

# Fair Observer

Monthly



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# Fair Observer Monthly



June 2022

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

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.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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# SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Join our network of 2,500+ contributors to publish your perspective, share your story and shape the global conversation. Become a Fair Observer and help us make sense of the world.

Remember, we are a digital media platform and welcome content in all forms: articles, podcasts, video, vlogs, photo essays, infographics and interactive features. We work closely with our contributors, provide feedback and enable them to achieve their potential. Think of us as a community that believes in diversity and debate.

We have a reputation for being thoughtful and insightful. The US Library of Congress recognizes us as a journal with ISSN 2372-9112 and publishing with us puts you in a select circle.

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# The Right to Fair Recollection

Mohamed Suliman

June 2, 2022

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**Social media platforms and applications are using opaque algorithms to monetize our past memories. It's time to hold them accountable.**

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One year from now, most of us will not be interested in seeing the painful memories of burnt buildings and lines of refugees in the Ukraine war surfacing on the newsfeed. By contrast, probably some might be curious, in experiencing these memories, to compare how the situation has changed and evolved. The tricky part of this recollection process is that the final decision will be made on behalf of all of us by opaque algorithms that could be utilized to increase engagement and profit and not to improve the healthy relationship with our past.

In the past few years, several social media platforms and web applications have started to build features that let the users interact with their online memories, tapping into the power of artificial intelligence algorithms to automate the whole process. These authoritative algorithms need to be challenged and subjected to public oversight.

## How Social Media Platforms Handle Our Memories

Meta, formerly known as Facebook, has two applications through which users can access their past memories on its platforms. The “Year in Review” features the important events for the year in one album. This feature was a subject of criticism after it displayed a photo of a deceased daughter to her father, leading Facebook to issue an apology statement. The

other application is “on this day” that, as the name suggests, automatically selects a memory from the past and presents it to the user.

Timehop is an application, introduced in 2017, that automates memories recollection across social media platforms. According to the application website, it has been downloaded by 20 million users. The application offers its subscribers the right to delete their personal data on it and to know what information has been collected, but it doesn't allow them to understand how their algorithm functions and operates.

Other platforms, such as Amazon and YouTube, seem merely interested in giving us a static view of our past interactions on them. For example, Amazon's “buy again” feature is directly shared and presented without any alteration or automation.

## The Pre-automated Memory Recollection

In the world of pre-automated memory recollection, we encounter our past experiences in a natural way. For example, we may create them when we stumble upon old pictures and videos, or engage in random conversations with family and friends. Or while we are reading old personal notes, celebrating anniversaries, or passing by buildings we used to live, study or work in, or when we are listening to songs associated with pleasant experiences or sad memories of breakups. These experiences are deeply interwoven into the fabric of reality. We always interact with them and handle them in a fundamentally humane way when they are evoked. Platforms such as Facebook and Timehop are now acting as an intermediary between ourselves and our past, and are continually shaping how we think and reason about our genuinely lived experiences, and hence how we live our lives.

Researchers who studied the automation of memories by social media found that the metrics used to quantify memory recollections, such as “likes,” could also be used by the

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platforms to increase engagement. They could also become a source of competition and comparison between users. All this clearly shows the extent to which platform creators are not transparent about the real goal of the memory feature and the damage they cause to our connection with the past as they monetize our engagement.

### **The Right to Fair Recollection**

Lawmakers should work to introduce the right to fair recollection. That means changing the current paradigm of memory-creation, rather than having algorithm designers dictate surreptitiously how the system works, the users should be the ones who manage the whole process. This will be achieved by allowing the users to decide on stopping the feature, blocking memories associated with certain persons, events and time, and avoiding categorization of memories. Lawmakers should also ensure that users can at anytime pull out and merge their online memories, distributed across applications and platforms, in order to form a unified access to our past, and access and tweak the factors that the algorithms depend on for the memories making. This approach will also give each of us a unique individual experience to the past memories instead of the current limited one-size-fits-all model.

Currently, some social media platforms and applications involuntarily give their users part of this right, for example, The ThrowBack application lets its users choose both the photo and a return date of the recollection without any intervention from the system. Snapchat's flashback feature automates photos shared on the same day in the past. It gives users the option to choose from many photos shared on that day. This model gives the application partial control of the recollection process by listing what photos the users may choose from. In this model, users could be seen as co-creators. Facebook memory allows users to

block memories associated with certain dates and persons, as well as to choose how often users would like to see notifications about memories. But the algorithms that run the whole process and select particular memories over others remain a black box.

It's legitimate to argue the shift to give users the full control over the recollection process will be complex for many, especially those who are not tech savvy, but this should change over time as the model becomes widely accepted and shared in society.

Our perception of the past contributes in a major way to our entire makeup. Having the right to protect ourselves against the downside of the automation and commercialization of our past experiences is definitely a step worth taking and it should be defended by everyone.

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## **Those Responsible for the 1994 Rwandan Genocide Must Be Brought to Justice**

Mehdi Alavi  
June 3, 2022

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**Big powers such as France and the US played a sinister role in exacerbating the 1994 Rwandan genocide. They must pay reparations and bring their officials to justice. African players who participated in the terror and the genocide must also be held accountable for their actions.**



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**R**wanda is a landlocked country located in East Africa. According to the Peace Worldwide Organization's Civility Report 2021, Rwanda has a population of 13 million, a literacy rate of 73%, a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$10.4 billion, and per capita income of \$800, which makes it one of the poorest countries in the world. Rwanda is ruled by an authoritarian regime that persecutes political opponents across the country. Journalists and human rights defenders are often killed or disappear. Security forces work with impunity. Refugees are treated badly and some are killed. About 134,000 or 1.2% of the population are forced into modern-day slavery. The country remains a source of, and to lesser extent, transit and destination point for trafficking women and children.

Rwanda has a tragic past. For 100 days in 1994, around 800,000 Rwandans were massacred in Rwanda by the ethnic Hutus in what has become known as the Rwanda genocide. Once, the country was run by the ethnic minority Tutsis. In 1959, they were overthrown by the ethnic majority Hutus. Thousands of Tutsis escaped to neighboring countries. Some of the Tutsis in exile united to set up the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which began fighting against the Hutu government until a peace treaty was signed in 1993. In April 1994, a plane carrying Rwanda's Hutu president and high-ranking officials was shot down, killing all on board. Blaming the RPF, Hutu extremists began the slaughters of the Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers.

The RPF maintained that the plane was shot by the Hutu extremists in order to blame the RPF and rationalize genocide. Meanwhile, French forces present in Rwanda watched the massacres, but did nothing. The French government has denied this persistently until recently. After 27 years of denial, France was finally forced by its own government commission to officially admit its complicity in the 1994 Rwanda genocide. In May 2021,

French President Emmanuel Macron, spoke at the genocide memorial in Rwanda's capital Kigali, where many of the victims were buried. He asked Rwandans to forgive France for its role in the 1994 genocide. "Only those who went through that night can perhaps forgive, and in doing so give the gift of forgiveness," Macron said.

### **United Nations Measures to Prevent Genocide**

The United Nations (UN) Article 1 clearly states that the countries are bound to suppress "acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means," a "settlement of international disputes" or resolution of situations that could lead to violence. In 1946, the UN General Assembly in its Resolution 96 (I) defined genocide and considered it an international crime.

In 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, defined genocide as, "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group." In the case of disputes, the convention made the International Court of Justice (ICJ) the final legal authority on genocide. In 1949, the Geneva Convention prohibited willful killings, torture, property destruction, unlawful deportation or confinement, and the taking of civilians as hostages.

More recently, international law has sought to prevent genocide. In May 1993, a Hague-based International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was established. The ICTY indicted a number of the perpetrators of the Bosnian genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Those indicted include Radovan Karadzic and Slobodan Milosevic for crimes against humanity.

In August 1993, the Rwanda government signed a peace treaty with RPF, known as "Arusha Accords." In October, the UN Security Council (UNSC) established the UN Assistance

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Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) to assist the parties executing the peace agreement. The UNAMIR was supposed to monitor the progress in the peace process and help form the transitional government.

As mentioned earlier, the plane carrying the Rwandan Hutu President was shot down in 1994 and the Hutu government blamed the RPF. The next day, on April 7, 1994, government forces and Hutu militia began killing Tutsis, moderate Hutus and the UNAMIR peacekeepers who were among their first victims.

On June 22, 1994, after two and a half months of killings, the UN finally authorized a French-led multinational operation, “Operation Turquoise”, which set a protection zone in Rwanda to help victims and refugees. On July 15, 1994, RPF took over the country and stopped the 100 days of killings. In August 1994, whatever was left of the UNAMIR took over the French-led multinational operation and provided shelter to thousands of refugees.

In November 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was established. Headquartered in Arusha, Tanzania, the ICTR was supposed to “prosecute persons responsible for genocide and other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda and neighboring States, between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1994.” So far, ICTR has brought to justice 93 persons “responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in Rwanda in 1994.”

