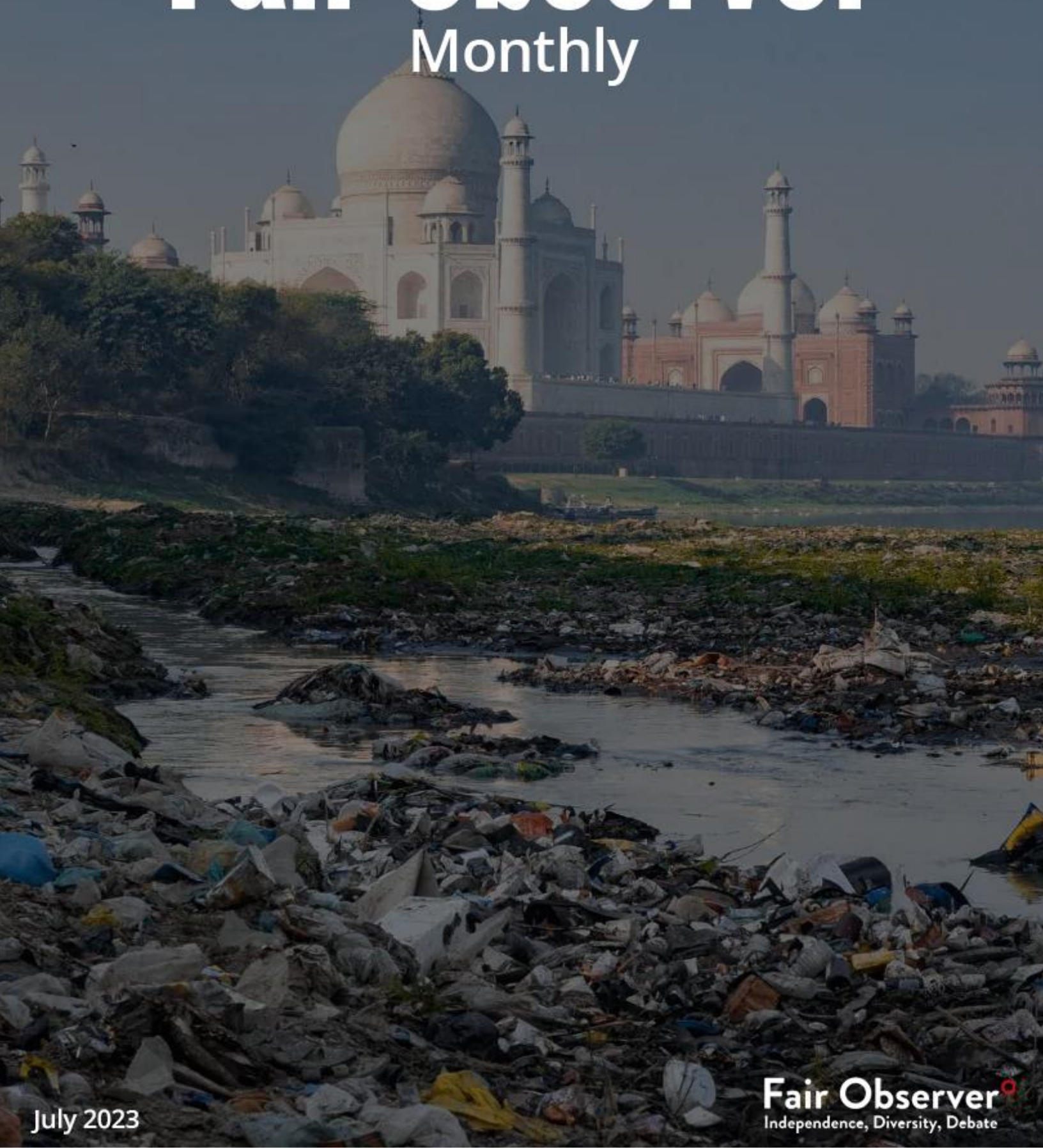


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Independence, Diversity, Debate

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Elective Dictatorship: The Plot by Britain's Radical Conservatives

Alan Waring, John Broadway
July 01, 2023

Since the middle of the last decade, the British Conservative Party has become increasingly captured by a radical right-wing faction that has taken the party down a path of nationalism and populism. They have resorted to autocratic tactics to protect anti-immigrant and anti-worker policies, eroding the institutions and customs that protect British democracy under the law. Things only seem set to keep getting worse.

The coalition government led by the Conservatives, or Tories, together with the Liberal Democrats from 2010 to 2015 largely continued the traditional “One Nation Tory” style. However, a coalition of radical-right activists, both inside and outside the Conservative Party, was growing. These discontents were implacably opposed to Britain’s continuing membership in the EU and demanded that Britain quit.

Should such activists, in that period and now, be termed “fringe Conservatives,” “ultra-Conservatives,” “radical right,” or “hard right”? The authors prefer “radical right,” since it encompasses the gamut of all such rebels.

Origins of the Neo-Right in the Brexit Debate

In those years, shrill advocacy for the Brexit concept quickly emerged. Tory Members of Parliament (MPs) had founded the European

Research Group (ERG) in 1993 to counter, if not eliminate, EU influence on Britain. During the coalition years, the ERG, along with its supporters in business, the media and radical-right advocacy bodies, placed intense pressure on Prime Minister David Cameron to hold a referendum on Brexit. In 2013, Cameron agreed to offer the electorate a non-binding referendum on whether Britain should remain in the EU. Since, out of some 355 Conservative MPs, the ERG’s membership and subscribers in total are never thought to have exceeded 60, the outsize influence demonstrated by their success is evident. The ERG tail has continued to wag the party dog, or try to, ever since.

Campaigning both for and against Brexit was robust. However, the overall pro-Brexit campaign was on the whole better organized, better funded, and used far more advanced digital, online and social media methods to persuade voters. Crucially, it was also far more ruthless, employing blatantly alarmist “fake facts.” The official Vote Leave campaign also applied large-scale data mining techniques similar to those later used by Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign in the US. This was done under the direction of Dominic Cummings, whom Cameron once reportedly referred to as “a career psychopath” (see later). The 2016 vote delivered a small but clear majority preference to leave the EU.

While Brexit arguably had lofty objectives, its implementation and subsequent realities have witnessed missed targets and major long-term economic damage.

Radical-Right takeover of the Conservative Party

Since 2016, the Brexiteer/ERG agenda has morphed into a generalized radical-right agenda. The insurgents not only espouse uncontrolled free market economic priorities and harbor a revulsion

for the EU, but also gleefully and noisily assert a right-wing authoritarian stance on law-and-order issues. They display an unmistakable animus against the welfare state, benefit claimants, those suffering from social and economic deprivation, immigrants, asylum seekers, ethnic and religious minorities, and victims of human rights abuses and other injustices.

Such proclivities, which pander to populist reactionary sympathies, have more in common with those of far-right parties and groups outside the Conservative Party—such as Reform UK, Reclaim, Far Right For Britain, the British National Party, the English Defence League, Britain First and other fringe groups—than with traditional party values.

Although it is somewhat less extreme, this conversion of the traditional Conservative Party is analogous to the radical-right takeover of the US Republican Party over a similar time frame. The “new” Conservative Party of the 2020s is thus Conservative in name only. Disturbingly, much of the electorate is unlikely to be aware of this radical change from its One Nation heritage.

The authors were both One Nation Conservative supporters for over 30 years until the scale of the Brexit debacle and the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Johnson administration became clear in 2019. There is substantive evidence of a concerted and sustained effort by Britain's ruling Conservative Party since 2019 to impose permanent, illiberal, radical-right governance on the nation. Some of the top-down subversion and coercion (such as proroguing Parliament in 2019) is done openly, as if were perfectly normal and morally acceptable, while other examples involve long-term stealth against the public interest. Although One Nation Conservative MPs still exist, their numbers and influence have been all but obliterated by the dominance of the ERG, its derivatives and its fellow travelers.

Case 1: Imposing Costly Private Healthcare

As we reported in detail last year in Fair Observer, deliberate underfunding of the state National Health Service (NHS) and social care system over 13 years has brought these services into not just a state of chronic dysfunctionality but also virtual collapse. While publicly appearing to champion the NHS, in reality the long-term Conservative policy is to have free market private provision become the only viable alternative in the vast majority of cases. Their ideological imperative appears to be to place the delivery of such services under the primary control of private companies and to ensure that, in effect, state provision withers on the vine.

The NHS and private provision have had a long and largely successful symbiosis since the 1980s, with the primacy of NHS provision assured by state funding paid for by patients via general taxation and National Insurance. Private provision contracted to the NHS has been a vital contributor. However, with the Health and Care Act 2022, the government appears to be pressing ahead with their new “healthcare salvation” model to replace the current NHS model with a direct pathway for private care companies, many of them foreign-based, to access NHS funds. Far from salvation, the impact is likely to be catastrophic for the level and amount of healthcare the NHS can provide, since NHS post-Covid recovery money and other funds will be diverted to boost the preferential use of private care.

Until now, the limit has always been that private care providers had to be awarded an NHS subcontract in order to access funds for clinical procedures. However, recent reports indicate that NHS patients are now being given a direct choice of where to obtain their clinical procedures: either private hospitals (with weeks to wait) or NHS hospitals with months or even years to wait. This choice decision is now taken at the Integrated Care

Board (ICB) level, much lower down the managerial hierarchy than previously and apparently without regard to budgetary limits and fair distribution of funds.

Whilst this sounds like good news for patients, the cost differential between private and NHS is huge, and some ICBs have already spent their annual budget as a result of this new relaxation. The NHS patients budget—worth about £200 billion (around \$250 billion) per year and funded by tax monies and National Insurance contributions—is now unprotected and vulnerable to profiteering by private corporations. Ultimately, the public will pay the price out of their own pockets via additional taxation and private medical insurance premiums. Speed of provision is likely to improve for those who can access it. However, the new system does not guarantee that private clinical provision itself will be superior to NHS provision, nor does it guarantee that affluent patients or those with private medical insurance will not be given preferential treatment.

The Tories have more or less acknowledged that the high likelihood of electoral defeat in 2024, their long-term rundown of the NHS, their drawn-out reluctance to reach a negotiated pay and conditions settlement with exasperated NHS staff, and an accelerated policy push for private healthcare have all merged into what some argue is a deliberate “scorched earth” mess to hand over to an incoming opposition government.

Case 2: Flagrant Attacks on the Judiciary, Civil Service, and Human Rights

The law is under attack by the radical right, which is trampling over the public interest and human rights. For example, in 2019 the Conservative government tried to prorogue (temporarily close) Parliament for five weeks to facilitate executive processes without scrutiny. The Supreme Court unanimously held that this action was unlawful, as

it would have prevented Parliament from supervising the executive. Since then, the Conservative government has vowed to put a stop to what it regards as “judicial interference” in its governing activities.

Determined to push through its political agenda unhindered by judicial scrutiny, the Tories are proceeding in 2023 with legislation to (1) automatically and rapidly deport asylum seekers while denying their access to legal representation or appeal, contrary to international law and UN Convention (more specifically, to deport them to Rwanda—a destination with a highly dubious human rights record—if they cannot be returned rapidly to their country of origin or last known country), and (2) curb the powers of the Supreme Court and the judiciary to intervene in this or other controversies. The Public Order Act 2023, for example, changes the fundamental right to public protest to one of limited freedom, with police making preemptive arrests on suspicion of a protester’s intent.

In June 2023, the Parliamentary Privileges Committee (with a majority of Conservative MP members) found that former Prime Minister Boris Johnson deliberately lied on several occasions to Parliament—a cardinal sin—and to the Committee. He was disingenuous in his evidence to the Committee by denying that he had many times broken COVID social distancing rules: the so-called Partygate Scandal. The report was scathing in its conclusions. Johnson, adopting a blusteringly Trump-like response, made wild and derogatory allegations about the Committee and individual members, making himself look more like a spoiled, self-absorbed brat than a former prime minister.

The parliamentary vote on the report resulted in a huge majority in favor of its acceptance (354 to 7), with House Leader Penny Mordaunt the only Cabinet minister attending. With dignity and

clarity, she justified clearly why the report should be accepted. Many now hope that Johnson's humiliation may signal an end to his style-over-substance brand of politics in Britain. After years of his buffoonery, charm and dishonesty, the public wants grown-ups as political leaders.

The Cabinet also sought to block certain judicial investigations by Baroness Heather Carol Hallett, a retired Court of Appeal judge. Hallett serves as the chair of the Cabinet's own official Partygate inquiry into Johnson's possibly unlawful social distancing conduct and subsequent lying to Parliament. In addition, the government has sought to impose a Cabinet override on the House of Lords (the upper chamber of Parliament) to prevent objections and protective modifications to its illegal Migration Bill. Subjugation of and contempt for the judiciary, as well as Parliament, has become a cause célèbre for this radical-right regime.

Since 2019, Tory government ministers and MPs have frequently attacked their own civil servants, variously accusing them of disloyalty, laziness and obstruction both of government policies and of the ministers' determination to reform the Civil Service. For example, Jacob Rees-Mogg, the former Cabinet Office Minister and unashamed champion of the radical right, referred to Foreign Office officials as "pampered panjandrums" who "prefer to idle away their hours." Justice Secretary and Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab also blamed his enforced resignation for bullying on an alleged conspiracy by civil servants.

Conservative anger has been directed at what ministers have called "The Blob," whereby they assert that senior civil servants have closed ranks to obstruct the government's agenda, even accusing them of supporting political opposition parties. What this government wants is to make civil servants its executive subordinates, to be its

absolute obedient drones, rather than fulfill their traditional role as "honest brokers" and "devil's advocates" trying to ensure that draft policies and legislation are lawful, feasible and as low-risk as possible, while steering ministers safely towards implementing their policies.

Unlike in some other countries, British civil servants are not political appointees. They are state employees whose work and posts normally transcend each change of political administration and thereby help to ensure governmental continuity and stability. Their overriding allegiance is to the Crown (i.e., the constitutional head of state) and not to any particular political administration; they are to remain politically neutral in their work for ministers of the day. Authoritarian Tories refuse to acknowledge this inconvenient subtlety and seem determined to remove it permanently.

Case 3: Cancelling of Inconvenient Expert Opinion

The Conservative government's Cabinet Office has been accused of operating a political blacklist introduced in 2022 against acknowledged subject experts whom the Cabinet Office believes do not share the government's views.

The government is now vetting such specialists by, among other things, screening their posts over the past 3-5 years on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn for "criticism of government officials or policy." Such selective politicization and removal of inconvenient expert information and advice may result in the failure of decision-makers failing to improve their work. As a Times leader comment noted, these rules "are scandalously vague and flimsy" and "were never debated in Parliament nor publicly announced."

The former Cabinet Office Minister Jacob Rees-Mogg is credited with introducing the new rules,

with the Times article headlined “Rees-Mogg’s Blacklist is Positively Soviet.” Others liken it to the US McCarthyist political blacklists of the late 1940s and 1950s: “Are you, or have you ever been, disrespectful to British Conservative Party policy or personnel?”

Case 4: National Impoverishment Caused by Tory Recklessness

Demands for pay raises in the UK public sector have risen on an unprecedented scale since 2022, with workers inflamed by domestic energy bills rising by 200% or more and double-digit annual percentage cost of living increases. Some basic foodstuff prices too have more than doubled since early 2022.

NHS doctors are fighting for a 30-35% increase just to neutralize the claimed fall in their salary value over the past decade. Nurses, ambulance drivers and ancillary staff, schoolteachers, and many other sectors have similarly high wage demands with similar justifications. The Royal College of Nursing, the UK’s largest nursing union, is on strike for the first time in its 100-year history. Large-scale strikes have escalated in the face of the government’s various offers typically capped at some 5-7%.

Government ministers are accused of demanding that public sector workers should, in effect, personally subsidize government coffers, and learn to budget and manage their meager personal finances better. One radical-right Tory MP (formerly of the Labour Party!) and Deputy Party Chairman, Lee Anderson, has even scoffed at the reality of significant numbers of public sector workers now reliant on food banks and charities and suggested that they could easily feed themselves on 30p (or 38¢) per day! Even some armed forces personnel are reportedly using food banks.

Another ERG luminary, Liz Truss, the shortest-lived British Prime Minister in history (44 days in 2022), disgraced and forced to resign by her catastrophic “growth by corporate tax cuts” policy that nearly collapsed the British pound, believes that poor people would somehow benefit quickly from the “trickle-down effect” of corporate tax cuts. Neither she nor her successor Rishi Sunak has ever publicly acknowledged that her ignorance of basic national economics and her ideologically driven certitudes recklessly damaged the immediate and long-term wealth and prosperity of the entire population. Emergency corrective measures alone are estimated to have cost taxpayers over £30 billion (\$38 billion).

Reckless endangerment, resulting from ignorance, incompetence, self-interest above national interest, and breathtakingly naïve ideological certitudes, has been the overriding hallmark of the past 13 years of Conservative rule.

