegedly fleeing with “\$169 million from the state coffers.”

Ignorance of the Wider World

Afghanistan represents a longstanding American weakness. In 1953, the US conducted a coup in Iran for British interests. They had no idea of the lay of the land and this coup spectacularly backfired in 1978-79, The Iranian Revolution haunts the US to this day. The US failure to understand Vietnam has been examined through books, documentaries and countless commentaries. In Afghanistan, the Americans relied on treacherous Pakistan and used interpreters instead of putting in the hard work to truly understand the people and their culture.

At its core, the Taliban was a peasant-supported movement. They shared this similarity with the Vietcong. The Pew Research Center found that 99% of Afghans support making sharia the official law. Frighteningly, 67% of Afghans believe “there is only one possible way to understand sharia.” As Stewart observes in his meticulous documentary on Afghanistan, Afghans have always believed in jihad against non-Muslims. Historically, Pashtuns came down the Khyber Pass to raid the plains of Punjab. The more enterprising ones got as far as the Gangetic plains of India. Babur conquered North India in 1526 from the Pashtun Lodi Dynasty. In 1947, Pakistan unleashed Pashtun irregulars against India and, as I pointed out in the previous article, my grandfather paid the price with his life.

Now that the Taliban are in charge of Kabul, Kashmir is its next target. Both the Taliban and Pakistan have persecuted minorities relentlessly. In September 2002, Dr. Iftikhar H. Malik published a damning report on Pakistan for Minority Rights Group International. Nearly 20 years ago, he observed how non-Muslims and even many Muslim groups are treated as second-class citizens and pressured to convert to Islam. The Taliban–Pakistan narrative constantly paints India as a land of “Hindu kafirs” that oppresses fellow Muslims in Kashmir.

Already, the Taliban–Pakistan move against India is in full swing. In November, nine Indian soldiers lost their lives to “freshly infiltrated” terror groups. Anas Haqqani, the youngest son of the late Jalaluddin Haqqani and the brother of Taliban’s deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, has visited the tomb of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi. Haqqani called Ghaznavi “a renowned Muslim warrior & Mujahid of the 10th century.” Ghaznavi raided India 17 times, smashing temples, looting gold and taking back hundreds of thousands of male and female slaves with him.

Haqqani’s tweet celebrated this bloodthirsty medieval sultan as the warrior king “who established a strong Muslim rule in the region from Ghazni & smashed the idol of Somnath.” His brother is the interior minister of Afghanistan and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation still offers a reward of \$10 million for his arrest. The Haqqani Network is responsible for some of the deadliest terror attacks in Afghanistan. From their declarations and actions, it is clear that their next target is jihad in Kashmir.

The Americans have long allowed Pakistan to play Pied Piper not only in Afghanistan, but also in Kashmir. Before the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US constantly lectured India on human rights, often at the behest of Pakistan. Washington failed to realize that much of the violence in Kashmir was being perpetrated by Pakistanis and Afghan irregulars. In 1995, the Sufi shrine of Charar-e-Sharief was razed to the ground by a Pashtun named Mast Gul who remains scot-free in Pakistan.

Once the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996, they sent jihadi fighters to Kashmir. Retired CIA officers remark that Muzaffarabad, the largest city in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, became the watering hole for the most hardened Islamists on their way to fight jihad against India. To the west of Muzaffarabad lies Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Pashtun-dominated Pakistani province bordering Afghanistan. To its east lie the Kupwara and Baramulla districts of Indian Kashmir.

Because of Kashmir, Indian troops had extensive experience in counterinsurgency against militant jihadists from Afghanistan, which analysts in the US government were lauding as early as 2004. Yet the US neither sought nor heeded Indian advice on Afghanistan. Now that the Taliban are back in power, they will inevitably do what they did in the late 1990s: fight jihad in Kashmir.

Opium Fuels Jihad

Under the Taliban, Afghanistan's economy has suffered a meltdown. The UN has warned that millions of Afghans might face starvation this winter.

Even when American troops were in Afghanistan, there was a 37% increase in opium poppy production. Now, this production will grow exponentially because the Taliban have no other way to fund the national economy and they cannot afford to alienate local farmers. Europe will not only have to deal with increasing numbers of Afghan refugees, but also skyrocketing heroin imports. The US has absolutely no idea as to how to deal with the Frankenstein's monster it has unleashed on the world.

For the first time, the world will have to deal with a state whose economy is based on narcotic exports. Globally, 85% of opium is sourced from Afghanistan and the heroin kingpins are now running the country. Therefore, it is in the economic interest of the state and its leadership to boost opium production. Pakistan will be a willing ally in the distribution of opium to keep the Taliban regime in power in Afghanistan and avoid more refugees spilling over across the border.

Earlier this year, Zulfikar Majid reported how Kashmir's drug problem was worsening. Imports from Afghanistan have been rising so dramatically that even 10-year-olds are falling prey to heroin abuse. Kashmir is now firmly in the crosshairs and the map of Asia might soon be in question. The world has just become a more

dangerous place and the US, notwithstanding its retreat from Afghanistan, is no exception.

***Rakesh Kaul** is the author of the bestselling "The Last Queen of Kashmir" and the critically acclaimed "Dawn: The Warrior Princess of Kashmir."

Finding the Source of Australian National Strength in the China Context

Philip Eliason
December 2, 2021

Australia does not have a clear path and must choose between one of two directions: trade and money or values.

Two starkly different viewpoints published in The Australian over Canberra's posture toward China show the contrasting approaches to strategic uncertainty and perception of threat from Beijing. The first article was posited by Hugh White on November 21 and the second was put forward by Peter Jennings two days later.

White, emeritus professor at the Australian National University, tends to a policy of national accommodation regarding China and its apparently inexorably growing influence in all aspects of world affairs. Therefore, he has not found a trip-wire that generates bolder positioning against Chinese activities and is unlikely to do so in the future.

Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), takes the position that Australia needs to have trip-wires with China and that Canberra should show early robustness to demonstrate it will take action to protect its current way of existence.

Two Schools

The accommodation and assertion schools of thought both have valid components.

When China's policy shift over Australia became publicly apparent, the accommodation school urged the Australian government to exercise caution and demanded ministerial contact to remedy the financial damage done to export income by Beijing. Negligible attention was paid to other demonstrations of Chinese influence and control exerted through Australian institutions, notably via universities, despite the strength of evidence published by the ASPI and by researchers such as Clive Hamilton in his 2018 book, "Silent Invasion." Concern about the economic consequences declined, with exporters finding alternative markets following the May 2020 Chinese sanctions through their market adjustments. This leaves the main line of opinion focusing on various thresholds for tougher Australian policy toward China and analysis of the intent of the United States and its own ability to deal with Beijing.

For the assertion school, Australia's policy needs to be clear and firm, with more elaborate military arrangements with like-minded countries to deter China and politically strengthen the international system. The favorable rules-based order continues to provide the basis for cooperation between the European Union, the US and countries in South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

With pushback against China, its approach is likely to shift from growing its appeal to pressing its influence. A 2021 survey by the European Think-Tank Network on China (ETNC) about the standing of Beijing's soft-power and influence in 17 European countries shows that European states are disinclined to listen to China and actively deny it leverage from its soft-power investments and economic importance.

Our response to China will have to both measure against those of other international friends and press ahead where it must. But it will also draw on nationally coalescing factors that

create an acceptable and comprehensible foundation for national resistance.

Australia is not mono-cultural, nor has it the satisfaction of a core religious, ethnic or aspirational identity. Additionally, it has weak internal cohesion on common values that can mobilize national efforts to project influence sufficient to comfort the country about its security.

Looking at "Sacred Values"

"Sacred values" are not only what drives people and groups into, for example, collective defense or violent extremism. They also drive people in negotiations to settle conflicts. Sacred values, those generally not tradeable against pecuniary or operational sustainment, will drive Australian policy on China. Such values include the conception of human rights, the role of the individual within society, liberty and the rule of law, and political participation in setting laws.

When asked to trade-off sacred values in a deal with a peace dividend, research shows that people typically react with a hostile "backfire effect," plus an increased commitment to these sacred values, in addition to higher potential for protective violence or preparation for it. Researchers Scott Atran and Jeremy Ginges show evidence for this.

The role of sacred values is applicable to all regions and levels of discord and has been so demonstrated in controlled experiments. Sacred values are also layered, in that limited trade-offs for assured security can take place — depending on the nature of the threat, of course. Dismissal of sacred values fails.

Sacred values relate to group emotion and identity and are used by political leaders to mobilize their constituents to shape acceptance of policy changes and action. This point is made clear in the 2019 book by Barry Richards, "The Psychology of Politics," which uses psychoanalytic ideas to show how fear and passion shape the political sphere in changing societies and cultures. The use of "sacred values" language also discredits adversaries during

political debate. This may well later befall Australian business lobbies because sacred values arguably matter more than money.

When our government uses sacred values rhetoric, it will incite what researcher Morgan Marietta calls a “valorisation effect,” whereby the political leader using sacred rhetoric is seen as principled and determined. There can be no other way to respond to the breadth of the challenges posed by the China issue.

Jennings says the China threat is not tolerable on a structural and national autonomy basis. White implies that the China threat is tolerable on the basis of trade, income and employment and that we should adapt to its new geopolitical environment.

This debate is not yet settled in the Australian political world. There are many other issues in play. For example, what do Australia’s Southeast Asian friends think? Are Australia’s European allies thinking along the same basic lines? But we will get to use sacred values sooner than we expect. This is because China has not indicated that it intends to cease or decrease its foreign policy activity, which is seen by many states as both malignant and dangerous.

Research on “sacred values” in political negotiations shows that a lack of outcome options, inappropriate negotiating procedures and poor recognition of emotions set in a context where sacred values are in play typically cause poor results. China’s diplomatic rhetoric and methods directed at Australia embody these factors.

Key Questions to Ask

How will a possible future shift in Australia’s foreign policy position, as a result of Chinese pressure, be seen by the public and presented by the political class, especially if there are sacred values involved? Nichole Argo and Jeremy Ginges write about the management of this question in their essay titled, “Beyond Impasse.”

As the China debate continues, we can ask these questions: What are the current declared values we attach to foreign policy regarding

China? Are the values “today’s values” or are they values linked to future goals, thereby allowing their adjustment by political leaders in the course of circumstance? Can we concede to China on one value alone, and would doing so be a tool to protect other values?