### **French Support of Genocidal Hutu-led Regime**

In April 2019, the US law firm Levy Firestone Muse released *A Foreseeable Genocide*, a report based on million pages of documents after years of interviews and investigation. The report found France to be a “collaborator” of the Hutu government in the genocide. The French were aware that the regime planned to

exterminate the Tutsis.

As per the report, the “French government was unwavering in its support for its Rwandan allies even when their genocidal intentions became clear, and only the French government was an indispensable collaborator in building the institutions that would become instruments of the Genocide.” The report concluded that “the Government of France bears significant responsibility for having enabled a foreseeable genocide.”

In March 2021, a French commission found that France bore “heavy and overwhelming responsibility” for the Rwanda genocide. After this finding, the French government could no longer deny its involvement in the genocide. Under international pressure, the French president was finally forced to apologize for supporting the Hutu-led genocidal regime in Rwanda in 1994.

### **US Support for RPF**

Even as the French backed a genocidal regime, the US supported the rebel RPF. Helen C Epstein, a visiting professor at Bard College, chronicled the secret role of the US in the Rwandan genocide in a tour de force in *The Guardian*. Rwandan President Paul Kagame was “then a senior officer in both the Ugandan army and the RPF, was in Kansas at the United States Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, studying field tactics and psyops, propaganda techniques to win hearts and minds.” He flew back to lead Uganda-backed RPF against the genocidal Hutu regime.

Kagame and the RPF were not blameless either. Epstein tells us that Robert Flaten, the then US ambassador to Rwanda, witnessed the terror caused by the RPF invasion of Rwanda. Apparently, “hundreds of thousands of mostly Hutu villagers fled RPF-held areas, saying they had seen abductions and killings.” Flaten urged the George Herbert Walker Bush (Bush Senior) administration “to impose sanctions on Uganda,

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as it had on Iraq after the Kuwait invasion earlier that year.” Instead, the US and its allies doubled aid to Yoweri Museveni’s government. Uganda’s defense spending ballooned to 48% of the budget. Strongman Museveni allocated a mere 13% for education and 5% for health, even as AIDS was ravaging the country and killing thousands.

In 2022, Museveni continues to rule Uganda while Kagame is the big boss of Rwanda. There has been relative peace in the region but both regimes are based on the barrel of the gun. Under the Belgians, the Tutsis “formed an elite minority caste in Rwanda” and “treated the Hutu peasants like serfs, forcing them to work on their land and sometimes beating them like donkeys.” Today, the Tutsis continue to occupy the top echelons of the Rwandan state. The Hutus may be better treated than a few decades ago but they are clearly second class citizens in their own land.

### **Time for Action**

Like many other countries, Rwanda is still waiting for justice. It is another example of the failure of the UN to stop genocide, save victims, and bring to justice all guilty parties. In 1994, the UN only acted after 75 days of killings. Even then, it chose France, a biased party, to lead the operation. The UN has acted belatedly, inadequately and irresponsibly repeatedly. Genocides in Cambodia, the Balkans and other places are proof of that fact.

The UN usually serves the interests of the powerful and ignores the poor. Thus, we cannot rely on the UN to prevent genocides, crimes against humanity and other atrocities. It is we the people who must assume responsibility and support political leaders who strive for global peace and harmony.

In the hope of avoiding another genocide, we must demand that our political leaders take the following actions:

First, ICTR must continue its work until all individuals, Rwandan or not, are brought to

justice. Its mandate must be expanded to include the forces of other countries who watched but chose not to take any action to stop the ongoing killings.

Second, France, which has already appointed a commission, must now form a criminal tribunal to investigate those who collaborated with the genocidal Hutu government in 1994. French troops who watched the killings, but chose not to act, should also be brought to justice. The French cannot be tried by the ICTR because France is a permanent member of the UNSC and will veto any such proposal. So, we must put pressure on France to bring its citizens to justice.

Third, France must make reparations for the loss of lives, injuries, human displacements, and property destruction caused by its illegal collaboration and complicity with the Hutu government. France has a GDP of over \$2.7 trillion compared with Rwanda’s \$10.4 billion. France must put its money where its mouth is and allocate at least \$20 billion, amounting to less than 1% of its GDP, to compensate the victims of the genocide.

Fourth, the US must form a bipartisan committee to investigate its officials who played a dubious role in Rwanda or Uganda in the 1990s. Those who knew about killings and did nothing to prevent them must be brought to justice just like their French counterparts. Like France, the US is a member of the UNSC and its citizens cannot be tried by ICTR. So, it is up to American citizens to demand a reckoning of the dark days of the 1990s.

Fifth, the US must also pay reparations for the loss of lives, injuries, people displacements, and property destruction that occurred during the genocide. The US GDP is much larger than France and the US could easily give Rwanda \$20 billion, about 1% of its GDP. If the bipartisan committee discovers systemic support of genocide, then this amount should be higher. This money should be spent to build infrastructure, educate people, improve

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healthcare, create means of production and much more.

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\***Mehdi Alavi** is an author and also the founder and president of Peace Worldwide Organization (<http://www.peaceworldwide.org/>), a non-religious, non-partisan charitable organization in the United States that promotes human rights, freedom, and peace for all.

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## **Shireen Abu Akleh: The Journalist Martyr**

Swaleh Idris  
June 5, 2022

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**Al Jazeera longtime journalist Shireen Abu Akleh was shot by Israeli forces on May 11, 2022. Her brutal killing has shocked the world.**

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**S**aying that the brutal killing of Shireen Abu Akleh has shocked the world would be an understatement. Talking to fellow journalists within my circle and in numerous East African journalists' WhatsApp groups, I could feel grief, anger, confusion and in some, I could even sense fear.

### **No Story Is Worth Dying For**

In most Kenyan media schools, the phrase "No Story Is Worth Dying For" is quite a common saying. However, what happens when you fall in love with your work?

Describing herself as a "product of Jerusalem," with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shaping much of her life, Shireen Abu Akleh has shown the world what it means to be a journalist and what it means to tell stories that affect you as a journalist and your community. In her own words, her only mission was to be

close to her people, and within her people she was killed.

"I chose to become a journalist to be close to people. It may not be easy to change reality, but I was at least able to bring their voice to the world," Abu Akleh said in a video taped for the Qatari channel's 25th anniversary.

### **Journalism in Africa Has Become a Travesty**

When I was growing up, I listened to Kenya Broadcasting Corporation's Radio Taifa and watched KBC Channel 1 — that's what we had at that time and I must say that the type of journalism exhibited was mind-blowing. A type of journalism that can only be compared to Abu Akleh's.

Today, African journalists have turned their craft into a very ordinary career reserved for cool kids, who spent most of their time in big cities or overseas. After spending time overseas, these cool kids return to their homeland and land jobs in major newsrooms, thanks to their polished English. Sadly, most of them have zero journalism skills or storytelling abilities.

While journalists like Ahmed Hussein-Suale, a renowned investigative journalist from Ghana, was killed in 2019 for his role in exposing the corruption in his country, and Jamal Farah Adan of Somalia, Betty Mtekhele Barasa of Kenya, and dozens were killed in Ethiopia covering the Tigray conflict, it is very unfortunate that some journalists still find it right to use journalism for fame, power, and build future political careers.

Today, some Kenyan journalists engage in uncalled-for social media wars with critics who point out their lack of skills and unreasonable theatrics for clout chasing.

We have lost the basics of journalism such as good storytelling. Instead, journalists are thirsty for social media numbers, likes, and retweets. We don't verify anymore. As long as it helps increase the number of followers, it goes for publishing. Right now, distinguishing a

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professionally trained journalist from a socialite is becoming an uphill task.

### **African Governments Must Learn from Palestine**

Shireen Abu Akleh was shot dead by Israeli forces just eight days after the world marked the World Press Freedom Day on May 3. With such events, African governments need to step up and steer clear of Israeli-like behaviors of gagging the media, and instead, just like Palestine gave Abu Akleh the freedom to tell her people's story, they should also give the same freedom to their journalists.

In March, Ugandan authorities raided the offices of Digitalk, an online tv station known for airing critical views of President Yoweri Museveni and his family. Other than confiscating the TV's production and broadcasting equipment, they also arrested and charged its reporters with cyberstalking and offensive communication. The charges could see them facing up to seven years in prison.

The killing of this brave journalist who dared to tell the stories of the oppressive Israeli should not kill the spirits of journalists worldwide. Instead, this should be an inspiration to every reporter to work even harder, to help give voice to the voiceless, uphold justice and make the world a better place for every person whether in Gaza, Tigray, Libya, Syria or Afghanistan among other countries and regions experiencing instability.

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**\*Swaleh Idris** is a Kenyan journalist, author, and media entrepreneur who covers humanitarian crises, conflict, and disasters. Prior to founding Najm Media; a multimedia communications agency based in Nairobi, he worked at Kenya's oldest media organization; Standard Media Group as a creative.

