

IRAN'S THREATS TO THE MIDDLE EAST



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Iran's Attack Requires a Broad Response

by Ahmed Charai

Iran's attack on Israel, with more than 170 drones and 120 ballistic missiles, was the largest that Tehran has ever launched against the Hebrew state.

Previously, Iran used proxy forces, including Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Houthi rebels in Yemen, to rain down rockets on Israeli homes and ships. Now, Iran is attacking directly and striking at well guarded military sites.

Iran has crossed a red line – forcing responses from both Israel and America. The Islamic republic is openly courting war. We should not give them the war that they want.

“Certainly, this is an escalation,” House Intelligence Committee chairman Mike Turner said on NBC's Meet the Press, urging the Biden administration to respond to an “already escalating” crisis.

Israel promises a response. We will “exact a price from Iran in a way and time that suits us,” war cabinet member Benny Gantz said on Sunday.

Israel is expecting more attacks. It announced country-wide school closures to better scatter its most vulnerable civilians.

The world is inches from open war between Israel and Iran, which could then draw in Arab states, and then the United States.

Let's carefully consider the chasm opening beneath us. With a regional war, oil and gas prices would climb to new heights, sputtering the US economy and scrambling the presidential race. Elections are also slated for the UK and other NATO allies this year. War could bring to power anti-immigrant parties as either leaders or key coalition partners.

Meanwhile, with America and NATO distracted, Russia would have a free hand in Ukraine and China could more safely invade Taiwan, the world's largest maker of semiconductors. The leader of the free world would be forced to focus on the supply of oil



An anti-missile system operates after Iran launched drones and missiles towards Israel, as seen from Ashkelon Israel April 14, 2024. Photo credit: Reuters/Amir Cohen

and chips, a captive to the whims of dictators in Tehran and other places.

For the first time since British rule ended in 1783, America's future might be decided overseas. This bleak and unthinkable prospect would drive public opinion towards a long war with casualties comparable to World War II.

While this dystopia is possible, there is still time to prevent it.

Many ordinary Iranians do not seek war. The Iranian regime is unpopular with its own people, the majority of whom are younger than 30. They want prosperity not conflagration. The scale of the protests in 2022 and 2023 shocked the ayatollahs. The demonstrators cited corruption,

not Israel, as the source of their suffering. The unemployment rate reached 9.6 percent in 2023 according to the IMF. It is expected to top 12 percent this year.

Iran's galloping inflation mobilizes more apolitical people against the regime. They see the prices in souk and blame the mullahs. This is why war is a helpful distraction for Iran's leaders.

At the same time, Israel largely regained its position within the world community, a position that had been severely eroded by civilian losses suffered in fighting Hamas in Gaza.

President Joseph R. Biden praised American forces who helped Israel shoot down "nearly



US President Biden meets with members of the National Security Council regarding the unfolding missile attacks on Israel in the Situation Room of the White House, April 13, 2024.
Photo credit: IMAGO/MediaPunch via Reuters Connect

all” of the drones and missiles fired by Iran and pledged to coordinate a global response.

That said, there is fear in Washington that Israel may set off a wider war by responding to Iran’s aggression – a war that America clearly does not want. President Biden confirmed his administration’s “unwavering” commitment to Israel but also told Prime Minister Netanyahu in a phone call Saturday that the US would not join offensive operations against Iran.

Biden is wary of becoming further entangled, as the US Navy is already fending off missiles by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Red Sea.

Israel’s and America’s forbearance – sticking to defensive use of anti-missile technology and

pinprick counterattacks on Iranian proxies that directly attack American forces – may not be enough to deter Tehran. The mullahs may simply escalate further.

Clearly, policymakers must think more broadly to prevent war.

Sanction enemies. While Iran is already one of the most sanctioned nations on Earth, sanctions must be expanded to companies and countries that supply weapons to Iran or its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Sanctions should reflect the reality that Iran leads a consortium of terrorist groups. These sanctions need to be enforced by all G-7 nations.

America should also strengthen its support of opposition movements both inside and outside Iran, including trade unions and democratic dissidents.

Air-tight sanctions on oil and gas sales will cut off funds for Iran's war-machine. A slowdown in Iran's oil exports means more unrest in Iran's electricity-starved cities and larger budget deficits, which may topple the regime.

Support Allies. The US must help its friends and not just cripple its enemies.

Jordan, once described as "island of stability" in a sea of chaos, now finds itself with a fragile economy, civil war in neighboring Syria, and a large population of Palestinian refugees (many of whom as now citizens. While a staunch US ally, and recipient of both US military and economic aid, it is teetering as Iran-backed groups spread dissent and militants cross its desert frontiers.

When Jordan's king decided to shoot down Iranian drones which had crossed into its sovereign airspace, his decision was popular in Jerusalem and Washington, but not at home. Supporting the Jordanian monarchy is both a moral and a strategic obligation of America.

Other Arab allies, including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, are a few kilometers from Iran and risk reprisals from the Iran or its proxies. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have already suffered terror attacks by Iran-backed militants.

The Emirates and Bahrain took big risks by choosing to be on the side of modernity and peace by signing the Abraham's Accords, recognizing and making peace with Israel.

Morocco, America's oldest ally and also a signatory to the Abraham Accords, will also be vital for countering terrorism across North Africa and stopping Iran's growing influence in the Arab world and Africa. Morocco's king is also his nation's top religious leader. He has worked tirelessly to promote a moderate form of Islam across Africa – countering Iran's many efforts to foment extremism among Africa's young Muslims.

Prosperity for the Region. Once Hamas is vanquished in Gaza, a Marshall Plan for the Palestinians will be needed to keep Iran at bay while Gaza is reborn as peaceful and growing. Gaza should reclaim its past as a key port and a food supplier to the Mediterranean.

Gaza has sizeable offshore proven gas reserves and could use these resources to finance a low-tax, light-regulatory model of the UAE or the tech-led route of Ireland. This would give ordinary Palestinians hope and prosperity, the true foundations of a lasting peace.

The US should commit to supplying Arab allies with military equipment to defend themselves against Iran, just as it has done with Israel. Additionally, the Arabs need their own Iron Dome.

The US often criticizes Arab nations for working with China to secure their economic and military security. Yet, the Arabs are only asking of Beijing what Washington will not give them. It is time to reverse this dynamic and make it valuable to be America's friend.

A strong set of sanctions and alliances is the best deterrent to Iran. To prevent a wider war, and the economic and political catastrophes that naturally comes with war, America needs to strengthen its friends and discourage its enemies.

Piecemeal politics won't do. ✱

— AHMED CHARAI

— Publisher

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Israeli Air Force F-15 Eagle following interception mission of Iran attack, April 14, 2024. Photo credit: Israel Defense Forces/Handout via Reuters



THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW: DARK CLOUDS LOOM OVER THE MIDDLE EAST



by James Foggo

In one of his last interviews on German television, before passing at the age of 100, Henry Kissinger opined that the slaughter of Israelis by Hamas on October 7 could end up bringing the rest of the Arab world into the fighting. Based on recent events, his remarks were prophetic. Unless cooler heads prevail, we could end up facing an escalatory cycle – some would say, all the way to a World War III – in the Middle East.

For over a week, US intelligence agencies warned Israel of a pending Iranian strike. General Erik Kurilla, commander of US Central Command, spent several days inside Israel in a clear signal of resolve and reassurance to our ally, meeting with his Israeli counterparts. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant subsequently underscored the “importance of close cooperation between US and Israeli forces in ensuring regional stability and security.”

Iran has established itself as the de facto leader of the self-described “Axis of Resistance,” a coalition of terrorist groups including Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Palestinian territories, all of which are aligned against Israel and the United States. Iran became incensed after Israel purportedly conducted an air attack on what Iran claimed was a diplomatic compound in Syria on April 1, in which key leaders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Council (IRGC) were killed.

This was reminiscent of the killing of the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani by the United States in January 2020. Based on the outpouring

of outrage towards the United States in Tehran at Soleimani’s state funeral, it became apparent that the Iranian leadership would respond to the strike. Then, as now, Iran vowed to pursue retaliation against the United States. In fact, Iran telegraphed its intentions before launching a strike of 12 ballistic missiles and drones against Al-Asad airbase in Western Iraq in January 2020. No US personnel were killed, but several suffered long term effects from the strike, including concussions, traumatic brain injury and posttraumatic stress disorder. Some in the US national security apparatus referred to this event as “one and done.” After the Al-Asad attack, both sides reverted to the status quo of clandestine warfare by continuing to undermine each other’s interests in the Middle East and beyond, which has not solved the underlying problem of Iran’s threats to the region.

Prior to the April 14 attack on Israel, Iran once again telegraphed its intentions. With intelligence confirmations flowing in, the United States alerted Israel to an imminent attack by IRGC forces. In a manner reminiscent of US actions prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Biden openly referred to the planned Iranian attack, offering short advice: “Don’t.” But they did. On April 14, over 300 weapons were launched, including ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. Several hours elapsed from launch to impact based on the distance from the territory of Iran to Israel and a period of tense anticipation ensued, as Israelis sheltered in place, bracing for impact.

The Iranian weapons – other than the ballistic missiles – were largely “air breathers,” slow-moving weapon systems by 21st century standards. Had they been hypersonic weapons, the results may have been different. Current reporting



Military exercise in Isfahan, October 28, 2023. Photo credit: via Reuters

indicates that less than one percent of the massive Iranian strike succeeded in penetrating the Israeli missile defense shield. The preponderance of the Iranian strike seems to have been aimed at Nevatim Air Base, one of Israel's key strategic airfields in the southern portion of the state. When the dust settled, the damage at Nevatim, and throughout Israel for that matter, was superficial. The airfield remains in operation.

The failure of such a massive strike on Israel is nothing short of amazing and a tribute to 21st Century technology, such as the Arrow and Iron Dome, and to coalition air interdiction of inbound Iranian missiles by units of CENTCOM, UK, and France. The defense of Israel was an exceptionally well executed combined arms operation. President Biden called members of US Air Force Fighter Squadrons stationed in the continental United States and overseas to congratulate them. More accolades will be forthcoming as we examine the role of each of

the services in preventing more loss of life in Israel.

President Biden also called Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel to encourage him to savor the spectacular results of combined coalition missile defense and to take no further retaliatory actions against the Islamic Republic of Iran. In other words, accept the "one and done," as the US did after Soleimani's death, and move on. For its part, Iran has declared mission complete, for now.

But Iran has changed the calculus. Never before has the Islamic Republic conducted an irrefutable direct attack on the sovereign territory of Israel. Until now, the tension and violence between Iran and Israel has been conducted as a shadow war lasting for decades. I remain concerned about the acute and long-term effects of Iran's brazen missile attack. If provoked, what would be the next escalatory step by the Iranians and what would we have to do to mitigate the effects?



Photo credit: Iliia Yefimovich/dpa via Reuters Connect.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Netanyahu and members of his cabinet have stated their intent to strike back at Iran at a place and time of their choosing. That could mean anything from an immediate massive retaliatory strike to covert action over the long term. Frankly, with all the challenges that Israel has with its own perimeter security, it may be wise to choose the latter. The Israel-Iran conflict is not the only problem that the United States is dealing with right now. Ukraine looms large while US Navy destroyers maintain a continuous presence in the Red Sea offsetting Houthi threats to international shipping. Likewise, tension remains in the Western Pacific as the United States provides assurance and security guarantees to allies and partners in the face of Chinese aggression in the region.

As we consider potential off-ramps to avoid Henry Kissinger's foreboding about a broader war in the Middle East, Ahmed Charai provides some insightful advice in his recent JST article: strengthen sanctions on Iran and her proxies; strengthen alliances and support friends in the

region, particularly Jordan; continue to promote the Abraham Accords with the Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco; restore the dialogue with Saudi Arabia on normalization of relations with Israel; and establish a Marshall Plan for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Gaza under a new and law-abiding rule. If we could do all of this, the dark clouds looming over the Middle East might dissipate. *

JAMES FOGGO

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Iranian ballistic missile parts that the IDF retrieved from the Dead Sea, April 16, 2024. Reuters/Amir Cohen



ISRAEL'S NEXT STEPS: BUILD ON VICTORY



by James Jeffrey

In the face of the dramatic large-scale Iranian assault on Israel April 14, Israel has a fateful choice, usually presented as whether or not to conduct a retaliatory attack on Iran. But the real choice is how Israel, as a state with its existence at stake, can exploit the current military and diplomatic situation to lead a loose coalition of regional states and the US to victory over Iran and its proxies, who have been advancing without an effective counter through the region these last twenty years.

As a close observer of the Trump administration's decision-making after the killing of Qasem Soleimani and subsequent Iranian missile attack, this writer can understand to some degree the magnitude of Israel's decision. No one but the Israeli state can make this decision. It was the state that was attacked, and it is the state whose existence is in play in this campaign. But that right to decide also includes the responsibility to consider how options affect larger strategic goals, including the impact on one's allies.

Israel's stated strategic goal since October 7, beyond the immediate tactical mission in Gaza of dismantling Hamas and returning the hostages, is to restore deterrence and escalation dominance, not so much against Hamas which is to be destroyed as an offensive military force,

but rather against the entire Iran-led "axis of resistance." All decisions thus should be made so as to best advance that vital priority.

That means above all else reversing that axis's twenty-year march through the region. Israel's strategic quandary today is not so much Iran's direct military threat (assuming it does not obtain nuclear weapons) but rather the expansion of heavily armed surrogates dedicated like Iran to Israel's destruction, now on its borders in Lebanon, Syria and Gaza and further afield in Yemen and Iraq. Iran, during this twenty-year campaign, has not only built up these now formidable forces, but with their help gained some degree of control over Gaza and four Arab states, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. The bloody wars in those states leading to Iranian success came at a cost, by US and UN counts, of roughly a million people killed and fifteen million refugees or internally displaced, a human cost exponentially greater than the tragic civilian losses in Gaza.

Aside from Teheran's well thought-out asymmetric strategy, its success owes to blunders on the part of Iran's opponents, the US, Israel, and at times various Arab states and Turkey, theoretically a massively strong coalition. Those blunders included a major one of omission, the failure of the US to mobilize that coalition effectively against Iran, with the limited exception of 2018-2020, and numerous errors of commission. Those range from the US overthrow of Iran's counterweight Saddam and its 2005 advocacy of Palestinian elections and Israel's



Photo credit: Morteza Nikoubazl via Reuters Connect

withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza, to the fatal 2006 Lebanon ceasefire UN Resolution 1701 and multiple US and Arab states' missteps in Syria and Yemen.