Clarification

The Australia/China question has further evolving factors to watch. We need to observe the rhetorical framing and content of any future dialogue with China and assess this not only against our values and interests, but also against the set we assess to be held by our allies in their dealings with Beijing.

How are the indicators of Australia’s sense of self and identity being used or indeed being created by our political and public leaders?

In view of the world economy, our region and our needs, what appears to be being traded-off in caution toward China? Is our strategy on China nationally or sectorally driven? If sectorally, what is the level of reference to sacred values in the promotion of, for example, education exports over responses to China’s territorial and political acquisitiveness in the Pacific?

Making a Choice

So far, Australia does not have a clear path and must choose between one of two directions: trade and money or values. The choice is clarifying.

The big issue for the government is to create a wider and convincing range of responses to China. To do so means consolidating a national position around how hard to pin down Australian values. This matter deserves attention. It requires the absorption by Australia’s various identity communities of a robust set of values and principles that commonly define the country and its citizens’ rights, responsibilities and expectations.

So far, the policy over China has largely been reserved for expert strategists. For a nationally effective response to the threat of an unfavorable fundamental change in circumstances caused by China, sacred values need to be found, clarified

and called on as required to bolster policy resolve.

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Afghans Turn to Crypto Amid Crisis

Kiara Taylor
December 3, 2021

Afghans are increasingly turning to cryptocurrency, but does this trend pose security concerns?

Images from Afghanistan have flooded the news media this year as the US completed its chaotic withdrawal. Crowds of Afghans desperate to escape the Taliban takeover flocked to Kabul airport despite the risk of terrorist attacks. Just a fraction made it onto evacuation flights, and those who remain behind face increasing hardships, including food insecurity, growing violence and social restrictions, with women and minorities particularly affected.

An issue that is causing immediate concern amid the increasingly dictatorial reign of the Taliban is the country's profound financial crisis. Cut off from international financial institutions and with nearly \$10 billion worth of assets frozen, Afghans can't rely on humanitarian assistance as aid organizations try to navigate their way around the newly-imposed sanctions regime.

The local currency, the afghani, is in freefall; down nearly 20% since mid-2021, there doesn't seem to be a stabilization point in the foreseeable future. Jobs have disappeared, and those lucky enough to be employed frequently are months behind in receiving their salaries. The United

Nations fears that the Afghan banking system is on the verge of collapse.

Currency Alternatives

With limited funds remaining in the country, lengthy lines form at the banks and ATMs as Afghans seek access to what little is left — many being left with nothing. In addition to having severely constrained access to cash, purchasing power for the average Afghan is falling quickly, placing them in ever more dire straits.

This perfect financial storm has led many Afghans to look to decentralized finance as an alternative, and cryptocurrency has rapidly moved in to fill the void, just as it has done in other countries facing currency crises. Although crypto is still often highly volatile, Afghans see it as a legitimate source for much-needed cash flow and liquidity. They also increasingly view digital wallets as far more stable than their bank accounts.

Even if cryptocurrencies are not truly decentralized, it is possible that Afghans see cryptocurrency as an escape route from at least one aspect of life under an authoritarian regime. Further adding to crypto's popularity is its ability to promote financial inclusion for people who often have difficulty gaining access to traditional financial services, like women, most of whom weren't allowed or able to open a bank account in Afghanistan.

Greater ease of opening accounts, lower documentation requirements and more affordable fee structures make cryptocurrency a viable and attractive alternative to brick-and-mortar banks and hard currency. Given that crypto financial services are intentionally mobile-friendly, they are much more accessible to the average Afghan than the failing internal banking system.

Connecting Scattered Families

According to the UN, as of last year, nearly 5.9 million Afghans lived abroad, mostly in neighboring Pakistan and Iran. The number has been on the increase since the Taliban takeover as thousands of new refugees seek asylum in

countries across the globe. Migration often leaves families separated and in dire need of resources.

Well before the Taliban administration took power, it was common for Afghans living abroad to help support family members back home. According to the World Bank, in 2020, nearly \$800 million, or roughly 4% of Afghanistan's GDP, streamed into the country in the form of remittances.

As Afghan banks shut down or limited operations and international payment providers like Western Union suspended operations in Afghanistan due to international sanctions, intra-family transfers became increasingly difficult. Moreover, even those banks that remained open typically did not make simple payment systems like Venmo or Zelle available to their customers.

With cryptocurrency-based payment systems, family members have a solution for bypassing the internal financial problems in the country. The result is an acceleration of crypto use, placing Afghanistan among the top 20 countries in the world for adoption rate.

Links Between Crypto and Terrorism

Unfortunately, crypto's ability to remain outside mainstream financial and regulatory structures has also made it attractive to terrorist organizations. A recent report from the US attorney general's Cyber Digital Task Force highlights the connection between cryptocurrency and terrorist organizations: "While public data on terrorist use of cryptocurrency is limited, it is clear that terrorist networks have conducted fundraising operations through Internet-based crowdsource platforms in an attempt to evade stopgaps built into the international banking system."

Well-known terrorist organizations from Hamas to the Islamic State use cryptocurrency to create funding networks and purchase supplies for their operations. It is remarkably simple for these groups to leverage extensive social media networks to back their fundraising drives.

Ongoing efforts to disrupt such activity have seen some limited success. For example, US anti-

terrorism efforts in 2020 led to civil forfeiture cases and the seizure of more than 300 cryptocurrency accounts containing several million dollars.

Can Crypto Help?

As crypto adoption rates skyrocket, concerns are building in the international community that the Taliban itself will turn to cryptocurrency to sidestep sanctions and cloud financial transparency. All of this raises the question of whether crypto adoption in Afghanistan poses a significant security threat for the rest of the world.

The Taliban continues to seek international recognition and has stated that failure to do so will have significant consequences for the world. However, it does not appear that recognition is forthcoming. Indeed, the US is unlikely to ever officially recognize the Taliban government, with the group still on its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Without formal recognition, the Taliban regime will continue to struggle to access its international accounts or generate international funding to help alleviate its economic woes. While cryptocurrency might seem like a reasonably effective option for the Taliban government, the complexity of the economic situation in the country precludes a single solution. With governments across the world beginning to introduce stricter regulations on cryptocurrency markets and actively working to prevent access by terrorist organizations, things may not be quite so simple for Afghanistan's new leaders.

At least one government has explicitly attempted to counteract US sanctions through cryptocurrency in the past. The embattled regime of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela had teamed with Russian banks to back Evrofinance Mosnarbank, the primary supporter of Venezuela's proposed national cryptocurrency, the petro. Maduro claimed that the petro would help Venezuela obtain alternative sources of international financing, despite heavy US sanctions. However,

the scheme has not been successful, a sign that similar attempts by the Taliban may be of limited use.

The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan represents an ongoing security threat far beyond its borders. Stability, both political and financial, is certainly in the best interests of the people of Afghanistan and everyone else, including cryptocurrency markets.

***Kiara Taylor** has worked as a financial analyst for more than a decade. Her career has involved a number of financial firms, including Fifth Third Bank, JPMorgan and Citibank.

How Date Farming Helps Yemenis on Soqatra

Fernando Carvajal
December 6, 2021

Development projects in Soqatra account for a fraction of funds requested by aid agencies every year, but the impact so far is wide and sustainable.

The disconnect between donor-based development aid and local needs grows wider as the crisis deepens in Yemen. Focus remains on prioritizing emergency response to crisis zones, such as the devastating environment in Mareb, rather than the development of stable economic zones. At the micro-level, political stability has proved effective for humanitarian aid and job creation.

As the economy continues to deteriorate in war-torn Yemen, with widespread protests from Lahj to Shebwa and Hadhramawt, there has been little to no hope. Devaluation of the Yemeni rial is a prominent issue driving protests across southern provinces, while the mass displacement of civilians from northern provinces is driven by

violence and unpaid salaries by Houthi authorities. The humanitarian crisis deepens as unemployment grows and donor funds are insufficient to meet demand by international nongovernmental organizations. Opportunities for job creation are minimal, but small initiatives led by local actors, with direct assistance from state donors, have made progress as economic activity contributes to local stability.

In a micro-environment like Soqatra, political stability over the past seven years of conflict has come at a high price. While fighting at a scale similar to the Yemeni mainland has not reached the Soqatra archipelago, the political conflict managed to disrupt life until a degree of order was established over a year ago. Humanitarian assistance has flowed into Soqatra for years following devastating cyclones, but with recent political stability on the island, assistance has shifted to more permanent projects — from hospitals and a power station to the island's first factory.

Small Steps Forward

While industries struggle through a moribund economy, the agriculture sector has received much-needed investment, mostly from aid agencies. Challenges remain, like annual storms, drought, pests and shortage of labor. From Hodeida to Hadhramawt, agriculture has struggled. Date farming is a particular example. This sector has suffered across the mainland, but it is being resurrected on Soqatra.

In August 2020, a group of women led now by Wafa Mohammed was hired to operate the first factory on Soqatra island. Built in the outskirts of Hadibu, with funds provided by the UAE's Khalifa Bin Zayed Foundation, the date factory became the first major project of its kind on the island. The factory can deliver nearly three tons of dates per day from a harvest of around half a million palm trees. According to Mohammed, this factory collects produce from around 500 farmers and has a direct impact on the economy of nearly 2,000 families on the island.

Prior to the construction of the factory, production was only for local consumption. Saeed Othman, a date farmer in Soqatra, said that in the past, “production was very weak because it was just for daily consumption.” The island also lacked other agricultural products and dates were often used as feed for livestock. Production at the factory has also created a competitive environment among local farmers as demand for higher quality increased for export, said Othman.

The factory project instantly provided unexpected opportunities to a group of college graduates, who simply had no hopes beyond the usual “routine at home, cooking, cleaning, doing the other home chores,” said Mohammed. Farmers across the island also highlight the opportunities created by the factory, primarily through an increase in income impacting their daily life. Farmers and factory workers alike enjoy the benefits from a stable environment that allows economic activity outside a war economy that prolongs the armed conflict on the mainland.

Conflict and Aid

As local, regional and international organizations jockey for their share of available funds since the donors’ conference on March 1, the debate continues over alternative approaches. UN organizations requested nearly \$4 billion this year, only to receive pledges for \$1.7 billion, of which an undisclosed amount has been dispersed so far.