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## **Electricity Reforms Are Essential to Power India's Ascent**

Vikram K. Malkani

June 11, 2022

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**State control of the electricity sector has caused waste of taxpayer money, theft of power and low per capita power consumption for decades. Over the years, India has brought in incremental reforms. Now, the country needs to go further but interest groups are likely to stall any progress till the 2024 elections, which will decide the future of power sector reforms in India.**

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Over the 18th and 19th centuries electric power fueled industrial revolutions in the UK, US and several European countries. In the last century countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea too leveraged it to develop economically. More recently, it has aided tremendous economic growth in China. Investment in power generation and distribution helped uplift these countries both economically and socially.

In 1971 India's and China's gross domestic products (GDP) stood at par at USD 118. India's per capita power consumption in that year was 98 kilowatt hours (kWh), China's was 152 kWh. Forty years on, China's GDP had risen to USD 5618, nearly fifty times the GDP in 1971. In the same year, India's GDP stood at USD 1458, a modest twelve-fold increase from the GDP in 1971. China's power consumption in 2011 had risen to 3296 kWh. India's was a distant 696 kWh.

About a fifth of India's population was estimated to be living below the poverty line in 2012. Approximately 50% of India's population is categorised as middle class. India has over 900 million people in the 15-64 age group.

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Over 360 million are under 14 years of age. This section of the population is also growing at a much faster rate than that of the overall population. Viewed from the perspective of current prosperity levels or population distribution based on age groups, today more than ever before, India needs to ensure sustained employment for its present and emerging workforce. An increasing GDP lifts people above the poverty line and makes more money available to the middle classes for investment in healthcare, security and education. Improved income and education levels also reduce crime.

While China has leveraged lessons of several countries by investing in economic infrastructure, India has failed to do so for much of its independent history.

### **The weight of socialism on power sector**

When India gained independence in 1947, its per capita power consumption was 16 kWh, far short of what the country needed for socioeconomic growth at pace. At that turning point in its history, India adopted the Soviet socialist model. The state stayed heavily invested in industry for several subsequent decades. On one hand, this prevented human resource capability and private enterprise from developing to their potential. On the other hand, key enablers for socioeconomic development – education, health, highways or power – were starved of sufficient investment.

USSR's collapse in 1991 served as a trigger for India to embrace economic reforms. Private companies began investing in power generation. But given the huge power shortfall built over decades, along with growing demand subsequently, the investment over 30 years has been far short of what's needed for sustained economic growth.

Power transmission and distribution continue to be mostly state-controlled. Power distribution companies (discoms) have borne the brunt of this model. Political parties make

populist electoral promises – ranging from subsidised electricity to waiver of past dues – and compel discoms to honour those if they form governments. Repeated election after election in many states, this populism leads to discoms charging on average less per unit than they buy electricity for, pushing them to default on payments to generating companies. This situation deters private investment in power generation.

The impact of this deep-rooted problem is not limited to the power sector. When power generators are unwilling to continue supplying power on credit, governments are compelled to bail the discoms out for them to pay generation companies. Bailouts are done at the cost of modernisation and expansion of power infrastructure, as well as investment in key sectors like healthcare and education.

Power loss by theft and technical causes is another systemic problem.

These deep-rooted problems have since long made a compelling case for further reforms in the power sector.

### **The reforms journey over 30 years**

In 1991, India opened power generation to private investment, which led to increased power generation in the country. Despite the sector's many challenges, consumers in both rural and urban India benefited. By 2018, electricity reached every village.

For several decades after independence, electricity was treated as a scarce commodity. If the post office, health care clinic and key facilities had power supply, then the electrification of the village was deemed done. This narrow definition of electrification was expanded in 1997 and 2004. If 10% of homes in a village have power supply, then it is deemed to be electrified.

Governments have repeatedly attempted further power sector reforms with varying degrees of success. The 1998 Electricity Regulatory Commissions Act of and the 2003

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Electricity Act were introduced to establish national and state regulatory bodies for rationalizing tariffs and subsidies as well as streamlining the transmission and the sale of power. These initiatives did not achieve their core objectives. Hence, in 2015 the government launched Ujwal Discom Assurance Yojana, UDAY to revive discoms financially and operationally. Given the depth of discoms' problems, which were further complicated by COVID lockdowns, UDAY fell short of achieving its objectives after some early successes.

Some successes are noteworthy. Many states have taken steps to control theft. In the prime minister's constituency, electricity authorities have implemented new technology to detect illegal connections. This has reduced power theft and increased legal power connections. Such initiatives have indeed lowered power losses but these are still over twice the global average.

In 2020, the government announced an economic stimulus package of over \$3 billion to revive a pandemic-battered economy. This included an injection of liquidity yet again for discoms. In 2021, the government announced a result-oriented package for discoms, which included introducing smart grids and smart meters across the country. These ambitious initiatives are expected to benefit discoms by reducing operational costs, checking theft and giving consumers detailed data about their electricity usage. India has also set up a national grid, connecting the five regional grids. This will strengthen the transmission network across the country, ensuring more even power distribution.

These reforms are noteworthy. They are a step in the right direction and will increase per capita power consumption. However, the core problem of the power sector — the government control over discoms — still remains unaddressed.

## **Lighting up the road to development**

India's power minister aspires to increase per capita power consumption threefold — the same level as the global average. The time has come to broaden the definition of electrification yet again. Only when 20-30% of a village has access to electricity should it be considered electrified. Furthermore, the successes in implementing new technologies must be institutionalized and implemented across the country.

Today, private companies are contributing significantly to India's power needs. Privatisation of discoms is the long overdue big ticket reform. To this end, the government introduced the Electricity Amendment Bill in 2021. This proposes a rationalization of subsidies and introduces other key reforms such as a push towards renewable energy. The bill promises to improve the financially parlous state of most discoms and incentivize private investment in the sector.

In 2020 the government proposed transformative agriculture reforms, which led to a year of protests. Ultimately the government withdrew the legislation. This was a huge setback for economic reforms. The 2021 electricity bill has similarly run into rough weather, forcing the government to climb down.

Hardships caused by over two years of the pandemic and yearlong protests have reduced the government's appetite for reforms. It is unlikely that significant reforms will be rolled out before the next national elections in 2024. The ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won large majorities in the 2014 and the 2019 elections. In 2024, the NDA faces a tougher challenge.

If the opposition wins, reform is unlikely. The opposition parties are wedded to left-leaning failed policies of the past. However, if the NDA wins decisively, it will have political capital to spend on reforms. Then, it may address the power sector's core problem that has cost the country tremendously over many



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decades. In this term, the NDA government sold off the failed nationalized airlines Air India to the Tatas. In the next term, the NDA could finally privatize dysfunctional, loss-making and tax-guzzling discoms, generating more light in the nation.

**\*Vikram Malkani** is a technology professional based in Bengaluru (Bangalore), India, focusing on information security and data analytics. He has been an independent observer of Indian politics for over three decades and an occasional writer for Indian publications.

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## India's Foreign Minister Schools Western Journalist

Peter Isackson  
June 18, 2022

**An interview with India's Minister of External Affairs bizarrely takes the form of a show trial.**

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**I**n the first week of June, the 17th edition of an event called the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum took place at a particularly tense moment in European history. Among its programmed events was an interview with India's Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. In a tweet following the event, the minister modestly summed up the interview in these words: "Animated discussion, reflecting a perspective from India and the Indo-Pacific." It was that indeed, but much more.

The GLOBSEC Policy Institute defines itself as a think tank and "a leading authority on security matters in Central and Eastern Europe." The announced mission of its annual forum is to facilitate "the free exchange of ideas" by providing "a meeting place for stakeholders from all sectors of society."

Like most institutions that claim the title of think tank, GLOBSEC is less focused on thinking than on implementing an ideology and an explicit activist agenda. This year's conference, it boldly announces, "will serve as a platform to mobilize the West's support and action for Ukraine."

GLOBSEC selected the seasoned journalist Maithreyi Seetharaman to interview Dr. Jaishankar. Chartwell Speakers describes the broadcaster as specialized "in connecting the dots between business, policy, civil society and the economy." She turned out to be the perfect choice for GLOBSEC. Seetharaman's personal worldview clearly aligns with the objectives of the conference. Less interested in the "free exchange of ideas" than the think tank's agenda, she focused on the real purpose of the interview: mobilizing "support and action for Ukraine."

### The West's Trickle-Down Diplomacy

Seetharaman sets the scene by reminding her interviewee that the issue of the day is the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Perhaps influenced by her own ideology, that of a top-down world embracing trickle-down economics, she prefaces her questioning with the curious remark that the Ukraine war is now "trickling in terms of effect... to the rest of the world, the East, the global South."

Seetharaman's illustrious career over the past 20 years has propelled her through some of the top media outlets specialized in financial and economic news, including Bloomberg, CNBC and more recently Fortune. Her rhetoric even in this seemingly innocent introduction to the interview reveals that she has fully absorbed this fundamental notion of economic ideology used traditionally to justify wealth inequality.

To kick off the conversation, Seetharaman then employs an artistic metaphor. "Paint us a little bit of a picture of India and how India's being impacted," she begins. With a few bold brushstrokes Jaishankar quickly passes in review the topics COVID, India's economy,

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China and Afghanistan. After evoking India's tension with China, he cuttingly drops the "useful reminder to Europe that there are other things happening in the rest of the world that perhaps Europe does not pay enough attention to." How is that – he seems to be suggesting – for a "a little bit of a picture" of "the rest of the world?"