A Collapse of Moral Standards in Public Life

There has been widespread evasion by Tory MPs and ministers of ethical standards in public life, established as a formal code by the Wicks Committee in 2001. The current government has been beset by a culture of sleaze similar to that which engulfed the Tory government in the 1990s, when the term “Tories-and-sleaze” became a national catchphrase. The following examples illustrate the breadth of the scandals since 2019 alone:

— Owen Patterson, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland: improper paid lobbying of government on behalf of a food company; forced to resign).

— Nadhim Zahawi, former Conservative Party Chairman: evasion of millions of pounds in tax liabilities; forced to resign chairmanship and from government.

— Baroness Mone, Conservative Peer: alleged receipt into offshore accounts of £29 million (\$37 million) in bribes for facilitating a contract for major COVID-related supplies with commercial supplier PPE Medpro; forced to suspend herself from House of Lords; under investigation by National Crime Agency.

— Boris Johnson, former Prime Minister: multiple scandals e.g., (1) an £800,000 (\$1 million) loan guarantee for himself while Prime Minister, facilitated by Richard Sharp, shortly before Johnson recommended him for the BBC Chairman post (Sharp failed to declare to the BBC a conflict of interest and resigned his BBC chairmanship); (2) controversy over the scale of costs for internal redecoration of the 10 Downing Street prime ministerial residence and the source of funds to pay for it; (3) the Partygate scandal involving multiple staff parties hosted or attended by Johnson at Downing Street contrary to strict Covid protection rules, and then whether he lied to or misled Parliament about this.

— Scott Benton: accused of paid lobbying of ministers on behalf of the gambling industry and leaking confidential information.

Other Tory MPs have been accused of sexual harassment, sexual assault or rape, including some convictions and jail sentences: Charlie Elphicke, Julian Knight, Andrew Griffiths, Christopher Pincher and David Warburton, and Imran Khan.

A catalog of bullying cases has included Tory ministers (e.g., Gavin Williamson, Dominic Raab) mistreating civil servants, as confirmed by independent inquiries and forced resignations. Such “right of abuse” prerogatives are positively feudal. This bullying trait even extended to particular ministerial advisers, most notably Dominic Cummings, who was appointed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson as his Chief of Staff. The rise of Cummings is profiled by Parker. Waring’s

profile describes Cummings as someone who has undoubted intellectual skills but also presents as “a hyper-authoritarian, driven, fixated, intellectual narcissist ... a great believer in himself, his ideas, and his self-certified superior intelligence and ... very disparaging of those he considers intellectual weaklings or who might attenuate or interfere with his mission.” It should be noted that Cummings was neither an elected MP nor a civil service employee, but rather a contracted consultant. Nevertheless, Cummings adopted a forceful, and by all accounts overbearing and contemptuous, stance towards Cabinet Office staffers, civil servants in ministries and, indeed, MPs and even Cabinet ministers.

Cummings clearly held many in terrorem and apparently was not averse to physical violence, such as the reported attack in 1999 on a former senior official of the Confederation of British Industry. As the leading adviser to Prime Minister Johnson, he created a major scandal by appearing to flagrantly ignore Covid protection rules that applied to every citizen and to which he himself contributed as Cabinet adviser. The scandal went from bad to worse as Cummings not only refused to apologize but brazenly argued in effect that he had been a paragon of virtue and had done nothing wrong. The court of British public opinion rejected such obvious sophistry. The damage to public trust and confidence was evident via a huge slump for the Conservatives in the polls. Eventually, after further misconduct, Johnson decided that Cummings had to go.

Boris “BoJo” Johnson, who took over as Prime Minister in 2019, was very much a political opportunist rather than a radical-right zealot. Reliant on buffoonery, photo-op flim-flam and the chutzpah that charmed many people, policy and strategy were never Johnson’s strong points. So, he left to Cummings such matters as “Get Brexit Done,” radical subjugation of the civil service and removal of independent judicial scrutiny of

government. To many, it appeared as if Cummings was PM and Johnson was his lapdog.

Cummings did not go quietly in November 2020. True to form, he quickly launched into an ongoing vituperative onslaught against Johnson via online blogs and social media. Cummings' powerful position is gone, but he remains an isolated and embittered radical-right fanatic.

Radical-Right Fellow Travellers

Some on the radical right exist within the Conservative Party (e.g., the ERG), while others operate externally in a variety of more hard-line nationalist parties and far-right entities, e.g., Reform UK, Reclaim, Britain First, Patriotic Alternative, and Far Right For Britain. Some radical-right supporters and agitators transcend the distinction between the Conservative Party and far-right nationalist organizations. The National Conservatism (NC) organization, for example, enjoys vocal support from Conservative Party Cabinet Members and MPs, particularly ERG members, as well as supporters of Reform UK and other parties. NC is in revolt against what it regards as a weak Conservative government, its neo-liberal economic and global markets policies, its "soft" immigration policies, and other "liberal" social policies. Three current or former Cabinet Ministers (Braverman, Gove and Rees-Mogg) spoke at the NC's two-day conference in May 2023.

The NC identifies closely with the US-based Edmund Burke Foundation, which strongly backs the Republican Party and big business. This foundation exudes authoritarian nationalism, right-wing moralizing certitudes and white Christian supremacy. Its high-profile radical- and far-right nationalist supporters include Giorgia Meloni, the Italian premier, Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian premier, and Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News presenter—all of whom have attained notoriety for

their harsh and uncompromising "illiberal democracy" comments.

A number of senior Tories (e.g., MPs Lee Anderson, Priti Patel, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and Marco Longhi) have been variously linked to such far-right organizations as the anti-Islam group Turning Point UK. Other Tory MPs also alleged to have far-right sympathies include Bob Blackman, Nadine Dorries, and Dehenna Davison.

The fanatical Lee Anderson, MP, has an abrasive and insulting style, e.g., his conduct towards the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in a parliamentary select committee hearing, and his dismissive let-them-eat-cake rhetoric towards impoverished public sector workers. Home Secretary Suella Braverman with her florid rhetoric has led the anti-immigrant, anti-asylum, anti-woke "culture war." There is some irony in the fact that her jibes about "woke political correctness" are themselves a truth-is-what-we-say-it-is expression of political correctness. By constantly blaming all Britain's problems on a so-called woke culture (i.e., seemingly anyone who dares disagree with her radical ideas and policies), she is in effect blaming the 56.4% of the electorate who did not vote Tory at the last General Election. Sneering and jeering at voters is a bold tactic indeed!

Populist anxieties about thousands of asylum seekers entering the UK by boat have led to such spine-chilling rhetoric as "let them drown" or "send them to Rwanda"—shades of the infamous Madagascar plan, perhaps? Few would disagree that there is indeed a control problem and that organized human trafficking criminals continue to challenge and thwart UK authorities' efforts to stop them. However, the "solution" proposed by Suella Braverman and her predecessor Home Secretary, Priti Patel, to the problem of cross-Channel small-boat asylum seekers is grotesque: treating them as if they were a priori criminals,

locking them up without trial or access to lawyers or the courts, and then swiftly deporting them to Rwanda in Central Africa with no right of appeal and a permanent UK expulsion order against them. These two Home Secretaries have proclaimed loudly that such treatment is inherently humane and compassionate, and that it is compliant with international law and the UN Convention on asylum, despite the UNHCR bluntly challenging that assertion.

Their grinning faces and glinting eyes when advocating the “Rwanda solution” have betrayed a lack of empathy or remorse and an unmistakable glee, almost as if they actually enjoy inflicting as much harm and distress as possible on unfortunate souls. Understandably, puzzled observers wonder if these particular ministers may be suffering from some form of pathological personality disorder.

Mass Political Brainwashing via Internet and Social Media

Some social media outlets have been criticized as being detrimental to democracy. According to Ronald Deibert, “The world of social media is more conducive to extreme, emotionally charged, and divisive types of content than it is to calm, principled considerations of competing or complex narratives.” Mari K. Eder points to failures of the Fourth Estate that have allowed outrage to be disguised as news, contributed to citizen apathy in confronting falsehoods and engendered further distrust in democratic institutions.

However, as Ethan Zuckerman notes, social media presents the opportunity to inform more people, amplify voices and allow for an array of diverse voices to speak. Social media has allowed vast new sectors of society, especially young people, to be engaged politically.

Politicians of all persuasions are using social media, whether via written statements or, more

commonly, direct-to-camera, talking-heads or controlled interviews. These are infrequently shared by other outlets; while they address a choir of faithful supporters and an echo chamber of fellow travelers, such content and messages avoid refutation by others. Among UK parties, the Conservative Party has become relatively expert in this kind of use of social media to garner electoral support.

All such attempts at mass indoctrination and manipulation, in essence, are merely following the acknowledged father of such principles, the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. His strategy was to propagate false reality and false assertions by engaging the mass German public unwittingly in the process via radio, cinema, newspapers, public meetings, rallies and cultural organizations. He was enthusiastic about the deliberate use of lies for political objectives. The end-justifies-the-means character of the past few years of Tory government is eerily similar. Goebbels would probably have been ecstatic about the way these latter-day disciples put the latest technology to use. Regrettably, opposition parties, notably Labour, are also rapidly moving towards using similar methods.

The Damage is Ongoing

The latest Corruption Perceptions International Index report shows that the UK fell to its lowest-ever position in 2022. The report observes that this sharp fall reflects a recent decline in standards in government and insufficient controls on the abuse of public office.

With its sleaze and corruption and its reckless endangerment of the economy and healthcare, the extant radical Conservative government has imposed an increasingly harsh, intolerant and authoritarian regime on the population and on democratic institutions such as the independent judiciary. Unchecked, such conduct is bound to

accelerate. Liberal democracy, already becoming illiberal, will drift into authoritarian diktat. Government propaganda and public brainwashing, seeking to normalize its dreadful abuses, grow apace.

The strident dogma and stealthy maneuverings of Conservative leaders, and the overall radical-right caucus demanding permanent radical-right governance, have already laid the groundwork for what would effectively be a coup establishing an elective dictatorship. The plot appears to be underway, whether the Conservative government and party remain intact and under radical-right domination or the party is rent asunder by infighting and joins the motley bunch of radical- and far-right fringe parties that are already vying for supremacy.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Dr. Alan Waring** is a retired risk analyst who has extensive international consulting experience with government departments, corporations, and institutions. He is the author of several books on risk and has also edited and contributed to the three-volume *The New Authoritarianism: A Risk Analysis*, published by Ibidem from 2018–2021.

***John Broadway** is a retired naval officer and program manager in capital network projects, including government and public sector organizations in the UK and projects in many other countries. He has substantial managerial experience in the British health and social services sector, including evaluation of the impact of NHS reforms on patient care.

The World Needs the US and China to Talk

John Bruton
July 03, 2023

The world's two most powerful nations are involved in an escalating war of words, tariffs and naval exercises. If the US and China are not careful, they could walk backward into a destructive cold war. Instead of expending energy on each other, the powers should use their combined influence to address issues of global concern.

The most worrying development in the world today is the dramatic deterioration in the relationship between the United States and China. The US is an established power, and China is rapidly catching up. Historic precedents suggest that it is difficult to avoid war where one power is overtaking another.

The rhetoric being exchanged between the two countries is becoming ever more heated. These exchanges are inimical to the exploration of compromise.

Mistrust and hostility build on both sides

On the US side, active preparation for rivalry with China is one of the very few things that seems to unite Republicans and Democrats.

President Biden has continued with the tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum, imposed by President Trump on supposed security grounds. President Biden has also continued the Trump policy of making it easier for US officials to meet Taiwanese officials, something that infuriates

Beijing. Former Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan led to a suspension of important working meetings, all for the sake of a photo opportunity.

The reason given for the steel and aluminum tariffs is that these materials might be used in warfare. Allies of the US are being pressured to apply the same policies to China, thereby dividing the world into two hostile blocs.

For its part, China's navy is using hostile tactics towards US vessels in the international waters of the South China Sea. An important principle is at stake here. The entire world benefits from freedom of navigation in international waters. Without the freedom of the seas being guaranteed, first by the Royal Navy and later by the US Navy, the prosperity the world enjoyed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would have been impossible.

China is also launching thousands of cyber attacks every day on Taiwan.

A conflict between the powers would not be pretty

Charles Kupchan, an American expert on international relations, who I came to like and admire during my time in Washington, has issued a stern warning about complacency about the development of a "cold war" with China in the latest edition of *The Atlantic*.

The balance of power for the US in a cold war with China will be very different than the one it had with the USSR. China has four times the US population, whereas the US and USSR had similar populations. China's gross domestic product will soon exceed that of the US. The USSR's GDP was only a fraction of that US. China already has a slightly larger Navy than does the US, and Chinese spending on research and development has increased dramatically in the past 10 years.

China is, however, an aging society, whereas the US is not. China's birth rate is so low that some speculate that the US population could exceed that of China by the year 2100!

With that context, I was surprised to read that, at present, a quarter of young Chinese are currently unable to find a suitable job. Chinese local governments have run up big debts building apartments that are lying empty.

Centralized thinking in the Chinese Communist Party has the potential to undermine China's military efforts by introducing rigidity of thinking. Unlike the US, China's military has little combat experience. Chinese military spending is 12 times that of Taiwan, but it is still much less than that of the US.

China and the West need to work together, not waste energy fighting

The rivalry between China and the US is diverting resources away from cooperative possibilities in areas, like climate change and food insecurity, in which both countries have a shared interest.

The dispute places the EU, as an ally of the US, in difficulty. It shares all the US reservations about Chinese policies on a range of issues. It has said that the Chinese stance on the invasion of Ukraine will be "the determining factor." That is a clear prioritization, which China should not ignore.

One of the big problems flowing from the present rivalry is a simple breakdown in communications. Canceled meetings have allowed misunderstandings to increase.

The same event is interpreted differently in Washington to the way it is interpreted in Beijing. Each side sincerely believes its interpretation. Minor issues for one can be seen as hostile signals by the other side when they were not so intended.

I believe the US and China should consider instituting some sort of “political truce” for a predetermined period.

This should be designed to allow a concentration of the formidable diplomatic weight of the two countries on an issue in which they have a shared interest, namely mitigating climate change. Such a signal by the two big powers would prompt the rest of the world to do more.

A “circuit breaker” of this kind is needed to prevent the current disagreement from spiraling out of control.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***John Bruton** is a former Irish prime minister and an international business leader. He has held a number of posts in the Irish government, including minister for finance; minister for industry and energy; minister for trade, commerce and tourism; and minister for the public service.

Combating Fake Information in the Era of Generative AI²

Stephen Marcinuk
July 07, 2023

AI tools now allow users to quickly generate images and written content, revolutionizing the creative process. However, the rapid pace of innovation in generative AI also brought risks, such as the creation of fake news and deep fakes. Recognizing these threats, organizations can use AI to identify and mitigate

misinformation, and human review is essential for ensuring accuracy and improving generative AI systems.

It was the year of generative AI. The twelve-month period between January and December 2022 gave us DALL-E, Midjourney and ChatGPT, powerful tools that put the combined power of a search engine, Wikipedia and a top-notch content generator at our fingertips.

Tools like Bard, Adobe Firefly and Bing AI quickly followed, rapidly expanding the abilities of your average internet user beyond anything we could’ve imagined just a few years ago. With a couple of simple keystrokes, we can now generate captivating images or pages of written content that, this time last year, would’ve taken hours, days, or weeks to produce—even for illustrators or writers with years of training.

Indeed, generative AI is changing the landscape beneath our feet—while we’re standing on it. But this pace of innovation comes with risks; namely, of losing our footing and letting algorithms override human discernment. As a recent article in the Harvard Business Review highlighted, the creation of fake news and so-called deep fakes poses a major challenge for businesses—and even entire countries—in 2023 and beyond.

Fortunately, innovation in AI is not just producing results for content generation. It’s also a tool that, when coupled with good, old-fashioned human instinct, can be used to resolve problems in the systems themselves. But before examining these strategies in more detail, it’s important we understand the real-world threats posed by AI-generated misinformation.

Recognizing the threats

The potential threats of AI-generated content are many, from reputational damage to political manipulation.

I recently read in *The Guardian* that the journal's editors received inquiries from readers about articles that were not showing up in its online archives. These were articles that reporters themselves couldn't even recall writing. It turns out, they were never written at all. ChatGPT, when prompted by users for information on particular topics, referenced *Guardian* articles in its output that were completely made up.

If errors or oversights baked into AI models themselves weren't concerning enough, there's also the possibility of intentional misuse to contend with. A recent Associated Press report identified several risk factors of generative AI use by humans ahead of the 2024 US presidential election. The report raised the specter of convincing yet illegitimate campaign emails, texts, or videos, all generated by AI, which could in turn mislead voters or sow political conflict.