Corruption, low-impact and reduced funding have all contributed to wide-ranging debates in recent months over alternatives to the current process. The multilateral approach has failed to deliver sufficient funds to meet demand, while warring parties continue to capture aid and obstruct delivery. In an environment like Soqatra, isolated from the armed conflict on the Yemeni mainland, direct delivery of aid by a state actor has proved efficient, delivering long-term impact on the ground.

The date factory project came as the political conflict in Soqatra settled. Under the current circumstances, the situation in Soqatra could

offer an alternative. For example, in contrast to affected areas in Hadhramawt or Mahra, soon after Cyclone Chapala struck the Soqatra in 2015 and following Cyclone Makunu in 2018, the United Arab Emirates delivered life-saving assistance directly to the people on the island. During the length of the conflict, the UAE has delivered over \$110 million in aid to the Soqatra archipelago. The aid has targeted areas in public and health services, transport and storage, fishing sector, construction, public education, energy and potable water.

Aid provided over the years also targeted farmers, who not only benefit from the funds provided for their crops, but also from projects like the date factory. The factory, for example, has provided an outlet for farmers to export goods rather than relying on local consumption alone. The aid provided has allowed the farmers to expand and stabilize harvests, improve the quality of products and increase revenue. In addition, the power plant in Hadibu, with a capacity of 2.2 megawatts, provides facilities like the date factory with a sustainable power supply that contributes to local economic security. The UAE also provided the Qalansiya area with 800 kilowatts. Other projects include a distribution network for more than 30 sites and solar-powered street lighting.

Development projects in Soqatra account for a fraction of funds requested by aid agencies every year, but the impact so far is wide and sustainable. Other environments could emulate the process in Soqatra, but deeply rooted political conflicts remain an obstacle. Aden, the interim capital, continues to suffer from a lack of sustainable power source, unemployment is high despite efforts by Aden authorities and the political conflict easily escalates to armed clashes. On the mainland, it is more difficult, but opportunities abound across southern provinces.

***Fernando Carvajal** served on the UN Security Council Panel of Experts of Yemen.

Iran's Ethnic Minorities Face Double Discrimination

Rahim Hamid
December 6, 2021

Ethnic minorities in Iran endure double discrimination — from the ruling regime and from the human rights community.

Last month, human rights organizations and many national legislatures commemorated the anniversary of the November 2019 protests in Iran and the crackdown that followed. The regime's response included the murder of more than 130 Ahwazi Arabs.

Iran's ethnic minorities endure double discrimination — from the ruling regime and from the Iranian human rights community. While the regime and human rights organizations both at home and abroad disagree on many issues, they share a disdain for Iran's ethnic minorities, unwilling to see them gain national rights. Thus, the government and its mainstream opposition share a common cause that strengthens the regime's ability to stay in power and prevent democracy from taking root in Iran.

Iran's ethnic minorities undergo extreme discrimination beyond the restrictions imposed on all Iranians. They are not allowed to operate schools in their native language, are forced to use Persian in all formal settings, and are regularly subjected to mockery and ridicule in the official media and school textbooks. Ahwazi Arabs face state-sponsored suppression of any expression of their ethnic identity and culture as well as open anti-Arab racism.

Ahwazi Arabs, who number around 8 million, suffer from water shortages, environmental degradation, discrimination in employment, and high rates of poverty despite being the majority population in the oil and gas-rich Khuzestan province. The Persian ruling class reaps the profits from these abundant natural resources

while the local Ahwazi people suffer the health implications and pollution from their production.

Shared Prejudice

Despite being formally committed to advancing democracy, Iranian human rights organizations share the regime's prejudices and racism. These organizations rarely report on the distinct discrimination against Iran's ethnic minorities, the specific goals of Ahwazi Arab protests or the political prisoners who have campaigned for the rights of ethnic minorities.

For instance, when listing the names of activists who have been abducted from their Western exiles by Iranian operatives, they neglect to mention Habib Chaab, an Ahwazi activist and Swedish citizen kidnapped by the regime in Istanbul. Chaab is being held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison and is in imminent danger of execution.

I personally have experienced this double discrimination. As an Ahwazi Arab human rights activist, I was jailed and tortured almost to death for supporting the right of Ahwazi children in Iran to learn their native language, Arabic. I was lucky to escape and settle in the US in 2015. My fellow activists Hashem Shabani and Hadi Rashedi were not so lucky — they were executed in 2014. The physical scars from that torture, which run from my sternum to my groin, will never leave me. Even after multiple operations, I will be on medication for the rest of my life.

Yet despite all the available evidence, I was shocked to discover that the Persian-dominated human rights organizations in the US opposed recognizing the rights of the Ahwazis and other minorities, co-opted our struggles and blocked reporting on our plight.

Social Media Wars

With Iran's regime imposing a total media blackout on the Ahwazi issue, social media remains the only option for activists to raise awareness. But even here activists face constant abuse and threats not only from the regime, which deploys trolls and bots to mass-report

activists' accounts in an effort to shut them down, but also from Farsi-speaking Iranian dissidents. At one point, I had three Twitter bans in under 20 days.

Due to this media war, most people in the West are not aware of Iran's ethnic diversity, where Turkish, Ahwazi Arabs, Balochi, Kurdish and Caspian minorities account for nearly 40% of Iran's population. Most Iranian human rights organizations in exile focus on abuses against Persian dissidents while barely giving any coverage to the systemic racism against the ethnic minorities.

When our young men die for their rights in the streets of Ahwaz, the Persian-dominated groups report on these protests as anti-regime activity, intentionally disregarding the ethnic factor. This was the case in the widespread November 2019 protests and the recent wave of demonstrations this July, which were led by Ahwazi youth. Such co-opting of our activism adds insult to the injury of the brave sacrifices made by our young people.

Refused Recognition

The country's Persian opposition is reluctant to recognize that Iran is a fundamentally diverse country and that its people have both a national identity and local sovereign claims. These Persian opposition groups have succumbed to the idea that providing support to the Ahwazi cause and recognizing its ethnic demands is a prelude to secessionism. Instead, they continue to turn a blind eye to the demands of ethnic minorities in their own regions in order to promote one nation, one centralized rule, one culture and one language — all Persian.

With this denial by Persian opposition groups both at home and in exile, and with the regime continuing its brutally repressive, restrictive and racist rule, the outcome of subjugating the country's ethnic minorities and disregarding their rights is predictable. The civil war that ravaged

former Yugoslavia serves as a terrible warning of how states can fracture along ethnic lines.

To avert such a catastrophe, Iran must abandon its antiquated supremacist mindset and acknowledge its non-Persian minorities as equal stakeholders and partners who form a power base in their own right. The creation of a federalized democratic system would defuse tensions and mean the possibility of a fair, genuinely progressive, modern state.

Even without its regressive theocratic foundation, the current supremacist system in Iran is an inadequate and outdated relic reflecting a mindset based on 19th-century colonialism. In reality, the Iranian state is a patchwork of ethnicities, faiths and doctrines. As a result, Iran can choose between creating a fair, stable, democratic and progressive 21st-century state — which reflects this vibrant and diverse melting pot where each group can elect its representatives to share in an equal, fair and federalized system — and collapsing into factionalism and civil war.

This double oppression to which Ahwazis and other ethnic minorities are subjected and the refusal of the Persian Iranian opposition in exile to even acknowledge both the regime's or its own deep-seated antagonism toward Ahwazis and other ethnic minorities ultimately only benefits the regime, which can easily thwart a splintered opposition. In the end, we can only dismantle oppression in Iran — and globally — through unity and mutual respect.

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Our Green Future: Is It All About the Money?

Oliver Matikainen
December 8, 2021

It is possible to create better lives in an economy that isn't growing — as long as we plan for it.

Take a look at the suited people at COP26. Some look inquisitively around as the bill is slipped across the table to them. Others pull out the inside of their empty pockets and shrug their shoulders. Some recall past promises and claim they are still owed money. Others point to someone else's swelling accounts and insist they have paid more than their fair share.

Money, money, money. Why is it always about money?

Finance has always been a key issue at the UN's Conferences of the Parties, and a sticky one at that. In this sense, COP26, held in Glasgow, Scotland, in November, was no different. Climate finance is key because it cuts across all other issues. It is required for mitigation efforts such as expanding renewable energy production; for adaptation efforts such as introducing early warning systems and constructing flood barriers; and, some suggest, it is now also required to pay for the loss and damage caused by climate change, such as destroyed infrastructure and soil rendered infertile by floods or drought.

Take a Breath

One of the big things to come out of COP26 was the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero. GFANZ — also referred to as the Carney initiative, after its chair, the former head of the Bank of England Mark Carney — that aims to align private capital with science-based targets to finance the investment in a net-zero economy. Representing over 450 major financial institutions, GFANZ claims to mobilize a

staggering \$130 trillion toward a net-zero future. This is an unbelievable number, meaning that GFANZ can make a real difference if it succeeds in changing the direction of such vast monetary flows.

Kelly Clark, director of finance and capital market transformation at The Laudes Foundation, could not hide her excitement: "The entire financial system has, in theory, accepted that there is a higher purpose for them ... I think we should take a little breath here and celebrate this amazing, amazing new world that we are in."

Not everyone shares Clark's optimism. Concerns have been raised over the fact that the \$130-trillion figure is misleading because it contains double accounting, does not represent new, allocatable money, and that the initiative leaves open significant loopholes for greenwashing while overestimating the role of private finance.

Nigel Topping, the UK's high-level climate action champion at COP26 and one of the leaders of the GFANZ initiative, explained that "the 130 [trillion US dollars] is real in the sense that it is a massive signal. It is not real in the sense that if you add it up, you get 130 because there's overlap, and it is not real in the sense that it is not available to be spent today."

If we follow Clark's advice and take a little breath, we will hear our high school physics teacher reminding us that the climate does not respond to signals but only to actual emission reductions. If we venture further and take a second breath, we can recall that the history of COP is full of good intentions and signaling that never translated into actual emission reductions. A third deep breath allows us to remember that our previous experiments with big market-based carbon-offset schemes were largely unsuccessful, such as the Clean Development Mechanism that had "fundamental flaws in terms of overall environmental integrity."

While GFANZ is surely an interesting initiative to follow because of its potential to move a lot of money in the right direction while giving civil society a specific framework within

which it can hold the companies who commit to the scheme accountable, Clark's celebration of an "amazing, amazing new world" is much too premature.