Seetharaman then intervenes with a question she deems important submitted by a member of the online audience: "How interested are the Indian people in the war in Ukraine? Is it a major concern, or a minor one?" The suggestion that it may be a minor one sums up the tone the journalist develops throughout the conversation that minimizes India's importance with regard to the real issues in the world. It contains an implicit reproach of Indian indifference to what Westerners see as a defining existential drama.

The minister responds with a detailed explanation of the nature of the impact of events in Europe on both the Indian government and Indians themselves. This provides the first opening for what Seetharaman considers the big question, and indeed perhaps the only question: the problem of India's traditional stance of "non-alignment." To make her point, she brings up the question of India's importing of oil from Russia, which she sees as the nation's defiance of the West's campaign to cripple Russia's economy. Assuming the role of a police interrogator, she aggressively frames her question as an accusation of criminal behavior: "Is that profiteering? Is that looking out for your own interests? What does that really mean for the foreign policy of India and how do you tie non-alignment with nine times more oil imports out of Russia?"

Politely and in appropriate detail, Jaishankar explains why the question of imports has nothing to do either with alignment or non-alignment. He points to a double standard, given that Europe, enthralled by American sanctions, is still allowed to consume Russia

gas. He adds that Western sanctions on Iran's oil had already cut off India's most reliable traditional source.

Undaunted and seeming not to have processed the minister's remarks, Seetharaman follows up with another accusatory question. "How do you then sit back," she asks, "and define Indian foreign policy at this point where the West seems to be quite vociferous in trying to curtail funding for the war in Ukraine whereas by purchasing this oil for its national interest, India is being asked, 'are you funding this war?'"

Her rhetoric is not only insidious and transparent but also insulting. Accusing the government of her own forebears of "sitting back" and presumably playing deceptive games cannot be considered either good journalism or acceptable diplomacy. She is directly challenging India's and her interviewee's integrity. And of course, Jaishankar has just answered exactly that question.

Maintaining a polite tone, the minister responds saying, "I don't want to sound argumentative" to her clearly argumentative question. He then comes back to a point he had already made, this time in the form of a rhetorical question. "Tell me that buying Russian gas is not funding the war? It's only Indian money and oil coming to India which funds but it's not gas coming to Europe that funds?"

### **From Oil to Wheat**

Seetharaman then seeks a new angle of attack that she has some difficulty articulating. She asks her guest to explain "the second aspect that India's foreign policy being questioned [about] at this point." Instead of "aspect," she could have said "the second invented accusation." This one concerns measures Indians have taken to ban wheat exports in a time of need, with Russian and Ukrainian exports blocked and the global South facing possible famine.

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The journalist asks if the minister sees that as “supporting Russia... or is it a completely different element that we don’t understand in the West?” With a wry smile, Jaishankar replies: “I think the answer is B. You don’t understand in the West.” He then helpfully explains to this journalist supposedly specialized in the workings of the economy that it was an element of the West’s ideology that is to blame for this restrictive policy. India was forced to adopt these measures to keep its wheat exports out of the hands of speculators in Singapore and Dubai, who in this time of crisis have been seeking to monopolize the market with the intent of selling at higher prices to high income countries, while neglecting the most needy.

This exchange reveals a reflex that now exists among all the proponents of the Western coalition in the media. Any action taken by a friendly country that fails to conform to the most arbitrary and ill-thought-out dictates of the NATO-allied West can be deemed to be “supporting Russia.” This marks a return to the “global war on terror” reasoning of George W Bush, whose binary logic informed us, “if you are not with us, you are against us.” Bush, however, had the excuse of being physically at war in Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast, today, even while bullying the world into joining its effort to cripple Russia’s economy and undermine Vladimir Putin’s presidency, neither the US nor Europe wants to be seen as being literally at war with Russia.

Jaishankar uses the occasion not just to clarify that it is mere fantasy to suppose Indian complicity with Russia, but especially to highlight the fact that the West’s approach to management of supply to the needy nations of the world leaves a lot to be desired. He cites the disastrous management of vaccine distribution that was monopolized by the wealthy nations, victimizing the poor and prolonging the pandemic’s global effect.

### **The Wall Street Journal as the Font of Truth**

Seetharaman then reads a question submitted by a member of the online audience, who cites the authority of The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), this time accusing India of the transshipment of Russian oil. The minister mockingly dismisses the very idea of transshipment as a nonsensical fantasy. Seetharaman seems astonished that Jaishankar’s should dare to deny something the WSJ reported and asks him if he deems it “inaccurate.” Though superficially accepting his denial, she immediately tries to reframe the accusation by asking whether India may be playing the role of “conduit to any Russian oil transactions.”

This exchange reveals two important facets of today’s Western propaganda. The first is that unfounded suspicions of practices that deviate from Western norms are routinely presented as facts by the most “respectable” organs of the press. The second is that readers of such supposedly informative journals – whether it’s the WSJ, The New York Times, The Economist or The Washington Post – accept as unvarnished truth reporting that is little more than speculative rumor. Like the adepts of Q-Anon, they have difficulty accepting any denial of such invented accusations, on the grounds that these organs of the press are above reproach. That impression alone facilitates the work of political and economic propagandists.

At this point a Lithuanian journalist stood up with a new accusation, that India was “essentially ignoring war crimes in Ukraine, not condemning Russia, not doing sanctions.” Referring to its “struggle” with China, the journalist asked “how do you think you’ll be trusted by others after that?” Correctly perceiving the question to be a mix between a reproach and a threat by powerful Western nations not to back India in its differences with China, Jaishankar returns the question. He reminds the journalist that since “Europe collectively... has been singularly silent about many things which were happening, for example, in Asia, you could ask why anybody

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in Asia could trust Europe on anything at all.” Turnabout, as the proverb tells us, is fair play.

The minister clarifies once again that what the journalist claims is “mischaracterizing our position” and explains why. More pertinently, he points to the absurdity of the implied reasoning, characterizing it as “a transaction” following the idea “that I come in one conflict because it will help me in conflict two,” adding this pertinent remark: “That’s not how the world works.”

Once again, instead of processing what the minister has just explained, Seetharaman tries to reformulate the same accusation in very much the same terms. “You have a problem with China on the border,” she begins before continuing with the question, “what position does that leave you in when it comes to seeking support if further incursions are done?” To bring home the seriousness of her claim, she poses another question coming from “one of the foremost geopolitical strategists on Wall Street,” who wants to know to whom, in a moment of crisis, India would look for support, the US or China? The questioner refers to this as “a defining moment that comes out of the defining moment that we face with Russia right now.”

### **Europe and the West Have a Mindset Problem**

Perceiving this challenge to be a frank attempt at psychological bullying by a particularly bellicose group of ideologues, Jaishankar reacts by providing what should be remembered as one of the best political quotes of the 21st century. “You know,” he intones, “somewhere Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.” India has been living with that mindset for more than two centuries.

He goes on to characterize the binary logic promoted by that mindset: “Your grand strategy must be about how you will choose.” Once

again refusing to acknowledge the minister’s line of reasoning, Seetharaman interrupts him by interjecting what she takes to be a truism: “There will always be two axes. At this point it’s an understood, accepted fact. You have the

West, US-led. You have China as the next potential axis. Where does India fit into this?”

The minister correctly identifies this as a “construct you are trying to impose on me.” In other words, a perfect illustration of the Western Eurocentric mindset. He asserts that India is entitled to weigh its own interests and make choices that, contrary to the worldview of the West, “are not cynical and transactional.” In other words, the self-interested “buying, selling, trading” logic of Wall Street – quintessentially cynical and purely transactional – is not appropriate to democracies.

Once again, discarding what Jaishankar has just explained, Seetharaman reformulates the same question, this time in even more cynical and transactional terms. With one fifth of the world’s population, she admonishes him, “you cannot sit on the fence with regard to foreign policy matters.” She adds the warning that “non-alignment isn’t plausible if you want to take your position on the world stage.”

Jaishankar responds that the accusation of sitting on the fence “just because I don’t agree with you” makes no sense. Instead, he counters that “I’m sitting on my ground.” Seetharaman’s rhetoric is revealing. For her, the world is a stage, a hyperreal platform on which decisions are made by important people. Those who are incapable of holding forth on the stage, where, as we know, “poor players” are wont to “strut and fret” while those who don’t deserve to join them are condemned to sit on the fence. But, as Shakespeare told us, being on the stage accomplishes little. All that strutting and fretting ultimately signifies nothing.

He goes on to state what should be obvious to all, listing “the big challenges of the world” that transcend the “sound and fury” of a complex war in Eastern Europe. He identifies

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them as “climate change, terrorism “and the emergence of a world order,” as well as security and sustainable development goals. He implies that cooperating on solving those problems should have priority over what the rest of the world see as a proxy war for military dominance in one corner of Europe.