But the threats posed by generative AI aren't only big-picture. Potential problems could spring up right on your doorstep. Organizations that overly and uncritically rely on generative AI to meet content production needs could unwittingly be spreading misinformation and causing damage to their reputations.

Generative AI models are trained on vast amounts of data, and data can be outdated. Data can be incomplete. Data can even be flat-out wrong: generative AI models have shown a marked tendency to "hallucinate" in these scenarios—that is, confidently assert a falsehood as true.

Since the data and information that AI models train on are typically created by humans, who have their own limitations and biases, AI output can be correspondingly limited and biased. In this sense, AI trained on outdated attitudes and perceptions could perpetuate certain harmful stereotypes, especially when presented as objective fact—as AI-generated content so often is.

AI vs. AI

Fortunately, organizations that use generative AI are not prisoners to these risks. There are a number of tools at their disposal to identify and mitigate issues of bad information in AI-generated content. And one of the best tools for this is AI itself.

These processes can even be fun. One method in particular, known as "adversarial training," essentially gamifies fact-checking by pitting two AI models against each other in a contest of wits. During this process, one model is trained to generate content, while the second model is trained to analyze that content for accuracy, flagging anything erroneous. The second model's fact-checking reports are then fed back into the first, which corrects its output based on those findings.

We can even juice the power of these fact-checker models by integrating them with third-party sources of knowledge—the Oxford English Dictionary, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, newspapers of record or university libraries. These adversarial training systems have developed sophisticated-enough palates to differentiate between fact, fiction and hyperbole.

Here's where it gets interesting: The first model, or the "generative" model, learns to outsmart the fact-checker, or "discriminative" model, by producing content that is increasingly difficult for the discriminative model to flag as wrong. The result? Steadily more accurate and reliable generative AI outputs over time.

Adding a human element

Although AI can be used to fact-check itself, this doesn't make the process hands-off for all humans involved. Far from it. A layer of human review not only ensures delivery of accurate, complete and up-to-date information, it can actually make generative AI systems better at what they do. Just as it tries to outsmart its discriminative nemesis, a generative model can learn from human corrections to improve future results.

What's more, internal strategies like this can then be shared between organizations to establish industry-wide standards and even a set of ethics for generative AI use. Organizations should further collaborate with other stakeholders, too—including researchers, industry experts and policymakers—to share insights, research findings and best practices.

One such best practice involves data collection efforts that prioritize quality and diversity. This involves careful selection and verification of data sources, by human experts, before they're fed into models, taking into consideration not just real-time accuracy, but representativeness, historical context and relevance.

All of us with stakes in making better generative AI products should likewise commit to promoting transparency industry-wide. AI systems are increasingly used in critical fields, like health care, finance and even the justice system. When AI models are involved in decisions that impact peoples' real lives, it's essential that all stakeholders understand how such a decision was made and how to spot inconsistencies or inaccuracies that could have major consequences.

There could be consequences of misuse or ethical breaches for the AI user too. A New York lawyer landed himself in hot water earlier this year after filing a ChatGPT-generated brief in court that

reportedly cited no fewer than six totally made-up cases. He now faces possible sanctions and could lose his law license altogether.

Generative AI modelers therefore shouldn't be afraid of sharing documentation on system architecture, data sources and training methodologies, where appropriate. The competition to create the best generative AI models is fierce, to be sure, but we can all benefit from standards that promote better, more reliable, and safer products. The stakes are simply too high to be playing our cards so close to our chests.

The strides taken by generative AI in the last year are only a taste of what's to come. We've already seen remarkable transformation not just in terms of what models are capable of, but in how humans are using them. And as these changes continue, it's critical that our human instinct evolves right along with them. Because AI can only achieve its potential in combination with human oversight, creativity and collaboration.

*As the Co-founder and Head of Operations at Intelligent Relations, Steve is actively involved in all aspects of operations and growth for the company - this ranges from the generation of the AI PR technology for the platform all the way across to client services.

Steve is a Wharton School of Business graduate with several startups under his belt and a keen eye for unique business ventures.

Sending Blinken to China Won't Interrupt the Slide Toward War

William H. Overholt
July 09, 2023

The last few US presidents have undone the work of decades with their failure to understand China. Mechanisms of dialogue have fallen into disuse while experts on China have been pushed out of the administration. If the US doesn't correct its course soon, the escalating war of words and sanctions can spiral out of control into a deadly global conflict.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken's trip to Beijing is a ripple on the tide of President Joe Biden's decisions not to promote dialogue or expert understanding. It has not interrupted the push toward war.

Breakdown of the US's ability to talk to and think about China

Under Presidents George W Bush, Barack Obama and, partly, Donald Trump, the US had institutionalized large-scale communications with China, especially through the strategic economic dialogue (Bush), strategic and economic dialogue (Obama), and comprehensive economic dialogue (Trump). Dozens of senior officials regularly met. Those dialogues could not resolve the great issues like Taiwan or intellectual property, but officials came to understand each other and render differences manageable.

When Donald Trump became President, Xi Jinping was determined to keep communications

open and relations constructive. Chinese scholars say the lavish welcome Trump was given was historically exceptional.

As with other relationships, Trump responded initially with admiration: "President Xi is a brilliant man. If you went all over Hollywood to look for somebody to play the role of President Xi, you couldn't find it. There's nobody like that. The look, the brain, the whole thing." Likewise, at Davos in 2020: "Our relationship with China has now probably never, ever been better ... He's for China, I'm for the US but, other than that, we love each other." But Trump's mood changed and the dialogue lapsed. Biden chose to permanently abandon institutionalized dialogue permanently. Blinken's trip marginally walks back that decision and marginally walks back the coldness Blinken deliberately instilled at his initial meeting with the Chinese in Anchorage.

US Presidents traditionally ensure the presence of some cabinet-level officials with expertise and experience on the most vital national security issue of the time, once the Soviet Union and now China. No Cold War president would have been without the top-level expertise brought to the task by a Kissinger, Brzezinski or Scowcroft.

George W. Bush was a foreign policy failure in many respects but, guided by Hank Paulsen in the Treasury and brilliant CIA China expert Dennis Wilder in the National Security Council (NSC), he balanced his strong support for Taiwan's security with strong support for the 1970s peace agreements and ended up admired by both Taipei and Beijing.

Obama ended the tradition of having cabinet-level China expertise. Trump followed suit. Biden has been exceptionally striking in declaring that China is America's ultimate foreign policy threat but hiring no top-level expertise on China. His Secretary of State, National Security Advisor and

CIA Director spent their careers on the Middle East and Europe; his Secretary of Defense on the Middle East. Even Biden's ambassador to China is a career Middle East and Europe official. His NSC Asia czar has no direct experience with China and became famous for demanding disengagement based on the false assertion that US engagement with China presumed engagement would democratize China.

Some of these officials, like CIA Director William J Burns, are outstanding and have deployed their European expertise to resist Russian aggression. Regarding China, though, it is another story. Imagine the CEO of a giant food company announcing that cereals constitute the greatest opportunity and the greatest competitive threat, then announcing that the heads of the Wheaties division, the Cheerios division, the oatmeal division and all others would be hamburger experts.

Below the leadership level, things are even worse. Intelligence and Defense Department officials say that it has become so difficult for anyone with China expertise and experience to get security clearance that the US has partially blinded itself. Scholars and business executives who bridge the two countries are frightened, and vast numbers are considering departure to China. Some visiting Chinese professors, including two of the most pro-American international relations scholars and one invited personally by Jimmy Carter, have been treated very badly by US immigration authorities.

In short, Biden has continued and worsened the Trump disjunction between strategic imperatives and leadership skills, the Trump contempt for expertise and the Trump (late, partial, possibly temporary) dismissal of institutionalized dialogue. No weekend trip can ameliorate these fundamental realities.

The US fumes against China because it no longer understands it

Magnifying the consequences is a vital difference between Trump and Biden. Trump always sought the deal, albeit a misconceived deal: The trade war was about trade disparities, and if Beijing took specific actions, the trade war would proportionately ease. Biden proposes no deal, just escalated sanctions.

Given the overwhelming evidence that steel and aluminum tariffs hurt the US more than China, raise prices and cost many tens of thousands of US jobs, most economists assumed that the President whose slogan is "a foreign policy for the middle class" would lift them. But, no: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai says they are necessary to maintain "leverage" over China. There is of course no leverage from policies that damage America more than China.

The Biden administration has totally repudiated the peace compromise so successfully negotiated by Kissinger and Brzezinski.

Lacking expertise, Washington frequently seems clueless about how the world views its China policies. For instance, Blinken and Biden often broadcast versions of Biden's June 9 statement that China's Belt and Road Initiative is a "debt and confiscation program." Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo characterized Belt & Road similarly. Developing world leaders, who frequently contrast China's development offers with Washington's lectures or its omnipresent Special Forces teams, know that is false. Every China specialist knows the study of 1100 Chinese loans that found there was not a single instance of China using debt problems to seize collateral.

Does the US President have no idea what he is talking about, or is he systematically spreading disinformation? Either way, developing countries

can dismiss much of US policy. For instance, many give credence to the argument that the problem in both Europe and Asia is US efforts to encircle and destabilize its adversaries. Hence, all of Latin America, Africa and the Middle East align with China regarding US sanctions on Russia.

The big problem is Taiwan. Henry Kissinger warns that we are sliding toward war over Taiwan. The Biden administration has totally repudiated the peace compromise so successfully negotiated by Kissinger and Brzezinski. Washington promised to abstain from official relations or an alliance with Taiwan. But President Biden has promised four times to defend Taiwan; that is an alliance.

Speaker Pelosi was emphatic that her August trip to Taipei was an “official” trip; immediately after her meeting with President Tsai, the presidential spokeswoman went on island-wide TV and proclaimed, “We are a sovereign and independent country.”

Responding to lesser provocations, George W Bush, his secretary of state, and his deputy secretary of state, no panda-hugging liberals, distanced the US and warned Taipei to stop. Instead, Secretary Blinken continues to welcome such official relations and tell the Chinese not to “overreact.”

The angry popular reaction inside China to Xi’s failure to respond decisively to such US initiatives is the one risk that could topple Xi Jinping from power. Concern about that is the one thing that could trigger him to launch a direct attack on Taiwan.

Biden has no senior advisor who understands such things. Blinken and Sullivan act on how they believe theoretically China should react, not on knowledge of actual Chinese politics.

If war comes, it will not be the limited conflict of US war games. China will hit Okinawa immediately or lose. The US will hit mainland Chinese bases immediately or lose. China will respond against the US.

The common denominator of Trump’s MAGA policies, Biden’s MAGA-plus policies, and Representative Mike Gallagher’s ultra-MAGA policies is a repudiation of the promises and norms the US accepted when Nixon, Carter, Mao and Deng compromised to eliminate what had been a terrible risk of conflict over Taiwan.

The cover for that repudiation is an endless repetition of the assertion that China is planning an invasion of Taiwan, an assertion for which the US intelligence community says there is no evidence.

The fact of the matter is that Washington’s hard left and the hard right always despised compromise. The pragmatic center has evaporated, for domestic reasons, and the self-righteous ideologues rule Congress. No quick visit, no fog of diplomatic niceties will arrest the resultant reversion to the pre-1972 risk of war.

(China took an equally dangerous turn, also for domestic reasons. Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Canadian hostages, economic war on Australia, and much else are serious issues. But this article is about the US; previous US administrations handled middle-sized issues without sliding toward war.)

Biden was elected by the pragmatic center, but he has no China team, no China policy, no strategic vision. He should be wary of taking even a small risk that history will remember him for the first inadvertent world war of choice. Weekend trips for marginal changes of tone do not address the problem.

[[Asia Times](#) first published this piece.]

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***William H. Overholt** is a senior research fellow at Harvard, where he currently organizes a Rise of China project with Lawrence Summers. He wrote the first book (1993) to argue that China would become a superpower; a 2018 book saying that China was headed into an era of financial and political stress, and a 2023 article arguing that, on its current trajectory, China will become the slowest growing major economy.

The Truth About the Insidious Government Corruption in Iraq

Shermeen Yousif
July 09, 2023

For the last two decades, corruption has been growing uncontrollably in Iraq and has become deeply rooted in nearly every aspect of society. Although there are some citizens fighting back, they have to focus on dismantling corruption by addressing the root causes.

On 12 April 2023, the Iraqi Prime Minister's Office and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) expressed their renewed collaboration on and dedication to the prevention and eradication of corruption in Iraq. The commitment was solidified through the formal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which aims to foster a culture of transparency, accountability and ethical conduct in both the public and private domains.

The MoU extends the existing assistance granted by UNDP for Iraq's anti-corruption initiative. This collaborative initiative entails enhancing the capabilities of anti-corruption organizations and aligning strategic and legal frameworks with the principles of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption.

Corruption in the Iraqi government is a pervasive and entrenched problem that has impeded the country's progress and development for decades. Understanding the causes of this corruption requires a thorough examination of the contributing historical, political, economic and social factors.

A Consistent History of Political Instability

Instability in Iraq over the past two decades has been one of the primary contributors to the country's corruption. The collapse of a long-standing authoritarian regime in 2003 precipitated a period of uncertainty, which was rapidly filled by competing political factions and sectarian groups. The ensuing conflicts that broke out in Iraq, specifically the sectarian violence, exacerbated the political instability. The intensification of sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia populations resulted in a cycle of violence, reprisals, and retaliation. These conflicts fostered an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility, in which political actors aligned along sectarian lines and struggled for power.

Corruption flourished in this environment. The pursuit of power and influence became intertwined with personal gain as individuals sought to exploit their political positions for financial gain. Political influence evolved into a means of amassing wealth, securing lucrative contracts and seizing control of resources. This environment encouraged officials to use their positions to extract bribes, engage in embezzlement and manipulate public funds for personal gain. In a recent corruption

scandal, nicknamed the “heist of the century,” former government officials were implicated in the larceny of \$2.5 billion in public funds.

The lack of political stability in Iraq has made it difficult to establish and implement effective anti-corruption measures. Comprehensive anti-corruption policies are impeded by frequent leadership turnover, ineffective governance structures and a lack of institutional stability. In certain instances, corrupt officials have been able to avoid accountability by utilizing their political connections or by taking advantage of the state of confusion in leadership.

Additionally, political instability has undermined the effectiveness of crucial anti-corruption institutions. The judiciary, law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies frequently confront interference, manipulation and intimidation in an unstable political climate. This hinders their ability to prosecute and penalize corrupt individuals, as political considerations frequently influence case outcomes. In addition, political instability has negatively impacted the continuity and efficacy of governance mechanisms. Frequent leadership and government structure changes impede the implementation of anti-corruption policies and institutional reforms. As political priorities have shifted, anti-corruption initiatives have frequently taken a back seat, allowing corrupt practices to persist and even flourish.

What’s more, the prevalence of patronage and nepotism in the Iraqi government has contributed to the spread of corruption. Often, positions of power and influence are filled on the basis of personal connections rather than merit, resulting in a system where loyalty and personal connections take precedence over competence and integrity. This practice undermines the government's integrity and creates opportunities for corruption to

thrive, as individuals in critical positions may place personal gain above the public interest.

Government Institutions Steadily Weakening

The Iraqi institutions charged with upholding transparency, accountability and the rule of law have frequently been undermined by inefficiency, lack of resources and political interference. Corruption within law enforcement agencies hinders their capacity to combat corruption at higher levels. Instances of bribery, nepotism and favoritism within these institutions compromise their integrity and hinder their ability to enforce laws and investigate instances of corruption. Corruption within law enforcement agencies can shield those who engage in corrupt practices, making it difficult to bring them to justice.

The judiciary, which is responsible for adjudicating corruption cases and upholding the rule of law, has also encountered difficulties. Corruption, such as bribery and political interference, has corrupted the judicial system. Corrupt individuals frequently use their connections and resources to manipulate legal proceedings or avoid punishment. This undermines public confidence in the judicial system and discourages individuals from reporting corruption, given that it is likely justice will not be served.

Regulatory bodies and oversight institutions have labored to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. These organizations are responsible for overseeing and regulating various sectors, such as public procurement, finance and public administration, to ensure compliance with legal and ethical standards. However, insufficient institutional capacity, a lack of resources, and political interference have hindered their ability to conduct effective oversight. Inadequate personnel, limited training and inadequate funding are also important factors that promote the spread of corruption.

In Iraq, there have been deficiencies in the anti-corruption safeguarding mechanisms. Among these mechanisms are the auditing of public finances, the monitoring of public contracts and procurement processes, and the enforcement of conduct regulations for public officials. As a result of insufficient oversight, corrupt individuals are able to exploit loopholes and indulge in fraudulent activities with the knowledge that their actions are less likely to be scrutinized and challenged.

In addition to Iraq's fragile institutions and defective legal system, its lack of security has hampered efforts to combat corruption effectively. Continual terrorism, insurgency and armed conflict have diverted resources, attention and political will from anti-corruption initiatives. Authorities may prioritize security concerns over confronting corruption, thereby fostering an environment conducive to unchecked corruption.