Climate Finance

Some also celebrated at COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, when the so-called developed nations promised to mobilize \$100 billion annually to the so-called developing nations by 2020 and through 2025 to finance both climate mitigation and adaptation measures.

COP26 started with the acknowledgment of the failure by the developed countries to fulfill this promise in time. Now not expected to be delivered until 2023, this tested the trust between wealthier and poorer nations. However, there is now an agreement to come up with new and larger finance goals to go into effect after 2025 and to dedicate a team of technical experts and ministers to see these through. A post-2025 climate finance goal, with a floor of \$100 billion annually, is expected to be set by 2024.

Even though it is obviously problematic that wealthier nations failed to mobilize the \$100 billion they promised by 2020, an arguably bigger issue than the exact quantity of climate finance is the quality of it. In 2020, Oxfam assessed that around 80% of public climate finance is provided in the form of loans and other non-grant instruments, and that climate-specific net assistance may be five times lower than reported by developed nations. This is largely because developed countries often count the full amount of loans at face value and classify funding for projects that have limited or no relevance to environmental issues as climate finance.

This means that a lot of the climate finance counted in the \$100-billion goal is de facto inaccessible to those who need it. Janine Felson, the lead on finance for the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), told Carbon Brief that the credibility of the Paris Agreement relies on climate finance being scaled up and being predictable, accessible and grants-based.

One reason for these transparency issues is that there currently is no multilaterally agreed definition of climate finance. While developing countries have called for a clear designation of the term in order to improve transparency, the US and the EU strongly opposed the idea.

The suggestion by AOSIS to establish a Glasgow Loss and Damage Facility to provide the short-term finance required to deal with the effects of climate change was also met with resistance. The facility would be in addition to the \$100-billion promise, which is earmarked for mitigation and adaptation. Although the idea was supported by G77 + China, strong opposition from the EU, the US and the UK, historically the largest global emitters, meant that the mechanism was not established.

Follow the Money

There is no doubt that developed countries have an obligation to deliver on the climate finance promises they have made. Not least because they have agreed to implement the Paris accords in a way that reflects equity and to carry the larger share of the burden by acting in accordance with the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities."

If we consider that developed nations both have a historical responsibility for causing climate change as well as current per capita emissions that far exceed the global carbon budget for 2°C, let alone 1.5°C, they have a second and, at least as important, obligation to bring their own emissions down to levels that reflect an equitable distribution of the remaining carbon budget.

There is a strong coupling between GDP growth and greenhouse gas emissions. Regardless of how much climate finance the developed nations had managed to mobilize by 2020, how much it will mobilize by 2025 and how much they agree to mobilize after 2025, this is an issue we will have to face. We can do this with a sense of optimism and excitement because it is, indeed, possible to create better lives in an economy that is not growing — as long as we plan for it.

There are at least two issues with seeing GDP growth as a desirable end in itself.

First, GDP is a general measure of economic activity that doesn't distinguish between different types or qualities of that activity. Weapons production, oil spill clean-ups and forest clearing, for example, all increase GDP. Simon Kuznets, the inventor of the GDP measure, warned us already in the 1930s that GDP should not be used as an indicator of social progress or as a measure of human welfare as the only thing it measures is economic activity, both good and bad.

Second, if the global economy grows 2.5% per year, it will double by 2050. It is difficult enough to decarbonize all economic activity at current levels; decarbonizing an economy twice the size is going to make it a hell of a lot more difficult.

Green Decoupling

This is why we get ideas like green growth that rely on the notion of absolute decoupling. The key point is that we can keep growing the economy in a sustainable way because we can decouple economic output from the environmental impacts in a way that is global, permanent, equitable and rapid. There is, however, no empirical indications that this is happening or is even possible within any meaningful timeframe, making green growth a very risky strategy.

Part of the problem is our reliance on speculative negative emission technologies. NETs are politically useful to artificially inflate the size of our current carbon budgets because we assume that future generations can remove that carbon again. However, since these technologies only have "limited realistic potential" to remove carbon from the atmosphere, we are kicking the problems down the line to future generations and to other parts of the world that are going to suffer from climate change.

It is "an unjust and high-stakes gamble" by the developed nations — who have high levels of income and exceedingly high emissions per capita — to place all bets on a green growth

strategy of NETs-dependent net-zero targets placed in a comfortably distant future.

Instead, developed nations ought to prepare for a post-growth world by reducing their dependence on economic growth and exploring more sufficiency-oriented strategies that respect equitable allocations of the remaining carbon budget.

Even if developed nations answer the climate finance question by, for example, mobilizing the \$100 billion they promised in 2009, the economic questions remain. Should we rely so much on NETs and the idea of green growth? Can we live good lives in the wealthy parts of the world without growing the economy further? If so, how? These questions, the last one in particular, are questions we need to pursue much more seriously.

From this perspective, we can answer our initial rhetorical question by saying that it is not all just about money. It is also about our conceptions of what we call "the economy" and the ideological context it is situated within. Climate finance is not just a matter of cold cash and tangible tables with neat numbers; it is about sticky issues of intergenerational justice, about catering to very different and often conflicting interests, and about the ideological context that shapes the way we understand and approach our common problems and their possible solutions.

If we continue to rely blindly on green growth, keep our fingers crossed that absolute decoupling will, against all odds, happen at the required scale, and continue the intergenerational buck-passing by shunning the difficult questions, the chances of staying below 2°C, let alone 1.5°C, are just about net zero.

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Can Self-Help Diplomacy Lower Political Heat in the Middle East?

Gary Grappo
December 13, 2021

In the Gulf, governments are starting to tackle their own problems — and this time without the directing influence or involvement of the United States.

Since the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the United States has been the unchallenged dominant power in the Middle East and North Africa. As such, it often saw its role, for better or worse, as fixing the region's many problems.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq and Saddam Hussein, Iran, high oil prices, Gulf security, Western Sahara, menacing non-state organizations, counterterrorism, human rights, democracy, autocratic leaders, failed states — whatever the concern or challenge, the Americans came to view them as priority issues and their responsibility. Moreover, many regional states and even their citizens often saw America's involvement as a necessity, sometimes even an obligation to tamp down the region's frenzied political climate.

But times have changed. Three recent presidents — Barack Obama, Donald Trump and now Joe Biden — have made efforts to distance the US from its endless, exasperating entanglements in the Middle East. Those efforts had distracted the United States from its principal challenges in the world — China and Russia — and sapped it of its military, economic and political might and influence. America received very little in return on its investment. Furthermore, years of US involvement in the region had also fractured the American public's support for the more critically important role it must play in anchoring the international order.

Enter the Others

Downgrading America's involvement in the Middle East isn't necessarily a bad thing. For decades, many in the Middle East and in the US had argued that the region's problems must be tackled by the governments and people of the region. Outsiders can play a supporting role, but the tough decisions can only be made by the governments themselves. That may now be happening.

But handing off the task of addressing the region's manifold challenges got off to a poor start. Neither the US, nor the international community, nor the states of the Middle East seemed able to solve the conundrum of the region's three failed states.

Then, starting around 2015, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman started ordering others around — imposing a blockade on Qatar, detaining the Lebanese prime minister, jailing courageous dissidents and largely harmless millionaires, ordering a hit job on journalist Jamal Khashoggi and jumping into the Yemeni Civil War. And it all went bad, very bad in fact. Additionally, it provoked other would-be movers and shakers to get in the act, including the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, China, Russia and even Israel. And not always with good intent or positive results.

After years of misdirection, however, governments now seem to be taking a more sober and responsible approach that could prove genuinely beneficial for the region. For starters, they have embarked on a simple approach: dialog. They are talking about their problems, especially those between and among one another. Dialog leads to understanding, which can lead to shared interests. Ultimately, to be effective, dialog must lead to compromise. That involves the inevitable give-and-take that allows nations, especially those close to one another, to live and thrive in peace and prosperity.

It's a Start

One of the most encouraging initiatives may be the most unexpected: dialog between the Middle

East's two major powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and hosted by perhaps the most unlikely state, Iraq, unquestionably the region's most conflict-ridden for decades.

The issues are many between these two historic rivals, separated by a narrow gulf on whose name neither seems able to agree. But the larger gulf lies in their differing views of the other, their competing religious sects — the Saudi uber-conservative Wahhabi Sunni Islam vs. Iran's clerically-led, conservative Shia Islam — perceptions of the other's role and intentions in the region, their wealth, and relations with and ties to the broader international community, almost non-existent in the case of Iran.

The Yemen War

One especially neuralgic issue for both is their respective roles in the Yemen War. It is now abundantly clear that the Saudis' overwhelming military power, bolstered by the US and some European nations, cannot defeat the Houthi rebels. Nor can it end either the war or even its costly intervention in it. The Saudis need help. Enter the Iranians, who have been supporting the Shia-affiliated Zaydi Houthis in this war since 2013. With ideology and much-needed weapons and funding, though much less than what Saudi Arabia has expended, the Iranians have empowered the rebels to the point where they are now an established power in a future Yemen, whether unified or bifurcated.

So, the two regional powers are talking it out. The Saudis want out of the war, but they also want reliable security along their southwestern border. The Iranians want a Shia power on the Arabian Peninsula, but preferably one at peace.

Yemen may be the most immediate challenge for the two states. But there are others. More broadly, Saudi Arabia and Iran need to reach a modus vivendi in the region. On-again, off-again formal relations, menacing behavior toward each other's oil and shipping interests, and verbal assaults do little more than increase the temperature in a region plagued by heat, literally and figuratively.

Brothers Reconcile?

Saudi Arabia has also launched a campaign to repair the frayed relations among its Arab neighbors. Last week, Mohammed bin Salman week began a PR campaign to demonstrate a new and improved political environment. In a swing through the neighboring Gulf states of Oman, the UAE, Bahrain and, most importantly, Qatar, he seems to be trying to rebuild what once had been the region's preeminent multilateral organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Mohammed bin Salman single-handedly fractured the Gulf alliance when he imposed his 2017 blockade on Qatar, joined by the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. It backfired. Qatar remained in the good graces of the US, drew the political and military support of peripheral power Turkey and earned the support of Iran. Consider it the young prince's on-the-job training in global as well as regional politics. He is now devoting particular attention to Doha in the hope of what yet we aren't quite certain. But this repair work and goodwill tour cannot help but create progress.