But now the Israeli tactical success, already achieved by escalation dominance with its ferocious Gaza ground offensive and brilliant air defense victory over Iran on April 14, opens the door to strategic success, eliminating Hamas as an army and state, pushing back Hezbollah, and reducing Iran's offensive air threat, while cementing a loose regional alliance both militarily, building on April 14, and diplomatically, advancing the Abraham Accords.

This however requires strategic, political thinking by Jerusalem and Washington, a trait seemingly in short supply at times in both

capitals since October 7. Specifically, Israel should consider carefully how retaliation against Iran fits into the larger strategic picture.

A pinprick strike will change nothing with Iran and infuriate a nervous region and the Biden administration. But even a massive retaliatory strike makes little sense. Short of destroying Iran completely, an unlikely result, such an action would likely provoke far more brutal Iranian and Hezbollah missile strikes, damaging much military and civilian infrastructure and inflicting possibly high casualties, including perhaps American and Arab state personnel, thereby smashing relations with Washington and the other April 14 allies. Subsequent Israeli and Iranian responses likely would throw the region and the US into a general war with unknown outcomes.



Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

A better approach would be to “trade” Israeli acquiescence to Washington on retaliation for Washington acquiescence to a major Rafah operation. To be sure, Israel should modify its tactics on Rafah to align better with some of Washington’s military proposals, particularly protection of civilians, and Egyptian concerns. But the reality is that the crucial Israeli Rafah endgame is now on hold because Washington really doesn’t want any new serious offensive owing to American domestic political concerns. Such a trade would allow Israel to break through Washington’s endless demand for ceasefire now (and thus Hamas’ obvious interest in refusing one).

Taking down Hamas is not enough. Israel must take four other steps to secure strategic

results. First, work with Washington, European and Arab states for a serious international presence in Gaza to establish governance and security and manage a huge humanitarian effort. This will involve the Palestinian Authority but does not require at this point Israel to change its position on a two-state process.

Next, Israel should shift forces to the Lebanese border and demand that Hizbullah withdraw beyond the Litani River, as stipulated in UN Resolution 1701, or else Israel will drive it north.

Israel should then, if the Houthis are still attacking Red Sea shipping, give Washington a stark choice. Either the US restores deterrence with the Houthis or Israel will. The flawed US campaign so far demonstrates that this requires

striking the Houthis' high value assets, from leadership to port facilities to core military capabilities. Only such decisive action will up the costs of their naval campaign sufficiently to compel them to either end it or else expose themselves to the risks of long-term survival.

Finally, with Iran, Israel should leave open the option of a targeted attack on Iranian assets engaged directly or indirectly against Israel, be they intelligence vessels in the Red Sea or radar stations endangering Israel air operations. In addition, Israel should make clear to Tehran that any new attack on it by Iran, or attacks by surrogates that kill civilians, will generate a massive Israeli counter-strike designed to take out top leadership, cripple national electrical generation and shut down nuclear sites. Here Israel should demand a commitment from the US that it would simultaneously take out the Fordow enrichment facility, and any other site buried under a mountain – likely beyond the reach of Israel's current capabilities.

Israeli concerns that Iran would interpret as weakness any immediate Israeli retaliatory restraint are not easily dismissed, certainly not with appeals from the faint-hearted swarming Washington and European capitals to “cease fire, deescalate, negotiate” however inappropriate, whatever the situation.

But there is a larger truth. From Thucydides to Machiavelli and Clausewitz: success in war has been defined not by rote application of any maxim, but by changing the underlying international situation in a way that strengthens a state militarily, economically and, particularly, diplomatically, while weakening its enemy.

Israel has within its grasp this kind of success: Iran's entire regional IRGC leadership taken out, Tehran's follow-up assault capacity – and much of its deterrence threat against Israel – brilliantly deflected, while Israel goes on to take down one major Iranian ally and weaken others, while forging a regional alliance with the US and Arab states.

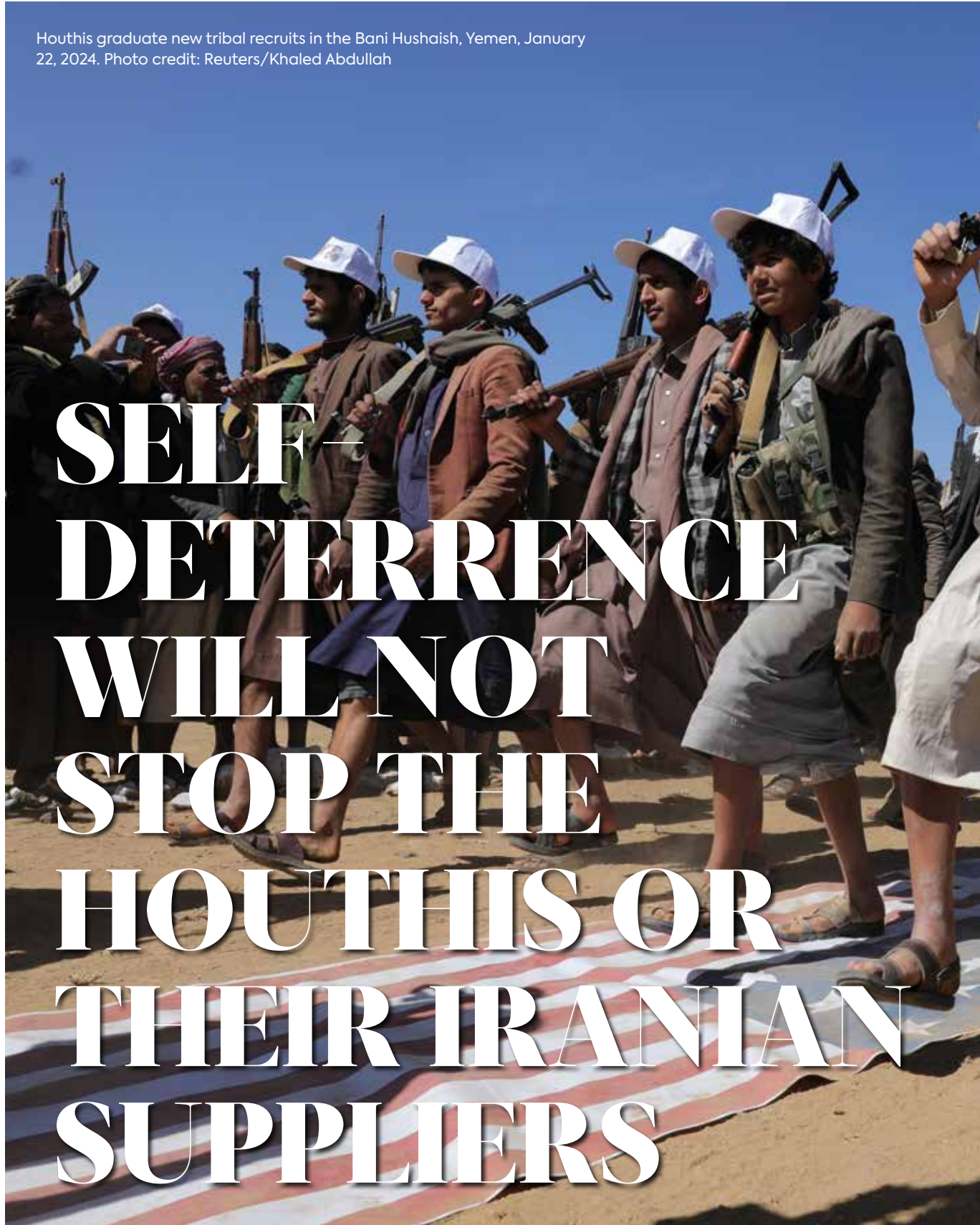
In 1991, Iraq fired scores of missiles into Israel, but Israel did not retaliate. Weeks later,

the United States backed by Arab states who, had Israel acted otherwise, might have defected, destroyed much of the Iraqi army on the path to Saddam Hussein's eventual demise. *

JAMES JEFFREY

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Houthis graduate new tribal recruits in the Bani Hushaish, Yemen, January 22, 2024. Photo credit: Reuters/Khaled Abdullah



**SELF-
DETERRENCE
WILL NOT
STOP THE
HOUTHIS OR
THEIR IRANIAN
SUPPLIERS**





by Dov S. Zakheim

Self-deterrence is a defense concept that a state may be restrained from using its military power not by the fear of a counter strike but rather owing to reputational concerns arising from moral, legal or other considerations. This concept may partly explain US reluctance to escalate the current level of military conflict with Iran, though there are other tools at the US disposal as well.

HOUTHİ RESILIENCE IN YEMEN AND THE RED SEA

After nearly three months of Houthi attacks on merchant shipping, during which time the US merely defended against Houthi drone and missile attacks on its warships, the United States finally began to strike back at Houthi facilities. On January 11, American and British fighters, using surface ships and submarines and with support from Australia, Canada, Bahrain, and the Netherlands, launched air strikes on 60 targets in 28 Yemeni locations. These included bases near the capital Sanaa and the city of Taiz, as well as the naval base at the Red Sea port of

Hodeidah. The strikes successfully hit radar systems, and storage and launch sites for drones, cruise and ballistic missiles.

Announcing the strikes, President Joe Biden bravely asserted that “these targeted strikes are a clear message that the United States and our partners will not tolerate attacks on our personnel or allow hostile actors to imperil freedom of navigation in one of the world’s most critical commercial routes.” The Houthis were not deterred, however, and vowed to continue striking ships in the Red Sea and more recently in the Gulf of Aden as well.

The Houthis were as good as their word. They again struck merchant shipping with what the Defense Department asserted were “anti-ship ballistic missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, uncrewed surface vessels and unmanned surface vehicles.” After more Houthi attacks, including against an American merchant vessel, on January 22, the US launched more strikes on Houthi targets. The second major strike was once again launched in conjunction with British forces and support from the other four states. According to a Defense Department release, the operation hit “eight Houthi targets, including an underground storage site and locations associated with the rebel group’s missile and air surveillance capabilities.”



The US and UK carried out additional strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen on January 22, 2024.
Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

Although Pentagon spokesmen insisted after each of the major strikes that they had seriously degraded Houthi capabilities, officials admitted that “that does not mean they have no more capability.” Indeed, the Houthis continued to target both merchant shipping and military warships. In the early morning hours of January 24 (Yemen time) the US launched a third strike, this time against two Houthi anti-ship missiles that were aimed into the southern Red Sea and were prepared to launch, according to the U.S. Central Command.

The Houthis seem to be able to regroup and attack Red Sea shipping even after their facilities appear to have been seriously degraded, using numerous mobile launchers that “shoot and scoot” back into hiding. It is therefore extremely difficult for the United States and its partners to

silence the Houthi drones, missiles and rockets. As a result, major shipping lines have begun to reroute their ships past the southern tip of Africa.

The Houthis benefit from the fact that American attacks are of necessity intermittent. There are not enough U.S. drones to maintain constant surveillance over Houthi territory in order to attack launchers as soon as they emerge from hiding. Nor is the single American aircraft carrier that is deployed in the Red Sea capable of maintaining twenty-four-hour operations. While the British have stated that they are ready to deploy one of their Queen Elizabeth class carriers to operate alongside the American Dwight D. Eisenhower carrier task force to enable round the clock operations, the British carrier has yet to arrive in the region.



British oil tanker Marlin Luanda after a missile attack by the Houthis, January 26, 2024.
Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

An additional and significant reason for Houthi resilience is the support that the terrorists continue to receive from Iran. Tehran has transferred drone jammers and parts for long-range rockets and missiles to the Houthis. The Iranians and the Lebanese Hezbollah have also dispatched engineers to help the Houthis assemble their drones and advisors to help them plan and launch their attacks on shipping. Because Tehran ships its weapons primarily by sea, it is extremely difficult to prevent them from reaching the Houthis. Moreover, Iran not only transports equipment to Yemen on dhows, skiffs and larger ships, but also uses “floating packages” rather than ship-to-ship transfers that are difficult to identify from aerial surveillance.

The Biden administration has responded to Iranian support of Houthi attacks by requesting Swiss officials to reach out to Iran to desist, and pleading with Beijing to intervene with Tehran as well. This enfeebled response to Iran’s ongoing support of Houthi military operations is hardly likely to result in a change of Iranian behavior.

OPPORTUNITIES TO PRESSURE IRAN ELSEWHERE

The recent spate of cross border attacks between Iran and Pakistan offers the Administration an opportune moment to pressure Tehran. Iran attacked a terrorist base

in Pakistan after several of its police and soldiers were killed over the past several months. Among those dead in the Iranian strike, however, were two children. Additionally, the Iranian attack damaged a mosque and injured several people. Two days later the outraged Pakistanis launched a reprisal attack on the Baluch Liberation Army, which has operated for decades from Iranian territory. The Pakistan attack on the terrorist targets in Iran, which its military termed “Operation Death to Insurgents” employed “killer drones, rockets, loitering munitions and standoff weapons” and resulted in the deaths of nine people.

Recognizing that it could find itself in a longer-term conflict with nuclear-armed Pakistan, Tehran elected to send reassuring messages to Islamabad. Additional Baluch Liberation Army strikes against Pakistani targets could further inflame tensions, which have not really died down.

Iran must be concerned that it could find itself simultaneously at odds on three fronts: Pakistan, an American-led “coalition of the willing” in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, and in Iraq where American forces are striking back in retaliation for attacks by Iranian-supported militias.

The Biden administration would be wise to exploit that concern. Until now it appears that the administration fears that any direct confrontation with Iran would lead to a regional conflict that the US desperately seeks to avoid, especially in an election year. Yet self-deterrence is hardly a winning policy and in any event, Iran does not have anything like the ability to initiate a conflict with the United States, which the Mullahs recognize could result in chaos leading to their overthrow.

Further pressure on Iran will not necessarily lead to a regional conflict. For example, Donald Trump’s maximum pressure policy on Iran, which targeted some 80 percent of the nation’s economy, seriously weakened that economy but did not lead to anything like a major Iranian response. Even the assassination of Quds Force

leader Qasem Soleimani one year before Trump left office has yet to provoke major Iranian reprisals.

If the administration wishes to prevent Iran from supporting the Houthis, and for that matter, the Iraqi militias, it should seize this moment to exert real pressure on Iran and its economy.

Such pressure could take the form of conducting or condoning cyber strikes on the country’s oil facilities, notably the Kharg Island oil terminal, or terminating the waivers and other concessions to Iran that have enabled Tehran to amass billions in oil revenues. Such a policy would render it far more difficult for Iran to maintain its current level of support for “the axis of resistance” that it leads. And doing so would be far more effective than turning to the Swiss and, of all people, the Chinese to beseech the Mullahs to moderate their aggressive behavior throughout the Middle East. *

DOV S. ZAKHEIM

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A suspect in the shooting attack before a court hearing in Moscow, Russia, March 25, 2024.
Photo credit: Reuters/Shamil Zhumatov

RUSSIA'S ISLAMIST TERROR THREAT REEMERGES





by Ilan Berman

On March 22, Islamic militants opened fire on a concert hall in the Russian capital of Moscow, killing scores of concertgoers before setting the venue ablaze. Less than 24 hours later, the Islamic State terrorist group publicly took responsibility for the assault. The death toll currently stands at 137. While some reports link the attack to the Islamic State’s regional branch in Central Asia (named “Islamic State – Khorasan Province”) where the shooters are from, other analysts conclude that multiple branches of the Islamic State cooperated in the Moscow attack.