In this curious rhetorical fencing match, he then attempts a fatal thrust. “A lot of things are happening outside Europe,” he tells this Western journalist of Indian heritage. He informs her that “the world cannot be that Eurocentric as it used to be in the past.”

### **When journalism imitates Lewis Carroll**

After this sally comes the final great moment of the interview. Anyone who remembers Lewis Carroll’s *The White Knight’s Song* in *Through the Looking-Glass*, will recognize the resemblance between Seetharaman and the narrator of Carroll’s poem, a poet who interrogates a man he happens upon in the countryside. Repeating the same question over and over again, the poet fails to take any account of the man’s answers, drifting off into his own speculations and fantasies. At least the narrator of the poem (Carroll’s parody of William Wordsworth), unlike Seetharaman, admits his inability to listen and process information. He confesses in the first stanza that “his answer trickled through my head/ Like water through a sieve.”

And so it is that, like Lewis Carroll’s persona, Seetharaman reformulates the same question, this time with these words: “And who will India play with? Will it be Europe and the US or will it be China and Russia?” The minister follows his nuanced answer with a serious recommendation as he attempts to appeal to the journalist’s sense of professionalism: “Don’t use necessarily a caricature version of one situation as a yardstick to pass a sweeping judgment.” Alas, that is all she has been doing for the past half hour.

Concerning the Ukraine conflict itself, he adds a thought that seems curiously absent in all official Western discourse. He reminds Seetharaman and the public that one day a negotiated peace will have to come, meaning that “it is in our collective interest to find some kind of resolution... unless you’re throwing your hands up and saying this is not fixable.”

This time it is Jaishankar who is guilty of mischaracterizing Seetharaman’s position and indeed the position of the entire Western coalition. They are not saying it isn’t fixable. They are saying it is only fixable on our terms, following the unimpeachable wisdom of geopolitical strategists on Wall Street.

These exchanges offer yet another illustration of how Western journalists are locked into an ideological program that requires them to endlessly repeat invented narratives already present in the media. In their interviews, they strive to confirm those points rather than to explore other avenues of understanding. That this happens routinely in newsrooms and editorial meetings should not be surprising. They have copy to deliver in conformity with the editorial line. But this is true even when the valuable resource for their reporting is sitting in front of them in the same room.

Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar must be congratulated for being one of the rare political voices that dares to challenge Western media to its face and find the appropriate tone for doing so.

### **Take Away From the Interview**

India’s Minister of External Affairs put in a brilliant performance but offered nothing radically new about India’s stance. His impressive pedagogical dexterity permitted him to confirm with appropriate factual detail what is already public knowledge about India’s non-alignment. After all, he is the author of a book, *The India Way*, that provides the scaffolding for everything he says in this interview.

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Surely, Seetharaman herself, with her Indian heritage, already understood that.

What the rest of us can take from this fascinating confrontation has less to do with understanding India than coming to grips with the mindset of the media in the West, particularly its refusal to handle or even admit any diversity of perspective. For Western journalists, even of Asian origin, it doesn't matter how much you already know or even what you may be able to learn from a source sitting in front of you.

What matters is your capacity to unfailingly repeat the mindset of your Western corporate and political masters. They have clearly enunciated their own unshakable geopolitical strategy, which is regurgitated in the news cycles on a daily, if not hourly, basis. They are intent on seeing it repeated ad nauseum until the public, hypnotized by the repetition, accepts their narrative as divine truth and deems no other possible truth valid.

Seetharaman may understand more than she lets on. She may well be playing a role that has been scripted for her. That would be perfectly understandable. After all, she is continuing to pursue a shining career. What is regrettable is that she seems to identify with that role.

It is worth noting that this interview has been the object of commentary across the full span of Indian media. Not one Western outlet has even referred to it. But there is a reason for that. In the West, nuanced discourse, curiosity about others and diversified perspectives are simply not considered news. News consists of two things: dramatic events of any kind and what may be called the official or authorized account of the meaning of those events.

In US media, there may be as many as two official accounts of certain events, but no more than two. The implicit rule seems to be that those two narratives correlate either with Democrat vs Republican, liberal vs conservative or even woke vs un-woke or anti-

woke positions. Even then, when it comes to US foreign policy, the Democrat and Republican positions tend to align in a single direction of assertive militarism.

The rhetorical advantage of this alignment is that any other perspective than the official one will be systematically denounced as a form of complicity with the enemy. Fox News's Tucker Carlson was thus ostracized as a Kremlin agent by a near unanimity of the media when, in the runup to the Russian invasion, he claimed that the US had no legitimate reason to engage or even take sides in a possible conflict. That take was verboten. Every visible critic of the US commitment to the war, including Carlson, was branded a Kremlin puppet.

### **The language of Cold War**

The other takeaway is that the mindset Jaishankar refers to is not only solidly established in both official and media circles in the West but it is also clearly a worldview built around the logic of a New Cold War. It will not tolerate the very idea of multipolarity. It expects every nation and every people on earth who are not named Russia and China (or Iran and North Korea) to align with the US and implement all its policies. To call the side aligned with the West "the free world" thus becomes little more than a sick joke. No nation claiming membership in the free world is permitted to think or act freely.

What is most surprising is that three quarters of a century after the breakout of the first Cold War that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the effective globalization of the world's economy, the language of the 1950s is once again on the lips of supposedly serious commentators. When Seetharaman affirms "there will always be two axes" and that "sitting on the fence is not a plausible option," it becomes apparent that it isn't Western political philosophy, with its commitment to democracy, but the Western economic system that dictates how the world must work.

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Western political philosophy has accordingly been reduced to a litany of empty slogans about democracy, freedom and human rights, as an economic oligarchy has grabbed the reins of power. The capitalist economy has become dependent on its dogma of competition that can now only be envisioned as a binary, Manichean conflict between good and evil. Multipolarity would be too confusing for Western leaders and pundits to seek to come to grips with.

Cold wars are always about ideology. But the easily recognizable ideologies of the past have disappeared or been transformed beyond recognition. US President Joe Biden has replaced the easier-to-understand rivalry between capitalism and communism by an imagined conflict between democracy and authoritarianism. But he has done so at a time when authoritarian practices have become the dominant trend in the culture of the indispensable leader of the free world. They increasingly include censorship, mass surveillance (both public and private), fomenting a climate of suspicion, shaming and jailing of those who think differently, mass incarceration and military bravado.

As a proclaimed think-tank, GLOBSEC might have used its forum to offer an example of thinking and problem-solving when it invited into its field of political research the Minister of External Affairs of a nation that comprises one fifth of the human race. Instead, it conducted an exercise in thought repression and enforcement of global conformity to its controlling mindset.

Few people in the West will have the opportunity to watch this interview, despite its obvious interest for anyone interested in global reality. It's a pity that Americans and Europeans will continue to be told that "the whole world" is aligned with NATO's objectives in Europe. It means they cannot even begin to suspect a more fundamental truth: that the vast majority of humanity has a nuanced view of complex political conflict in Eastern Europe.

Included in that majority are both Americans and Europeans, a thinking minority. But their voices are never heard because, as noted above, nuance has no place in the news. Whether it is Noam Chomsky or Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, people with something important to say will be allowed to speak, but their message will never be heard by more than a few. And when they do speak up, even in an interview, their words will trickle through the heads of their listeners and their interviewers, like water through a sieve. That is how effective the New Cold War censorship has become.

**\*Peter Isackson** is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology.

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## **Dead Souls in America: Taking Away Guns is the Only Way**

Larry Beck  
June 20, 2022

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**America seems so insecure today precisely because of the chaotic proliferation of firearms in civilian hands.**

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**“L**ook, I own guns, and I'm a hunter. But all the hunters and gun owners I know are responsible gun owners who favor common sense gun safety measures.” This is complete bullshit, repeated over and over again to create the illusion that we are in this together to stop the crazies from killing our kids in schools and our friends and families at the mall or in the grocery store.



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## **Too Many Weapons With Too Many People**

There are over 400 million firearms in civilian hands in the United States. I am sure that a whole bunch of them are owned by people who hunt something other than humans. But I am equally sure that a whole bunch of them are owned by people who hunt, own military style weapons, possess military style magazines and ammunition, leave easy access to their guns to anyone around, and fight tooth and nail to ensure their access to even more weaponry. And I am sure that a whole bunch of them don't give a damn about the carnage left behind, especially if the dead and dying are Black or Brown souls.

And how about those gun manufacturers and gun dealers. I'll bet a whole bunch of them are hunters too. Probably even the guy who thought it was a good idea to sell two AR-15 semi-automatic rifles to the same kid just days after his 18th birthday, not to mention the extended magazines and ammunition necessary to turn those weapons into active killing machines in Uvalde, Texas. Let's find that guy and interview him for his take on hunting and gun safety.

And the cops on the scene, likely hunters and heroes all. Surely they are not afraid to plug a deer, but put them up against a hunter of humans with a "long gun" and they wait around for a key to open the door to an elementary school killing field. Behind that door was a room filled with a killer, one of his AR-15 rifles with loaded magazines at the ready, and the pools of blood around nineteen dead or dying children and two dead teachers. Also, behind that door were those children who somehow survived covered in blood and bullet fragments to relive this nightmare for the rest of their lives.