And not to be outdone, the Gulf's other power, the UAE, has embarked on its own diplomatic repair mission. Like the Saudis, the Emiratis want to lower the temperature in the Gulf, and their position as the region's prime economic entrepôt gives them special heft. The UAE's ties to the US, still the unquestioned but now quiescent power in the Gulf, also lend special weight.

Could It All Be for Naught?

Looming over all of these laudable efforts, however, is Iranian behavior in the region. All eyes are now on the recently restarted talks over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna, Austria. Following a near-six-month hiatus at Iran's request, the P5+1 group and Iran renewed negotiations to reinstate the JCPOA — aka the Iran nuclear deal.

But it is the critical non-dialog between the US and Iran — the two countries are still not meeting face-to-face but rather communicating

through the intermediation of the other P5+1 countries — that bears the most serious watching. Unless they can agree on a way forward that puts Iran’s nuclear weapons potential well into the very distant future while also lifting America’s onerous and inescapably crippling sanctions on the Islamic Republic, the heat in the Middle East will become white hot.

Judging from the US State Department’s uncharacteristically downcast semi-official readout of the first round of the negotiation restart, there is cause for concern. Iran’s counterproductive, albeit predictable, maximalist opening gambit soured the P5+1, even China and Russia. Negotiators met again last week. Unless there is a greater attitude toward compromise, however, pessimism will win out. Positions will harden. And more extreme (and dangerous) measures will become viable.

President Biden has reiterated the US pledge that Iran will not get nuclear weapons. But neither he nor his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, will state what the consequences of failed talks might be.

Israel, however, is not so coy. Recent Israeli statements confirm that the military option is very much in play. As if to put an even finer point on the matter, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Jerusalem late last week for meetings with his Israeli counterpart, Defense Minister Benny Gantz. Both men are retired top generals of their respective armed forces and will have discussed military and other options.

Military action would be an unspeakable disaster for the Middle East. But so would a nuclear-armed or even nuclear-capable Iran. Even an approach that stops short of armed conflict will impose extraordinary hardship on the region, certainly prompting other states to consider acquiring nuclear weapons and further isolate Iran.

It would be unfair to place the entirety of the burden for the success of these talks on Tehran. However, unless Iran understands the futility of its mindless pursuit of nuclear weapons, no effort

at fostering understanding elsewhere can temper the region’s mercury-popping political heat.

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Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Complicated Puzzle

Davor Džalto
December 14, 2021

Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing similar problems that former Yugoslavia failed to resolve.

On December 10, the parliament of the Republic of Srpska, one of the constitutive entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, adopted a Declaration on Constitutional Principles that states that the legislation imposed by the high representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be considered unconstitutional since the required procedure was not followed. The parliament also adopted conclusions by which it withdraws the formerly given consent to delegate some of Republic of Srpska’s authority to the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The same conclusions also require the government to propose adequate legislation within six months, which would enable normal functioning in view of the transfer of authority and competencies, formerly given to the federal level, back to the Republic of Srpska. The opposition parties criticized this move as a risky one, which can potentially bring more harm than good.

Postwar Design

This news provoked outrage in the centers of Western political power as well as in many mainstream Western media. The European Union and the governments of the US, UK, Germany and France have condemned these conclusions, calling for the respect of the Bosnian state institutions and the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war in the former Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and established the state in its postwar design.

This may seem a somewhat paradoxical situation given that the Western governments that criticize the leadership of the Republic of Srpska affirm the Dayton Accords, while the leadership in Banja Luka and especially Milorad Dodik — the Serb member of the collective presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, by far the strongest political figure in the Republic of Srpska — likewise express their unreserved support Dayton. Dodik has repeatedly claimed that the only way for Bosnia and Herzegovina to continue to exist as a state is the return to the Dayton Agreement and stick to all its articles.

The problem, however, is not simply a formal one. It is deeply political. The current crisis was triggered by the former high representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, who outlawed the denial of the Srebrenica massacre as well as any questioning of the qualification of this crime as genocide.

This was the last straw that broke the camel's back, as it were, leading the leaders of the Bosnian Serbs immediately to declare that if this legislation — perceived as anti-Serb — is not annulled, they would take steps toward protecting Bosnian Serbs and their entity from illegitimate and oppressive measures coming from the Office of the High Representative. The high representative is best described as the foreign governor of Bosnia and Herzegovina — acting, in reality, as an exponent of the most influential Western governments — with enormous powers and no democratic legitimacy.

The Dayton Agreement may have put an end to the war back in 1995, but it created a state

which, in one sense, was stillborn. The Bosnian–Herzegovinian Serbs obtained the Republic of Srpska, with which they have primarily identified ever since. Bosnian–Herzegovinian Croats, as the third major ethnic/national community in Bosnia and Herzegovina — although much smaller than the Muslim/Bosniak and Serb ethnic/national groups — ended up without their own entity within the newly established Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Instead, they were included into the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as the other constitutive part of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to the Republic of Srpska. This is what is still provoking dissatisfaction among many Bosnian Croats and the reason why many, if not the majority of them, perceive Croatia, not Bosnia and Herzegovina, as their “home” country.

Small Yugoslavia

This means that only among Bosnian Muslims/Bosniaks one can find an overwhelming commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this political dynamic lies the reason why many Bosnian Muslim/Bosniak politicians advocate for a unitary state — and the eventual dissolution of the Republic of Srpska by taking away its key competencies — and for the abandoning of any ethnic/national principles in the election of political representatives under the pretext that this is in accordance with liberal-democratic principles.

However, this is precisely what is perceived as a threat among many Bosnian Serbs and Croats, since the Muslim/Bosniak ethnic group is the largest one, which means that in practice it would be able to impose its will unto the other two major ethnicities and the institutions that were initially designed to prevent such discrimination.

This means that the “small Yugoslavia,” as Bosnia and Herzegovina used to be called because of its diverse religious and ethnic landscape reminiscent of Yugoslavia as a whole, is facing similar problems that former (big) Yugoslavia failed to resolve. The position of

Muslims/Bosniaks (and their leadership) in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be seen in parallel to the position of Serbs in Yugoslavia.

As the Serbs were the biggest ethnic group present in significant numbers in most Yugoslav republics, the overwhelming majority of Serbs were in support of Yugoslavia as a state. This, however, was perceived by many other ethnic communities as potential oppressiveness. The Serbs thus ended up being the only ones trying to save Yugoslavia from dissolution.

Similarly, Muslims/Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina, being the biggest ethnic/national community, perceive Bosnia and Herzegovina as their country and are trying to centralize and preserve it at all costs, even though this is perceived as oppression by the members of other ethnicities. For many Bosnian Serbs, the survival of Bosnia and Herzegovina is also a question of principle. They often posit the question that if former Yugoslavia could collapse and new states be established from its constitutive parts, why can't the same happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Here we come to another major piece of the complicated Bosnian puzzle: the international factor. It was the Western governments — and primarily the US — under whose auspices postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina was created, with its highly inefficient structures and with the Office of the High Representative who, over time, obtained pharaonic powers. Naturally, the governments of the countries that have sponsored this arrangement are unwilling to admit that the whole experiment was a tremendous failure and that their interventions have actively prevented the development of democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition, Bosnia and Herzegovina, just as the Balkans as a whole, is also the terrain for bigger games and powerplay between the US-led alliance (which, in reality, is much less coherent than it is claimed), Russia and Turkey. Western politicians and the media are trying to explain the situation to the Western audience by blaming the local politicians, especially the Bosnian Serb

leadership, as pro-Russian. What they are selling to their citizens is the story that everything will be fine as soon as the old politicians go and new ones, loyal to the West, take over.

However, blaming everything on corrupt and irresponsible political elites will not resolve the structural problems that are, to a large extent, created by generous Western support. Yes, political elites — and not only in the Balkans — tend to be corrupt, irresponsible and ready to exploit people's misery and nationalistic sentiments to their own advantage. This is, however, only one dimension to the complex story that tends to be grossly oversimplified in the mainstream Western media. The real problems are deeper, and the policies of influential Western governments are still only adding fuel to the fire.

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Amid the Pandemic, Eating Disorders Are on the Rise

Jennifer Wider
December 15, 2021

Eating disorders diagnoses and hospitalizations are up significantly as a result of the pandemic.

As the COVID-19 pandemic wreaks havoc across the globe, it leaves a multitude of long-lasting consequences in its wake. Among them, a host of mental health issues including an uptick in depression, anxiety and stress-related disorders. One of the less frequently discussed, however, is eating disorders.

A new study published by JAMA Network reveals that the number of hospitalizations for

eating disorders including anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorders, among others, increased dramatically during the pandemic. According to Dr. Kelly Allison, one of the researchers on the study and the director of the Center for Weight and Eating Disorders at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, the results “suggest that disordered eating became more severe in disorders of extreme restriction, as well as in those with loss of control eating.” What’s even more troubling is that the average age of the patients has decreased over time.

Eating disorders are mental health conditions typified by significant and persistent disturbances in eating behaviors, accompanied by distressing emotions. People who suffer from eating disorders often display a preoccupation with body weight and food intake. These disorders can affect people of all ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as genders, although they are more common in girls and women. People are particularly vulnerable during the adolescence and teen years and are most often diagnosed between the ages of 12 and 35.

There are many reasons why the COVID-19 pandemic created a breeding ground for eating disorders. For many people, eating habits changed significantly. Shopping at a grocery store was already incredibly stressful for the general population; for people with disordered eating behavioral patterns, it was most likely worse.

Those who restrict food intake may have limited their shopping excursions or curtailed their purchases; for those who binged, they may have the added temptation of bulk purchases of processed foods. “They were then in close proximity to that food all day while working or schooling from home, so the temptation to eat those foods was likely increased during this time,” says Allison.

Obesity is often cited as a risk factor for severe COVID disease and poor outcomes even in younger people. This news may have triggered disordered eating patterns in vulnerable people. Excess weight is often a modifiable risk factor

and could have been the impetus for extreme dieting. “I have been overweight for a long time, hearing that extra pounds could land me on a ventilator in the hospital was enough for me to diet,” says Shaunda F., a 27-year-old mom from New York state. “I lost more than 12 pounds in two months at the beginning of the pandemic fearing for my life. I basically starved myself.”