Vladimir Putin has suggested that the assailants had links to Ukraine. But the Islamic State’s likely “justifications” for the attack won’t lie in Kyiv. Rather, the Islamic State would likely justify the attack through two causes in Russia: Russia’s policies in the Middle East, and the alienation of its Muslim citizens and migrant Muslim populations living in Russia. The proximate cause for such an attack may have more to do with tactical considerations such as chances for success resulting from Russia’s vulnerability.

SYRIAN BLOWBACK IS ONE POSSIBLE “JUSTIFICATION”

Moscow’s deep relationship with Syria stretches back to Soviet times. In September of 2015, Putin decided to wade into the Syrian civil war on the side of the country’s beleaguered dictator, Bashar al-Assad. While this help enabled Damascus to turn the tide, it also made Moscow a party to the civil war – and a target of Islamist militants eager to unseat Assad and lash out at his allies.

Meanwhile, as the Islamic State emerged, Russia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia became the largest recruiting grounds of foreign fighters for this terror group. When tallied by the Soufan Center in October 2017, Russia and the former Soviet Republics accounted for nearly thirty percent of the roughly 30,000 foreign militants that had by then signed on to the group’s radical cause in Syria and Iraq. For their part, Russian authorities – worried about the potential threat of militant “returnees” – doubled down on their support for Assad’s Syria as a way to mitigate the future threat these fighters might pose at home.

Thus the Kremlin became a target of the Islamic State and its ideological fellow travelers. Nearly a decade ago, one of its key military leaders – a Chechen with the nom de guerre of



Russian President Putin meets with Iranian President Raisi in Moscow, December 2023.
Photo credit: Sputnik/Sergei Bobylev/Pool via Reuters

Abu Omar al-Shishani – threatened that the group would target Russia in the future. The Kremlin’s preoccupation with the ongoing war in Ukraine has left it more vulnerable to Islamic State’s opportunistic attacks.

AND IRAN IS ANOTHER

Relevant, too, to Islamic State targeting decision may be Russia’s alliance with Sh’ite Iran. For Islamic State militants, Iran is another popular target, as illustrated by the January 2024 bombing attack on a memorial ceremony in Kirman, Iran (which the Khorasan branch of the Islamic State claimed credit for).

Moscow has pursued a Middle East policy increasingly centered on its partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and increasingly based on arms trade as well as shared ideological opposition to the West. Meanwhile, Russia’s own Muslim population of over 21 million is overwhelmingly Sunni.

Historically, Russia was the stronger partner and Iran was forced to rely on it for both political and economic support. Once Russia invaded Ukraine, however, the dynamic in the relationship began to change to favor Tehran.

Today, it is Iran rather than Russia that serves as the senior partner in their alliance. Over the past year-and-a-half, Iran has become

a major supplier of battlefield materiel (such as drones) for the Russian armed forces, and greatly expanded its economic ties to Russia.

ALIENATION OF MUSLIM MINORITY GROUPS

For more than half a century, Russia has been locked in a cycle of protracted demographic decline. But Russia's Muslims are a comparative growth group in this overall picture, with birth rates far above the national average. As a consequence, Muslims have emerged as the country's fastest-growing minority (though they are far from a cohesive group and are spread among numerous ethnicities). These various Muslim ethnic groups are collectively projected to make up as much as 30 percent of the national population by the middle of the next decade.

Yet this expanding, diverse religious minority isn't well integrated. Russia's Muslims often see themselves as outsiders in the ultra-nationalist authoritarian state that has been erected by Vladimir Putin over the past quarter-century. Their second-class status has been highlighted in Russia's current war, with conscription rates of soldiers disproportionately coming from Muslim minority groups.

This trend has led to protests against the Kremlin, and a growing sense of alienation in places like Dagestan. More ominously for Moscow, there have been renewed signs of secessionist stirrings there and in several other majority-Muslim parts of Russia. All of which creates fertile soil for recruitment on the part of groups like the Islamic State and its ideological competitor, al-Qaeda.

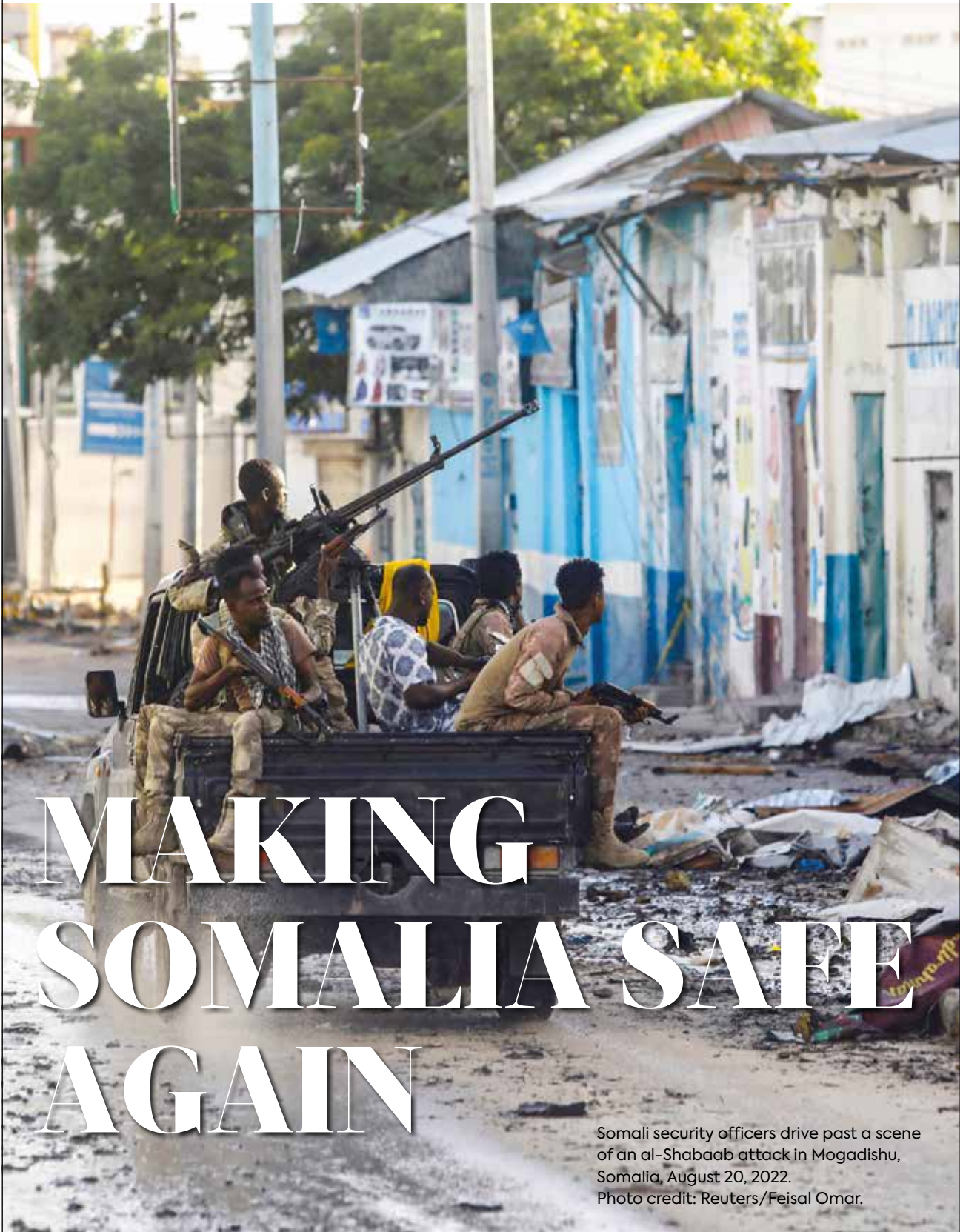
The March 22 attack in Moscow may be a potential portent of things to come. Russia's Mideast policy has given foreign Islamist militants several excuses for conducting murderous attacks, and Russia's Muslim minority groups are feeling alienated from, and sometimes hostile to, the prevailing political order.

In addition, Russia's preoccupation with its Ukraine war has left it vulnerable to terrorist

attacks. Such tactical considerations (i.e., the likelihood of being able to murder large numbers of civilians) are often the triggers for terrorist groups to prioritize one target over the many other possible ones. These factors together add up to the possibility of still more acts of terror directed at Russians in the years to come. *

ILAN BERMAN

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MAKING SOMALIA SAFE AGAIN

Somali security officers drive past a scene of an al-Shabaab attack in Mogadishu, Somalia, August 20, 2022.
Photo credit: Reuters/Feisal Omar.



by Staffan Tillander

In January 2018, I traveled via armored convoy over 20 kilometers of bad roads from a regional airport to the Hirshabelle provincial state capital of Jowar in central Somalia. Protected by Burundian soldiers of the African Union peacekeeping force, we sped through countryside and villages controlled by the al-Shabaab terror group. In Jowar, the UN delegation witnessed the signing of an agreement on the rule of law system in Somalia, concluded by state and federal leaders.

At the time, I was based in Mogadishu, leading the Rule of Law and Security Institutions Group of the UN mission in Somalia. Functioning rule of law is critical to any state coming out of conflict. But it is very difficult to establish in a country still undergoing an armed conflict with a terrorist group, like Somalia is with al-Shabaab.

THE SPREAD OF ISLAMIST TERRORIST GROUPS

Al-Shabaab is only estimated to have perhaps 4 to 5000 fighters, but it thrives on rifts and conflicts in society, using local sub-clan divisions to play Somalis off against each other. And it sometimes uses elders and clan leaders at the village level to impose its rule, threatening them into obedience and forcing them to supply the group with support and people. It extorts "taxes"

from businesses and individuals and kidnaps children and forces them to become fighters. As long as al-Shabaab controls land in Somalia, peace and development will remain an uphill battle, with constant set-backs.

The growing threat from militant jihadist groups is the game changer in Africa over the past two decades. We may not have realized the full extent of this threat as it grew, but in 2022, the Africa-based think tank International Security Studies warned the UN Security Council that Africa could become a future base of an Islamic State caliphate. Jihadist groups were active in 20 African countries and used another 20 for logistical support and fund raising.

We should have seen the danger much earlier. Others did. In the 1990s, during my first posting to the Horn of Africa, Ethiopian officials shared their concern that Salafist teachers were changing the nature of Islam in the Horn and causing rifts among religious groups. Already in the early 1990s, al-Itihad al-Islamiyya was a threat in Somalia and Ethiopia.

Sweden had plenty of warning. For years, some Swedish citizens with immigrant backgrounds from the Middle East were involved in supporting Islamist groups in Somalia. The Kenyan security services arrested a number of Swedes in 2006, supposedly on "vacation" in Mogadishu, when the "Islamic Courts Union" in Somalia was defeated. A few months later they were released and returned to Sweden. Some years later a couple of them were captured again, this time by Pakistan security forces when trying to join Taliban forces in



Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. Photo credit: Reuters/Feisal Omar

Afghanistan. Finally, one of them was later caught trying to carry out a terrorist attack on a Danish newspaper in Copenhagen. We should have seen this coming and we should have taken appropriate law enforcement action much earlier.

Elsewhere in Africa, the advance of militant jihadist groups has negatively affected a number of countries. Some have been destabilized and overtaken by terrorists. Even when that is not the case, social, economic and democratic progress have been undermined and development processes have been replaced by "failed states." A sad example is Mali, a country that for several decades was held up as a good example of democratic leadership and positive social and economic development. A decade ago, jihadists attacking from the north changed all that.

Destabilization tends to spread. When Mali was attacked from the north, and the jihadists advanced towards the capital, there was growing concern that this would affect other countries in the region. Liberia and Sierra Leone were obvious targets, being fragile and vulnerable and in the process of rebuilding after many years of civil war. In the end, the jihadists were stopped before they got that far, thanks to quick international intervention led by France. But while Liberia and Sierra Leone managed to avoid jihadist attacks, other countries in the Sahel have not been so lucky. The Lake Chad Basin contains a growing number of countries where terrorists have made inroads and now reign with terror, undermining legitimate regimes.

If Somalia teaches us anything, it is the danger posed by an entrenched terrorist group.

It is urgent to stop jihadist terrorist groups, wherever they appear, to block their advance and to roll back their control. In Somalia, they have been able to infiltrate and permeate society and its institutions, use banks and companies to launder money, control trade and harbors, and to prevent peace and statebuilding efforts. The threat posed to the greater Horn of Africa is real. Attacks on Kenyan shopping malls, hotels and universities have instilled fear way beyond the Somali borders.

REBUILDING SOMALIA

Rebuilding Somalia entails rebuilding trust among the various clans and sub-clans that form the national fabric. Politics, thus, is at the core of rebuilding security institutions including the police and the courts. Interestingly, Somalis chose federalism as their governance system to accommodate different clans and sub-clans. Federalism requires a political dialogue and decisions for who will do what at what level. In Somalia this means that the states, and the state and regional presidents, are as important as the federal leaders.

The 2018 agreement on the legal system had been hammered out after lengthy discussions among justice officials from all the provincial states and the federal ministry. It recognized the existence of traditional legal practice and the limitations of federal government jurisdiction. The states have legitimate roles in policing and courts, incorporating local and traditional justice. For that reason, signing the agreement in a state capital was of great symbolic value. It showed that Somali politics were not just Mogadishu-centered. It also signaled to the terrorists that change was happening, that Somalis were united behind it.

Al-Shabaab responds with terrorism. One impressive Somali contact in the federal Justice ministry, responsible for security-related issues, was at his desk when al-Shabaab attacked the ministry, moving from office to office, from floor to floor, killing everybody they came across. He

managed to escape through a window, climbing down onto a lower building, jumping to the ground and running to safety.

This may be about to change. During the last year and a half, Somali leaders under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, an experienced politician, are fighting back against al-Shabaab. One leader is forming a joint security force from the disparate military, police and clan militias. Some exceptional women operate often in the background in this male-dominated polity, including in the security institutions. Together they have improving the institutions of government, ready to be used when the leaders decide to act.

The offensive started in earnest in the early fall of 2022 and has so far been successful in pushing back the terrorist group. If this offensive continues, it could, in the end, break the back of al-Shabaab, forcing it to abandon areas of control and possibly eliminating this militant group for good.