A Widespread Issue With Transparency

Transparency, or the lack thereof, has played a significant role in the perpetuation of corruption in Iraq. Government transparency is a pillar of good governance as it promotes accountability, public trust, and effective supervision. In Iraq, however, access to information has been restricted and disclosure mechanisms are feeble or nonexistent. Transparency International continues to rank Iraq's public sector among the twenty-five most corrupt in the world.

Citizens and civil society organizations frequently encounter obstacles when pursuing information about government activities, budgets and contracts. This lack of transparency hinders the public's ability to hold officials accountable and allows corruption to continue unfettered. Individuals are unable to scrutinize government actions, identify irregularities or expose corrupt practices without access to information.

In addition, inadequate disclosure mechanisms exacerbate the lack of transparency. In the absence of comprehensive and effective mechanisms for reporting, monitoring and investigating corruption cases, officials are able to engage in corrupt activities without fear of public exposure and repercussions. Without appropriate channels for reporting corruption or protection for whistleblowers, witnesses of corruption may be dissuaded from coming forward out of fear of retaliation or lack of faith in the system.

Oil and the Economic Struggles of Citizens

Economic factors also contribute to corruption in Iraq. The country's economy heavily relies on oil exports, which has led to a concentration of wealth and power. Mismanagement and misappropriation of oil revenues have caused corruption in areas including public procurement, contracts, and resource allocation. Lack of economic diversification and excessive reliance on hydrocarbon revenues not only limit the potential for economic growth and development but also increase the likelihood of corruption.

The focus on a single industry leaves other sectors vulnerable to corruption and underdeveloped. When a substantial portion of a nation's wealth is derived from a single source, those in control can manipulate and exploit the system for their own benefit.

In addition, the absence of a robust and diverse economy increases the likelihood that individuals will engage in corrupt behavior as they seek financial security. This establishes a system in which rent-seeking and illicit practices become the norm, perpetuating a cycle of corruption and stifling efforts to promote transparency, accountability, and good governance.

Lack of Trust in Government

The lack of functioning law enforcement, government credibility and transparency not only shields corrupt officials but also erodes public trust in the government and its institutions. When citizens feel they cannot trust their own government, they become disillusioned and may feel disconnected from the democratic process. This undermines the government's social contract with its citizens, impeding efforts to promote good governance and accountability.

In the absence of an empowered and active civil society, citizen engagement and accountability are hampered. A robust civil society serves as a watchdog, holding the government accountable and advocating for openness and good governance. In Iraq, civil society faces regular repression, lack of resources and restricted space for participation.

Without an engaged and active populace demanding accountability and transparency, corruption can flourish unchecked. Unfortunately, Iraqi citizens fear speaking out against corruption—particularly after citizens were arrested, tortured and murdered during and after the October 2019 demonstrations.

The Fight Against Corruption

On the whole, corruption has been Iraq's biggest challenge, and it has far-reaching consequences. Socially, corruption undermines citizens' faith in the democratic process and erodes public trust in the government. It promotes a culture of impunity and undermines the rule of law. It diverts funds from essential humanitarian programs, public services, and infrastructure development. It restricts economic prospects, discourages foreign investment and perpetuates inequality. Corruption hinders political stability by undermining the legitimacy of the government, exacerbating

sectarian tensions and fostering public discontent and unrest.

Combating corruption in Iraq is doubtlessly a complex problem. Without addressing the underlying causes and foundations of corruption, relying solely on memoranda and agendas will yield only marginal and superficial results. To make substantial progress, it is necessary to investigate the root causes of corruption and enact meaningful reforms.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

***Shermeen Yousif** is an assistant professor at Florida Atlantic University. As a female academic who witnessed women's rights issues in the civil unrest of post-war Iraq, she escaped to the United States where she earned her doctorate. Yousif is an activist and writer who focuses on social and political change in Iraq and the Middle East, as well as feminism and increasing awareness of women's rights in the region.

Is Privacy Such a Good Thing?

Ellis Cashmore
July 15, 2023

Much ink has been spilled on cancel culture, perhaps without considering the privacy culture that preceded it. Was it such a good thing to keep every evil so hidden away as we did? Perhaps now that we can converse, dialogue and indeed gossip, we can build better norms together.

We human beings create morality. The gods don't bequeath it to us. Morality provides a basis for making judgments and decisions in our personal conduct and professional settings. It shapes the way we approach all kinds of affairs. Moral frameworks change over time and space, and they may derive from faith, philosophy or just personal perspectives. Stories are also an important source: one of the ways we remind ourselves of what's right and wrong is through drama. For decades, the dramas we read and watched built and renewed principles and guidelines that helped us decide what's right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable.

Precious scandals

But we don't need them anymore: we have social media. The likes of Twitter serve as tools for moral reasoning and help individuals navigate complex ethical issues and dilemmas in their personal and social lives. I can already hear you laughing at my pretense. But indulge me: so far this year, the British have been gifted two precious scandals that have exercised their imaginations, powers of discernment and, best of all, their ethical reasoning.

The first scandal featured a popular TV presenter who was found to have conducted a relationship with a younger male colleague. The presenter, Phillip Schofield, worked for ITV, the UK's main commercial television network. He resigned after conceding that he had "lied" to his boss and his agent, as well as the media, about what he called an "unwise, but not illegal" affair.

With the ink barely dry on this scandal, the second also features a TV presenter. The case involves a dichotomy about which British society

does not yet have a clear idea of where to draw the dividing line.

The Sun newspaper recently reported that an unnamed BBC presenter paid a teenager £35,000 (about \$45,000) for sexually explicit photos over a three-year period. The young person was allegedly 17 years old when the payments started. According to reports, the mother of the teenager first complained to the national broadcaster in May 2023 and the BBC undertook to investigate the allegations.

Presumably frustrated at the lack of progress, the mother took the story to The Sun, which is the country's best-selling newspaper. There followed a guessing game in which anyone on social media could hazard their own hypotheses on the identity and motivations of the presenter. Even the prospect of defaming BBC personnel didn't deter tweeters. In efforts to ward off speculators, several of the BBC's best-known presenters went onto social media themselves, explicitly to say they were not the culprit. This seemed a guileless maneuver and probably heightened suspicions on the Shakespearean principle, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Unlike the former scandal, this one may indeed contain illegal activities, though at the time of writing this has not been decided by a court. What is known is that, like the Schofield case, it has gripped the public and inclined the twitterati, in particular, to flex their moral muscles.

Questions, questions.

Think of some of the more immediate questions. Quite apart from the obvious, "Whodunit?"—at the time of publication, this seems to be an answered question—there are other enticing challenges, such as, "Does the teenager bear any responsibility?" After all, they agreed to take and send pictures of themselves naked in exchange for

money. They then decided to spend the money, not on a three-year university education, but on crack cocaine. Were they mature enough to make a clear-headed, informed decision? The age of consent in the UK is 16, but this does not apply in this case. The Protection of Children Act, of 1978, specifies that it's a crime to take, make, share and possess indecent images of people under 18 years old. So, the presenter could be facing 26 weeks in prison. Would justice be served?

Another question is: Should the BBC bear any responsibility for allowing the presenter to operate, however covertly? "I blame this BBC man for destroying my child's life," said the teenager's mother. "Taking my child's innocence and handing over the money for crack cocaine that could kill my child." Where does the blame lie?

We exist in an environment in which malicious gossip, scandalous relationships and transgressions that bring dishonor, disgrace and infamy are parts of the daily menu of news. Our media, even the serious media, specialize in gossip, hearsay and miscellaneous tittle-tattle, mainly on celebrities. Since 2006 when Twitter launched, we have all had a more direct way of sharing our views. Although Twitter's original idea was to allow people to send words that were as inconsequential as the chirruping of birds, it soon morphed into a gossip medium.

The temptations of Twitter

It's probable no one anticipated how tempting Twitter would become. It's not as if people were enticed into sharing confidential information. After all, Twitter didn't coax or sweet-talk tweeters into disclosing anything they didn't want to. But it offered a sort of purgatory device. I don't mean it was a place of suffering or torment for those wishing to expiate their sins before going to heaven: just a way of venting your thoughts. In a kind of self-perpetuating manner, others responded

with comparable candor and lack of inhibition to find the release was surprisingly purifying. That's what's going on at the moment: everyone is excitedly ridding themselves of their opinions and, in the process, passing judgment in what's become an online moral universe.

All this could tempt us into believing that privacy, at least privacy in the traditional sense of the condition, has disappeared. Twitter is now part of the natural order of things. Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and the most newcomer Threads have added impudence and brio, making sharing arguably the defining experience of our time. We share money, knowledge and hours upon hours of our time; it would be untenable to ask people not to share what used to pass as a private life. Is this a bad thing?

It seems only a few years ago that privacy shielded all manner of vile practices that are now in the common domain. Child abuse was hushed up. Domestic violence was kept secret as an internal family issue. Women were often persuaded they were partly responsible if they were raped. People with developmental disorders, such as Asperger syndrome, seldom revealed and less still discussed their experiences. And well-known TV personalities were allowed to get away with vile abuses of privilege and status, in the secure knowledge that they were sheltered by a code of silence. These once-private matters have been turned into social affairs.

Much as it might disgust people to accept that so much thought and time have been spent on matters that could be handled in a hushed-up way without damaging reputations or harming the credibility of national institutions, celebrity culture has brought with it a refreshing encroachment: the public has trespassed on the private.

[[Ellis Cashmore](#) is the author of [Kardashian Culture](#)]

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Ellis Cashmore** is the author of "Elizabeth Taylor," "Beyond Black" and "Celebrity Culture." He is an honorary professor of sociology at Aston University and has previously worked at the universities of Hong Kong and Tampa.

Here Is Why the Taliban Cannot Change

Mustafa Suroush
July 17, 2023

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, many observers naively believed their promises to instate a more moderate rule. Mustafa Suroush, an Afghan native and a former government official, explains why this was never possible. The Taliban's ideals, methods and resources are incompatible with any kind of real liberalization.

The Taliban's ban on women's access to work and education is the latest example of the regime's incapability to change and moderate. If there was initially any realistic hope within the international community of the Taliban reversing their discriminatory and extreme policies, those hopes appear to be evaporating.

The US-Taliban agreement signed on February 29, 2020, and the cowardly escape of President Ashraf Ghani paved the way for the final collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the face

of the Taliban's assault on August 15, 2021. Afghanistan was submerged back into an age of darkness.

The political and humanitarian crisis only grows larger and deeper. In response, NATO member states, along with the UN and other humanitarian organizations, have been sending aid to Afghanistan to uplift the Taliban-made crisis. The country has received some \$2.4 billion in aid since the start of 2022.

The international community has been attempting to influence the Taliban to moderate their discriminatory policies, form an inclusive government, respect human rights and prevent the spread of terrorism outside of Afghanistan. However, engaging with the Taliban in the hope of change remains unrealistic, because moderation is against the Taliban's ideological necessities.

The ideological ends

The Taliban are a Pashtun tribal and Islamist ideological group whose their ideology and practice consist of three elements: ends, ways and means. First, let us speak of the ends.

They have two types of goals: earthly life, and the afterlife. In the afterlife, their grand vision is to go to heaven.

In this life, they primarily want to implement their self-invented sharia (Islamic law) by establishing an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA)—an Afghanistan where an emir or supreme leader rules, and the rest unquestionably obey and practice the Taliban's version of sharia. The Taliban arrive at their legal conclusions by a creative application of sunna (practices based on the life of the Prophet Muhammad), ijma (juridical consensus), qiyas (reasoning based on analogies with other rulings), and the principle of sadaqah (benevolence).

Mullah Haibatullah, the purported supreme leader of the Taliban, ordered full implementation of sharia. “You have used the mother of all bombs and you are welcome to use even the atomic bomb against us because nothing can scare us into taking any step that is against Islam or sharia,” Haibatullah said, addressing the United States.

Further, the Taliban have been subjugating non-Pashtun ethnic groups, particularly the Hazaras. Taliban leaders lay stress on the execution of Pashtunwali—the Pashtun people’s traditional code of ethics—in an ethnically diverse Afghanistan. It includes a number of principles, but the most important ones involve the subjection of women, the promotion of revenge and the protection of honor, property and country by any means and resources at one’s disposal.

Understanding the Taliban’s end goals is therefore crucial for better making sense of their policy intentions and objectives.

The ideological ways

The Taliban’s approach is elimination, exclusion, suppression and submission. Their manifesto prescribes terminating any resistance against the IEA by force. Maulawi Mujeeb Rahman Ansari, one of the Taliban’s ideological allies, said that “anyone who opposes the current government should be beheaded.”

Following their supreme leader’s instructions, the Taliban have killed hundreds of their opponents since their 2021 takeover of the country. Last year, the Taliban massacred 8 Hazaras including, children aged 6–14 and women and men from the same family in a mass shooting at their home in Daikundi province. In a separate incident, Hasht e Subh Daily reported that the Taliban had shot dead 27 people on suspicion of having affiliations with the National Resistance Front in

Panjshir. The Taliban’s IEA consistently opts for annihilation over dialogue and negotiation.

The Taliban have excluded and repressed others. Their cabinet is composed of 33 male members who have monopolistically come from the Pashtuns (30 members), Tajiks (two members) and Uzbeks (one member). This arrangement excludes four major ethnic groups and more than a dozen other ethnic groups that live in Afghanistan.

Citizens have been turned into subjects. They must obey the orders of the IEA. They must grow their beard, dress and worship per the Taliban’s version of Islamic principles, an intrusion into the private affairs of the people.

In a similar fashion, the IEA has tragically enslaved women and reinstated gender apartheid. They believe the woman’s domain is completely isolated from the public sphere and that a woman’s job is to take care of the home, cook, bear children and serve men. This is why they denied the rights to education and to work for women, removing half of the population from social, political and economic activities, imposed the burqa (full cover) and banned travel without chaperones.

The Taliban have responded to the women’s civil protests with gunshots. Moreover, the remaining civil society organizations and political parties are silenced by systematic subjugation. There is no sign of tolerance in the IEA’s conduct for others who are not members.

In addition, the Taliban view modern values—e.g., democracy, elections and human rights—as un-Islamic. They contend that their IEA alternative is a flawless and ideal socio-political arrangement. The IEA opposes modern education. Mullah Haibatullah said, “Over the past 20 years, there have been a lot of anti-sharia and anti-Islam rhetoric and laws which are made by the people are not implementable.” Their manifesto instead

dictates that (male) citizens attend obligatory Islamic education at religious seminaries. They have begun turning modern schools into Madrasas and religious seminaries. Eradicating the liberal institutions, which were primarily imported by the Western coalition post-9/11 into Afghanistan, is now a top priority for the IEA.

The ideological means

The Taliban enjoy abundant resources in line with their ideological aspirations and modus operandi. Domestically, they mobilize their human resources from among the most illiterate and poorest Pashtun communities, normally coming out of religious seminaries and rural areas. Before ousting the democratic government in 2021, they had 60,000 core fighters and another 140,000 auxiliary members.

Financially, the Taliban rely on two main sources of income. They collect taxes and extract natural resources, and they receive aid from backers abroad. The IEA collected \$270 million in tax revenue between August and November in 2021. The IEA utilizes illegal opium cultivation and drug trade, illicit mining, unlawful export, extortion and illegitimate taxation. According to NATO, the Taliban made \$1.6 billion from illegal sources only in 2020.

In terms of foreign money, the Taliban used to receive generous support during their insurgency period. The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) reported in January 2021 that the Taliban were enjoying a great deal of financial, logistical and technical assistance coming from neighboring and Gulf countries, private donors, cross-board extremist groups and the al-Qaeda network. The Taliban are hence one of the wealthiest extremist groups in the world.

The Taliban will not change any time soon

Many in the international community and some political actors in Afghanistan expected the Taliban to have positively changed prior to returning to power for the second time in August 2021. The argument was that the Taliban must have learned from their past colossal mistakes made during their 1996–2001 rule.

The most glaring of those mistakes was the stubborn refusal of Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's founder and supreme leader, to surrender Osama Bin Laden to US authorities after the 9/11 attack. That refusal prompted the US to lead international coalition forces which ousted the IEA in November 2001.

Thereafter, the Taliban claimed that they had softened their fundamentalist views and behaviors. It proved to be a tactic to deceive the people of Afghanistan and the international community.

Expecting the Taliban to moderate themselves was naive. They are the product of a rigid, absolutist and fundamentalist Islamic and tribal value system. Democratic governance, human rights and scientific knowledge threaten their existence. Implementing self-interpreted Islamic-divine laws, together with Pashtunwali principles, is their core objective. The Taliban's ideologues realize that they are stronger if they stick to their radical ideals as a way of survival and endurance.