There are other considerations with regard to an increase in the diagnosis of eating disorders and subsequent hospitalizations. Family members were able to pick up on pathological behaviors because they were together more frequently than normal. According to Allison, “Middle school, high school and college-aged individuals were home all day, and their eating behaviors and weight changes were more evident.” Under normal circumstances, these behaviors may have gone unnoticed but were more difficult to hide during the pandemic.

Access to care was likely another factor responsible for the uptick in hospitalizations for eating disorders. “In the beginning of the pandemic, access was limited as providers were transitioning to virtual outpatient care,” says Allison. “This could have led to a time delay that progressed the severity of symptoms to a state where hospitalization was needed.”

It is imperative that parents and loved ones have this issue on their radar screen, as treating disordered eating patterns often requires clinical intervention. Keeping an eye out for warning signs can be life-saving. “If someone you care about starts avoiding eating with family and friends, along with noticing changes in weight (sudden increases or decreases), these should be considered concerning,” Allison points out. Using a bathroom directly after a meal could be a red flag for vomiting or laxative use. Other warning signs include hoarding food, a preoccupation with body weight, food or calories, wearing baggy clothes to hide weight loss, frequent checking in the mirror, skipping meals, etc.

Regardless of the reason, the pandemic has driven a rise in eating disorders and, like with

COVID-19, a lot depends on everyone doing their bit to make sure those at risk are protected.

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Making Sense of Vladimir Putin's Long Game

Atul Singh & Glenn Carle
December 24, 2021

Channeling Russian resentment, Tsarist ideas and Orthodox identity, the Russian president challenges the US-led West to make Russia great again.

On November 21, Bloomberg reported that US intelligence had shared Russian plans for a potential invasion of Ukraine with its NATO allies. Estimates indicated about 100,000 soldiers in around 100 battalion tactical groups were deployed on the Ukrainian border. Since then, this troop buildup has continued with “tanks, artillery, armoured units, drones, [and] electronic warfare systems” poised on Ukraine's border.

Reports indicate that Moscow has called up tens of thousands of reservists, the first time since the end of the Cold War over 40 years ago. They could secure territory that regular troops capture. Moscow already has a blueprint to follow. In 2014, Russian troops took over Crimea. This time, they could gobble up significant territory in Eastern Ukraine. As with the Crimea, Russia claims that Ukraine is historically and culturally an integral part of Russia

The US Response

In response to this threat, US President Joe Biden has warned Russian President Vladimir Putin of “severe consequences.” for any aggression.

Though Biden has ruled out putting American troops on the ground, the US president has promised Putin “economic consequences like [he has] never seen.” Almost simultaneously, the foreign ministers of the G-7 group of the world's seven most powerful economies warned Russia of “massive consequences and severe cost” if Russia were to invade Ukraine.

Biden has continued to ratchet up his threats of severe countermeasures. On 19 December, influential columnist David Ignatius wrote that “a knowledgeable official” revealed US plans to arm future Ukrainian “insurgents” with advanced weaponry should Moscow invade. The official mentioned that “the CIA and other key agencies, [have] been studying how insurgencies were organized against the Soviets in Afghanistan and Russian-backed forces in Syria — and also against the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.” If Putin invades Ukraine, the Biden administration wants “to make it hurt.”

Even as Biden has been warning Putin, on the other side of the Eurasian landmass 7,500 kilometers to the east, Moscow and Beijing have been romancing one another, in a straightforward diplomatic counterbalance to the US and NATO. In October, China and Russia conducted a joint naval exercise that set alarm bells ringing in many international capitals. A joint Russian-Chinese flotilla of 10 warships sailed through the Tsugaru Strait that separates the Japanese islands of Honshu and Hokkaido. This flotilla headed down Japan's eastern coast and then back toward China through the Osumi Strait north of the southern Japanese island of Kyushu.

This joint naval exercise is significant. For the first time a Russian-Chinese flotilla passed through the strait, in what was likely a countermove to heightened naval activity by the rejuvenated “Quad” alliance that includes India, Japan, Australia and the US. The flotilla's circumnavigation of Japan's main island of Honshu was clearly intended to threaten Tokyo and send a signal to Washington. What is going on?

Russian Resentment

Over the years, both authors have spoken to and interacted with numerous Russians in intelligence, defense and diplomatic circles. One theme repeatedly crops up: The US and the West treated Russia imperiously and dismissively after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Most of our Russian interlocutors have believed that the US has long sought to weaken, even destroy, Russia, and interpret almost every US action and statement as pieces of a long term, coherent plan to undermine Russia and the government of Vladimir Putin.

Dangerously, even seasoned diplomats and intelligence officers tend to ascribe a strategic coherence and hostility to rival states, when the rival states in fact almost always have competing and contradictory power centers, mutually incompatible objectives, and struggle to pursue a sustained and coherent policy. Accurate or not, the Russians have tended to view their American rival as strategically competent, and malevolent. As per this narrative, the US first cajoled the new Russia to commit samoubiystvo — suicide. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the US funded a project by Harvard economists to reform the Russian economy. In the memorable words of Janine Fedel, neophyte reformers enabled “the Harvard boys [to] do Russia,” causing the misappropriation of Western aid and the plunder of Russian wealth. Till date, Boris Fyodorov, Anatoly Chubais and Yegor Gaidar remain hated names in Russia. Economist Jeffrey Sachs, then a high-flying 38-year-old who arrived in Moscow to transform the Russian economy, evokes similar sentiments.

With the zeal of a Cold War free market missionary, Sachs advocated that Russia implement “shock therapy.” Sachs took the view that shock therapy would work even in societies where there was “no collective memory of free markets or history of evenhanded rules of contract law and property rights.” In those heady days, Sachs was regarded as the slayer of hyperinflation, and the savior of the Bolivian and the Polish economies. He envisaged “an

industrial comeback” in Russia “worthy of postwar Japan.” At that time, Russian industrial exports were around \$5 billion and Sachs predicted they would “reach \$50 billion by the turn of the century.”

Today, it is easy to conclude that Sachs suffered from hubris. Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz has been damning in his critique of Sachs’s shock therapy. For Stiglitz, the key point is that privatizing an economy before establishing a functioning legal and juridical system inevitably leads to overwhelming corruption and concentration of wealth; in other words, to a thug’s kleptocracy.

Many US officials foresaw this danger at the time, and even as Sachs was pushing for total and immediate privatization of the entire Russian economy, the US government was trying to foster the establishment in post-Soviet Russia of the rule of law, the establishment of private property and the regulatory and legal regime required to avoid corruption, abuse, and excessive concentration of wealth. In particular, American officials were working to prevent the de facto theft of the state’s assets, capital and natural resources. One of the authors knows this first hand, having worked on this very issue.

Sachs, however, “succeeded,” and this now infamous privatization led to asset stripping, massive impoverishment and runaway inflation, averaging 204.91% in 1995. Even as price rises made it impossible to pay for goods, Russia’s annual per capita income cratered, dropping over 50% in nine years, from \$3,440 to \$1,710. The result of Sach’s policy was that the Russian economy foundered, poverty soared and life expectancy sank. Sachs’s recommendations brought, as Stiglitz stingingly put it, “Gucci bags, Mercedes, the fruits of capitalism to a few,” and misery and humiliation to 148 million Russians.

This economic catastrophe tore apart Russia’s social fabric and the legitimacy of Russia’s nascent post-Communist democracy. Contrary to a common Russian belief, the US did not seek to destroy Russia, but to help it succeed in its transformation into a successful, democratic

market economy. However, the view among many Russian officials is that Sachs was implementing a longstanding strategic plan by the US to destroy Russia as a functioning power. Tragically, this American-induced calamity became Russia's grim reality for a dismal decade.

One of the authors still remembers a protracted, boozy conversation with a former Russian psychological operations (PSYOP) officer. This gentleman had served in Chechnya and was convinced that Sachs plotted the destruction of the Russian economy. This former PSYOP officer's thinking is most revealing. In his view, the US sent Sachs to ruin Russia's economy. Then, at a time when Russia was weak, NATO gobbled up the nations of Eastern Europe that until 1991 were Soviet satellites and constituted Russia's "near abroad" security cordon. The PSYOP officer also argued that the US never dealt with Russia in good faith. In 2001, Putin offered the US complete support after the attacks of September 11. In Russian eyes, the US responded to Russian loyalty with treachery. On December 13, then US President George W. Bush announced that the US would pull out of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, an act that still infuriates Moscow.

The other author, when serving as a US official, heard the same zero-sum game viewpoints from his Russian counterparts. How, they demanded, could NATO expansion be anything but an aggressive anti-Russian act? They took any of the author's counter-arguments as proof of America's disingenuous duplicity and as confirmation of their convictions.

Putin Distills Russian Resentment

Putin expresses Russian resentment and suspicion best. In a lengthy article published on July 12, he argues "that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole." He blames both Russian mistakes and outside forces for undermining that unity. In Putin's words, "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus." Language,

economic ties and the Orthodox faith bind them together.

Unsurprisingly, Putin evokes a particularly Russo-centric version of history in making his claim. He refers to the 17th century war of liberation of the Russian Orthodox people from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which he blames for "social and religious oppression" of Russians. The Russian president also blames outsiders like the Poles and the Austro-Hungarians for "the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians." In Putin's telling, this "idea" has no historical basis or much popular support.

When Vladimir Lenin forged the Soviet Union in 1922, he gave constituent republics the right to secede, which was incorporated into the 1924 constitution. Putin blames this for the "parade of sovereignties" that caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argues that "modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era." Putin further argues that Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine "in gross violation of legal norms that were in force at the time."

In his article, Putin takes the view that the borders between Soviet republics were never state borders. Communists ran a highly centralized government from Moscow. With the sudden disintegration of the USSR, "people found themselves abroad overnight, taken away, this time indeed, from their historical motherland." Notably, Putin blames the West for using "the old groundwork of the Polish-Austrian ideologists to create an 'anti-Moscow Russia'." He accuses the new Ukrainian elites of hobnobbing with neo-Nazis, attacking the Russian language and unleashing an anti-Russia project.