I wonder whether any of those cops will change their point of view about guns in civilian hands after what they witnessed that those guns, those magazines, and those exploding bullets can do. Their silence, and

the silence of tens of thousands of other cops, says it all.

So save the pious crap for the thoughts and prayers that litter the landscape of a violent land filled with violent people, and a gun culture that always raises the ante and the death toll. It was easy to find the first deflection. All those "responsible" gun owners were at the ready to bemoan the dismal carnage and repeat their pious outrage about guns in the wrong hands. Yet, nowhere in the mix will there be any self-reflection that they themselves bear any responsibility for the carnage. For somehow, it is the freedom to create that carnage that is more precious to them than someone else's precious child with a body destroyed beyond recognition by the firearms that those "responsible" gun owners crave.

## **Examining the Second Amendment**

Just what is this precious freedom that is so worth the carnage to so many. It is the supposed individual right to keep and bear arms. Some say that this right is enshrined in the Second Amendment to the US Constitution. Yet that Second Amendment doesn't say a word about individual gun ownership or who among the people shall enjoy the precious right. Nor does it mention automatic and semi-automatic weapons or what to do when human ingenuity creates high-capacity magazines and exploding bullets.

In fact, the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution is short and extremely imprecise. It says in its entirety: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

So, if you are a member of a well-regulated militia, it seems that you have the right to access a gun or two in order to perform the duties associated with a late 18th century public militia. Beyond those merry militiamen, the amendment doesn't even try to suggest who else might be included among the "people"

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whose right to keep and bear arms is not to be infringed.

If the revered founding fathers wanted to arm everyone, they probably would have said so. Remember how purposeful they were in leaving women out of most of the Constitution and how famously precise they were in creating the three-fifths Black guy. Yet now, all of sudden, the word “people” means everybody. And just to add to the definitional confusion, the Second Amendment doesn’t even try to define the word “arms,” leaving that task to the gun manufactures of the future and their paid flacks and corrupted politicians.

There has been much written about the history of today’s quixotic notion of individual gun rights. But one thing is certain, in order to get there, whether you are a gun nut or a Supreme Court justice, you have to ignore the entire introductory phrase of the Second Amendment. Only by doing so can you arrive at the conviction that an individual right to bear any and all arms is enshrined in the US Constitution.

To be precise, individual citizens armed to hunt deer or prairie dogs, protect themselves, and indiscriminately kill and maim other humans, is the antithesis of any notion of a well-regulated militia that is “necessary to the security of a free State.” America seems so insecure today precisely because of the chaotic proliferation of firearms in civilian hands.

### **Fear Your Armed Neighbors**

At this moment, the gunmen that we should fear are our armed neighbors. We should fear them because they are gunmen. We should understand that the ones among them who create the chaos do not act alone. They act with our tacit support when we say nothing about the guns they own, and about the people in our communities who arm them for profit. They act with our overt support when we buy into their fantasies by doing nothing to disarm them. The lone wolf idea is nothing more than another

useful fiction that keeps us quiet and does a disservice to wolves. The killers never act alone.

So, save it folks, I want you to know that I am coming after your guns, all of them. Because I know and you know that that is the only way to truly protect ourselves from each other and our baser instincts that so often turn so deadly only in that instant when a trigger is pulled. Learn to fish. It is more satisfying and only fatal to humans who are stupid enough to swallow their own hook.

As we watch America’s legislative gun control charade play out in the days and weeks ahead, it is useful to remember that there are times when something can be better than nothing. However, sometimes, and this is one of those times, “something” sure looks like nothing.

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## **Exploring the Confessions of a Modern Indian**

Maanas Jain and Peter Isackson  
June 25, 2022

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**D**ear Maanas,  
Reading your fascinating article, Confessions of a Modern Indian, I was intrigued by a distinction you made, which people outside India may not be aware of. You wrote, “The difference between Westernism and Liberalism used to be a fine line for me until I realized that there was indeed a large gap.”

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I myself wrote an article on the word “liberalism” as it has been used by The Economist throughout its history dating back to 1843. I described the term as “one of the most confusing labels used to describe today’s civilization.” I pointed out how flexible the meaning seems to be, depending on context. Obviously, within the Indian context and concerning your generation, you are not thinking along the same lines as The Economist. Neither are you using it in the same ways it is used in the US, where contrast “liberal” with “conservative” are using it in their own culturally specific way, which has turned out to be another source of confusion.

As for the term Westernism, I’m familiar with the deep cultural divide that once separated Russians who identified with European culture from the Slavophiles who rejected European models and insisted on cleaving to the Slavic soul of their motherland. This rivalry dominated the question of Russian identity for the better part of two centuries. It has sadly re-emerged today in a new iteration focused on Ukraine’s Slavic but not Russian identity. Ukraine has long struggled, culturally and psychologically, with the problems likely to befall a culture sandwiched between the East and the West. Obviously, when you use the term Westernization, it is specific to India, which has had its own complex relationship with Western culture.

I would therefore be grateful if we could take this occasion to give Fair Observer’s readers some insight to the nuanced meaning of the terms. What can you, as a young Indian, tell us about how you and your generation understand these terms?

### **Maanas Jain**

The word ‘liberal’ is an English word of which I always knew the meaning, and I’m sure others know it too. But past a certain age and maturity, I think people need to begin treating the word as the embodiment of certain ideals, especially

if they are going to use the term to claim the betterment of peoples’ lives.

If ‘liberalism’ means being open to ideas, opinions and cultures, then all ideas should either be evaluated on the same logical basis, or we should not even bother to compare and judge them and simply assume the attitude that ignorance is bliss.

### **Peter**

That definition stressing openness sounds somewhat similar to the traditional American idea, which implies welcoming social experimentation, refusing to be bound by traditions and inherited rules, while avoiding being disrespectful at the same time. With the culture wars around “wokeness” that seems to have changed radically and is the object of heated debate these days in the US. But coming back to India, who are the Indians that have adopted the liberal outlook you describe?

### **Maanas**

The Indians who care about the term are primarily middle-class and above. This demographic thus consists of wealthy people, people who have time to bother about the value of ideals and who question the morals guiding their life’s choices. But this generalization is an ideal, and from what I’ve seen, most people don’t do this. What they seem to care about more is convincing themselves that their lives are ‘correct’ and well thought out. And the most convenient way one can delude oneself and society into believing this is by labeling themselves as liberal.

Once ‘liberalism’ is thrown in as a factor of one’s identity, it becomes fundamentally and morally unethical to question the nature of any action or opinion. Everything is judged as equally valid. That may mean that society may evolve in ignorance of the underlying logical – or illogical – basis behind many of its decisions. And since, in India, those who have adopted a modern way of life are the ones who call

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themselves liberal, they thus assume their values are justified.

When I lived in Pune, one of India's developed cities, I was at an age at which I would be able to remember people and events to ponder about in the future. That experience led to my long-standing unease and even a feeling of inferiority that developed while having lived in such a society.

Many of my friends and acquaintances represented a part of the population that adhered to liberal values. Their ways of attaining happiness were already defined. These were the people who commented on the Indian government behaving like a dictatorship, complained of outdated cultures holding people back and advocated following one's heart and passion. These were also the people whose happiness lay in Instagram, shopping malls, fancy restaurants and alcohol. While they talked about diversity, there was nothing diverse in their social community. The word freedom, when they uttered it, now seems to me like a hollow concept.

For these Indians, liberalism is a fad. It's about casting away the chains that our indigenous, 'retrograde' culture has forced upon us and ascending to the glorious world of consumerism and capitalism. Leaving aside what the term 'absolute right' actually means, if they tried to be logically consistent, these liberals would view Indian culture as equally acceptable. Since that is not the case, the term 'liberal' is tainted by the values imported from the West that this community actually embodies. Thus the term I like to use is pseudo-liberal, or just Western, though this term seems to offend the individuals being addressed.

### **Peter**

Where do you see these values expressed?

### **Maanas**

Today I feel that much of how people's inner minds work can be gleaned from their social

media feeds. Certain trends are predominant among the majority of the users, limiting the diversity of ideas or discussions. Now this seems paradoxical, if you accept the idea that the platforms are presumably designed for sharing one's uniqueness. But I guess this is logical, as social media tends to attract people who, in the first place, simply want to fit in.

One could argue that their social media activity represents what they want to show others in their quest to conform, and not what they actually believe deep down inside. But on a larger scale, I don't think people's inner thoughts are very significant. The sad reality is that the state of any situation and the expected responses are based on what people say and how they act, not what they believe deep down inside. Regardless of internal beliefs, most people, who have a conformist instinct, will respond according to dominant social trends.

### **Peter**

Can you give some examples of how that conflict plays out?

### **Maanas**

During my limited time on Instagram, the posts about self-love and acceptance, about being unique and having a passion as well as thinking that not being perfect was alright always fascinated me. But trying to imbibe these thoughts would leave me with a sense of inferiority. I began to understand why when I was struggling to conform to conventional education during the preparatory phase for my medical entrance exams.