The international community has two options. It can continue the ongoing engagement with the Taliban, which would further harm the citizens of Afghanistan and jeopardize regional and global security. Or, it can subvert the Taliban by opening avenues for dialogue and supporting various democratic adversaries of the Taliban, such as women leaders, political activists and representatives of ethnic groups and importantly

the young generation. These groups can take a hand in determining Afghanistan's future.

The international community must stipulate specific conditions for aid going to Afghanistan. It must terminate free travel and prevent any direct engagement with the IEA. The Taliban's arrogance and impudence will with time be sapped while the international community's negotiation power increases.

[[Christian Hadjipateras](#) and [Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Mustafa Suroush** has worked in different leadership and management capacities for government and international non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan in the last twenty years. Mustafa holds two master's degrees: one in International Development from the Turin School of Development, Italy, and the other in Leadership and Change Management from the Institute of Executive Capabilities-Steinbeis University, Germany.

A Secure Eastern Border Depends on the Stability of NATO Member States

Cristian Gherasim
July 18, 2023

Internal stability is key in securing NATO's eastern border. As we look at how each nation on NATO's eastern flank is doing we notice some are faring better than others. But only with a few success stories, the situation might

not be enough for NATO and its allies in the current geopolitical climate.

The recent NATO summit in Vilnius was all about defending the alliance's eastern border. From Estonia in the north all the way to Bulgaria in the south, NATO's most tested and heavily militarized region could also prove the most fragile. It all comes down to politics.

The eight nations that make up NATO's eastern flank are the most exposed to potential Russian aggression and to the effects of the war in Ukraine. They are also amongst NATO's most diverse, from the stable and predictable north to the more politically chaotic south. Making sure these nations are in lockstep without politics getting in the way of regional security is a matter of survival.

Europe's vulnerable frontiers

Ever since gaining independence from the former Soviet Union, the Baltic nations have been a model of democratic stability. Estonia, which is at the forefront of the region's democratic accomplishments, shares a 183-mile border with Russia. On the southern side, Lithuania has a 171-mile border with Russia's exclave Kaliningrad, which mostly cuts the Baltics off from the rest of NATO. These geographically vulnerable democracies know what's at stake given the current crisis in Ukraine.

For Eastern Europe, the Ukrainian tragedy strikes a deep chord not only because of its proximity but because stories of Soviet occupation are still entrenched in the public mindset. Eastern Europeans have rightly won plaudits for welcoming Ukrainians fleeing war and offering continued assistance to Ukraine.

According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Eastern European nations top the list of countries committing aid to Ukraine as a share of their own gross domestic product (GDP). The small Baltic nation of Estonia has offered the most to Ukraine by GDP share; Latvia ranks second.

It is this very push that is slowly changing the face of the European Union, with Eastern Europe at its vanguard. In short, Eastern Europe has proven to be a moral leader in this crisis. But goodwill, favorable public opinion and military assistance are not enough. Internal politics needs to deliver, too.

Corruption is widespread and getting worse

Unfortunately, the farther south you go in Eastern Europe, the less stable internal affairs get.

According to Freedom House, Poland's democracy has been backsliding due to partisan influence over state institutions. A key NATO ally, Poland has been criticized over the last few years for its policies that undermine the rule of law. A country's defense is only as strong as its institutions, and creeping authoritarian tendencies are not reassuring for NATO's strongest eastern partner in a time of great need.

Hungary follows suit. Viktor Orbán's cabinet has been pounding the country's democratic institutions for years now. The populist government in Budapest has been pushing for chummy relations with Putin. Its potential to disrupt EU and NATO affairs is significant. Since both systems require unanimity, via Hungary, Russia and China nearly have a seat at the decision-making table in Brussels.

Move further southeast and things continue to get dicey. Romania shares the longest border with Ukraine of any EU or NATO member state. The country has had its fair of internal woes, from the

government backtracking on its pledge to curb corruption, to declining press freedom.

Romania has tried and failed to join the Schengen Area, the borderless free movement zone of the EU. Schengen is crucial because it not only provides freedom of movement but also security. Schengen regulations help curb everything from organized crime to smuggling and terrorism.

Romania may get even further away from joining Schengen if it fails to secure its border with Ukraine. This border has proven to be the most lucrative in terms of smuggling and illicit trade in the entire EU as Romania remains the country worst hit by cigarette smuggling in the European Union.

Stop Contrabanda, a website monitoring contraband cigarette busts, reported that 110 million contraband cigarettes were seized by the Romanian authorities in 2022 alone. But this is just the tip of the iceberg; many more hundreds of millions of euros worth of fake cigarettes evade being seized by authorities, as recent investigations show.

Bucharest recently announced its intent to suddenly raise taxes and prices, for the third time this year, on various sectors including the tobacco industry most prone to contraband. This will only lead to an increase in the smuggling of cheaper, more harmful fake cigarettes and other illicit goods. The European Anti-Fraud Office has been sounding the alarm on the manifold risks of illicit trade.

A surge in contraband will lead to new smuggling routes being opened, routes which end up being used not only by smugglers but also by organized crime, weakening the EU and NATO's border during a time of conflict.

Mixed news from Bulgaria

Things are currently beginning to look up for Bulgaria, Romania's southern neighbor, which has seen no fewer than five parliamentary elections held over the last two years. The country has been on a political rollercoaster, and its security approach has been following suit. From a rather shy supporter of Ukraine to one of its most important allies. Bulgaria has internally fluctuated between pro-Western and pro-Kremlin politicians, which is a liability.

Given these sensitivities and the many elections over a short period of time, there has been a lot of uncertainty as to where Bulgaria really stands regarding the war in Ukraine. Fortunately, a recent investigation by the German daily Die Welt revealed that Bulgaria, although the poorest country in the EU, has punched well above its weight when it comes to helping out Ukraine and has proven amongst its most reliable partners.

For NATO to prevail in securing its member states and allies, unity and predictability need to be more than an encouraging slogan. Governments need to act to ensure internal stability and rule of law. Some do indeed a better job than others, but with a war raging next door, that may not suffice.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Cristian Gherasim** is an analyst, foreign affairs expert and journalist specializing in Eastern and Central European politics. With a decade-long engagement in political and corporate communications, he brings a unique perspective. He has contributed to news outlets such as *CNN*, *Euronews*, *EUobserver*, *The Independent*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *CGTN Europe*.

Overlapping Legacies: Vedic India and Ancient Greece in Conversation

Vikram Zutshi
July 20, 2023

Greece and India share a common, ancient language, brought to both lands by the same people that brought the gods of their pantheons. The connection goes beyond the common Proto-Indo-European inheritance: Greek and Indian learning, too, interacted in historical times.

Imagine a distant past, thousands of years ago, when ancient tribes roamed the vast lands of Eurasia. Among these tribes were the enigmatic Proto-Indo-Europeans, whose language, now known as Proto-Indo-European (PIE), would shape the course of history. From this ancient tongue, a linguistic family tree emerged with branches spreading far and wide, giving rise to fascinating languages like Greek and Sanskrit.

Picture a diverse community of Proto-Indo-Europeans, their voices blending in a harmonious symphony of speech. As the tribes dispersed, dialects naturally evolved, setting the stage for the emergence of new branches within the Indo-European family.

In one branch, we encounter the ancestors of the Greeks. Through centuries of storytelling, trade and cultural exchanges, their language transformed, molding itself into the melodic sounds of ancient Greek. From Mycenaean Greek to the majestic Classical Greek, it left an indelible mark on literature, philosophy and civilization.

In a distant land, the Indo-Aryan branch began to take shape. Eventually settling in the Indian subcontinent, the early Indo-Aryans embraced their own dialects, leading to the emergence of Sanskrit. This refined language, with its intricate grammar and poetic beauty, became the language of the Vedas, the sacred texts of Hinduism. Sanskrit's influence extended across the Indian subcontinent, weaving the rich tapestry of modern Indian languages.

But how did these languages, which had once been intertwined, diverge and become distinct entities? Sound changes and linguistic shifts played a crucial role. Over time, unique pronunciations emerged, creating new phonetic landscapes for each language. The way they treated certain sounds diverged like branches growing apart yet still rooted in their ancestral soil.

As these languages developed, their vocabularies and grammars evolved, shaped by the cultures, experiences and encounters of their speakers. Greek and Sanskrit each cultivated their own lexicons and syntactic structures, resulting in distinct linguistic identities.

As centuries passed, Greek went through a historical odyssey, with Classical Greek paving the way for the renowned Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, and Byzantine Greek, echoing through the corridors of the Eastern Roman Empire. Eventually, Modern Greek emerged, carrying the torch of its ancient lineage into the contemporary world.

Meanwhile, Sanskrit's influence permeated the Indian subcontinent, nurturing a multitude of Indo-Aryan languages. From Hindi to Bengali, Gujarati to Punjabi, each language absorbed the essence of Sanskrit, blending it with regional flavors and giving birth to a linguistic kaleidoscope.

The development of Greek, Sanskrit and their linguistic kin reflects the interplay of history, migration and human ingenuity. From a common ancestral language, Proto-Indo-European, these languages branched out, enriching the give-and-take of human communication.

The past tends to conceal its secrets, leaving us with tantalizing clues and intriguing possibilities. Yet, how tempting it is to contemplate the hidden connections between ancient Greece and India, where ideas flowed like a gentle breeze, moving the thoughts of philosophers, kings and the laity alike.

A confluence of ideas between Vedic India and ancient Greece.

Both Classical Greek and Vedic Sanskrit belong to the Indo-European language family, two distant branches of the same linguistic tree. This shared heritage suggests that these cultures may have interacted and exchanged more than just passing greetings.

Neoplatonism emerged as a philosophical movement within the Roman Empire between the third and fifth centuries CE, building upon the foundational ideas of Plato (c. 428-347 BC) while also expanding and reshaping them in various ways.

Neoplatonism, with its roots in classical Greek and Persian philosophy as well as Egyptian theology, served as a profound source of inspiration for a wide range of metaphysicians and mystics across various traditions. I argue that it has its roots in Indian philosophy as well. Its metaphysical principles not only influenced pagan, Jewish, Christian, Gnostic and Islamic thinkers but also continued to shape their philosophical and mystical endeavors throughout the centuries.

Ammonius Saccas was a philosopher who lived in Alexandria during the third century CE. He is considered the founder of the Neoplatonic school. Ammonius was deeply influenced by various philosophical and religious traditions, including Greek, Egyptian and, some writers suggest, Indian philosophies. In my view, however, it was through his student Plotinus, a Roman philosopher who lived in the third century CE, that the integration of Vedanta philosophy into Neoplatonism became more explicit.

Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy (SUNY Press), edited by the estimable Paulos Mar Gregorios, delves into the potential influence of Indian thought on Plotinus and his teacher Ammonius Saccas as well as their primary inspiration, Plato. It raises the question of whether Platonism, Plotinism and the underlying thought patterns in Western religion, literature and art are variations of concepts found in ancient Hindu philosophy, rather than purely evolutionary products of Greek philosophy.

The essays within the book explore the actual similarities in themes or philosophical systems between select Western Neoplatonic writers and prominent Hindu philosophers. They thoroughly examine the arguments both in favor of and against the notion that Indian philosophy serves as a source for Plotinus' ideas.

At the core of Vedanta philosophy is the concept of Brahman, the ultimate reality or absolute consciousness that underlies all existence. This concept resonates with Plotinus' idea of "the One," which he considered as the ultimate source of all being and the pinnacle of reality. For Plotinus, the One transcends all categories, including being and non-being, and is beyond the grasp of intellectual comprehension. This notion parallels the Vedantic understanding of Brahman as beyond words and concepts.

Furthermore, Vedanta philosophy emphasizes the concept of maya, which refers to the illusory nature of the phenomenal world. According to Vedanta, the world we perceive is a manifestation of Brahman but is not ultimately real. Plotinus incorporated a similar notion in his teachings, suggesting that the material world is a lower level of reality and is a product of the multiplicity and diversity emanating from the One.

Another significant parallel between Neoplatonism and Vedanta is the idea of emanation. In Vedanta, the world emanates from Brahman in a hierarchical manner, with various levels of reality emerging from the Absolute. Similarly, Plotinus proposed a system of emanation, where multiple levels of reality cascade down from the One, including the Intellect and the Soul.

Plotinus and Vedanta both drew upon ideas of the soul's journey towards liberation or union with the divine. In Vedanta, this process is known as moksha or self-realization. Plotinus referred to it as "the return of the soul to the One." He believed that the soul, which is originally derived from the One, has become entangled in the material world but can regain its true nature through contemplation, philosophical inquiry and ascetic practices.

The Neoplatonic school, with its focus on the One, the nature of reality, the hierarchy of existence and the journey of the soul, provided a framework to the Greco-Roman world for understanding the universe and one's place in it. It included subsequent philosophers such as Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus and influenced early Christian thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo.

In Greek philosophy, especially in the writings of Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher hailing from Ephesus in present-day Turkey, the term

“logos” encompassed a range of significances. Plato and Aristotle subsequently expanded upon the theme. The meanings of the term included reason, conversation and language, as well as the inherent order and organization of the cosmos. Logos embodied the rational principle that governs and brings harmony to the world. It was regarded as a fundamental element of human existence, facilitating communication, comprehension and the quest for knowledge.

Similarly, in the Vedic tradition, “vak” is the Sanskrit term for speech or language but also holds a deeper significance. Vak is considered a divine power associated with the goddess Saraswati and is seen as the creative force behind the universe. Vak is believed to have the power to manifest thoughts and ideas into reality. It is the means through which the ultimate reality (Brahman) expresses itself in the world.

Both logos and vak emphasize the importance of language in shaping our understanding of the world. They recognize that language is not merely a tool for communication but a profound force that underlies creation and provides a framework for human cognition and expression. Both concepts suggest that there is an inherent order and meaning in the universe that can be accessed and understood through language.

Furthermore, both logos and vak recognize the transformative power of words. They emphasize that the way we use language can shape our reality and have a profound impact on ourselves and others. The proper use of language is seen as a means to attain wisdom, knowledge and spiritual realization. The epistemic similarities between the two have been analyzed by the Greek scholar Nikolas Kazanas among others.

The Greeks encountered a fascinating belief: metempsychosis—the notion that souls can migrate into new bodies. This concept intrigued

early Greek philosophers like Pythagoras. It bears a strong similarity to the Indian belief in reincarnation. For centuries, Hindus, Buddhists and Jains have embraced the idea that our souls embark on a journey of multiple lifetimes. Could it be that Indian notions about the cyclical nature of existence influenced the musings of these Greek thinkers? Many scholars seem to think so.

The Greek philosopher Empedocles introduced the world to the four elements—earth, air, fire and water—as the building blocks of all matter. Remarkably, ancient Indian philosophy also recognized a similar set of elements known as “mahabhuta.” Earth, air, fire and water played a vital role in both cultures’ understanding of the world.

Greek philosophers like Pyrrho and the Cynics had a remarkable inclination toward detachment and renunciation. These ideas bear a striking resemblance to concepts found in Indian philosophies such as Buddhism and Jainism. The pursuit of non-attachment, the rejection of material possessions and the quest for inner peace and enlightenment were common to both the Pyrrhonists and the gymnosophists.

The Greeks coined the term “gymnosophist” to refer to a group of ancient Indian philosophers. The word literally means “naked philosophers” or “naked wise men.” These individuals pursued asceticism to such an extent that they considered food and clothing as hindrances to pure thinking. Various Greek authors mentioned that they followed a vegetarian diet. Additionally, there were gymnosophists in Upper Egypt who Apollonius of Tyana referred to as “Ethiopian gymnosophists.”

Diogenes Laërtius, the famous biographer of philosophers who lived in the 3rd century AD, made references to the gymnosophists. He reported that Pyrrho of Elis, while in India alongside

Alexander the Great, was influenced by these gymnosophists. Upon returning to Ellis, Pyrrho adopted their way of life, which eventually led him to establish the Hellenistic philosophy of Pyrrhonism.

Gods and fate in the Iliad and the Mahabharata

The Iliad and the Mahabharata, two monumental epic poems, offer captivating narratives that plumb the depths of human experience and explore themes of war, heroism and destiny. The Iliad, a Greek epic poem traditionally attributed to Homer, originated in ancient Greece during the 6th to 8th centuries BC. Similarly, the Mahabharata, an ancient epic poem from India, traditionally attributed to the great sage Vyasa, traces its roots back to the 6th century BC. Despite originating from different cultures, these epics share intriguing similarities and offer rich grounds for comparative analysis.

One of the most striking parallels between the Iliad and the Mahabharata is their central focus on monumental wars. In the Iliad, we witness the epic conflict of the Trojan War, while the Mahabharata unfolds around the Kurukshetra War. Both battles serve as backdrops for the exploration of profound human emotions, the struggles of heroes and the complex dynamics of family and honor.