Defeating al-Shabaab requires much more than military force. Somalia has taken important steps in terms of financial and institutional measures to prevent extortion and money laundering. Much remains to be done in the areas of social and economic needs, security and rule of law, and good governance and political reconciliation. Agreement on a constitution is still a work in progress. Small tentative steps have been taken towards democratic governance, with one person, one vote at the local level being carried out only in Puntland in the north. A determined state president there played a key role and Puntland could move on to implement state-wide elections, a first in Somalia outside of relatively peaceful Somaliland.

For several decades, we have been used to looking at Somalia as a failed state and a terrorist hot spot. Rebuilding a failed state is a difficult, expensive and long-term effort requiring international engagement. To manage reforms and rebuild Somalia, al-Shabaab must be defeated and rendered harmless. It is a



Somali hotel rebuilt after al-Shabaab bombing in Mogadishu, December 2020.
Photo credit: Reuters/Feisal Omar

necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for peace and development. The key is ultimately a matter of leadership and leaders' ability to reconcile, resolve conflicts through dialogue and find a common way forward.

During my years in Somalia, I used to visit the busy Mogadishu Fish Market. Fishermen would bring in the morning's catch and then the buying and selling would start in earnest. I would walk over to the Lido Beach and see young Somalis swimming and playing in the water, sitting on the beach, while older Somalis were having a coffee in the cafes. These brief visits would give me hope for Somalia's future.

But these visits were only possible with heavy security. If peace efforts continue, if al-Shabaab is defeated and the state and security is

reestablished, it may be possible to enjoy a coffee at Lido Beach without a squad of heavily armed guards and to stroll the Fish Market without a bulletproof vest. Maybe in a few years time. *

— STAFFAN TILLANDER

Staffan Tillander is a retired Swedish diplomat. He served in several posts in the Horn of Africa, as Swedish ambassador to Ethiopia (1997-2001) and to Sudan and Djibouti (2005-2008), and as UN Director and then Swedish ambassador to Somalia (2016-2021). He also led the UN Peacebuilding Commission Country Configuration for Liberia 2012-2014.



Gazans gather at the site of an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis, March 29, 2024.
Photo credit: Reuters/Ahmed Zakot



HOW ISRAEL WINS THE POSTWAR



by Robert Silverman

Israel must finish the job of crushing Hamas in Gaza both as a military force and as a government. That's the legitimate response to the surprise attack of October 7. This war aim also includes return of the hostages and minimizing Gazan civilian casualties to the extent possible. The Israel Defense Forces are in the process of achieving this war aim with the full backing of the Israeli public, despite all of the continuing skepticism among international pundits.

Dismantling Hamas in Gaza, however, is only step one. A strategy for the Day After in Gaza requires planning that integrates security needs, humanitarian supply, economic and reconstruction aid, civil governance and de-radicalization initiatives. (Another required step is pressing Hamas throughout its overseas network of support, including elements in Qatar, Turkey, the United States and elsewhere.) Without such a plan, Israel is on a trajectory in the postwar period to end up in a much worse situation than it was in before October 7.

In short, Israel is poised to lose the postwar by seeking to exercise control over Gaza, thereby becoming the occupying power. Israel could win the postwar by working with its ally the United States, and through the US with leading

members of the international community, to form a temporary multinational mission for Gaza. Israel must relinquish its control of Gaza and transfer it to the multinational mission after defeating Hamas, in order to win the postwar.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL CONSEQUENCES

The Israeli public should understand the consequences of seeking to exercise control over Gaza after major combat is ended. They include, according to international humanitarian law, "the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population." Things that may go wrong in Gaza in the future – food shortages, outbreaks of disease – would be the responsibility of Israel as the occupying power, the country that is seeking to exercise control over the territory of Gaza.

No one in Israel – not the government, media, military, or civil society – is informing Israeli citizens of the heavy burdens they are now in the process of assuming in Gaza. Senior government officials and members of Knesset seem to be under the false impression that Israel's current postwar plans do not add up to control over and thus responsibility for Gaza. But they are wrong – and it isn't a close call.

According to Prime Minister Netanyahu's public statements, Israel will retain full security control over Gaza after the war and not just control, as it did before October 7, of most of



Israeli soldiers near the Israel-Gaza border. Photo credit: Reuters/Violeta Santos Moura.

Gaza's land border and all of the sea border and airspace. Israel is now establishing a buffer zone inside Gaza, on roughly 14 percent of Gaza's territory. Most importantly, the IDF and the internal security service today remain on the ground operating in areas already conquered, including through special forces raids on remaining Hamas groups, such as the continuing operations on Al-Shifa' Hospital in Gaza City.

Furthermore, Israel has no credible plan to transfer civil governance authority to some other body or entity. Various government ministers are freelancing with their own separate and conflicting plans to do some things in postwar Gaza, but these have not been adopted by the government. In the meantime and to prevent chaos, the IDF will have to

continue to exercise control over Gaza.

The wishful thinking of senior Israeli government officials is that they will identify, arm and develop the capacity of Gazan clans opposed to Hamas, and then transfer local governance responsibility to them (again, while maintaining effective overall security control). As a legal matter, this doesn't absolve Israel of responsibility for Gaza, since it will continue to hold many of the legal indicia of control.

As a policy matter, reliance on traditional family clans to provide local government in Gaza was Israel's policy from 1967 until the First Intifada broke out in 1988. There is no indication that such a "back to the future" policy will work in Gaza after 12 years of the Palestinian Authority followed by 17 years of Hamas.



Prime Minister Netanyahu chairs cabinet meeting in Tel Aviv, December 24, 2023.
Photo credit: Ohad Zwigenberg/Pool via Reuters

BARRIERS TO POSTWAR PLANNING

Why is Israel sliding into a postwar crisis in Gaza? Shouldn't it develop a plan to transfer authority to a multinational civil and military force, preferably one organized and led by the US, to replace its forces in Gaza (while reserving the right to intervene for counter-terrorism purposes)? Many voices have urged Israel to adopt this kind of plan.

Two barriers prevent postwar planning.

The first, often cited in the Israeli and international media, is domestic politics. The current governing coalition wouldn't be able to agree on any postwar plan whereby Israel relinquishes even partial control, so the issue is left off of cabinet agendas. Key members of the cabinet, especially Public Security Minister Ben

Gvir and Finance Minister Smotrich, want Israel to remain in Gaza permanently, as do elements within Netanyahu's own Likud Party.

Given the ability of this issue to split the governing coalition wide open, dissolve the government and lead to elections in the midst of a war, Netanyahu has decided not to bring it before the cabinet. He may have learned the following lesson from his first premiership 1996-1999, when his coalition broke up over implementation of the Oslo Accords: prioritize keeping the coalition together, await developments and react to them.

This highlights a general weakness of parliamentary systems like Israel's. Fierce disagreements over issues like postwar dispensation are common to governments in wartime (recall the open disputes between the

vice president and secretaries of state in the George W. Bush administration over Iraq). But such disputes in the US can't result in the dissolution of the government. In parliamentary systems, where there is no presidential power and the prime minister is merely first among equals, such disputes can topple the government.

Second, Israel's senior officials are uncomfortable with strategic planning, a reluctance natural to all bureaucracies. Operational plans are always more immediate, easier to implement and less risky. Preternaturally cautious officialdom everywhere, including in Israel, tends to shy away from strategies that may not work as planned. Furthermore, as I have noted elsewhere, Israel doesn't prepare a national security strategy unlike many other countries and doesn't prioritize this kind of planning.

In the postwar Gaza case, however, the risks of not having a postwar plan that transfers effective control are greater than those of adopting such a plan.

THE SOLUTION

Temporary governance of the 2.2 million Gazans must be an international responsibility, until such time as Gazans are able to effectively govern themselves living peacefully alongside Israel. The consensus of those who work and have worked with the Palestinian Authority is that it is not ready to assume the governance of Gaza, that the Authority needs to undergo a process of capacity-building and reformation.

Models for successful post-conflict operations, for instance in Bosnia and Kosovo, always have as a key element the US as organizer, with a majority of the funding and personnel supplied by others in the relevant region. That multinational model could work in Gaza as well, with the US as organizer alongside European and Arab partners.

The Palestinians have a legitimate interest in a political future independent of Israel.

Israel has a legitimate interest in the security conditions of a hostile Gazan neighbor located less than 40 miles from its largest city. The workable solution is for Israel to negotiate with the US over the conditions of its transfer of authority in Gaza to a US-led multi-national body, a transfer in which it keeps sufficient ability to intervene in Gaza when needed to protect its security and in which it provides assurances of a Palestinian political horizon, also subject to governance conditions.

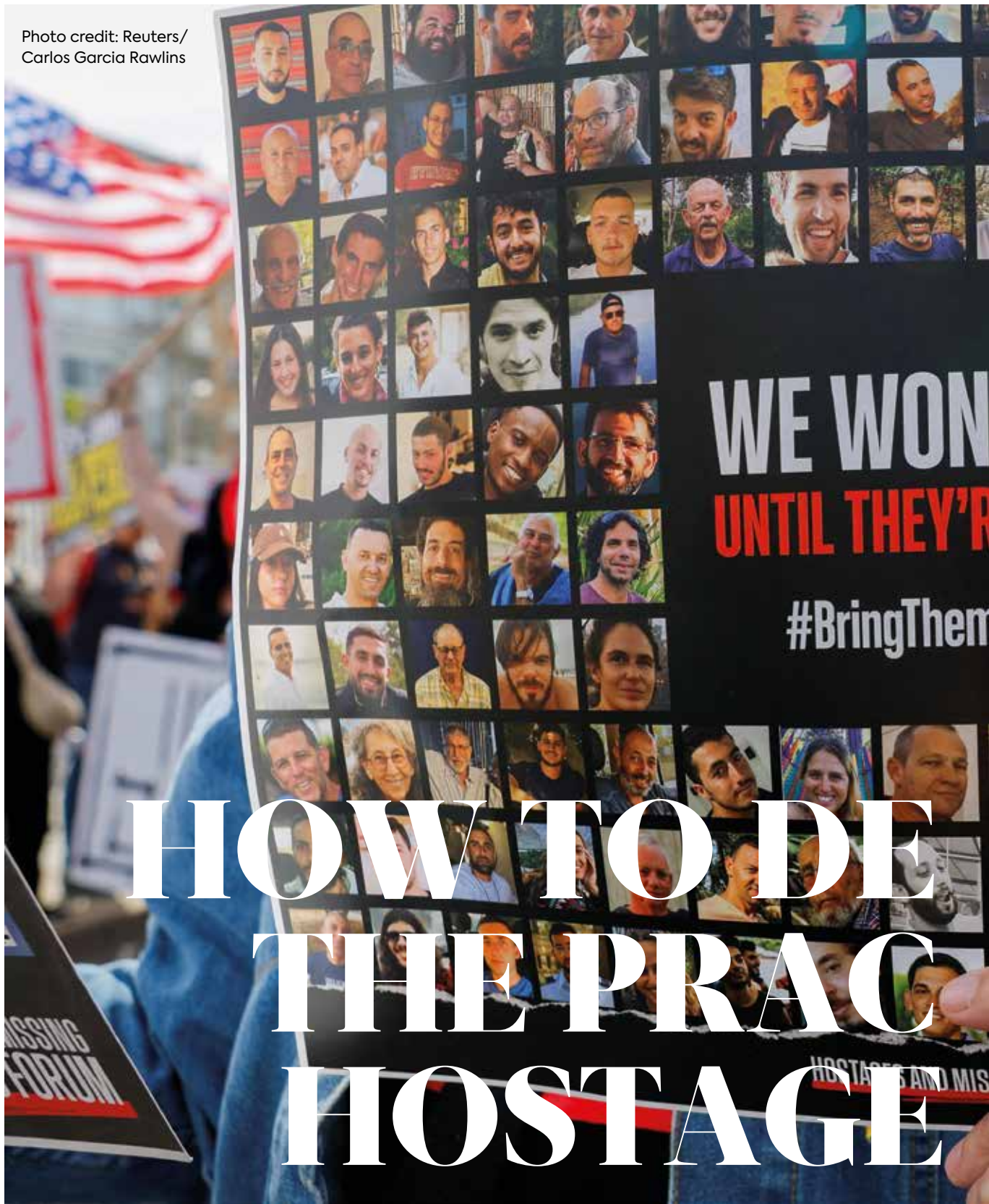
At present all eyes are on the upcoming Israeli military operation in Rafah. That operation involves evacuation of civilians from Rafah to the Muwasi safe zone along the coast of the Gaza Strip. The potential strategic win for the US and its allies is immense – the removal of a key Iranian proxy from control of a territory and a government.

For Israel's postwar future, and in order to sustain the impending strategic win over Iran, the immediate task is breaking through Israeli political and bureaucratic barriers to adopting a postwar Gaza plan. Then the hard work of rebuilding Gaza with America, its partners and the Gazans can begin. *

ROBERT SILVERMAN

A former US diplomat and president of the American Foreign Service Association, Robert Silverman is a lecturer at Shalem College, senior fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, and president of the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance.

Photo credit: Reuters/
Carlos Garcia Rawlins



**WE WON
UNTIL THEY'RE**

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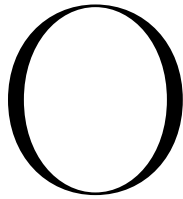
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LEGITIMIZE TICE OF TAKING



by Thomas Warrick



One of the conclusions from the Israel-Hamas war is the need for renewed, concerted action to address hostage taking. There are concrete diplomatic and law enforcement actions that the international community should take to delegitimize this practice and raise the cost to hostage takers, governments that also employ this tactic, and governments that provide safe haven to hostage takers.

Hamas's cold-blooded capture of 240 hostages on October 7 represented a calculated use of kidnapping civilians and soldiers for the twin purposes of limiting Israel's retaliation for the attack and demanding the release of thousands of Palestinians held by Israel. Most of these Palestinians (though not all) were convicted on charges of terrorist attacks against civilians.

October 7 built on Hamas's kidnapping of Israeli soldiers and civilians in 1994, 2006, and 2014. Taking hostages to achieve political aims is also used by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hamas's chief sponsor, starting with American diplomats taken hostage on November 4, 1979 through September 2023, when five Americans were freed from prison in Iran in return for the unfreezing of six billion dollars of South Korean payments for Iranian oil. The government of Syria also employs hostage taking.

The entire world has a stake in Hamas's hostage taking. If it fails, the October 7 terrorist attack will be regarded as one of the most self-destructive failures in the modern Middle East. However, if Hamas stays in power in Gaza, and is able to show that hostage taking enabled it to survive against Israel's greater military power, other groups around the world will look to Hamas as a model for how a weaker totalitarian state or terrorist group can prevail against a larger, democratic one. This could well lead to an open season for new hostage taking.