At that time, I complained about Indian mainstream education being too orthodox, limiting and not about testing individuals' unique qualities. But with this entire line of thinking, I was merely fooling myself. It was all an elaborate excuse I was using to cover up my inability to work hard. And considering the common trend in India, that most teenagers of upper-class societies are unable to get good

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rankings on national entrance exams, I believe that the situation is the same for them too.

When faced with a challenge too difficult to tackle, like a competitive exam, they invoke the power of liberalism. The claim that others need to accept their differences, their uniqueness, that they are passionate about something else, that their inability to stress themselves is okay. Of course, justifying themselves in this manner isn't an isolated decision that each individual makes. It's part of their culture and just a component of a plethora of other perspectives that lead to their decision to move away from mainstream education.

**Peter**

Is this culture common to your generation in India or do you see it as associated with a class in Indian society?

**Maanas**

My medical college consists of top-ranking students from all around India. And it's clear from their behavior that during their phase of preparation, they didn't care about being different. They chose to believe that they were the same as everyone else, that they were the same as those who got better marks, that they too could rise to that level, and all they needed to do was work harder. I don't think it's a coincidence that most of the people in my college are middle or lower class, and only very few are much more noticeably wealthy.

**Peter**

So, the liberal mindset has an impact on attitudes to education. Are there other institutions that it effects?

**Maanas**

There is one area where liberalism in India generally witnesses a tremendous surge of popularity – when it comes to finding the faults of religion. Some of the older generations in our modern societies are atheists, but almost all

teenagers indefinitely are. They view religion as a bubble inside which people are trapped. According to them, the religious are ignorant of the freedom and the “true” happiness that lies outside their bubble and can be found in the joys of modernism. To me this seems like nothing more than another religion and another bubble. Fundamentally, consumerism is nothing more than a religion. It is a moral system that people believe, if followed, will lead to happiness. But acknowledging that this may be the equivalent of a religion is something no one bothers to consider.

During one of my lectures in medical college, a psychiatrist taught my class the definition of a delusion. It has three components. The first is belief in something that is not a fact. The second is the persistence of the belief even after the falsity of the fact has been proved. The third is belief in an idea that is not widely held by people of the same socioeconomic status. After the class, my friends were awed by the thought that religion was just a potential delusion, which would be the case if no account was taken of the third condition mentioned by the psychiatrist.

The way religion is selectively targeted for this discussion is interesting and definitely not liberal. A better statement would have been that any widespread belief, be it philosophy, spirituality or materialism could be considered a potential delusion, but is not because a majority of the population believes in its existence. After all, the very power that gives money value is just the baseless belief that it has intrinsic value.

But this won't stop pseudo-liberals from scoffing at people who pray outside the temples after the gates have been closed and people who listen to religious prayers and devotional songs. However, it's okay for them to gawk at cars and clothes when window shopping or listening devotedly to pop music.

Many people who are strongly religious tend to be close-minded. They aren't open to

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new ideas in general, and they believe that what their culture represents is the “absolute truth”. But right now, it seems as if the liberals are behaving in the same way. They are supporting Westernism without any definitive logical claims as to why it is better. This is where the problem arises. The liberals portray themselves as more intellectual than the others. They believe that their opinions, if implemented, are what will lead to a better future. But this hides a certain hypocrisy and escapism. If they want to tag themselves as torchbearers, they should be willing to think more honestly and in a genuinely liberal manner.

I am not defending all aspects of Indian culture (for example – sati, where the wife ascends the funeral pyre of her husband, a practice that pseudo-liberals commonly bring up). I am merely highlighting the fact that the pros and cons of all cultures must be considered. The Western concepts that pseudo-liberals view as freedom are more often than not the effects of indirect manipulations by large organizations, including corporations. For example, the value of brands that are subliminally embedded in people’s minds, as opposed to the method in India whereby one is made to imbibe certain values through the direct commands of family members.

In many ways, since Westernism promotes the idea of continuous economic and technological growth, a true liberal must be willing to accept that these are not necessarily the definitive goals of humanity. Maybe a culture without monetary goals as its priority is ideologically acceptable as well. Perhaps each community and every individual should be allowed to choose their own delusion without being looked down upon.

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\***Maanas Jain** is a medical student at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Jodhpur in India. Maanas was homeschooled by his parents.

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## General Bajwa Has Reformed the Pakistani Military and Strengthened Democracy

Sergio Restelli  
June 26, 2022

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Over the last few months, even perhaps the last couple of years, a quiet, unobtrusive and perhaps unnoticed transformation has been taking place in the Pakistan Army. There was a time when the Pakistan Army would unabashedly interfere in the politics of the country and play favorites to a point. Apparently, it has now changed track and adopted a hands-off approach, allowing politics to play itself out. This shift in approach surprisingly signifies a more accommodating stance towards democracy and politics.

In recent years, the Pakistan Army has been trying to stabilize civilian governments instead of destabilizing them. Cynics will of course disagree. They might claim that the military had no option but to cut its losses that prompted its current “neutral” stance. However, this is at best a half-truth and overlooks the fact the military could have intervened decisively as it did in the past. Instead, the military now allows Pakistan’s political, constitutional and judicial processes to run.

Does this mean that the military will stay out of the political domain forever? The answer is that we do not know for sure. A lot will depend on both civilian and military leaders as well as political and economic conditions in the country.

### An Unusual General in Pakistan

As of now the Pakistan Army led by General Qamar Javed Bajwa is letting civilian politicians run the country. Imran Khan has been voted out by the parliament and Shehbaz Sharif is the new prime minister in a coalition government. This government is running the

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country with little interference from the military, which is largely trying to stabilize the situation.

Bajwa was not always so benign to democracy. He interfered with the Nawaz Sharif (elder brother of the current prime minister) government who was eventually pushed into exile in 2017. Next year, Bajwa favored Khan and helped him become prime minister. Reports reveal that some candidates were pressured to change loyalties, others were persuaded against running for office, elections were manipulated and other dirty tricks employed. After the 2018 elections, independent members were corralled into Khan's party. The military backed Khan both at the national and the state level. His party won a majority in the state legislature of Punjab, Pakistan's dominant state.

From 2018, Bajwa has changed course. The military has not been interfering in politics. Bajwa served Khan loyally and tried to make his government a success. The military fixed many of Khan's blunders vis-à-vis close allies like China, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Even when Khan went against the military's advice, Bajwa did not act against the elected government. Eventually, Khan lost the confidence of his parliament because he was incompetent and grew delusional over time.

### **A Step to Normalization and Democracy**

Most importantly, the military top brass accepted cuts to the defense budget in 2019 as Pakistan faced economic woes and rushed with a begging bowl yet again to the International Monetary Fund. The military supported the Khan government when it passed legislation to steer Pakistan out of the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) grey list. The FATF is an organization that focuses on combating money laundering, a common practice in Pakistan where some of the proceeds are used to finance terrorism.

Bajwa's biggest achievement has been pushing better ties with India despite Khan's

incendiary anti-India rhetoric. He has called for talks with India, begun back channel initiatives to kick off trade and negotiated a ceasefire on the Line of Control that forms the de facto border with India. Most recently, 50,000 tons of Indian wheat has been rolling through Pakistan for Afghanistan, saving millions of lives. For the first time, there is hope that the military is finally supporting the normalization of ties with India.

Unlike many of his predecessors, Bajwa did not step in when the Khan government suffered a meltdown. He has scrupulously avoided displaying any Bonapartist tendencies in the land of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf. Now, a coalition is in charge and the Bajwa-led military is abiding by the constitution. If the military withdraws from politics and democracy strengthens in Pakistan, Bajwa would have left an enduring legacy for his country.

**\*Sergio Restelli** is an Italian political advisor, author and geopolitical expert. He served in the Craxi government in the 1990's as the special assistant to the deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Martelli and worked closely with anti-mafia magistrates Falcone and Borsellino.

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## **Russian Imperialism, Not NATO Expansion, Caused the Ukraine War**

Bhaskar Majumdar

June 27, 2022

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**With Vladimir Putin evoking Peter the Great, it is clear that Russian imperialism is alive and kicking. Neighbors fled to NATO precisely to avoid the sharp claws of the Russian bear. After 1991, the West did not expand east. Instead, Eastern Europe moved west.**



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**W**hen it comes to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is easy to get into the popular narrative of the Cold War. Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this narrative still lives subconsciously, if not consciously, in people's minds. It puts things in easy perspectives: a binary black and white, the US against Russia, us versus them. To quote George W. Bush (Bush Junior), this narrative is simple: "If you are not with us, you are against us."

While the Cold War mindset might be obvious, other modes of thinking are less so. A key one is imperialism. In my naive youth, I had never believed that Americans would think of their role in the world from a great-power imperialistic perspective. When the Iraq War broke out in 2003, my impression was rudely shattered. I met a doctor in Connecticut and told him that I had just come from Kuwait. The good medic had never been outside his native state of Connecticut. Yet he expansively waved his hands and asked me: "So how are we managing the region?" I realized then that this attitude was as imperial as the British one of "managing" India or the French one of "managing" Algeria or that of any colonial power "managing" a colony.