There is a strong resemblance between characters in the Iliad and their counterparts in the Mahabharata. Take Achilles, the central figure in the Iliad, and his uncanny similarities to the valiant Arjuna from the Mahabharata. Both are renowned warriors, gifted with extraordinary skills while burdened with fatal flaws. Both are guided by a code of honor that shapes their actions on the battlefield.

Both grand narratives of the Iliad and the Mahabharata, though commonly ascribed to single authors, emerged from what M.H. Abrams, a

renowned critic known for shaping the contemporary literary canon through the creation of the Norton Anthology of English Literature, defines as the “primary epic.” Within this framework, these epics were carefully molded by literary artists who drew inspiration from historical and legendary accounts that had evolved within the oral traditions of their respective nations during periods of expansion and conflict.

Divine intervention plays a significant role in both these epics, where gods and goddesses actively intervene in the affairs of semi-divine humans on Earth. The deities participate in councils, manipulate events and even determine the fates of mortal warriors. In the Mahabharata, gods frequently descend from the heavens to witness battles between valiant warriors. However, these divine beings are not above trickery, as exemplified by the god Indra's actions when he approaches Karna to acquire his armor, thus ensuring Karna's defeat against Arjuna.

Moreover, the gods bestow blessings or punishments on humans according as they are driven by their personal inclinations. Often portrayed as relentless, they exhibit little mercy, especially when humans deviate from their ordained paths. In the Iliad, Zeus stands in support of the Trojans during the war and sends Hermes to accompany King Priam to Achilles' camp.

Both the Mahabharata and the Iliad seem to exalt the splendor of warfare. Characters are assessed and judged based on their courage and competence in battle, determining whether they are worthy of admiration or contempt. For instance, Paris in the Iliad is disdained by his family and lover for his aversion to fighting, while Achilles earns eternal renown for deliberately rejecting a peaceful and unremarkable life at home.

The texts themselves uphold this measure of character evaluation and extend it even to the gods.

They portray warlike deities like Athena in a favorable light, while humorously ridiculing timid gods such as Aphrodite and Artemis, who shy away from aggression.

Fate weaves its tapestry in intriguing ways across both tales. The Pandavas, banished to the forest for a grueling 14-year period, mirror the enduring struggle of the Trojan War, fought for an equally lengthy duration.

As battle ensues, we witness the inner turmoil of two great warriors. Arjuna, initially hesitant to raise his weapon, mirrors the reluctance that Achilles shows when the Trojan War erupts. Both grapple with their roles in the face of conflict.

Arjuna, filled with sorrow over his fallen son Abhimanyu, solemnly vows to avenge his death by slaying Jaydrath. Similarly, Achilles mourns the loss of his beloved brother Patroclus, vowing to seek retribution by slaying Hector.

Darkness becomes an ally as strategic strikes shake the enemy's foundations. Ghatotkacha, using the element of surprise and wielding fire as his weapon, wreaks havoc upon the Kaurava army, decimating their camps with devastating flames. Hector employs a similar tactic, launching a fiery assault under the cover of night, reducing the Greek ships to ash.

The art of storytelling unites the two narratives. Sanjaya, the narrator of the Mahabharata, relays the epic saga of the war to the blind king Dhritarashtra, providing a window into the unfolding events. Similarly, a minister assumes the role of narrator, recounting the Trojan War to their king, ensuring the tales of valor and tragedy reach eager ears.

Blindness to the faults of one's own kin emerges as a recurring theme. Dhritarashtra, turning a blind eye to the misdeeds of his wicked son

Duryodhana, parallels the Trojan king, who remains oblivious to the faults of his son Paris, despite their detrimental consequences.

Moments of triumph and anguish shape the lives of the characters. Duryodhana's exultation upon winning Draupadi in the game of dice echoes through the halls as he revels in his newfound power, proclaiming her as their slave. Similarly, in the Iliad, Briseis, a Trojan woman, becomes a pawn awarded to Achilles after suffering the indignities inflicted upon her by other kings and soldiers.

Prophecies cast a foreboding shadow over the destinies of key figures. The Iliad speaks of the prophecy regarding Paris, the harbinger of destruction for his kingdom. Similarly, the Mahabharata foretells the prophecy of Duryodhana, whose actions will ultimately bring ruin upon his own realm

From Dyéus to Zeus: The Sky Father in Indo-European Mythology.

In the hidden mists of prehistory, where myth and religion intermingle, the Proto-Indo-European people held a profound reverence for their deities. Among this pantheon of gods, one figure stood out—the mighty Sky Father. Initially revered as the father of other gods, this celestial patriarch ultimately ascended to become the supreme ruler of the divine realm, reigning over a vast expanse of Indo-European lands from Ireland to India.

The connection between the Indo-European populations and the luminous daytime sky was unmistakable. The radiant heavens served as a beacon of inspiration for poets, scholars and mystics who sought to unravel the mysteries of the divine.

Deep within the roots of the Proto-Indo-European language, scholars unearthed the name

Dyḗus phtér, Sky Father, as the ancient term for this revered deity. Its echoes reverberated across cultures, finding expression in the Vedic Dyáuṣ, the Greek Zeús and the Latin Iouis or Diouis. The assimilation of thunder and storms by Zeus and Iouis, possibly influenced by Near Eastern traditions, added a dynamic and powerful dimension to their divine personas.

The linguistic puzzle pieces gradually revealed the underlying meaning of Dyḗus. The word di/dei, serving as the foundation for the derived forms of Dyḗus, encapsulated the essence of “giving off light.” It is no surprise, then, that words stemming from this root evoked notions of brightness, heaven, sky, daylight and day itself.

The Latin “diēs” the Vedic “divé-dive” denoting daily occurrences and the Armenian word “tiw,” meaning daytime, all point to the undeniable connection between the sky and the concept of day. Furthermore, the same root gave rise to dyéw- or deiwos, finding expression in the Baltic deities Diēvas and Dievs, as well as the generic Latin term for God, deus.

Across the vast pantheon of Indo-European deities, the Sky Father Dyḗus reigned supreme. His role transcended that of a mere deity; he assumed the esteemed position of a divine patriarch, a father figure to the gods themselves. Whether referred to as Dyáuṣ in Vedic, Zeu páter or patrós Diós in Greek or Iuppiter and Diespiter in Latin, his fatherly title remained consistent, reflecting the enduring reverence bestowed upon him by his worshippers.

But how did Zeus and Jupiter, the illustrious figures of Greek and Roman mythology, ascend from being mere sky-gods to sovereign rulers of the entire pantheon? The answer lies not solely in their fatherly status but also in their embodiment of the sky and heaven itself. As divine entities, Zeus

and Jupiter possessed an all-seeing, all-encompassing wisdom.

Homer, the renowned ancient Greek poet, aptly described Zeus with the epithet “eurúopa,” meaning “with wide vision.” Interestingly, this epithet gave birth to the name Europe itself, as the continent was named after a woman abducted by Zeus, who bore him the famous King Minos of Crete.

Similarly, the Rigveda hailed Dyáuṣ as the “all-knowing god.” This supreme quality stemmed from his ability to perceive all that transpired below. With such immense power, the Rigveda rightfully acknowledged the greatness of the Sky God, referring to him as “máh,” meaning “great.” Zeus, too, was often described with the Homeric epithet mégas, emphasizing his immense stature.

The sun, often called the “eye of Dyḗus” or the “lamp of Dyḗus,” enjoyed a unique connection to the Sky Father. Both the sun and the sky shared the attributes of being all-seeing and all-knowing, making them overseers of oaths and justice.

This all-seeing, all-knowing nature of the Sky Father, his role in overseeing justice and oaths and his connection to the sun created a fertile ground for the concept of sovereignty and kingship. French mythographer and philologist, George Dumézil, introduced the significant concept of the “trifunctional hypothesis.”

According to Dumézil, Indo-European myths and religions could be interpreted as symbolic representations of three fundamental domains: the sacred, the martial and the economic. These domains reflected different ideologies and corresponded to the hierarchical division of society into castes or classes associated with sovereignty, military affairs and productivity. In the Greco-Roman world, Zeus and Jupiter embodied sovereignty, while Mitra-Varuna and Mithra-

Ahura Mazda fulfilled this role in the Indo-Iranian context.

In the vast Indo-European cosmos, the gods resided in the heavens, while humanity inhabited the earth below. This division created an inherent contrast between mortals and the divine. Yet, through wisdom gained from observing celestial phenomena and the skies above, humans gained glimpses of the tremendous power possessed by the immortals.

The great ancient poet Homer beautifully captured this distinction when Odysseus told Nausicaa, “If you are one of the gods who dwell in the broad heaven, I reckon you are most like Artemis ... but if you are of the mortals who live on earth, then thrice fortunate are your parents and brothers.”

The enduring legacy of the ancient Proto-Indo-European religion and mythology continues to shape the belief systems of their countless descendants. Across vast lands, under the watchful gaze of the all-seeing Sky Father Dyéus, his children thrive, honoring their ancestral roots and embracing the divinity that stretches across the heavens.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Vikram Zutshi** is a cultural critic, author and filmmaker who divides his time between the US, Latin America and Asia. For a decade, Vikram worked in indie film and network television, as a consultant to tech start-ups, as a real estate developer, and in media sales and acquisitions. Then, he produced feature films before transitioning into directing.

Caste and Party: A Volatile Mix in Karnataka

Shishira Maiya
July 23, 2023

Karnataka is the only southern Indian state where India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is competitive. In the 2023 Karnataka state elections, the BJP has just lost to the Indian National Congress. Karnataka's intricate caste and religious dynamics make local politics quite unpredictable. With national elections coming up next year, can the BJP recover in this state?

With the dust of the election finally settled, the new king has been anointed. Siddaramaiah, a senior leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), became the chief minister of Karnataka once again on May 20. He had previously served in the office from 2013 to 2018.

D. K. Shivakumar has begrudgingly taken the second post of the deputy chief minister. It remains to be seen if he will continue to stand on the sideline, as history tells us that chief ministers usually have a hard time completing their terms in this state. In the 66 years of its modern political history, Karnataka has seen only four instances of chief ministers completing their terms. The last one, though, was Siddaramaiah himself.

A brief history

The roots of this anomaly lie in the 20th-century unification movement that led to the formation of the state. This movement aimed to bring together various regions, uniting the territory of the former

Mysore Kingdom with parts of Hyderabad and Bombay states, along with the districts of Ballari, Dakshina Kannada and Kodagu. These regions shared a common language, Kannada.

Despite the unification of the state into a single administrative entity, politics in Karnataka remained highly regionalized. This resulted in a system with a weak state capital. Regional strongmen held considerable sway over policy, often demanding plum posts for their supporters. Winning in Karnataka means effectively winning six different elections, each with its own unique characteristics. To have a chance at forming a government without a coalition, a political party must perform exceptionally well in at least three regions and achieve above-average results in at least two others.

In Karnataka's 66 years of existence, the INC has been the dominant political force, governing the state for approximately 50 years. As in any other Indian election, caste plays a crucial role in determining electoral outcomes. Before the unification of Karnataka, the Vokkaligas, a landholding community, held considerable sway within the INC party of Mysore state. Concerned about potentially relinquishing power to the numerically superior Lingayats, a dominant Shaivite caste in the northern regions that were to be added to the state, several Vokkaliga leaders voiced their opposition to the unification of Kannada speakers. Vokkaliga fears were not unfounded. After unification, Lingayats swiftly captured power within the INC and also took the coveted post of the chief minister. They continued to dominate the INC until the late 1980s.

The turning point came when Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi unceremoniously dismissed Chief Minister Veerendra Patil in a press conference over his handling of a communal riot. This 1990 "humiliation" of a son of the soil by a national leader prompted the entire Lingayat community to

align itself with the then-nascent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under B. S. Yediyurappa, a loyalty that has endured ever since.

Meanwhile, the capture of the INC by the Lingayat community had created the need for a strong Vokkaliga leader who could unite them into a formidable force. H. D. Devegowda and his party Janata Dal (JD), quickly filled this void. The JD rose rapidly thanks to the support of the Vokkaliga community. This resurgence led to the Vokkaligas reclaiming the post of chief minister after nearly four decades, and, to their delight, even the post of prime minister, albeit for only a year from 1996–1997. In 1999, the party split and Devegowda's faction became the Janata Dal (Secular), or JD(S).

Twenty years ago, H. D. Kumaraswamy, the son of Devegowda, took over the reins from his father. Since entering politics in 2003, Kumaraswamy has served as chief minister twice.

With these two dominant castes fighting for power, a third alternative emerged in the form of "Ahinda"—an alliance between religious minorities, backward castes and Dalits. The alliance masterminded by former chief minister Devraj Urs has found its torchbearer in Siddaramaiah today. These are the three corners of the triangular fight that has dominated Karnataka politics for the past three decades.

The Lingayat blunder

The previous assembly elections in 2018 had returned a hung assembly, with the BJP as the single largest party. However, the INC and JD(S) managed to stitch together an alliance with H. D. Kumaraswamy as chief minister.

A year into the government, discontent grew and 12 legislators belonging to both coalition partners defected to the BJP and formed a government with Yediyurappa at the helm. He was a leader of great

stature, with a massive following in the state. Since 1990, this Lingayat leader had toiled to build up the BJP in Karnataka, the party's only home in the South. However, Yediyurappa's independent style of working often clashed with the ever-centralizing impulse of BJP high command.

When the conflict between the state and national parties reached a deadlock, Yediyurappa resigned after Home Minister Amit Shah and the central BJP leadership used a clause in the BJP charter that mandated compulsory retirement at 75 to force the senior statesman out of office. Cognizant that the sentiments of Yediyurappa's community would be hurt, the BJP tried to placate it by appointing Basavraj Bommai, another Lingayat, as the chief minister for the remainder of the term. But the damage was done. Bommai was a political lightweight who could never fit into Yediyurappa's shoes.

Adding insult to injury, the BJP also decided to endorse the former chief minister and Lingayat leader Jagadish Shettar, a six-time elected member of Karnataka's legislative assembly, and the former deputy chief minister Laxman Savadi a month before the elections. Unfortunately for the BJP, both leaders left the party and joined the INC, claiming that the BJP was anti-Lingayat. Their supporters followed en masse, further adding credibility to their claims that "BJP is anti-Lingayat." Even though Shettar lost in the polls, his joining the INC worked in the party's favor. It swept the Hyderabad and Mumbai Karnataka regions with a majority of Lingayat votes.

Hindutva vs. Kannada pride

After the leadership change, the BJP thought it could offset potential losses on Lingayat votes by building a pan-religious identity of Hindutva. The party focused on national Hindu identity to win support. While the monsoon ravaged the infrastructure of the state capital Bengaluru, the

Karnataka government busied itself making a fuss about hijabs in schools and the boycott of halal products. This aggressive push was spearheaded by C. T. Ravi, a rising star in the state party. However, this imported northern version of Hindutva failed to resonate with the people of Karnataka. While Hindutva politics can be seen as an acceptable side dish, it cannot serve as the main course in Karnataka. Unsurprisingly, Ravi lost his seat, and the BJP drew a blank in his district, Chikmagalur.

Hindutva has a natural tendency to homogenize people under a broad blanket of Hinduism and Hindi. In South India, language forms a fundamental part of identity and Hindi is still resented as an imposition by North Indian leaders. In Karnataka, the BJP was seen as neglecting the interests of the Kannada language and cozying up to New Delhi's edicts, heightening concerns about the erosion of local autonomy. Moreover, the non-payment of goods and services taxes owed to the state and the promotion of Gujarat's Amul dairy cooperative over the local Nandini brand contributed to this narrative of the neglect of Karnataka.

Administrative Failure

Furthermore, the BJP had many failures on the administrative front. The Karnataka State Contractors Association (KSCA) alleged that ministers were demanding illegal cuts as high as 40% of the project budget, making it unfeasible for KSCA members to operate. The INC, under the guidance of their consultant Sunil Kanugolu, who worked formerly for McKinsey & Company, latched on to this and launched a campaign: "40% Sarkara" (40% Government). The campaign prominently featured posters with the phrase "Pay CM," cleverly playing a pun on India's popular payment network "Paytm," with an accompanying QR code to "pay bribes." Kanugolu's campaign

was a hit on social media, tilting the narrative battle towards the INC.

The BJP faced the polls with a sinking ship and an unreliable captain. The best they were hoping for was a hung assembly. When the results were out, they could only hold on to their bastions in the capital Bengaluru and in coastal Karnataka. As many as 11 ministers lost their seats and the party drew a blank in eight districts. Their only silver lining was the BJP vote share remained unchanged at ~36%.

Meanwhile, the INC increased its vote share by a decisive ~5%, going up from 38% to 43%. This came at the cost of Kumaraswamy's JD(S) whose vote share fell from 18.3% to 13.3%. The INC's remarkable victory in the Old Mysore region can be attributed to Vokkaligas uniting behind the state INC chief Shivakumar who is now the second-in-command. He missed out on the chief ministerial positions because Jawaharlal Nehru's great-grandson Rahul Gandhi favored Siddaramaiah once again. This overlooking of Shivakumar might have consequences. It remains to be seen if Vokkaliga support for the INC will extend to the crucial upcoming national elections next year.