Putin's aggrieved and self-justifying version of history, however, grossly misrepresents the past. A little perspective: It is true that many Ukrainians initially welcomed the Nazi invaders as liberators in 1941. They wanted relief from the oppressive and exploitative mass-murdering communist regime of Joseph Stalin, whom Putin

has been rehabilitating as a Russian icon. Unfortunately for the Ukrainians, Adolf Hitler's Nazis proved to be as murderous and imperial as the Soviet Union. Longsuffering Ukrainians were quickly and hideously disabused of the notion that the Nazis themselves offered Untermenschen Slavs anything but enslavement and death. In the end, the Nazis massacred 3 million Ukrainians, a lower number than the 3.9 million killed by the Soviets. In his self-serving version of history, Putin omits such awkward facts.

Biden and his European allies are understandably worried by this amalgam of Soviet and pre-World War I pan-Slavic and imperial Russian historiography. On December 7, Biden and Putin spoke for about two hours to defuse rising tensions over Ukraine. Putin "demanded legal guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward toward Russia's borders or deploy offensive weapons systems in Ukraine." Biden "reiterated his support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and called for de-escalation and a return to diplomacy." Two days later, Putin used harsher language. He accused Ukraine of Russophobia and discriminating against Russian speakers in the country. He argued that Ukrainian action in the eastern Donbas region "certainly looks like genocide." On December 23, Putin articulated Russian resentments in a four-hour press conference even as US officials announced possibilities of talks in January.

On December 17, Moscow "demanded strict limits on the activities of the US-led NATO military alliance in countries in Eastern Europe." Moscow wants no troop or weapon deployment in areas where they could be a threat to Russia. If Washington accepts this demand, NATO would no longer play a role in the three Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia or, for that matter, in highly vulnerable Poland. Russia also wants a guarantee that Ukraine and Georgia would never join NATO.

Putin has long called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century" and argued that "the epidemic

of collapse has spilled over to Russia itself." He has repeatedly pointed out that 25 million Russians became foreigners in their own homes. From Lithuania to Tajikistan, Putin sees Russians as an oppressed minority instead of full citizens of a once mighty nation.

But nowhere is this more galling than Ukraine, home to the historic Kingdom of Rus. His consistent objective as Russian leader has been to restore Russia to its historic greatness and global power. In his mind, the best defense for Russia is now offence.

Ideas Animating Putin

It is important and instructive to remember that Putin was a KGB officer for years. He was inspired by Max Otto von Stierlitz, the Soviet James Bond who infiltrated the German high command in World War II. Like Stierlitz, Putin served in Germany too and was posted in Dresden in 1989. Thousands of Germans took to the streets, the Berlin Wall fell and "Moscow [was] silent."

The collapse of the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union turned Putin's life upside down. Recently, he mentioned moonlighting as a taxi driver during those days to make ends meet and, like many older Russians, is haunted by those memories. The collapse of Soviet theology allowed Putin and all Russians to return to their history, culture, Slavic ethnicity, and Orthodox religion as the essence of the Russian nation and greatness. Over 70 years of Communist internationalist ideology dissipated in an instant, and has left virtually no trace on Russian culture.

Instantaneously, Putin and millions of Russians have reverted to Russian nationalism for identity and pride. At its core, this nationalism is Orthodox, Slavic and autocratic. The Russian Orthodox Church, persecuted during the Soviet era, has made a spectacular comeback. Putin has been filmed dipping into the freezing waters of a cross-shaped pool to observe an Orthodox Christian ritual that marks the feast of Epiphany on more than one occasion. Cossacks, the

glamorized sword arm of Tsarist Russia, are also back in fashion.

Putin has brought back the idea of a collective Russian identity, in which Western individualism and cosmopolitanism are decadent Western infections. The strength and stability of the state takes precedence over human rights. In this “new” (old) Russia, respect for the ruler is sacrosanct and Putin is a father figure for a powerful strong nation that can once again project its power. After the humiliating years of a weak Mikhail Gorbachev and a drunk Boris Yeltsin, Russians see Putin as a leader who has restored dignity to a great nation and people.

A 2016 tour de force analysis by Charles Clover explains how the Russian leader has found inspiration in the ideas of the late historian Lev Gumilev. This son of Soviet dissidents Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova spent many years in the Siberian Gulag. Gumilev developed a fascination for “the irrational in history” as he watched his fellow prisoners “die of exhaustion and hypothermia.” Just as Italian Renaissance thinker Niccolò Machiavelli coined the idea of *virtù*, as a character of moral excellence devoted to the state, and Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun of *asabiyya*, the tribal solidarity of desert nomads, Gumilev came up with the idea of *passionarnost*, a human capacity for suffering.

In his 2012 annual address to the Russian federal assembly, Putin noted that the world was becoming more unequal and competition for resources more intense. New economic, geopolitical and ethnic conflicts were likely. As per Putin, victory and defeat would “depend not only on the economic potential, but primarily on the will of each nation” and the inner energy that Gumilev termed *passionarity*.

Clover explains how Gumilev came up with the idea of Eurasianism, “the germ of a new Russian nationalism.” This idea seeks inspiration not from the westward-looking Peter the Great or Catherine the Great but from the nomads who swept out of the steppes to destroy everything before them. Gumilev took the view that

European social theories like the Enlightenment and communism had led Russia to ruin. Instead, Russians were heirs to the Huns, the Turks and the Mongols, the conquering peoples who united the Eurasian steppes and the forests under “a single conquering imperial banner.” In Gumilev’s view, the Russians “were the latest incarnation of this timeless continental unity.” Putin seems to be deeply influenced by Gumilev’s ideas.

In this regard, one author recalls a memorable evening spent with a Russian counterpart nearly 30 years ago, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The discussion turned around what Russians believed in and the author asked in some frustration: Are you European or Asian? Implicit in the question was the assumption that the Russians must choose between the two, and would surely finally embrace the westernizing approach of Peter the Great. “Of course we are neither,” the Russian replied quite accurately, “and both.”

Putin also adheres to the views of Ivan Ilyin, an influential pan-Slavic Russian nationalist and fascist who exalted the Russian soul and who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1922. He took the view that the 1917 October Revolution was the worst catastrophe in Russian history. As an exile, Ilyin first lived in Germany and then in Switzerland, where he died in 1954. His work strongly influenced mystical Russian nationalists like Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. Putin was personally involved in bringing back Ilyin’s remains to Russia and consecrated his grave in 2009. Noted historian Timothy Snyder has called Ilyin “Putin’s philosopher of Russian fascism” because he saw individuals as cells in the body of society, freedom as knowing one’s place in society, democracy as a ritual, the leader as a hero and facts as of no value whatsoever. Ilyin saw Russian nationalism as the only truth in the world and imagined “that his nation could redeem the world.”

Gumilev and Ilyin are the modern Russian muses, and Putin the renascent tsar of the Eurasianist “neither European nor Asian” Russian culture and nation. But Putin’s Russian

Eurasianism is the Russian strain of a widespread phenomenon called Traditionalism. It is a reaction to and rejection of the cosmopolitan, international, modernizing forces of Western liberalism and capitalism. Ironically, Traditionalism's believers consist of a heterodox melange of French Catholic royalists, Muslim intellectuals, left-wing anti-materialists, social conservatives and nationalists brought together by their profound malaise at the culturally destructive and personally alienating forces of the technological and material developments of the industrial and modern era and, in their view, of the nihilism and imperialism of cosmopolitan Western liberalism.

The philosophical roots of Traditionalism and Russia's "Eurasianism" version reach back to one of the fathers of Fascism, an Italian philosopher named Baron Giulio Evola. Evola's thought became the basis for Fascism in Italy, National Socialism in Germany, and — after World War II and the spread of democracy and the success of market economies — for the far-right across Europe, and the ascendancy of anti-Western Muslim extremism in Islamic societies.

One of the authors first encountered Traditionalism personally in the mid-1980s when he was assigned to follow and understand the neo-fascistic movements in Western Europe then called the "euro-right." The "nation," the "people," and "tradition" became the roots of personal meaning for the euro-right in the progressively mutable world of capitalism, materialism, individualism, and democracy. The very successes of the Western economic and political model were the basis of the Euro-right's indictment of liberal democracy and the Western Alliance.

The author recalls sitting in a café in Paris and through the cigarette smoke listening in some astonishment and progressive alarm as the right-wing French political figure across the table confidently denounced American liberal decadence (that was no surprise), evoked the fascist and conservatively Catholic ideas of the French politician Charles Maurras (again, no

surprise)... and then spoke warmly of the concordance of the rejection of democracy, capitalism, and the West by Islam, Italian Fascism, and Russian Orthodoxy. The author has followed the Traditionalist movement in the 40 years since that café conversation and watched it wax in direct proportion to the speed and scale of social and political change caused by globalization and the end of the Cold War.

Evola's movement and the French politician from the café morphed into today's "Rassemblement national" (RN) party (formerly the National Front) in France and to the other ascendant far-right parties in Europe today. These new Traditionalists consistently identify with Putin's Russia, because both exalt the "nation" and reject "rootless" materialism. The Russian "Eurasian" manifestation believes "liberal" democracy would lead to the ruin of Russian civilization and to Russia's domination by a nihilistic West. Under Putin, Russia's intelligence services have also insinuated Eurasianist, Traditionalist ideas into populist and right-wing parties throughout the West.

Putin clearly derives his worldview and policies from this coherent Traditionalist, Eurasian rejection of and hostility to the West. In his words, "The liberal idea [has] outlived its purpose....[Western views on gender, culture and power] must not be allowed to overshadow the culture, traditions and traditional family values of millions of people making up the core population." For Putin, Eurasianists, and far-rightists across Europe, the postwar globalized, capitalist, democratic liberal world order, and US-led Western alliances are wantonly destroying faith, culture and, for Putin, the Russian soul and nation.

While Evola, Gumilev and Ilyin might be patron saints of Traditionalism, Eurasianism and Russian nationalism, the strident nationalist Aleksandr Dugin is the evangelist of Putin's new (old) Russia. In 1997, he published "Foundations of Geopolitics," a work that has deeply influenced the thinking of Russia's military, secret services and political leadership.

Ferociously opposed to US hegemony, Dugin advocates Russian Eurasianism as a response to Anglo-Saxon Atlanticism. Dugin's views derive directly from the Eurasian and Traditionalist focus on the supposedly inevitable geopolitical clash of cultures, pitting Orthodox and continental Russia against the atheistic and cosmopolitan West. Instead of direct conflict, however, Dugin "advocates a sophisticated, asymmetric program of subversion, destabilization, and disinformation spearheaded by the Russian special services, supported by a tough, hard-headed use of Russia's gas, oil, and natural resource riches to pressure and bully other countries into bending to Russia's will."