HOSTAGE TAKING UNDER INTERNATIONAL LAW

Hostage taking is both as old as history and illegal under both international and domestic law. Phillip II of Macedon and Julius Caesar both were hostages before becoming military leaders. Hostage taking today is a violation of Geneva Convention common article 3, a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and a violation of Additional Protocols I and II.

Under the International Criminal Court treaty, hostage taking is a war crime, even in conflicts not of an international character. After a series of high-profile hostage takings in the 1970s, a limited international convention against the taking of hostages entered into force in 1983. Families of Israeli hostages taken on October 7 recently traveled to The Hague to press the International Criminal Court to open a case against Hamas for taking their loved ones hostage.



Two snipers get in position in the Olympic Village in Munich, on 5 September 1972, after Palestinian terrorists took Israeli athletes and coaches hostage. Photo credit: DPA / Picture Alliance via Reuters Connect / Horst Ossinger

LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF BANNING WEAPONS AND TACTICS

Delegitimizing hostage taking is not far-fetched fantasy. De-legitimization of weapons and tactics has been done many times and with more success than most realize. Poisoned bullets were banned by France and Germany in 1675, then more universally in the 1874 Brussels Convention.

After chemical weapons were used in World War I, the 1925 Geneva Protocol banned their use in war—which was generally respected for fifty years, including during World War II. While chemical weapons were used by Iran and Iraq during their 1980-1988 war, including against Kurdish civilians (for which crime Saddam Hussein and several henchmen were later executed), the

1997 Chemical Weapons Convention provided for their elimination. The use of biological weapons in war was banned in the 1925 Geneva Protocol. The 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, which largely banned such weapons, entered into force in 1975. Even terrorist groups, with rare exceptions, have not used chemical or biological weapons, though many have toyed with the idea and they are relatively easy to make.

Nuclear weapons, first used at the end of World War II, have not been used since. Various arms control and test ban treaties have restricted the spread of nuclear weapons, most notably the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. While nine countries reportedly have nuclear weapons today, dozens more could have built them—but have not.

Other efforts to ban new kinds of weapons or tactics have fallen short. Before and after World War I, there were efforts to end unrestricted aerial warfare and unrestricted submarine warfare. Both tactics were used by both sides during World War II. Efforts to ban anti-personnel land mines have partially succeeded. Other bans have been proposed, mostly by academics, on enhanced radiation weapons (“neutron bombs”), cyber warfare, killer satellites, and other weapons or tactics.

Terrorism has been partially delegitimized. There is no agreed-upon international definition of terrorism, though the United Nations lists more than a dozen international treaties and conventions against terrorism. The mobilization of eighty-six nations and international organizations to form the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS shows the unifying power of international mobilization to defeat terrorism as a major threat to international peace. The fact that there are efforts to label drug cartels as terrorist groups, but almost no comparable efforts to brand terrorist groups as drug traffickers, shows the power of terrorism designations as a motivator for governments to take decisive action.

The 1979 hostage convention came after two decades of airline hijackings (159 between 1961 and 1972 alone) and high-profile terrorist attacks like the 1972 taking of Israeli athletes hostage during the Munich Olympics.

What really ended airline hijackings was not an international convention but the universal deployment of metal detectors at airports around the world to keep guns and bombs off of airplanes. When this was initially proposed in 1968, government officials dismissed the idea as scary and an invasion of privacy—this objection changed within a decade. The combination of social engineering (getting passengers to expect metal detectors and pat-downs), better detection technology, and efforts to delegitimize airline hijackings bought the world relative peace until Al-Qaeda terrorists on 9/11 found a way around metal detectors and used airplanes themselves

as weapons. While bombs aboard aircraft remain a constant threat to aviation security, airline hostage situations today are rare. You are far more likely to be struck by lightning.

DEMOCRACIES ARE ESPECIALLY AT RISK—BUT SO ARE ALL NATIONS

Hostage taking for strategic purposes by states like Iran or terrorist groups like Hamas poses a dilemma to democratic nations. They don’t want to abandon their citizens to death or suffering, while simultaneously not wanting to appear weak in making concessions. Hamas’s taking of hostages has shaped Israel’s campaign against Hamas in many ways, forcing Israel to prioritize the return of hostages over other objectives, including the goal of bringing about Hamas’ lasting defeat. Increased frustration by hostage families has both motivated the Israeli government’s response, limited Israel’s military options, and led to criticism that the Israeli government is not doing enough to secure the hostages’ freedom. Iran similarly extracted concessions from the United States for the 2023 return of Americans held in Iranian prisons.

Non-democratic nations have also had citizens taken hostage. In 2002, terrorists at the behest of a Chechen warlord took more than 850 people hostage in Moscow’s Dubrovka Theater. In 2004, terrorists sent by the same Chechen warlord took 1,100 people, including 777 children, hostage for three days at the Beslan school in southern Russia.

Among the most infamous hostage incidents in modern history was the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, to which all Muslims face in prayer. Fanatics held thousands of hostages for two weeks. In Algeria in 2003, an al-Qaeda affiliate known today as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb took thirty-two European tourists hostage and held onto more than a dozen for more than two hundred days, resulting in a ransom payment by Germany believed to be around €5 million.



The school in Beslan, Russia where over 300 hostages were killed, September 2004.
Photo credit: Reuters/Dima Korotayev CVI/dbp

Using force to release large numbers of hostages has a mixed record of success, underscoring how risky those operations are. The most famous success was Israel's 1976 rescue of 103 hostages from Entebbe, Uganda, with Yonatan Netanyahu, brother of the current prime minister, the only Israeli military service member killed in the operation. The United States failed in its 1980 attempt to rescue fifty-three Americans held hostage in Iran when helicopters crashed at a refueling stop known as Desert One. In Moscow's Dubrovka Theater incident, 172 people died when Russian special units pumped gas containing fentanyl into the theater in an attempt to reduce casualties in a

rescue raid. Russian forces tried to rescue the 1,100 people at the Beslan school, but 331 people died, including 186 children.

WHAT DELEGITIMIZATION OF HOSTAGE TAKING WOULD LOOK LIKE

An international campaign to delegitimize hostage taking would start by using methods similar to other successful efforts to strengthen international norms. The goal should be that no future hostage-taking group or government is able to count on international support from any quarter.

A first step would be to review international convention against the taking of hostages and



Members of Al-Qassam Brigades of Hamas release two Israeli hostages, October 23, 2023.
Photo credit: Balkis Press/ABACAPRESS.COM

reaffirm its positive commitments. Unless there is peace between Israelis and Palestinians, however, there is unlikely to be change to Article 12 which exempts peoples “fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist régimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination.” This is a case where the exception swallows up the rule, as most terrorist groups and their international supporters invariably claim to be fighting domination or occupation by someone, whether true or not.

Other diplomatic measures will be needed to fill the loophole left in the international convention. These include passing resolutions at the United Nations and in other international bodies and convening conferences where

governments call on each other to refuse to give hostage takers international support and legitimacy. Such efforts may benefit democracies at risk, like the United States and Israel, by raising the cost to other governments who want to continue dealing with hostage takers.

Diplomatic measures should avoid the well worn policy statements – “We don’t negotiate with hostage takers” and “We don’t pay ransoms” – because they are so discredited by contrary practice that no one takes them seriously.

The greater challenge is going beyond diplomacy: removing foreign ministries as the lead agency within governments and replacing them with security ministries and law enforcement organizations. For instance,

such agencies often engage in risk-reduction exercises in other contexts; they should be tasked to make periodic assessments where and how their citizens are most at risk from hostage takers and build up the mechanisms (1) to reduce the risk, and (2) to increase the likelihood that hostage crises will be short and, for the hostage takers, unsuccessful. Israel will have important lessons-learned from October 7 that could help prevent other countries from falling prey to hostage takers.

Governments need to re-assess the present system of travel advisories. The United States, for example, lists nineteen countries as “Level 4: Do Not Travel.” One option is for governments to ban travel by their citizens to certain countries, like Iran, that take hostages. A broad, multilateral group of countries that ban or limit travel of their citizens to countries that hold hostages could send a more important message than a single nation’s travel ban. Such bans would come under pressure from families who want to travel to countries like Iran or Russia to visit relatives; however, visiting family members have also become hostages in Iran.

Kinetic options can also be improved. Many countries today have hostage rescue units at the national level, or in major cities, but not all do. Even advanced governments should reassess their capabilities in light of October 7. A faster response in Israel could have saved hostages’ lives—but even countries like the United States would have struggled to respond rapidly enough to a large-scale hostage incident like October 7. Cooperation exists among governments, usually in training and mutual reinforcement, but is not universal—this is an area for improvement.

Another important focus is depriving hostage takers of safe havens. Hamas benefits from using Qatar as a safe haven. Other terrorist groups often have allies in ungoverned spaces near international borders. And hiding hostages inside a country has its own infamous history, including the Ayotzinapa 43 in Mexico and the 1976 Chowchilla schoolbus case in California. Given the rarity of large-scale hostage taking,

efforts to deny hostage takers the possibility of safe haven is not what most governments consider a priority. However, this puts hostage taking into the same category of other low-probability, high-impact events that deserve more attention from homeland security experts.

WHY EVERYONE HAS A STAKE IN PREVENTING INTERNATIONAL HOSTAGE TAKING

The world has a stake in the outcome of the Israel-Hamas war beyond what happens to Israelis and Palestinians. If Hamas gets away with taking more than two hundred hostages and using them to achieve their strategic objective of avoiding a military defeat and claiming the leadership of the Palestinian cause, the floodgates will be open to other terrorist groups and rogue states around the world to take hostages to serve their ends.

Democratic and non-democratic countries alike are vulnerable to nation-states and terrorist groups willing to take large numbers of hostages. World leaders will not want to look back in twenty years and wish they had delegitimized hostage taking in 2024. When the shooting finally stops in Gaza and all remaining hostages are returned, then world leaders, diplomats, and security officials need to start this work right away. *

— THOMAS WARRICK

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EVEN BEFORE THE ISRAEL'S POLITICAL



GUNS FALL SILENT: DEBATES REAWAKEN



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant during a press conference in Tel Aviv, October 2023. Photo credit: Abir Sultan Pool/Pool via Reuters



by Eran Lerman

As 2024 began, the Israeli war effort in the Gaza Strip changed in nature, with the focus shifting to the battles in the central and southern areas and to special forces operations against Hamas' immense tunnel system. But the hostage situation remained unresolved, with 136 still held according to Israel's count. The sad news of loss in battle, with the faces of the fallen and their life stories that have come to a premature end, continue to be at every Israeli doorstep and computer screen with the morning (and mourning) news.

Morale and determination in the ranks of the fighting forces remains high, and the recognition that Hamas must be dismantled is still prevalent among the public at large. But at the same time, questions continue to be raised – in public and private discourse, in the traditional media, let alone in the busy and often bruising social networks – as to the ultimate purpose of the war and the direction in which the country is headed.

As a result, even though the end of the war is not in yet in sight, the country is witnessing the stirring of re-awakened political debates about the legitimacy of the present government, about the proper priorities in pursuing the war, about the “Day After” in Gaza, and ultimately, about the need to translate both the bitter lessons of October 7, and the remarkable resilience shown by Israeli society in response, into a new national covenant and a transformed political reality.

Quite early on in the war, there have been calls for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to take full responsibility for the catastrophic failure of October 7 and step down – which

he refuses to do. Moreover, in late October he attempted to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the military and the intelligence services – for which he was forced to apologize (Netanyahu blames security agencies for intelligence failure, then pulls back). But his loyalists keep up the attacks on the “Deep State” (the military as well as the courts). For instance, one Likud member of Knesset alleged that the IDF high command admitted to a terrible mistake in the Gaza war, in which three hostages were accidentally killed, with the deliberate intent of demoralizing the public and bringing about the end of the fighting (IDF publicized killing of hostages in ploy to end Gaza war – Gotliv – *The Jerusalem Post*).

As these tensions persist, they feed an ongoing rift between Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant. In March 2023, Netanyahu fired Gallant when he warned against growing security dangers, only to be reinstated due to massive public pressure. Continuing tensions between the two impede the formulation of long-term policy toward the Gaza Strip and “the Day After.” In early January, Gallant briefed the media about his own ideas – an end to Hamas rule, a “multinational task force” and coalition for reconstruction, local Palestinian authorities playing a role, and Israel free to act to foil terrorist activities (Israeli Defense Minister Presents Plan for ‘Day After’ in Gaza). A leaked clarification from the Prime Minister’s office swiftly followed: no such plans have been taken up, let alone approved, by the Cabinet.

For Netanyahu, moreover, the political danger is that any plan which implies that Gaza will not be under Israeli control would run afoul of his right-wing coalition partners, who openly advocate the migration of the present population and the rebuilding of Jewish



A protestor wears a Benjamin Netanyahu mask next to a sign that reads “Go” during a demonstration in Tel Aviv, December 23, 2023. Photo credit: Matan Golan/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

settlements in Gaza. The underlying political rivalry thus becomes a direct obstacle to the adoption of any coherent plan that can counter the increasing American pressure to bring in the hapless Palestinian Authority as the government in Gaza once the fighting ends.

For this and other reasons, many among those who led the judicial reform protests in the first nine months of 2023 are considering the option of taking to the streets again to force a government change; a few have already done so. This significant political segment of Israeli society – on the left, center, and some even on the right – is sometimes referred to as “anyone but Bibi” (with the Hebrew acronym RLB “Rak Lo Bibi”).

The protestors were initially preoccupied with the war. Some of its leaders, such as Major General Yair Golan, went south to fight on October 7. Others, calling themselves “Brothers in Arms,” set up supply centers or worked with

those evacuated from their homes. Now some of them are speaking of taking to the streets again.

Political tensions have also seeped into the debate over the hostage situation and the priority that their release should be given. The Hamas leadership, from their shelters underground, blatantly demand an end to the war and an Israeli withdrawal, as well as the release of all security prisoners held by Israel – in other words, an Israeli defeat.

Some of Netanyahu’s fiercest detractors are also raising the call – “Bring Them Home Now” – which explains why this, too, has taken on a political coloring, alongside the natural sentiments and sense of pain that all or most Israelis share as the agony of the hostages and their families endures. Some of Israel’s most prominent political commentators write that they suspect that Netanyahu is prolonging the war – and refusing to accept Hamas’s terms – not

on the strategic merits of the case but because he wants to put off the day of reckoning that is bound to come once the fighting ends. This accusation ignores the majority public support for the goal, also shared by the American administration, of dismantling Hamas. But reason is not always the driving force, on both sides of the divide, when passions run high, and Netanyahu's own conduct helped feed them.