What Next?

The 2023 Karnataka election victory was a hard-fought one for the INC. They needed the organizational skills of Shivakumar as well as the personal charisma of Siddaramaiah to win. The two leaders realized that they depended on each other. Hence, they buried their differences and fought the elections unitedly. Now that victory is theirs, their rivalry is back and the gloves are off. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that the government's reign might not be frictionless.

Gandhi is banking on the Shivakumar-Siddaramaiah duo to deliver a major chunk of seats in the all-important national elections next May. In

the 2019 national elections, the Congress managed to win only one out of the 28 seats in Karnataka. However, 2024 might turn out differently. The BJP has been completely decimated in Karnataka and is in soul-searching mode. The state BJP lacks a strong leader who can deliver the only potential set of seats in South India to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Yet it is important to remember that the people of Karnataka possess a commendable level of political maturity. In the past, they have often made distinctions between state and national issues, voting for different parties in state and national elections. Time will tell if the Congress can successfully capitalize on its 2023 victory or whether the BJP will make a comeback.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Shishira** is a PhD student at the University of Maryland, College Park, specializing in computer vision and machine learning. Prior to this, he worked as a researcher at IISc and also spent time in various Bangalore-based AI startups. An avid quizzer and a reader, he writes occasionally on Substack.

India's Urban Middle Class Craves Better Quality of Life

Atul Singh, Manu Sharma
July 23, 2023

Most of India still lives in villages. Yet cities have given birth to social and political movements in the past. Today, urban voters are discontented with their quality of life and want

politicians, especially the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, to address their concerns.

Gone are the days when only officers of the Indian Foreign Service and a chosen few traveled abroad. The socialist India created by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi is safely dead. Indians now travel extensively, their relatives do WhatsApp video calls from all parts of the world, their children study in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Singapore and even Hong Kong and they see images of foreign cities on a daily basis on their mobile screens.

Increasingly, Indians are asking themselves why their cities look and feel like slums. Buildings are in disrepair, city roads have potholes, sewage overflows, tap water is far from clean and waste is everywhere. Cody Daniel, an entrepreneur, MIT alumnus and great lover of India, once remarked during his visit to Gujarat, “The tragedy of India is trash.”

Even ten years ago, Indians might not have felt the same way as Daniel. Today, many of them do. Indians have achieved success in cities like Singapore, Sydney and London. They have run global institutions and even other nations. Middle-class Indians are often world-class. They want their own cities to be world-class, not trash towns that seem war-ravaged and shell-shocked.

Ironically, as India’s economy has grown and the middle class has increased, its cities have deteriorated. Older citizens in Bengaluru (once Bangalore) speak of how their beloved garden city has now become a garbage city. Pune, the historic city of the Peshwas, is another casualty. Urban populations have outgrown the cities they live in and put tremendous pressure on infrastructure. Urban authorities have simply failed to deliver.

Urban cash cows fund redistribution

India’s politicians have long taxed cities and redistributed the revenue to rural areas. Despite significant improvement in tax revenues by the current government, India’s tax base remains frightfully narrow. The urban middle class shoulders much of the tax burden but gets very little in terms of return.

Historically, neglect of urban areas did not hurt political parties in elections. India was a largely agrarian society. In the early days of India’s independence, the rural population was 82%. This figure has been declining consistently and, in 2022, only around 64% of Indians lived in villages. As they did during British colonial rule, cities have spearheaded social and political movements. The Indian National Congress (INC) was an urban organization until Mahatma Gandhi made it a mass movement.

After independence, Jawaharlal Nehru became prime minister. He embraced socialism, which meant heavy taxation of India’s small urban population. His daughter Indira Gandhi doubled down on socialism; so did the opposition that unseated her in the 1977 elections. Socialism, not Hinduism, led to the infamous Hindu rate of growth.

Liberalization in 1991 freed up the economy and Indian growth rates improved, but urban areas have still disproportionately borne the burden of taxes.

Historically, it is this disaffected voter base that has seeded new parties. Initially, the core base of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was small traders in urban areas. Most recently, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has targeted the urban vote, promising better public services to this section of the population. Both are following in the footsteps of the INC that began in Mumbai in 1885.

Today, urban Indians are disaffected again. They do not expect their cities to turn into Singapore or London, but they want water supply, electricity, public transport, schools, basic healthcare, basic law and order and some public spaces such as parks and playgrounds. These Indians feel they have no representation. During a cross-country tour, one of the authors met business leaders, executives, engineers, doctors and many other urban Indians. Invariably, they complained that they had no real representation. Politicians were milking them for taxes and redistributing them to rural areas or, worse still, doling out freebies whilst neglecting cities. Above all, these urban voters want more livable cities and a better quality of life.

The current situation is reminiscent of the Nehru family-led INC pre-2014. The grand old party of India thought that the Hindu vote could never consolidate and ignored the growing threat from the BJP. Today, it is coming from the opposite direction. The BJP has been taking its urban voter base for granted. The party has imposed unpopular tax policies with the assumption that urban voters have nowhere to turn to. Besides, some BJP leaders seem to think that these voters do not have the numbers to matter.

India's seemingly dominant party might be in for a surprise. The success of AAP is based on targeting urban voters. The party has solidified its support by improving schools and promising primary healthcare centers as well as providing free water and electricity. In the 2022 Gujarat elections, the BJP won 52.52% of the vote in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state. Yet it is important to note that young AAP got 12.91% of the vote, almost all of it in urban areas.

Urban middle-class voters were once loyal to the BJP, but that loyalty is increasingly being tested. A crisis is brewing. After months of internecine warfare, the opposition seems to be

coming together to take on the Modi-led BJP. Should urban voters switch to other parties, the government might lose valuable and much-needed support. The BJP will have to act speedily before next year's 2024 national elections to retain its urban support.

No real local democracy or competent urban government

India is a vibrant democracy, but most people do not realize that the unit of power is the national government in New Delhi and the state government in capitals like Chennai, Lucknow, Kolkata, Mumbai and Guwahati. The prime minister, known often as PM, rules the country largely through the heaven-born Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Chief ministers (CMs) of states also use IAS officers to enforce their writ.

Rural districts and urban areas are ruled by IAS officers who are modern-day mansabdars—feudatories sent by the Mughal emperor to collect revenue and do his bidding. They are called district collectors (because the job of ICS officers was to collect revenue for the British Empire) or district magistrates (because the ICS officers were responsible for the maintenance of law and order in the district). A district magistrate is popularly referred to as the DM. In India, it is a running joke that only three positions matter: PM, CM and DM. Everyone else has to serve these three regardless of whether they are surgeons, scientists or software engineers.

The IAS DMs are responsible to the CMs in state capitals and not to the population in their jurisdiction. Descendants of the imperial Indian Civil Service (ICS), they still suffer from the hangover of the British Raj. Too many IAS officers invariably behave like rulers instead of public servants. Some things have changed, though, and not for the better. Unlike ICS officers

who had secure tenures, IAS officers are transferred at the drop of a hat. They know that they enjoy their position thanks to the patronage of the chief minister. They answer upwards, not downwards.

Simply put, Indian cities are run not by elected officials, but by IAS satraps. Unlike Chinese Communist Party bosses who spend a lifetime in their fiefdom and move up the hierarchy on the condition that they deliver economic growth and build infrastructure, IAS officers rarely look back at the districts or cities they run. They settle around the national capital New Delhi or various state capitals and tell tall tales of how they “civilized” Nagapattinam or East Champaran. Truth be told, what IAS officers do is immaterial. Loyalty to their political bosses matters much more than their performance.

This means that most IAS officers do not care two hoots about the concerns of local citizens. In the words of a senior IAS officer who would only speak on condition of anonymity, the so-called steel frame of India has become a “steal frame” instead. On July 20, airport authorities stopped an IAS officer with assets worth over \$12 million (100 crore rupees) and a prime suspect in a Covid scam from fleeing the country. Ironically, this officer is also the CEO of the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), responsible for providing affordable housing in the state. Needless to say, MHADA has done an awful job of providing housing in any of the state’s cities.

In Noida, where the parents of one of the authors live, politicians and IAS officers were involved in an over \$6 billion (50,000 crore rupees) scam. While Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has taken action against minor forest officials, he has spared the IAS officers who engaged in this grand heist that would have done Robert Clive proud. Unsurprisingly, Noida is not

exactly a pleasant place to stay. Other cities have also been victims of such scams and are not doing much better.

In rural areas, citizens are more forgiving of IAS officers engaging in the loot. In India’s cities, the times they are a-changin’, and citizens expect more. As stated earlier, they return from cities abroad wondering why their urban areas cannot be cleaner, greener and better run. Most political parties, including the ruling BJP, are increasingly out of touch with this changed zeitgeist. IAS officers clear one exam in their 20s to become feudal barons for life. Politicians, especially in the ruling BJP, do not have that luxury. In particular, overtaxed urban voters will weigh, measure and find them wanting if Modi’s promise of achhe din (good days) rings false.

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

***Manu Sharma** is a contributing editor at Fair Observer. He is a political analyst with an international footprint. A dynamic, young thought leader in the field of global political research, communications strategy, public policy and political economy, Manu has served in financial institutions, international organizations and media bodies across four continents.

Here Is Why Indian Manufacturing Is Struggling

Mudit Jain
July 24, 2023

Between April 2022 and March 2023, India's trade deficit in manufacturing exceeded \$250 billion. This serves as a stark reminder of the challenges and lack of competitiveness of Indian manufacturing. The roots of this decline began in the 1990s and a lack of comprehensive reforms has limited the sector's ability to compete effectively on a global scale.

Following India's hard-fought independence in 1947, the nation stood at the threshold of a transformative journey toward industrialization. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru proclaimed the ascendancy of factories as the “temples of modern India.”

However, navigating the complexities of this nascent industrialization required a delicate balance between fostering domestic growth and safeguarding against the influx of cheaper imports. To that end, Nehru implemented a policy of imposing high import duties, thereby erecting a protective barrier around domestic industries.⁴⁰

In the 1990s, India, under the leadership of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, confronted a pressing foreign exchange crisis that required urgent action. The government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance, securing loans that would ultimately have far-reaching implications for the nation's economic trajectory. The conditions attached to these loans marked a decisive turning point, as they compelled

India to embark on a path of liberalization and open its economy to the world.

In compliance with the IMF's prescriptions, India embarked on a momentous journey of economic liberalization, dismantling trade barriers and embracing free trade. Over the span of a mere decade, the government drastically changed its policy. It slashed import duties for industrial goods to the bone. The reduction, however, occurred without commensurate comprehensive reforms.

Amidst the rapid decline in import duties, the manufacturing industry found itself grappling with a confluence of factors that eroded its competitiveness.

The costs of essential inputs for manufacturing, including furnace oil, power, loans and infrastructure, witnessed a notable uptick. Often, government-backed entities supplied these inputs. The cost escalations imposed a significant burden on domestic manufacturers, impeding their ability to compete on a level playing field.

Further red tape and corruption have plagued the implementation of a number of laws, including the Factories Act and the Environment and Pollution Control Act. This impedes the growth of the manufacturing industry and hinders its potential.

To meet local demand, look overseas

In the early 2000s, a noticeable trend emerged within India's business landscape. An increasing number of domestic companies opted to outsource their manufacturing operations overseas and import products.

This strategic decision aimed at minimizing costs and capitalizing on global supply chains. Simultaneously, however, it contributed to the closure of numerous domestic industries that were

unable to compete with the influx of cheaper imports.

Despite its vast size and burgeoning population, India finds itself heavily reliant on imports to meet a significant portion of its domestic demand. This has forced many industries in India to shutter their operations, as they are unable to withstand the onslaught of more cost-effective imports.

A notable example can be found in the calcium carbide industry, where Indian companies have increasingly turned to foreign suppliers for imports. By 2004, this had led to closures in the domestic industry due to the inflow of cheaper foreign sources, despite the presence of a heavy import duty.

The soda ash industry also outsourced production in the early 2000s as many big names like Tata Chemicals and Nirma bought plants overseas and imported soda ash into India rather than expanding their domestic operations.

Another striking example is India's status as the largest importer of PVC resin globally. There has been no concurrent expansion of domestic companies. Neither have there been foreign companies establishing their own plants in the country.

These dynamics contribute to a business culture in India in which non-technocrats occupy leadership positions; their primary focus often lies in navigating the business environment rather than spearheading technological advancements.

Subsidies, taxes and red tape

The decline of India's manufacturing sector can be attributed, in part, to the comparatively higher input costs imposed by the Indian government. This discrepancy in cost has made it arduous for

domestic companies to thrive amidst global competition.

A glaring example of this disparity lies in the freight costs incurred for transporting goods. It is almost twice as expensive to ship goods to the north of India from the south of India than it is to ship them from China! This is largely due to the burdensome 100% taxes levied on petrol and diesel.

Remarkably, it is less expensive to fly from Mumbai to Dubai than to travel the same distance from Mumbai to Calcutta. This is due to the exemption of aviation turbine fuel taxes for international flights.

India's practice of subsidizing the government without yielding significant benefits has also become evident. The case of calcium carbide in the late 1990s exemplifies this. Despite a substantial duty on the chemical, imports of calcium carbide from China are far cheaper than domestically manufactured calcium carbide.

This is due to the exorbitant power costs imposed by State Electricity Boards in India. These elevated power costs significantly inflate the cost of producing calcium carbide domestically, rendering it less competitive compared to its imported counterpart.

India's high indirect taxes also contribute to the burdensome costs of the manufacturing sector. It should be noted that the World Trade Organization (WTO) has recommended that exports should be exempt from such taxes.

Lastly, the acts and regulations governing the manufacturing industry in India often take on a policing approach rather than fostering a partnership for growth.

For instance, in the airline industry, companies seeking regulatory approval to operate are not only

required to obtain licenses but must also pay the regulation agency's employees to develop the necessary skills for certification. Generally, these authorities lack the expertise of the industries they oversee.

This necessitates a reevaluation of the regulatory framework in India. By fostering a collaborative and supportive approach, authorities can align themselves with the needs of the sector. This entails developing a deep understanding of the specific industries they regulate and providing necessary guidance.

While I have not exhausted all of the factors, these are the core reasons why manufacturing is less than 15% of India's gross domestic product. Despite the country's abundant natural resources and a large pool of human talent, outdated methods of governance have continued to hinder the growth of the manufacturing sector. It is crucial to address these issues comprehensively.

Regulators can do better

Addressing the decline in manufacturing requires proactive measures from the government.

- Establishing a collaborative body: Creating a Ministry of International Trade and Industry-style body, similar to post-World War II Japan, can facilitate closer collaboration between businesses and industries.
- Drastically reducing indirect taxation: Reducing the burden of indirect taxes can significantly alleviate the cost pressures on manufacturers. Additionally, allowing for the set-off of all indirect taxes at different stages of the production process would further enhance their competitiveness.

- Embracing blockchain technology: Removing regulations and encouraging the adoption of blockchain technology can enhance transparency and efficiency in the approval process. By leveraging blockchain, the government can create a transparent and traceable system that streamlines regulatory procedures and reduces bureaucracy.
- Incentivizing foreign investment: Providing attractive incentives to foreign companies can encourage them to invest in India's manufacturing sector. Foreign investment can bring in advanced technologies, expertise and capital, leading to job creation and economic growth. Drawing lessons from Margaret Thatcher's approach in the 1980s, India should embrace foreign ownership of companies to revitalize the manufacturing sector.

Implementing these strategies requires a change in mindset and a commitment to prioritizing growth. Government officials and policymakers need to adopt a proactive approach that encourages and supports industry rather than excessively regulating it. By fostering a conducive environment for manufacturing, India can move closer to achieving the goal of self-reliance—*atmanirbharta*—and become a global manufacturing hub.

[[Naveed Ahsan](#) edited this piece.]

***Mudit Jain** is third generation member of his family-owned company, which manufactures industrial chemicals. He has played an active role in various chambers of commerce. In addition to his business responsibilities, Mudit is actively engaged in various activities and organizations.

The Truth about Western Values in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Davor Džalto
July 26, 2023

Bosnia continues to spiral into disintegration under the guise of a Western-led pursuit of stabilitocracy. Western leadership has systemically undermined the democratization of the country, causing an ongoing and underreported crisis.

Today, the war in Ukraine, the attempted coup in Russia and the unrest in France are making the headlines. Still, there is another crisis in Europe happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Known for its chronic political instability and dysfunctional institutions, the country is showing more signs of disintegration, encouraged by the West.

Similarly to the situation that emerged in 2021 when then High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina Valentin Inzko imposed amendments to the criminal code, the present crisis is due to the decisions of the current High Representative in this Balkan country.