Putinism's Strangely Unreal World

Even as others provide ideas, Vladislav Surkov, a brilliant Putin aide puts them into operation. On a spring day in 2013, Surkov claimed to be "the author, or one of the authors, of the new Russian system." In the words of Peter Pomerantsev, "Surkov [consciously and explicitly] has directed Russian society like one great reality show." Through puppet political parties, fake social media accounts and manipulation of truth, in the press, on television and on the internet, this modern master of propaganda has blurred truth and falsehood, reasoning that, as the public becomes less able to discern the truth, the state can shape reality to discredit its opponents and to consolidate its power. Even as Russia maintains the illusion of democracy, political challengers find every path forward thwarted, by murder if need be, and one man rules.

For ordinary Russians, Surkov has conjured up the specter of a deadly enemy and authored a new chapter of Putinism in Russian history. Putin "is the president of 'stability,' the antithesis to the era of 'confusion and twilight' in the 1990s." Anyone who opposes Putin, by definition, is disloyal to Russia. Unlike Stalin's iron-fisted oppression, Putinism "climbs inside all ideologies and movements, exploiting and rendering them absurd." In Surkov's Putinist Russia, "everything is PR" and only fools believe in anything. Putin,

through Surkov's cynical wizardry, reigns by turning Russia into a real-world combination of George Orwell's 1984 and the Keanu Reeves starring *The Matrix*. It is the dystopian triumph of the nihilism and solipsism of jaded postmodernists, literally weaponized by the State: Truth no longer exists, but it does not matter, because one can feel good through delusional self-regard and meaningless pageantry. And Surkov, the Russian intelligence services and, above them both, Putin control the images, shape the public's consciousness, and wield the real-world power.

Yet even Surkov seems to have some beliefs. In conversations with journalists, he reveals a "sharp nationalist edge." Surkov claims that Putin did not abolish democracy. Instead, the Russian leader just "married it with the monarchical archetype of Russian governance." Surkov claims, "this archetype is working. It is not going anywhere . . . It has enough freedom and enough order."

If Surkov had confined his dark arts to Russia, he would not be one of the seminal figures of the 21st century. But he has deployed his skills to advance Russia's national interests abroad, specifically by interfering in elections in other countries. The most famous examples are the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election of 2016. There is strong evidence to suggest that Russia interfered not only in these two elections but in many others. There have been spin doctors galore in the past, from Edward Bernays who invented PR in the US to Dominic Cummings who coined "Take Back Control" for the pro-Brexit campaign. Yet Surkov has taken propaganda to another level. He has created what documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis has termed "Hypernormalization," a strangely unreal world of total inauthenticity.

The Cold War Never Quite Ended

In the heady days after the end of the Cold War, the likes of Francis Fukuyama heralded the "unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism." In an iconic article, he called it the

end of history and celebrated “the triumph of the West, of the Western idea.” Fukuyama’s celebrations were premature. For 15 years, from Gorbachev’s assumption of power in 1985 to the departure from office of Yeltsin on December 31, 1999, the Western-oriented views and aspirations of Peter the Great’s Russia dominated. But as one author’s Russian interlocutor from years ago pointed out, Russia is neither West nor East — it is both. And so after the catastrophe of shock therapy and the expansion of NATO, Russian resentment returned in the form of Eurasianist Putin.

The Russian president has always sought to restore Russia’s greatness and reestablish hegemony over its “near abroad” — states in Central and Eastern Europe that the Soviet Union once forced into the Warsaw Pact. Of course, while making Russia great again, Putin seeks to solidify and perennialize his power, and, along the way, to enrich himself. He has always rejected the normative unipolar international order created and dominated by the US that, in Putin’s eyes, institutionalized American imperialism and hegemony. In the past decade, the Russian president has modernized his military, eliminated any potential rival at home, and embarked on a series of aggressive foreign moves that are changing the balance of power in Europe and the Middle East. Notably, he has constantly argued that “the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world.”

Putin realizes that, to prevail, Russia must leverage its strengths against the more powerful economies of the US and Europe, and he has been fortunate that many Western leaders have neither realized the scope of nor the power in the asymmetric warfare tactics of Dugin and Surkov. In contrast, Putin is very aware that the US GDP is 14 times larger than Russia’s, where oil and gas comprise close to 40% of the GDP. Hence, he engages in a different “battle space” and, in so doing, has restored much of the influence Russia lost when the Soviet Union imploded in 1991. Putin’s military and intelligence services have

reasserted Russian predominance all along the “near abroad” states and former Soviet republics. Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus and the Baltics have all felt the sting of Russian operations, and have had to temper their pro-Western positions and accommodate Russian demands.

Bolstered by success, Russian confidence and aggression has been growing. In 2014, Russia invaded and (re)annexed Crimea. In 2015, Putin sent the Russian military into Syria. Since 2019, he has used “private sector” mercenaries, who act under the guidance of the Russian intelligence services, in Libya. By intervening in Syria and Libya, Putin has made Russia a key power broker in the Middle East for the first time since 1972. Russian mercenaries are also active in Mozambique, Sudan and the Central African Republic. As if this was not enough, Putin has actively sought to destabilize his greatest rivals, the UK and the US. Russia has conducted a series of intelligence operations to influence the attitudes of the British and American public, with an overall goal of delegitimizing and paralyzing the UK and US governments.

Even as Putin has ratcheted up pressure on Ukraine, he has also ostentatiously deepened relations with China, the other bugbear of the West. Russia’s new China play is a classic example of the balance of power and “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” approach to geopolitics. The cruise of the Russo-Sino fleet around Japan’s main island is a clear signal by Moscow and Beijing that they will support each other against the West. Putin has also worked assiduously to bolster relations with India, a nascent global power that has reservations about recent US decisions such as pulling out of Afghanistan and entering into a nuclear submarine deal with Australia and the UK. As a former Soviet ally, India also has strong elements hostile to a strategic entente with the US.

Should Western powers implement tougher sanctions on Moscow, an allied China and neutral India are likely to stay close trading partners, attenuating Russia’s economic hardship.

Relations with the two Asian giants also boost morale at home by demonstrating that a Putin-led Russia is a global power and Moscow will not bend to the imperial and arrogant US.

As a nimble judoka, Putin is also using gas diplomacy to pressure the West. On December 15, Putin and his new best-friend-forever, Chinese President Xi Jinping, had a highly-publicized conversation about the Power of Siberia-2 project, a mega pipeline through Mongolia that would deliver up to 50 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to China every year. Beijing has long feared that the US Navy could block the Straits of Malacca, choking China's energy supplies. Power of Siberia-2 serves both Russian and Chinese interests, weakening future leverage for both Europe and the US.

To pressure Europe, Russia is planning to sell gas not only to China but also to other growing Asian economies, while always holding the implicit threat over Western Europe of restricting gas shipments, just as it has done before in its "gas wars" with Ukraine. Putin's "gas pivot" is making Europe nervous because Russia remains Europe's main gas supplier. On December 20, The Moscow Times reported that Russia had cut gas supplies to Europe even as temperatures dropped, a clear example of "gas-politik." Gas prices have surged as a result, leading to added inflationary pressures in European economies.

Russia is using gas diplomacy not only to cause economic pain to Europe but also to divide its opponents. For years, Russian companies have been building the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline to Germany, bypassing Ukraine to deprive the country of gas transit revenue and to leave Kyiv in no position to completely block Russian gas supplies to Europe. Berlin favored Nord Stream 2 because Germany is boosting natural gas imports to transition away from coal and nuclear energy, and the pipeline would double the supply of cheap natural gas from Russia.

However, Nord Stream 2 has caused a rift within NATO with allies like Poland and the US opposing Germany's decision to go ahead with

this pipeline project. Recently, the German economics minister has called the pipeline a "geopolitical mistake" and warned Russia that an invasion of Ukraine would lead to a suspension of this controversial project. Yet both Berlin and Moscow know that such a cancellation would depress the German and West European economies. The pipeline, even unfinished, gives Putin good sway over Germany and Europe.

Putin is also exploiting the refugee and migration crisis in Europe and the Middle East to pressure the West. Imitating Turkey's use of Syrian refugees to pressure the EU, the Russian leader has massed thousands of migrants in Belarus, a country now firmly under Russia's thumb. These migrants have been trying to enter Poland, a member of the EU. Polish police have used tear gas and water cannons to deter migrants from crossing the Belarusian-Polish border, under the keenly watchful eyes of the media. Images of such police action have portrayed Europe as uncaring and inhuman, damaging its reputation, causing internal European divisions, and diverting attention from Russia and Belarus, and especially from Russia's threatening moves on Ukraine's border.

What Will Putin Do Next?

Fundamentally, Putin is a cold and calculating practitioner of realpolitik. He wants to keep the pot boiling but not spilling over. He wants to avoid war if he can. So, Putin will keep seizing the initiative, creating strategic dilemmas for the US, NATO and the West on multiple fronts. He calculates that the West is decadent and unwilling to fight, despite the series of diplomatic and economic sanctions Western states have imposed in response to his actions, especially after his invasion of Crimea.

Now, Putin is focused on Ukraine, the "heart of Rus." In his pan-Russian nationalist worldview, Ukraine is Russian land. Even so, the authors believe it unlikely, on balance, that Putin will invade. But he is likely to extract de facto changes to the status quo in Eastern Ukraine. He is also seeking to destabilize Ukraine's

government and to stop the West from bringing Ukraine within the western fold. He calculates, probably correctly, that the West does not view the Donbas or Luhansk regions of Ukraine, or the fates of ethnic Russians in Ukraine as worth a war between the world's great powers. Biden did all but make this explicit in his announcement that the prospect of sending US troops to Ukraine was "not on the table."

But Putin's aggressive actions in Ukraine are merely parts of his larger worldview and strategy. He has consistently pursued a sphere-of-influence international order, in part to bring the US down a notch, but in line with deeply held beliefs concerning existential Russian security needs in Russia's "near abroad." His Eurasianist worldview is coherent, resonates with traditional Russian Orthodox pan-Slavic ideology, and makes it possible for Russians to see themselves as heroes in the drama of world history. Whatever happens to Ukraine, Putin will always seek to reorder Europe and international relations to Russia's advantage, to weaken his decadent US and European rivals, and to oppose the cosmopolitan, liberal West.

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