Our good doctor was well aware that the US Army had a base in Kuwait and the gateway to Iraq was directly through Kuwait. He assumed that the US was responsible for the whole region as some form of a world's policeman and sovereign states in the region had little say in the matter. Given the fact that the US is the top dog as the sole superpower, it is easy to blame it for neo imperialism and more. Yet imperialism is not an American monopoly and it is important not to view the world through a monochromatic lens.

### **US Provocation or Russian Imperialism?**

Some of the popular narrative in many countries is that the US is responsible for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, at least in part.

John Mearsheimer, professor at the University of Chicago, has popularized this line of thought. He argues that NATO's eastward expansion provoked Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine. The problem with this argument is that it is curiously imperial.

As per Mearsheimer's worldview, NATO in general and the US in particular were at fault for welcoming countries that were in the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Admitting the three former Soviet republics in the Baltics was rubbing salt into wounded Russian pride. This view forgets that the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union, expanded in western Europe as well as in the east all the way to the Pacific. In 1979, the Soviet troops even marched into Afghanistan to protect the communist government.

None of the countries that suffered under Moscow's yoke wants to go back to those. That is what so many of them lined up to join NATO when the Soviet Union fell. Eastern European nations also turned to the EU because of economic opportunities on offer. Poles, Lithuanians and even Hungarians prefer to work in France, Germany and the UK instead of in Russia. In a nutshell, NATO guaranteed security against an imperial Moscow while the EU boosted the economy for Eastern Europe.

An imperial view would see the expansion of NATO as a win for the US and a loss to Russia. However, it might be a good idea not to think of NATO or even the EU expanding east but Eastern Europe moving westward. "Go West, young man" had a new meaning for Poles suffering from nightmares of the 1943 Katyn Forest Massacre when the Soviets slaughtered the flower of Polish society.

Obviously, Russia did not like the eastward expansion of NATO or the EU. For a historically imperial power, this was deeply humiliating. In particular, the Soviet collapse scarred Vladimir Putin. This former KGB officer ended up driving a taxi for a bit. As Atul Singh and Glenn Carle write, the 1990s deeply

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traumatized Russians “who interpret almost every US action and statement as pieces of a long term, coherent plan to undermine Russia.” Russia claims that NATO threatens its sovereignty by encroaching on its near abroad.

### **What Is the Conflict Really About?**

The reality is that NATO armies have no designs on Russian territory. It is Russia that annexed Crimea with impunity and in contravention of international law. Now, it has attacked Ukraine without provocation. It is razing entire cities, killing civilians and committing atrocities in a classically brutal Russian way. The history and the current reality of Russia puts fear into the hearts of its neighbors. That is why Finland and Sweden have applied to join NATO. Their action is defensive, not offensive.

US President Joe Biden may have been at fault in Afghanistan but he is not at fault for Ukraine. Putin is the man responsible for this conflict. Running a kleptocratic regime, this authoritarian leader needs to squash a democratic Ukraine. This removes the risk of calls for democracy in Russia. If Russian forces had taken Kyiv, a Moscow-friendly government would be in place. That was a key objective for Putin’s reckless assault on Kyiv. Unfortunately for the new tsar of Russia, Ukrainians beat back Russian forces.

Now Russian troops are taking over the Donbas region and much of Ukraine’s Black Sea coast so that Russia has a land route to Crimea. Putin’s constant references to history are self-serving justifications and too clever by half obfuscations. Putin recently compared himself to Peter the Great who fought the Great Northern Wars from 1700 to 1721. Addressing young scientists and entrepreneurs, Putin “talked politics and power.” He spoke about the new battle for geopolitical dominance and proclaimed Peter the Great to be a role model who in Putin’s eyes reclaimed Russian land.

For Putin, it is all about land. Russia wants the Donbas, period. And maybe some more.

**\*Bhaskar Majumdar** is the founder and managing partner at Unicorn India Ventures (UIV), an India-based venture capital fund. In the past, he has been an entrepreneur as well as a media and technology executive both in India and the UK.

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## **Biden’s America and MBS’s Saudi Arabia: Is Diplomacy Possible?**

Qanta A. Ahmed  
June 30, 2022

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**Joe Biden’s July visit to Saudi Arabia is a stark reminder that while diplomacy is a give and take, memories in the Middle East run painfully deep.**

**U**S President Biden’s earlier condemnation of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Saudi Arabia, following the beheading of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, resonated globally, with his denigration of the nation as a “pariah.” Biden added, “there was very little redeeming social value in the present government of Saudi Arabia.”

Then-presidential candidate Biden’s comment undermined the near century-long relationship of deeply interwoven national interests between America and Saudi Arabia. This has ramifications that include the history of the mass murder on 9/11 and the slaughter of Khashoggi, who had at one time been editor of the Saudi newspaper, Al Watan, as well as being longtime advisor to Saudi Intelligence chief Prince Turki Al-Faisal.

**Neither an American President nor a Saudi Prince can escape these harsh realities.**

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Saudi Arabia's proven oil reserves run deep, as it is home to the world's largest oil field, and the country clearly holds primacy in the oil and gas basin. With 298 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, according to 2019 estimates, only Venezuela edges ahead of Saudi Arabia at 302 billion barrels.

US reserves stand at 69 billion barrels, in the top 10 nations worldwide, but as the most prolific consumer at almost 17.2 million barrels per day, or 20% of the world's supply, as revealed by US Energy Information data, US supplies may diminish before those of Saudi Arabia.

This is a key factor in the US-led drive to pursue renewable energy that will perhaps liberate the United States from dependence on hydrocarbons, exacerbated by the high cost of gasoline. Exorbitant prices at the pump are influenced by the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the trend of price volatility since April 2020.

### **Balancing Biden's diplomatic rhetoric**

Instead of a sweeping rebuke, perhaps an acknowledgement of the heinous crime without the excoriation of the US' most valuable ally in the Muslim-majority world, would have been more astute. This is a region where memories are measured by the reigns of monarchs and time dates back to the Hijra, the Prophet Mohammed's divinely ordained decampment from Mecca, in the year 622 of the modern era.

Middle East's rulers and officials will trace Biden's legacy back to President Barack Obama's policies, which further divided a Muslim world already wrenched apart by the global war on terror. Obama's presidency in this region is defined for many by a US stance that empowered Islamists over Muslims and favored cultivating the mothership of Islamism, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, under former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

Many in the region also say the era also empowered the AKP Islamists founded by

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the expense of the persecuted Kurds. Some report these US policies also emboldened Shia Islamist Iran during their colonization and proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen's internecine civil war.

Yet despite being embroiled in Yemen in the South and being flanked by a deeply conflicted Iraq and failed Syrian state, Saudi Arabia is demonstrating a certain facility at playing the long game.

On the threshold of Biden's visit, Saudi Arabia's allies are now confronting a nuclear power in Iran that has enriched sufficient uranium to be weaponized. Iran recently disconnected 27 monitoring camera-feeds to the international atomic energy agency.

In Northern Tehran at the Saadabad Palace, President of Iran Sayyid Ebrahim Raisolsadati and Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela signed a 20-year cooperation deal to rebuild Venezuela's refining capabilities. This will enable Iranian engineers to help process Venezuela's crude oil in exchange for Iranian condensates to make Venezuela's oil more attractive on the global market.

Also in the region, Israel is reportedly escalating its own aggressive activities aimed at defanging nuclear Iran while forming security alliances not only with the Abraham Accords' nations but also with Saudi Arabia.

Biden states that he is attending the summit in Saudi Arabia to solidify US national security in the region and beyond. But the region, including the two custodians of the world's oldest Abrahamic religion and its youngest – Israel and Saudi Arabia – are no longer heeding US intentions. They are reportedly following their own regional security concerns and increasingly shared foreign policies.

### **Saudi Arabia is complicated and critical for the US**

In the last 20 years since leaving Saudi Arabia where I practiced medicine and performed the

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Hajj, there has been an undeniable expansion of both the voice and rights for men and women.

Since 2013, the Majlis al-Shura Consultative Council (a legislative consultancy in existence since 1926) has instituted, by law, a mandatory 20% quota for women representatives. Saudi Arabia has become more porous to the international world as both its intellectual liberals and its orthodox clerics enjoy expanded accessibility by the Saudi public. This is posing a new challenge to the Saudi monarchy, which must manage the impact of clerics with millions of followers on social media channels.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 conceived by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to realize Saudi Arabia's post-petrochemical future, includes the goal of a vast expansion of its international tourism that attracts millions of religious pilgrims from around the world. In 2019 the country expanded access to tourists through e-visas, a program launched just before the global pandemic.

To be sure, political dissent is not tolerated in Saudi Arabia and remains a global human rights concern. Khashoggi's reported political dissidence resulted in his state-sponsored assassination. More recently, in March 2022, Saudi authorities carried out a mass execution of 81 men.

These painful realities must inform and shape both the current diplomacy and the direction of future policies between the US and Saudi Arabia, a relationship that will continue long after Biden's administration ends.

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