What do Netanyahu's detractors seek? Some are putting forward a demand for an early election, perhaps as early as May 2024 (which would require the Knesset to disband itself soon). They pin their hopes on the persistent polls, which give the present coalition twenty seats less in the next Knesset, while Benny Gantz and his centrist party seem set to win and take power. Others would settle – as opposition leader Yair Lapid recently suggested – for the personal replacement of Netanyahu by another Likud leader in the present Knesset. For any of these options to be realized, however, a significant number of Likud members of Knesset would have to join the opposition in voting Netanyahu out. That's not likely to happen, but the prospect keeps Netanyahu wary of any prominent or semi-independent voices within his own party.

Meanwhile, tempers are fraying on the right, within Likud as well as among the two hard-right factions that Netanyahu's majority in the Knesset may depend upon: Religious Zionism, led by Betzalel Smotrich, and Jewish Power, led by Itamar ben-Gvir (both came under direct criticism by the Biden administration and others around the globe for their advocacy of reducing the present population in Gaza). They are also livid about Netanyahu's decision to appoint former Chief Justice Aharon Barak to serve as the Israeli judge on the panel of the International Court of Justice, which weighs South Africa's accusation that the war in Gaza amounts to genocide.

Judge Barak is a *bête noire* of the right, portrayed as the architect of left-wing judicial activism. For the right, selecting Barak indicates that Netanyahu has now given up on the agenda of judicial reform. Indeed, the Supreme Court ruled (by the slim majority of 8 to 7) to strike down the one legislative act of the reform package passed thus far by the Knesset – a

law forbidding the Supreme Court to use the standard of "reasonableness" in determining the legality of government decisions and appointments (Why is the court striking down the reasonableness law now? – analysis – Israel News – The Jerusalem Post). Netanyahu's response amounted to little more than a sigh, although his right-wing allies and some of his Likud colleagues reacted sharply.

The Court also ruled – by a vote of 12 to 3 – on a far-reaching issue of the balance between branches of government. The law banning the reasonableness standard was an amendment to a basic law (the 1994 Basic Law on the Judiciary). Basic Laws are conceived of as building blocks for a future constitution. Thus before reviewing this law, the Court took up the general issue of its ability to review basic laws and amendments to them, and decided that it could do so. This ruling further reduces the prospect for judicial changes, thus ending the coalition's main project before the war broke out.

Do these setbacks at the polls and in the courts mean that the role of the right-wing parties will be marginalized in the post-war reality? Not likely. One indication of continuing strength is this: a large proportion of those killed in battle have come from West Bank settlements. The settlers may not be in a position to dictate policy post-war, but they may be able to mobilize public opinion against any notion of future evacuation of settlements in the context of Israeli-Palestinian relations. The need for unity as a lesson of October 7 cuts both ways. *

ERAN LERMAN

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THE DANGER OF FAILED STATES SURROUNDING ISRAEL



by Ksenia Svetlova

Four months into the war in Gaza and the cafés in Tel Aviv are full. It's nearly impossible to find a spot in trendy restaurants on weekends. Yet no one should be mistaken. Israel is not back to normal.

A radio or television plays in the background of nearly every café and shop, and when it signals a news update is forthcoming, everybody falls silent. The anchor reads the names of the fallen soldiers in Gaza, then an update about Hizbullah rocket fire that destroyed houses in the north, followed by information about drones shot down near the southern city of Eilat by either Yemeni or Iraqi pro-Iranian militias. This short news bulletin is a precise description of reality: Israel is now fighting for its future on multiple fronts, some as far as 2,000 kilometers away from its borders, for the first time since the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

Fifty years ago Israel fought against state actors – Egypt and Syria – but today the enemy is a variety of militias and terrorist organizations that thrive within weak or failed states. While not so long ago Israel was celebrating the decline of pan-Arabism and the disintegration of once powerful Arab regimes in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, today it realizes that the critical weakness of Arab states and the Arab system in general is nothing less than a mortal danger.

THE RISKS OF ASYMMETRICAL WAR IN LEBANON

Today Israel borders two failed states, Lebanon and Syria, while Gaza is a part of a failed autonomy. Further away from Israel lie Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and Libya – all torn by internal wars and insurrections. Each has a different degree of “failure.” However, all have lost control of the most important feature of a sovereign state – a monopoly on the use of military force – and have in the process become playgrounds for others.

One such state is Lebanon where Hizbullah, a pro-Iranian militia, has created a state within a state. Since October 7, when Hizbullah started shelling Israeli territory and Israel retaliated, more than 100,000 Lebanese have left their villages in the south and escaped up north. According to the Lebanese minister of agriculture, the country has lost a fortune owing to farmers’ inability to tend to their crops. The Lebanese head of state constantly warns against war and desperately seeks some kind of diplomatic solution. And yet, Hizbullah leaders promise to continue shelling Israel until the end of the war in Gaza. The risk of a full-blown military conflict between Israel and Lebanon keeps growing.

If Lebanon were a functioning state, it would not tolerate such a breach of its sovereignty and threat to its national security. But Lebanon was born weak and fragmented into sectarian and ethnic communities. Some of its militias

were sponsored by Syria, others were funded by Iraq and Libya, and trained by the USSR. Israel supported the Christian Falangists, and later the Army of Southern Lebanon. In 1982 Iran helped in establishing Hizbullah. After the end of the civil war in Lebanon, when Taif agreements were signed in Saudi Arabia, Hizbullah emerged as the only powerful militia that wasn't disarmed, since it fought the Israeli presence in southern Lebanon. It refused to put down its weapons also when Israel decided to pull out from Lebanon in 2000, and there was little that the Lebanese state could do then or now.

Today, if war breaks out between Israel and Lebanon, Israel will find itself – again – fighting an asymmetric war, like in Gaza. Hizbullah, like Hamas, hasn't bothered to prepare shelters or air-defense for its citizens. During the war it will be hiding amongst them, like it did during the war in 2006. And just like Hamas, Hizbullah has benefited from advances in technology. Given its proximity to Israeli territory and precision guided missiles, Hizbullah can inflict significant damage on the Israeli civilian population. Yet it will still be seen as the weaker player and even a victim in the Middle East and in the world.

After October 7, the Israeli leadership swore to eradicate Hamas in Gaza. Achieving this goal requires more than military measures. Unless capable and adequate leadership in Gaza and West Bank emerges to take charge of security and governance, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and possibly other militant groups will simply re-emerge.

The same is true for Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Military activity of stronger states like Israel and the US against militias can weaken or deter them temporarily, yet these asymmetrical battles often increase the popular support of these groups and eventually just perpetuate their control of the failed states.

FIGHTING TERROR, STABILIZING STATES

Regional and international powers must address the issue of Middle Eastern failed states that sponsor and facilitate terrorism. Fighting terror and providing economic aid are not sufficient. After World War II, the Allied

powers aimed not only to reconstruct economies but also to reorganize the political systems of Germany and Japan.

Is the free world today capable of tackling endemic poor governance, corruption, and political violence in failed states? The American-led attempt to create a democratic regime in Iraq was poorly executed and the results were disappointing, but that doesn't mean that the world should give up on the problem of failed states worldwide. Different models might be implemented with different countries: from governance assistance to transitional delegation of governance authorities to multinational bodies. The case study of Cambodia in the 1990s should be revisited. The United States has attempted to reform its programs that address this set of issues in the Global Fragility Act of 2019 but much more needs to be done.

The international community and regional powers must address the internal governance problems of weak states that are in the process of failing. Once they become hospitable platforms for terrorists and criminals, they threaten the security of both neighboring countries and the global order. Today, America and its European allies are contemplating unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state. It's important for its neighbors – and the world – to ensure that a Palestinian state would not be born failed, just like many others in the Middle East. *

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THE GAZA WAR AND EAST ASIA



Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates and Fumio Kishida, Prime Minister of Japan, during an official reception in Abu Dhabi, July 17, 2023. Photo credit: Ryan Carter/UAE Presidential Court via Reuters.





by Bilahari Kausikan

What can be said about the impact of current developments in the Middle East on East Asia?

The most compelling current development is obviously the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which has dominated the headlines for two months and will do so for many more months to come.

War arouses strong emotions. But in order to accurately assess the implications of this war for Asia we must see it in proper perspective.

This is the fifth and largest-scale war Israel has fought against Hamas since the latter seized control of Gaza in 2007. The October 7 terrorist attack caught Israel totally by surprise. Israeli deterrence clearly failed. This is a reminder – if any is really needed – of the inherent unpredictability of the Middle East.

In my judgment, the war precipitated by the barbaric October 7 terrorist attack on Israel is only a sub-regional conflict with limited global geopolitical consequences. It is likely to remain

sub-regional in scope and limited in geopolitical consequences. Not every humanitarian disaster is of geopolitical significance.

I am convinced that sooner or later there will be a regional conflict in the Middle East that will have global consequences. But the current war in Gaza is not that war. That big war will be fought over Iran's nuclear capability and not Palestine.

Palestine is simply not important enough for any of the major actors to risk a region-wide war. One key indicator of Palestine's much diminished significance in regional politics is that the Gaza war has hardly moved the price of oil.

Terrorist incidents outside of Gaza have caused relatively few casualties – exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and Israel, attacks by the Houthis on US and Israeli targets and hijacking of ships thought to be linked to Israel, skirmishes on the West Bank. They seem intended to show political solidarity with Hamas and maintain credibility with supporters rather than provide real military support to Hamas or open new fronts to divert Israel from Gaza.

Iran seemed as surprised as anyone by the October 7 terrorist attack. Iran initially issued fierce warnings against Israel. But after the



Aftermath of October 7 terrorist attack, Netivot, Israel. Photo credit: Reuters/Ronen Zvulun

US made clear its resolve to maintain overall deterrence in support of Israel by deploying two aircraft carriers and a cruise-missile armed nuclear submarine to the region and attacking targets in Syria and Iraq, Tehran reportedly told the US it does not want Israel's war with Hamas to spread further.

The wild card is Tehran's less than complete control over the many non-state actors it sponsors. It is a motley collection each with its own agenda not always fully aligned with Iran.

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime was a strategic blunder that destroyed the only regional balance to Iran. The US intervention in Afghanistan compounded the

mistake. This created a fundamental geopolitical instability at the heart of the Middle East. Ever since, dealing with this imbalance and not Palestine has been the primary strategic concern of most Sunni Arab governments, particularly Egypt and the Sunni Arab monarchies, with the partial exceptions of Qatar and Oman.

After three failed wars against Israel, in 1948, 1967 and 1973, enthusiasm for the Palestinian cause had in any case faded as most Arab governments increasingly looked to their own national interests while paying lip-service to the Palestinian cause.

After the 1979 Iranian revolution and during the course of the 1980s, their support of the Palestinian cause increasingly became pro

forma diplomatic and political, and in some cases, financial. During this period, their most substantive and strategically important support was not to Palestine but to Iraq in the eight year-long war from 1980 to 1988.

The Iran-Iraq War is believed to have resulted in between one to two million military and civilian casualties. We will never know the exact number, but it is probably more than the total number of casualties in all other wars against Israel since 1948 combined. That gives you some idea of where the current Gaza war and the Palestinian issue in general lies in the region's overall strategic priorities.

In 1979 Egypt recognized Israel, followed by Jordan in 1994. This fundamentally changed the regional dynamics of the Palestinian issue and Palestine steadily declined in strategic importance through the 1990s.

The 2011 Arab Spring turned the attention of Egypt and the Sunni monarchies even further away from Palestine as they grappled with the far more vital issue of regime survival. The Gulf monarchies began to focus on economic reforms which necessarily also entailed broader socio-cultural reforms, including how Islam was understood and practiced. These reforms are potentially of much greater consequence to the world, and in particular to the Muslim communities in South and Southeast Asia, than the war in Gaza.

Palestine is irrelevant to these reforms. On the other hand, Israel can potentially play a significant role in the transformation of their economies. The 2020 Abraham Accords between the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan and Israel marked the formal marginalization of the Palestinian issue.

For Iran, Palestine is mainly a means to pressure Israel and embarrass Sunni Arab monarchies.

The October 7 terrorist attack, as well as earlier smaller-scale attacks on Israel and clashes over Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount) and al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, were attempts by Hamas and other Palestinian groups

to check this process of marginalization and bring the Palestinian issue back to center stage.

The October 7 attack was the most destructive of these increasingly desperate attempts, triggered by the faster-than-expected progress in the talks between the US and Saudi Arabia on normalization of relations with Israel in return for American security guarantees and help with its civilian nuclear programme. October 7 succeeded in putting the Palestinian cause back in center stage. But this is likely to be only temporary.

The Abraham Accords are in effect a US-sponsored anti-Iran coalition. Israel provides military capability and the US deters Iran as off-shore balancer, as demonstrated by American naval deployments to the region during the current war. Since the geopolitical conditions that led to the Abraham Accords have not changed, sooner or later the process of Saudi-Israel normalization will resume, delayed but not diverted by October 7 and the Gaza war.

Hamas is an off-shoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood which is anathema to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the Egyptian military. I doubt anyone in the governments in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, or Cairo is shedding tears or losing sleep over Israel's attempt to annihilate the Hamas leadership. No country has left the Abraham Accords over the Gaza war. Etihad and Emirates Airlines are still flying to Israel.

Israel's fundamental war aim is to restore deterrence against Hamas and, more generally, Iran and the other non-state actors sponsored by Tehran. Israel does not want the Gaza war to broaden and this is also in the interests of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and most Arab monarchies. The collateral civilian casualties in Gaza, which evoke strong reactions among their publics, are primarily a domestic political problem for these governments to manage. Their statements in the UN, the OIC, and other actions should be seen in this light.

It is in no country's interest that terrorists anywhere be encouraged by Hamas' October 7 attack. It is therefore in no one's interest



Chinese President Xi Jinping and Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas in Beijing, June 14, 2023.
Photo credit: Kyodo via Reuters Connect

that Israel's war against Hamas should fail. By deploying its military assets in, under, and among Gaza's civilian infrastructure, Hamas encourages civilian casualties and weaponizes and exploits them against Israel's military superiority. We should not let natural empathy with the suffering of the ordinary Palestinians blind us to these harsh realities.

In an ideal world the Gaza war would be fought strictly in accordance with humanitarian law and the laws of war. But the Middle East is the land of no good options, only bad and worse options; compliance with international law by both sides is going to be imperfect.

For Israel restoring deterrence against enemies that have vowed its destruction is

an existential issue. I think Israel will try to minimize civilian casualties if only because it needs American support. But an existential issue is always going to make other considerations secondary by comparison. Israeli decision-makers probably regard the reputational and diplomatic damage as sunk-costs.

Although Palestine is clearly no longer central to the Middle Eastern strategic equation, no matter how the current Gaza war ends and whatever will be the ultimate fate of Hamas, I do not see conflict over Palestine ending because I cannot see any viable pathway to a two-state or any other solution to the question of Palestine.