Why we should care what happens in Bosnia

There are at least two reasons why we should pay attention to this crisis. First, it can potentially escalate, with unpredictable consequences for the region and the continent.

Second, it confirms that the proclaimed commitment of many Western governments to

democracy, human rights and the rule of law is nothing but propaganda. This propaganda campaign hides the adherence to non-democratic procedures whenever these better serve imperial interests and political-economic goals.

On July 1, 2023, High Representative Christian Schmidt issued a series of legally binding decisions. Schmidt imposed amendments to the criminal code and declared that everyone who does not “apply, implement, enforce or otherwise comply with a decision of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or who prevents or otherwise obstructs its application, implementation or enforcement, shall be punished by imprisonment for a term between six months and five years.”

In addition, Schmidt issued decisions aimed at nullifying the previously approved laws by the parliament of Republika Srpska, one of the constitutive entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The parliament had determined not to implement the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the territory of Republika Srpska until the federal parliament approves new legislation regarding the constitutional court. This would prevent foreigners from illegitimately serving as constitutional court justices in the country—which has been the practice since the end of the war in 1995.

The perception of the parliament majority and the leadership of Republika Srpska is that the constitutional court lacks legitimacy. They believe that this court has been making unconstitutional decisions that merely reflect the interests of Western political elites, disregarding the vital interests of the Bosnian constitutive entity.

A corrupt system without supervision

The Western press is rightfully reporting on authoritarian leadership in countries like Russia.

However, there is a lack of coverage on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the High Representative, who holds no democratic legitimacy, can overrule decisions made by the parliament, whose members are democratically elected. This power structure is the sad reality of the Western-backed neocolonial rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The complicated institutional arrangement of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily the result of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the war in the former Yugoslav Republic. Annex 10 of this agreement calls for the establishment of the office of the high representative. As designated by Annex 10, the high representative coordinates organizations involved in the civilian aspects of a peace settlement, monitoring and resolving difficulties. The high representative also participates in donor meetings for rehabilitation and reconstruction.

However, the procedure for appointing the high representative was never clearly defined and lacked transparency from the beginning. The Peace Implementation Conference held in London in December 1995 only "approved the designation of Mr. Carl Bildt as High Representative," inviting "the United Nations Security Council to agree to Mr. Bildt's designation as High Representative."

The Conference established the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), where the US-led coalition was the decisive voice that would appoint future high representatives and influence peace implementations. Originally, the steering board of the PIC was supposed to give political guidance on peace implementation to the high representative. There was an initial attempt to provide newly appointed high representatives a semblance of legitimacy by submitting the decision to the UN Security Council for approval. However, even this procedure has gone by the wayside.

Significant problems started with the "Bonn Powers," referring to the process of PIC granting more authority to the high representative. In December 1997, at the PIC meeting in Bonn, the High Representative was authorized to make binding decisions on implementing the peace agreement, including measures against officials who "are absent from meetings without good cause" or who are "found by the High Representative to be in violation of legal commitments made under the Peace Agreement or the terms for its implementation."

This vague formula allows for virtually unlimited powers over institutions and procedures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The high representative became the supreme legislator and the judge, responsible only to his imperial masters and financiers. The rest of the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina are supposed to serve as obedient executors and do whatever the neocolonial governor tells them.

Based on these extraordinary powers, High Representatives started to overrule the decisions of elected representatives. They also began to annul and change state legislation and decisions made by local authorities, remove democratically elected officials and change state legislation as they found fit.

Success or failure is a matter of perspective

The power of unelected governors, without any democratic legitimacy, undermines the authority of the law approved by legitimate, elected state authorities. Western democracies, of course, do not see a problem, and the mainstream Western media do not report on such abominations within a political system of a European country. Authoritarianism is fine, as long as the autocrats are "our" guys.

Some call Bosnia and Herzegovina an epic failure of the West and the US-led coalition to build a sustainable and democratic country after the bloody war of the 1990s. Others see it as a successful case of preventing democratic development, reasoning that the policies and post-war design of Bosnia and Herzegovina were intended to prevent the country from being a functioning state and a meaningful democracy.

The territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains unstable and is a stage for implementing neo-liberal policies in agreement with corrupt local elites. When there is a crisis initiated or enhanced by imperial policies, the Western empire will act as if they are rescuing people from their tribal leaders who lack sophisticated democratic culture. The lesson that the native population in every colony is supposed to learn is that only (neo)colonial masters can set you free.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

***Dr. Davor Džalto** is a Professor of Religion and Democracy at University College Stockholm and President of the Institute for the Study of Culture and Christianity. His research interests cover the fields of social and political philosophy, political theology and cultural studies.

Must Spain Cobble Together Another Frankenstein Government?

Josep Colomer
July 29, 2023

Spain's general election, held on July 23, returned a result in which no party has a clear majority. The country may be heading towards another tumultuous minority coalition government.

Spaniards wanted to be “a normal country,” and they have almost achieved it—but at the worst possible time.

Like many other European countries, Spain's party system is fragmented and polarized, which renders the country ungovernable. And as in other countries, when it is able to form governments, they will be governments of the Frankenstein type, formed by stitching together multiple heterogeneous parties into an improbable and lackluster unity.

For one thing, votes are now more dispersed across parties. In the nine elections from 1982 to 2011, the two largest parties, the Socialist Party and the People's Party, averaged a total of 75% of the votes. In the most recent four elections, from 2015 to 2019, however, the main parties' combined average was only 50%. In last week's election, it was 65%, which is not a clear indication of any return to solid bipartisanship; both the Socialists and the People's Party will need the support of other parties if they hope to govern. This seems to be becoming something of a new normal for Spain.

As a consequence of the parties' inability to form parliamentary majorities, snap elections were called in 2016 and 2019, leaving the country without a government for many months. If Spain holds one more snap election, its record of misgovernment will approach those of that Bulgaria, Romania and Israel which have likewise undergone repeated elections.

Disintegration of political norms

Since the country's modern democratic constitution came into force in 1978, Spain did not have a successful vote of no confidence for 39 years. This streak was broken in 2018 with the confidence motion that brought down Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. This development signified instability and dissatisfaction with the system.

The second election in 2019 ruptured another Spanish political tradition. For 37 years, Spain had avoided the need for a coalition government. Each ruling party governed alone until Pedro Sánchez's Socialists found themselves constrained to form a coalition with the leftist Podemos party in 2020. Spain thus lost its distinction as the only country in Europe where a coalition government had never been formed.

What's worse, it was a minority coalition; on top of the difficulties of negotiating and agreeing between government partners, it needed to transact with other parties in Parliament that lacked a general commitment to cooperate. There were opportunities to form a grand coalition government in both 2015 and 2019, but cowardice prevented it. The evaporation of the centrist party Citizens, which would have been the bridge, sealed the possibility altogether.

Another tradition that fell by the wayside in recent years was the absence of far-right parties, a trait due to the memory of the Civil War and Franco's dictatorship. In other European countries, the engine of the populist reaction was the financial crisis, austerity policies, and massive immigration. But the Spanish far-right did not gain a voice when those parties jumped on the stage, but later, immediately after the referendum for the independence of Catalonia in 2017. The Vox party—the “Voice” of the nation, which jumps, exasperated, like an automatic spring at any sign of

territorial tension—was, above all, a jingoistic overreaction to Catalan nationalist provocations.

Now, it has backfired. As a counter-reaction to Vox, the Catalan independentists have become a pivot to form a majority in the Spanish Parliament. The incumbent prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, needs the votes or at least the abstention of the Catalan pro-independence parties to govern again. They will ask for the moon in return.

Spain is at an impasse

The People's Party and the Socialist Party may be tempted to hold another catastrophic snap election because they can expect that, as occurred on both previous occasions, both abstention and the percentage of votes for the two larger parties would increase.

Given this situation of Frankensteinian normality, some of the democratic reforms that many Spaniards have desired for years may no longer be a priority and could even become counterproductive. A more proportional electoral system, which has been long demanded, would allow even more parties to enter Parliament and make it even more difficult to form a majority, aggravating the governance problem.

Any complex, open and pluralistic political system entails high transaction costs. That is to say, it tends to reproduce the problems of information, coordination, negotiation and implementation of collective decisions that society cannot solve for itself and that, precisely for this reason, it transfers to the institutional sphere.

In today's Europe and today's world, with large scale and very high transaction costs, the most effective way to improve governance would be more transfers to other levels of government, especially the European Union and global institutions. As we are faced with problems of the

magnitude of financial fragility, energy and food interdependence, vulnerability to epidemics, transcontinental migrations, the deployment of artificial intelligence, climate change, and new border conflicts, our highest priority is to execute competent decisions and recommendations in a way that is accountable to the public for their results.

In this context, citizens' relatively high electoral abstention may be inevitable and not very hurting. More necessary and beneficial would be higher abstention from superfluous and conflict-prone legislation on the part of a Frankenstein government.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Josep M. Colomer** was a full-time professor of political science at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He is currently an associate researcher at the university's School of Foreign Service. He is an elected member of the Academy of Europe and a life member of the American Political Science Association (APSA).

What's Behind Biden's Delayed Invitation to Netanyahu?

Gary Grappo
July 30, 2023

A new Israeli PM would normally be invited to Washington immediately, but Biden has bent tradition by delaying Netanyahu's invitation for several months. Israel's judicial reform

program is causing strain with the nation's most vital ally.

Ordinarily, newly elected Israeli prime ministers are invited to Washington fairly soon after taking office. It is a tradition that has been carried on from US administration to administration as a symbol of the enduring ties between the two countries, regardless of leadership.

That was until Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu was elected seven months ago and embarked on his controversial overhaul of Israel's judiciary. That effort, which was a condition the right-wing parties had before joining the ruling coalition, has sparked outrage and demonstrations throughout the Jewish state and even led to threatened strikes by Israeli Defense Force pilots and other officers opposed to the changes.

Joe Biden didn't like the judicial reform proposal either. His administration has issued repeated warnings about the weakening of Israel's democratic institutions. In several phone calls, Biden advised Netanyahu of the danger of moving forward on such a controversial issue without a genuine national consensus. To demonstrate US concern, Biden went even further by postponing what had been almost ritualistic in US-Israel relations.

The invitation to the US was finally issued this past week, just a day before Israeli President Isaac Herzog was scheduled to call on Biden in the White House. The invitation was noteworthy because there was no mention of the traditional White House Oval Office tête-à-tête, only a meeting "in the United States." Pundits have subsequently posited that Biden may meet Bibi at the September UN General Assembly meeting in New York, as the president typically does with

visiting heads of state. Were that to happen, it would be tantamount to a slap in the face to an Israeli PM well-accustomed to more ceremonious confabs in the White House, including considerable media hoopla.

Israel's external threats require consultation between the two allies

Why the apparent effrontery? Is it warranted for such a close US ally? That would depend on one's perspective.

A pro-Israeli view would argue that Israel confronts heightened challenges from virtually all directions these days. Those include a threatening Hezbollah to the north, increasingly menacing military actions by Syrian forces and their Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp backers to the northeast, the worst rash of terrorism and violence in the West Bank since the Second Intifada and an Iran still apparently hell-bent on advancing its nuclear weapons program.

When an ally is under threat, it's no time for its friends to play petty diplomatic games, least of all the US. Moreover, this view holds, the ostensible reason for the delayed invitation, Israel's judicial reform proposal, is an internal Israeli matter in which the US has no right to interfere.

There is no argument from anyone in the US, including the Biden administration, about the threats Israel faces. White House and State Department statements have been categorical concerning America's defense of and support for Israel. Moreover, US defense and intelligence cooperation has been as close and frequent as under any other administration. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, as well as CIA Director Bill Burns, have visited Israel and met with Netanyahu and their respective Israeli counterparts.

Israel's enemies would be grossly mistaken to conclude from the Biden-Bibi tiff that US support for Israel is weakening in the least. Much to the contrary; the two nations' diplomatic, military and intelligence officials confer regularly on the threats facing Israel, with discussions including potential joint measures to stymie Iran's nuclear weapons development. Lastly, Joe Biden has a long and well-established record of unstinting support for the State of Israel, as a US senator, vice president and now as president. That is not changing.

But the internal threat within Israel is just as dangerous

The other perspective sees that the US administration is alarmed by the proposed judicial changes, viewing them as damaging to Israel's democracy. This may, the argument goes, bring the US to reevaluate its interests in the region.

After all, the oft-touted justification for America's decades of strong support for Israel has been its standing as the only democracy in the Middle East. US friends elsewhere in the region, e.g., Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and others, enjoy nowhere near the benefits Israel does. They aren't democratic nations that the US judges especially worthy of American support and largess.

In fact, US support for Israel by any measure is among its greatest anywhere in the world (save for the recent emergency aid to Ukraine following Russia's invasion): a \$3 billion-plus check sent directly to the Israeli treasury at the beginning of every US fiscal year, access to its most advanced weapons, a virtually permanent veto of any anti-Israeli resolution in the UN Security Council and arguably the most fulsome intelligence sharing arrangement outside the Five Eyes alliance.

To be sure, the cooperation isn't one-way. America is a top beneficiary of Israel's vaunted

intelligence-gathering apparatus and of its world-leading tech and health sectors' developments.

However, it isn't just about the attempted judicial reform. The reform is a political manifestation of the Israeli government's pronounced movement toward autocratic, right-wing extremism. It is most apparent in the presence of two fanatics in Israel's cabinet, Bezale Smotrich as finance minister and Itamar Ben-Gvir as national security minister. Both represent the growing presence of "religious zealots, Jewish supremacists and homophobes" in Israel's body politic. They have spoken out publicly on West Bank settlement expansion and even annexation and are among the principal backers of judicial changes to exempt Hassidic Jews from the military service required of all other able-bodied Israeli men and women.

Under the proposed changes, a newly-formed Israeli supreme court would likely overturn or void multiple indictments Netanyahu faces for corruption during his last stint as prime minister. These are the moves of an autocrat and patently inconsistent with Israel's democratic traditions. Furthermore, some argue, they undermine the nation's unity, something the recent rash of demonstrations appears to confirm. That is worthy of American concern in a region where its own vital interests are currently under threat by a host of malign actors, including China and Russia.

Remember 2015?

There is a final matter not often articulated in this discussion. In 2015, Netanyahu traveled to the US on the invitation of then-Speaker of the House John Boehner, a Republican, to address a joint session of Congress on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran arms accord negotiated by the Obama administration and its P5-plus-one partners.

Netanyahu's visit and speech were viewed as a serious breach of protocol for a visiting head of state. (He did not meet with then-President Barak Obama.) Speaking before Congress, he vigorously criticized the accord, which would have halted Iran's nuclear weapons development. Many saw it as nothing less than an attack on the president, with whom Netanyahu had a frosty personal relationship, and his signature foreign policy achievement. Many Israelis, including senior military and intelligence officials, regret Netanyahu's actions and former President Donald Trump's subsequent decision to withdraw from the accord.

The shock of that discordant visit and speech cannot have been forgotten by Joe Biden. Throughout his 36-year Senate career and eight years as vice president, Biden made a practice of never making an enemy. In his view, an opponent on one issue one day might later become a valued ally on another issue. Bipartisanship was his byword and he clung to it as often as possible. Therefore, seeing the leader of America's closest ally in the Middle East and among its closest in the world attack a sitting US president's policy in the nation's capital before a joint congressional session must have been unforgivable, an insult of the highest order.

The argument given by Netanyahu supporters at the time was that the JCPOA directly impacted Israel's security, an argument with which no one would disagree. But if so, do not the current Israeli government's rightward moves and the consequent threats to its democracy and unity directly impact US interests in Israel and the region? For nearly seven straight months, tens of thousands of Israelis have consistently taken to the streets in dozens of cities to make that very case. America, Israel's closest and indispensable ally, cannot stand by silently and watch such an eventuality.

What's really important

The above arguments aside, a meeting will take place. What is vital to both countries now is what is said in the meeting, as opposed to location and frivolous ceremony. Biden must warn Netanyahu of the treacherous path on which he's embarked.

The American president stands as the head of state of a deeply divided nation. His predecessor exacerbated those divisions and caused immense damage to the country's unity on so many fronts, for which America continues to pay a high price. And while the US faces serious external threats, it maintains the necessary wherewithal (for now) to confront them successfully.

Benjamin Netanyahu is risking taking his country down a similarly divisive path. His nation's enemies are poised right on its borders, breathlessly eager for the first sign of disunity and fracturing. Whatever his or his coalition's political stakes, the nation's interests must prevail. That is the only way to ensure Israel's continuing survival as a united democracy and America's continued unflinching support.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

***Gary Grappo** is a former US ambassador and a distinguished fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Korbel School for International Studies, University of Denver. He possesses nearly 40 years of diplomatic and public policy experience in a variety of public, private and nonprofit endeavors.

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