There is reason to doubt whether Palestinian leaders – and some on the Israeli right – really

want a two-state solution. Full sovereignty means full responsibility and the Palestinian Authority (PA) is said to be working with the US on a plan for post-war Gaza. It is probably the least bad option: but the PA's record in the West Bank does not inspire confidence in its ability to govern competently and honestly. Without the excuse of Israeli occupation, a Palestinian state would become just another corrupt and ill-managed Third World state. International aid would dry to a trickle.

Even if Hamas as it presently exists is eliminated, misgovernment will eventually lead to another Hamas-like group developing in Gaza. Furthermore, any solution requires stability. Stability in turn must be built on a foundation of strong deterrence. But after October 7, what Israel must do to restore deterrence will make any pathway to a solution even more difficult.

Thus we must expect periodic conflicts over the Palestinian issue as an endemic condition. That is yet another reason to not let that issue distract us from the much more crucial changes underway in the Middle East: the emergence of Iran as the central strategic challenge, the shift of American strategic posture from direct intervention to that of off-shore balancer, and the efforts of the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, to reform their economies and societies.

I come back to the diminished strategic importance of the Palestinian issue because leaders in the Japanese government, businesses, media and academia are still to some extent traumatized by the oil-shock of 1973 and consequently they tend to overemphasize the importance of the Palestinian issue. This is perhaps understandable given Japan's continuing dependence on energy from the Gulf, but is nevertheless still a self-imposed constraint on Japan's freedom of action in the Middle East and in particular the Gulf.

Japan is not alone in this. China and South Korea in their own ways suffer from the same self-imposed constraint. All prefer to confine their interests to economics. I will deal with

China later, but I believe that this is a much more serious constraint on Japan because of its status as America's principal Asian ally. Let us not forget that what we habitually call the 'Middle East' is really west Asia and the Gulf is the western-most extent of the strategic space we now call the Indo-Pacific.

The Gaza war is going to result in reputational damage to the US for its support of Israel in Arab societies. But to Arab governments, particularly the Gulf monarchies and Egypt, the Gaza war has also underscored the indispensable role of the US in maintaining whatever stability is possible in the Middle East through its thus far successful efforts to deter Iran.

The Gulf monarchies and Egypt would also have noted Beijing's refusal to unequivocally condemn Hamas for the October 7 attack. This has exposed the internal contradictions of China's approach to the Middle East – trying to simultaneously maintain stable relations with Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia by ignoring geopolitics in favor of economics.

This is unsustainable in a region where geopolitics and economics are inextricably intertwined. China's position on the tensions between Iran and the Arab Gulf monarchies is now exposed. Of course, the Gulf monarchies will never ignore China. But the recent Saudi-led visit by a group of Islamic foreign ministers to China should be regarded as motivated more by the need to manage domestic politics by being seen to leave no avenue unexplored, rather than any real expectation of China playing a substantive role.

China's influence in the Middle East should neither be exaggerated nor under-estimated. The Saudi-Iran deal to restore diplomatic relations announced in Beijing in March is a case in point. This was undoubtedly a diplomatic coup for China. But Beijing's announcement was only icing on a cake baked by Oman, with the assistance of Iraq, after more than two years of quiet mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in which no external power had much of a role.



Pro-Palestinian rally in Bandung, Indonesia, October 21, 2023. Photo credit: Algi Febri Sugita via Reuters Connect

Iran's reasons for wanting the deal to be announced in China are obvious. But more significantly, a day before the Beijing announcement, on March 9, the Wall Street Journal reported a Saudi leak, that Riyadh was prepared to join the Abraham Accords and recognize Israel in return for security guarantees and a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the US.

For Riyadh, the choice of Beijing as a venue was the start of a complex process of bargaining with the US and an attempt to gain negotiating leverage over the US. The tactic was apparently not unsuccessful and as previously noted, it was the faster-than-expected progress in these negotiations that was the proximate cause of the October 7 attack.

Only the US can provide the kind of security guarantees against Iran that the Gulf monarchies need. Any assurance or guarantee that Beijing may give will lack credibility because China cannot abandon Iran. There is no other power of any strategic weight in the Middle East that shares China's deep distrust of the American-led order. Nor can Beijing distance itself from Hamas and other groups supported by Iran that claim to be fighting for Palestine.

In this respect, Beijing's position on Palestine is a trap of its own devising. This sets limits to what China can achieve strategically.

Still, it is inevitable that China's presence in the Middle East will grow and in particular that China's strategic footprint in the Gulf, which is an important source of China's energy, will

increase. At present, China's energy supply routes from the Gulf are in effect being protected by the American navy. This is an intolerable situation for any major power and China will sooner or later deploy its own navy to the Gulf and seek facilities for its navy in the Gulf as it already has done in Djibouti. The Gulf states will probably go along for their own reasons. The crucial question is how will the US react?

I had earlier referred to America's strategic blunder of intervening directly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Correcting this mistake entailed the US eschewing direct intervention by ground forces and instead playing the role of off-shore balancer. This shift is sometimes portrayed as a 'retreat' from the Middle East. But the Fifth Fleet is still in Bahrain, the US Air Force is still in Qatar and the UAE, the US army is still based in Kuwait. As the Gaza war has shown, it has been quite effective as an off-shore balancer in deterring Iran.

However, an off-shore balancer demands more of its allies, partners and friends in maintaining order. Such demands became increasingly insistent after the end of the Cold War. Japan, particularly the late Mr. Abe Shinzo, understood this very well and as we all know, he made important legislative and administrative changes that enabled Japan to play a more proactive defense and security role in support of the US in East Asia.

Strategic competition between the US and China is a new structural condition of international relations and the boundaries between different theaters of competition are being blurred. As China begins to deploy its navy to the Gulf and seeks facilities there, it is highly probable – in fact, I believe, inevitable – that Japan will eventually be expected to play a bigger role in support of the US in the Middle East as well.

Of course, expectations of Japan in the Middle East will not be the same as in East Asia. But since Japan is so dependent on Middle Eastern energy whose flow depends on the maintenance of stability, it is not unreasonable

for the US to expect its Asian allies to contribute to stability in the Middle East. The I2U2 group that brings together India, Israel, the US and the UAE is one early indication. Can Japan and South Korea remain detached?

US expectations of allied support may be heightened if Trump wins in 2024. If Japan cannot or will not meet them, its standing as a US ally in East Asia cannot be unaffected as the 1991 Gulf war had already shown.

Japan will have to change the mindset with which it approaches the Middle East. It is simply not viable for Japan to continue defining its interests in the Middle East solely or even primarily in economic terms. A large part of the mindset shift to defining Japan's interests in the Middle East in strategic as well as economic terms is to see Palestine in its proper perspective and not let a single issue limit Japan's strategic horizons.

So far I have dealt with broad strategic implications of developments in the Middle East and specifically the Gaza war. Let me now conclude with some narrower but no less significant implications.

In Southeast Asia, the immediate impact of the Gaza war has been to raise social tensions between Muslims – to whom support for Palestine has become an important element of their identity – and non-Muslims, and to some degree between generations as well. I am aware that is a somewhat simple way of classifying attitudes towards a complex issue, but in broad outline it is not inaccurate. Certainly, Muslim politicians in Malaysia and Indonesia compete to make political capital out of the Gaza war adding to existing inter-ethnic and inter-religious stresses in their societies. For my own country, Singapore, our primary concern is to maintain social cohesion amidst the passions aroused by the war.

Over the last 40 years or so, the traditional syncretic and open Southeast Asian understanding of Islam has been steadily displaced by narrower, more essentialist, often Wahhabist, interpretations from the Middle

East. This has changed the texture of Muslim communities in the region, turning them inwards upon themselves. All Southeast Asian countries are multi-ethnic and multi-religious and this phenomenon is affecting the politics of Muslim majority countries. The process is well-nigh irreversible in Malaysia but is still contested in Indonesia, at least by the present administration. It has also had an effect on countries with substantial Muslim minorities, including my own.

Attitudes towards the Gaza war may enhance these existing trends and inject an anti-Western element into Southeast Asian Muslim identities. This can have a long-term strategic impact that should be of concern to all countries with interests in the region. Potentially, it could have a similar impact on Muslim attitudes in South Asia as well.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf monarchies are attempting to reorient the practice of Islam from the public to the private sphere as part of their efforts to reform their economies. It is in the interest of all Asian countries to do what they can encourage and assist them in this effort.

It is in no country's interest to allow terrorists anywhere to be encouraged by the October 7 attack. There is a strong demonstration of international terrorism. 9/11 was followed one year later by the Bali bombings. In 2016, only two years after Israel launched Operation Protective Edge against Hamas to stop rocket attacks from Gaza, a plot by a terrorist group to fire rockets at Singapore from Batam, an Indonesian island only 44 kilometers away – closer than Jerusalem or Tel Aviv is to Gaza – was foiled with the help of the Indonesian authorities. Hamas has a significant presence in Malaysia.

Again these concerns may seem remote to us in East Asia. But it is precisely because countries like Singapore and Japan are generally so safe that they are vulnerable. No open society can be totally immune from terrorist attacks and we should all devote some effort to studying

why Israeli intelligence failed so badly over the October 7 attacks, apparently despite having picked up strong signals of its possibility.

Finally, the most important immediate consequence of the Gaza war could be its impact on the 2024 US presidential elections. Foreign policy is usually not a significant influence in presidential elections. But the Gaza war could be an exception. With the Democratic Party already divided and ambivalent about Biden, his administration's strong support for Israel is unpopular with progressives and younger voters. The current polling shows Trump and Biden running neck-to-neck. Could the Gaza war tip the balance if substantial numbers of young and progressive voters stay home on election day? This is a question that only time can answer but it will have an impact on all of us in Asia. *

This essay is based on Ambassador Bilahari's comments at a symposium held on December 7, 2023 by the Japan Institute of Middle Eastern Economies Centre and the Institute of Energy Economics of Japan.

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AFTER TWO YEARS OF WAR: THE WEST'S STRATEGIC CHOICE IN UKRAINE

Ukrainian President Zelensky meets with US President Biden at the White House, September 2023.
Photo credit: Reuters/Kevin Lamarque.



by Daniel Fried

With support from Europe, the United States, and others, Ukraine has held off – and in part, beaten back – Russia’s campaign of conquest and subjugation. But Ukraine has not won, Putin seems determined to fight on, and the West seems beset by doubts as to whether continuing to back Ukraine is practical or worth the investment. Lessons learned the hard way in the 20th century – among them that aggressive dictators need to be stopped and people willing to fight for their freedom need to be supported – are in danger of being lost once again.

As of the end of January, funding for new US assistance to Ukraine is being blocked by a determined minority of legislators, and EU assistance is being held up by the veto power of one member state. The Ukrainian military is running short of ammunition. If not resolved soon, these political blockades could lead to Ukraine’s defeat, a catastrophe for Ukrainians and a major blow to the West: a sign to dictators around the world that Western allies will not stand up for their friends, and perhaps not even for themselves.

The case for supporting Ukraine, repeatedly made by President Joe Biden, is rooted in American grand strategy for over a century. It was first articulated by Woodrow Wilson in his

14 Points speech of 1918, applied by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill to the Atlantic Charter of 1941, realized by Harry Truman after 1945 and maintained by American presidents ever since. It was also adopted by Western European and key Asian allies after 1945 and by Central and Eastern European nations after regaining their sovereignty in 1989.

The axioms of this grand strategy include support for democracy and the rule of law at home; security through alliances, in which the United States has played an indispensable part; and, most broadly, support for an open world, without closed empires or blocs, with economic relations rooted in common rules. This system used to be known as the free world and is now often referred to by the ungainly name of “the rules-based liberal international order.”

The United States took the lead in establishing this free world system that, notwithstanding the blunders, hypocrisy, and inconsistency of implementation since the late 1940s, brought about three generations of general peace among great powers, no third world war and unparalleled prosperity. This system saw an end to the European empires that had subjugated much of the world and to the Soviet empire that subjugated half of Europe.

The United States is frequently accused of seeking hegemony, and of acting just as other leading world powers did over the centuries. But the US-led order is not zero-sum. It held open the gates of growth and encouraged the rise and prosperity of other powers, including former



Russian President Putin, with Defense Minister Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, visits military headquarters at Rostov-on-Don, November 2023. Photo credit: Sputnik/Gavriil Grigorov/Kremlin via Reuters

enemies Germany and Japan and later China, with which the United States fought a war in the early 1950s but to whom, starting in the 1970s, the US offered a place around the table, to the benefit of the Chinese economy.

The US also opened for post-Soviet Russia a place in the free world order, notwithstanding two generations of Cold War with the Kremlin. Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all made similar offers to Moscow: join with your former adversaries in a common international framework and reap the benefits of common prosperity and security.

The inclusion in NATO of Moscow's former imperial subjects in Central and Eastern Europe no more threatened Russia's security than did the inclusion of Germany in NATO in 1955. The enlargement of NATO launched by President Clinton and continued by President Bush was intended to avoid the renationalization of security in Europe. Both administrations regarded defense against a revanchist Moscow as an unlikely contingency.

Russia was having none of it. After a period in which Russian President Boris Yeltsin seemed to consider the possibility of Russia integrating with the wider, US-led free world



Ukrainian tank in the Kharkiv region, December 2023.

Photo credit: Mykhaylo Palinchak / SOPA Images/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

system, Vladimir Putin returned to imperial, zero-sum thinking. His ambitions focused on reestablishing Kremlin control over as much of the former Soviet and Russian empire as possible.

Putin made his hostility to the United States and Europe clear in a stark speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. He invaded Georgia in 2008 and also that year made a claim to Crimea, Ukrainian territory. In 2014, Putin invaded Ukraine. He was angered by the fall of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, his loyal subordinate who fled the country in the face of pro-European demonstrations that he had failed to crush, even after firing on demonstrators. After eight years of steady but

low levels of fighting, Putin launched an all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 aimed at destroying Ukraine's sovereignty either by annexing it outright or reducing it to satellite status, recalling the Soviet satellites during the Cold War.

The US and European nations had treated Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia as peripheral and its 2014 initial attack on Ukraine as a limited problem. In retrospect, that seems to have been a mistake. But they reacted sharply to the outbreak of full-scale war in 2022, treating it as a major international challenge that they had to meet. They imposed serious economic sanctions against Russia and provided Ukraine with large quantities of weapons and ammunition

including, though only after prolonged periods of indecision, sophisticated arms such as tanks, fighter jets, advanced air defense systems, and longer-range attack missiles.

Before the full-scale invasion, the Biden administration had sought essentially to park the US-Russian relationship in a “stable and predictable” category, the better to focus on what it considered to be the more profound challenge from China. After the invasion, the Biden administration spoke of needing to meet simultaneous challenges to the free world (or “rules-based, liberal international order”) from two authoritarian adversaries, China and Russia.

European governments, especially in Western Europe, made similar strategic shifts. Germany seemed stunned by the all-out Russian invasion and acknowledged that its assumptions that Russia was on some level a partner, assumptions to which it had clung even after the Russo-Georgian War and the initial Russo-Ukraine War, had collapsed. In a sign of just how far German thinking had changed, senior German officials began to admit privately that the Poles and Baltics had been right all along in their dark warnings of Russian intentions. The French government, which had dismissed warnings from European countries closest to (and most knowledgeable about) Russia, shifted as well. In a major speech in March 2023 in Bratislava, President Emmanuel Macron came close to apologizing for France’s earlier attitude, acknowledging that the Russian threat was real.

In the wake of this revised view of Russia, the European Union found creative ways of financing the provision of weapons to Ukraine. The US and Europe saw the stakes in deep strategic terms and acted accordingly, backing Ukraine’s wartime efforts and increasing their military readiness to defend their own ranks against Russian attack.

It is not clear, however, whether the West can maintain this stance of resistance. In 2023, a Ukrainian land offensive, of which much was expected, failed to gain ground. This came as a cold shower to Western governments, which

had hoped – on the basis of Ukrainian military successes in the summer and fall of 2022 – for greater success and even a potential end to the war on Ukrainian terms. Russia, on the other hand, appeared to double down on its war aims, mobilizing its military industry in the face of economic sanctions and export controls.

These setbacks fueled arguments that the United States was again mired in an “endless war”; that Ukrainian victory was out of reach; and the US would be better off encouraging (or pushing) Ukraine to settle the war essentially on Putin’s terms.

Opposition grew within the Congress to continued support for Ukraine. Some took the form of political linkage: Republicans, especially in the House of Representatives, insisted that the Biden Administration agree to major changes in immigration and border policy as a price for Ukraine aid.

In part, this simply reflects hardball legislative tactics. But there is a deeper strategic context. Some of the Republican arguments against aid to Ukraine and many of the more sophisticated arguments by skeptics of support for Ukraine reflect objections to the Biden administration’s strategic framing of the issue.

Former President Trump and his “MAGA” allies have made clear that they do not accept the axioms of the rules-based liberal international order, aka, the free world. Rhetorically, they reject it as “globalism” and speak in terms that recall the “American First” isolationists in Congress before the US entry into World War II. Trump himself has repeatedly expressed himself in these terms, speaking with disdain or even hostility towards NATO and the European Union. Albeit inconsistently, Trump seems to prefer great power politics and the logic of *machtpolitik*, or “might makes right.”

In parallel, some serious and knowledgeable experts argue against open-ended support for Ukraine because it is ultimately futile and will lead to needless conflict with Russia, while greater realism requires a return to an international system based on great power

spheres of influence. They argue, essentially, that the US needs to accept that Ukraine will inevitably come under Moscow's sway. They are less explicit about the baleful consequences of that for the Ukrainian people, and posit that Ukraine is in any case ill-prepared for a future as part of Europe, suggesting that it is not really part of the European or transatlantic family.

Some of the current strategic debate over Ukraine policy recalls an earlier argument during the Cold War. Was liberation of Central and Eastern Europe from Soviet rule possible? Or was talk of it mere cant that flew in the face of a realistic view that the Iron Curtain, however unfortunate, was a fact of life?

Cold War realism, as it was then known, had a basis and was generally accepted by the American and West European foreign policy establishments, President Ronald Reagan's rhetoric notwithstanding, until 1989, when developments on the ground, namely the rapid overthrow of communist rule in Poland and other countries of Central Europe by democratic dissidents and in some cases mass social movements, decided the issue.

The strategic argument about Ukraine may also be decided on the ground. The war's outcome hangs in the balance. The failure of Ukraine's land offensive in 2023 was matched by Russia's equal failure to advance. Less noticed were Ukrainian successes in deep strikes that forced the Russian Black Sea Fleet to retreat and opened the Black Sea to renewed exports of Ukrainian grain.

Biden administration officials have articulated a credible theory of relative success for the West in 2024: give Ukraine the weapons it needs to hold off the Russians on the ground and inflict heavy casualties if the Russians seek to advance; provide more and longer-range missiles enabling the Ukrainians to put Crimea, the Kerch Strait bridge, and Russian logistical chokepoints under fire; keep tightening enforcement of sanctions and export controls to intensify pressure on the Russian economy; and act on a G7 basis to seize the more than \$300

billion of frozen Russian sovereign assets, using them to help Ukraine.

These steps could generate a more favorable outlook by the time of the July 2024 NATO Summit in Washington. There NATO could make clear in a credible way that time is not on Putin's side; that Ukraine is on the road to membership in NATO (and the EU) if it can continue the systemic transformations needed, succeeding as did Poland and other countries a generation ago; and that Europe and the United States will not be intimidated or discouraged by Russia but will rather help Ukraine prevail.

That optimistic scenario is not inevitable. But it is reasonably possible, which in foreign policy, is usually as good as it gets. To get that far, however, both European and American political leaders need to break through the blockage of assistance to Ukraine, rooted in politics and strategic arguments that could doom Ukraine's efforts and vindicate the darker hypothesis that democracies, as in the 1930s, are in retreat before aggressive dictators. The strategic stakes in Ukraine are high. Europe, the United States, and other friends of Ukraine still have an opportunity to affect the outcome. *

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Ukrainian soldier defends Zaporizhzhia in south-eastern Ukraine.
Photo credit: Dmytro Smolienko/Ukrinform/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

THE UKRAINE WAR AFTER TWO YEARS: INITIAL MILITARY LESSONS



by Eado Hecht

As the war approaches the end of its second year, unless some dramatic development occurs to shift current trends – for instance, a collapse of NATO support for Ukraine or the death of Putin – it seems that the war is a long way from being decided or brought to an end. Initial lessons on the military side are already available.

RUSSIA'S EVOLVING WAR GOALS

Two years ago, before the war in Ukraine started, Russia's political goals were to return Ukraine to the Russian sphere, prevent it from ever joining NATO and tie its foreign policy and economy with those of Russia. A secondary goal was the return to Russia of areas of Ukraine that Russians regard as historically Russian and that only became part of Ukraine because of the manner in which the Soviet Union drew its internal maps.

To achieve these goals Russia's invasion was organized in two major directions:

A converging thrust directly towards Kyiv – a special forces 'scalpel' aimed directly at the Ukrainian political leadership, followed by a larger, but still fairly small airborne force to reinforce it and a large ground force to stabilize

the new regime that would replace it. This was similar to the operations launched against Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979).

A dispersed offensive across eastern Ukraine to capture most of it with an auxiliary thrust also along the Black Sea coast towards Odessa, utilizing Russian control of Crimea since 2014.

The early Russian offensive towards Kyiv gained much territory, but did not achieve its political goal of eliminating the Ukrainian regime. Simultaneously, the offensives in eastern Ukraine captured a sizable area, although the attempt to advance towards Odessa was defeated.

The Russians assumed that a majority of Ukraine's population would either support or be indifferent towards the notion of Moscow imposing a pro-Russian regime in Kyiv. This was a major intelligence failure that led, among other things, to the Russians deploying a force too small to achieve the goals assigned to it – both the force-to-pace ratio, and the Russian force to Ukrainian force ratio. In both cases, the invading force was in many respects weaker than the Ukrainian forces facing it.

After the failure of the offensive towards Kyiv, Russia's political focus shifted and the secondary political goal, "liberating" historically Russian territory, became the primary goal. Not for the last time in this war, Russian leadership exhibited an ability to cut their losses and recalibrate their goals to their perceived capabilities.



Photo credit: IMAGO/Steinach via Reuters Connect

UKRAINE'S EVOLVING GOALS

Initially, Ukraine's political goal was merely to survive the Russian onslaught, maintain its political independence, and not lose more territory, in addition to that already lost in 2014. The defeat of Russia's thrust towards Kyiv, especially when followed by its withdrawal of forces from that region, and the slowing down of Russia's offensive in eastern Ukraine, encouraged Ukraine's leaders to believe that they could also recover the territory lost in the first half year of the war.

Ukraine's first major counter-offensive, launched in late August 2022, did indeed regain some ground. East of Kharkiv, Russian troops rapidly abandoned a few thousand square kilometers of ground and much equipment before finally regrouping to halt the Ukrainians. Russians gave up more ground around Kherson (another deliberate cutting of losses). This

success caused the Ukrainians to extend their goal from the liberation of all the territory lost in the initial Russian 2022 invasion to the liberation of the territory lost in 2014. Russian attacks through the winter of 2022 – 2023 regained some ground (especially the town of Bakhmut) but at an enormous cost that seemed to show that the Russian army was indeed weak and could possibly be defeated by another major counter-offensive.

NATO'S EVOLVING GOALS

NATO, which according to some sources was surprised by the initial Russian failure, backed Ukraine's original goals but seems to have been less enthusiastic about the extended goals. NATO is chary of pushing Russia to the point that Putin might feel the need to employ nuclear weapons in order to prevent a defeat too great for the survival of his regime (after he claimed

that the annexed regions are now Russian national territory).

NATO supplied crucial funding and equipment for Ukraine to survive, but not enough to defeat Russia decisively. Partly this was because of the hesitation to provoke Russia. But another reason was that NATO simply could not keep up with the demands of the war. The weakness of NATO countries' defensive organizations – the militaries themselves, the military industries and the political and legal structures providing support – was exposed.

The war also exposed the limitation of sanctions as an economic weapon of NATO. Sanctions imposed on Russia by NATO states caused some damage to Russia's economy (though how much is disputed by economic analysts) but did not deter Russia from prosecuting the war. Furthermore, the sanctions on Russian oil also damaged the economies of NATO members – causing a slow imposition of sanctions, allowing Russia to adjust (thus, for example, creating a global shift in the direction of oil exports and the creation of bypass routes of trade between Russia and Western countries). To the unpleasant surprise of the NATO leaders, much of the non-NATO world refused to respect these sanctions, let alone impose them. The current discussion on whether to transfer Russian Central Bank funds frozen in Western banks to Ukraine may strengthen a trend away from the US dollar-based international trade regime towards an alternative Chinese-dominated trade regime.

RUSSIA STRIKES BACK IN 2023

Following its reversal in the Ukrainian autumn 2022 counter-offensive, Russia realized that maintaining its mobilization and military industrial output at peacetime levels was one of the reasons for its defeats. The response was to mobilize approximately 300,000 reservists, reduce exemptions from conscript service and launch a patriotic and fiscal campaign to encourage volunteering to the armed forces.

Another source of volunteers was imprisoned criminals serving long sentences who were promised release in return for service at the front. The first batch of newly mobilized personnel reached the front with minimal training to rapidly close gaps at the front, the others received longer and better training before being sent forward. Russia's industry was ordered to shift focus to meet military requirements.

Military industry output takes longer than mobilization of new manpower. Meanwhile Russia turned to external vendors to close gaps in its arsenals – Iran, North Korea and China. Iran, specifically, provided a solution to a technological gap suffered by the Russian forces – a variety of exploding drone models for strategic and tactical uses, and the technology to manufacture them in Russia.

Though the Russian army resumed localized offensive operations through the winter of 2022 – 2023, it focused on preparing a strong defensive front for the expected next Ukrainian counter-offensive, building several lines of obstacles and fortifications, and deploying forces to close gaps, create depth and mobile reserves – in short, falling back upon the foundations of Russian defensive doctrine.

The Ukrainian counter-offensive began in May 2023 with long-range firing at Russian command and logistics followed by a ground offensive in early June. The counter-offensive failed after only miniscule gains on the ground and heavy losses on both sides. Already during the Ukrainian attacks the Russians renewed their own deliberate slow but steady offensive, initially on secondary fronts and gradually also in the areas where the Ukrainians had attacked and gained ground.

As of the end of 2023, the Russian counterattacks have gained more ground than the original Ukrainian achievements.

The failure of the Ukrainian counter-offensive has also weakened the resolve of NATO to support Ukraine. There are more open calls for reaching an accommodation with Russia and demands to limit the funding and supply of equipment. NATO's flow of equipment and



Russian soldiers depart for the front line, January 17, 2024. Photo credit: Reuters/Chingis Kondarov

ammunition is not sufficient and Ukrainian units are feeling the lack of it as they are forced to give ground. Part of the problem is that the production rate of equipment and ammunition is still well below that needed by the Ukrainian forces. It is too early to tell whether these voices will create a crisis in NATO support and actual pressure on Ukraine to accept a completely unfavorable compromise with Russia.

Both sides are hiding their casualty data but both have suffered casualties in enormous proportions. Though the Russians seem to have lost more, the casualty ratio is not enough to amount to a Ukrainian victory – the ratio of available manpower in Russia's favor is greater. Furthermore, the duration of the war and the

accumulation of casualties is beginning to sap the morale of Ukraine's population. The initial fervor and voluntary mobilization is over; conscription is facing more resistance and evasion. Ukraine's leaders are discussing widening the conscription to add age groups that were previously exempt and imposing sanctions to compel Ukrainians living abroad to return to serve. These actions shine a light on the level of casualties suffered by the Ukrainian forces.

THE WAR AT SEA AND IN THE AIR

The land war at the front and industrial output in the rear will be the ultimate arbiters of this war, but two secondary fronts also demand attention.



A residential building in Odessa damaged by a Russian drone attack, January 17, 2024.
Photo credit: Nina Liashonok via Reuters Connect

At sea, Russia initially enjoyed complete supremacy – its navy imposed a maritime blockade, launched numerous missiles and conducted some amphibious operations. However, gradually the Ukrainians have managed to erode that supremacy with a sea-denial strategy based on a long-range fire capability built during the war. Aerial drones, shore-to-sea missiles and long-range exploding drone-boats have forced the Russian navy to distance itself from Ukraine's shores. This has enabled a bypass of the naval blockade and reduced the threat of amphibious landings while simultaneously enabling the Ukrainians to conduct some naval-commando raids.

In the air, the Russian initial one-way war against the Ukrainian hinterland has evolved into a two-way exchange. Though the Russian air force is much bigger than Ukraine's, it had never developed a non-nuclear strategic bombardment

capability and is almost incapable of penetrating Ukrainian air defenses. Instead it reverted to the use of long-range missile and exploding drones and a large proportion of these, too, are being shot down. Russia still enjoys an advantage in its ability to bombard Ukraine's rear, but at its height, even before Ukraine received the weapons necessary to defend itself, Russian capability was never enough to cause damage at a level that would bring Ukraine to its knees – especially as Ukraine's economy and military industry rest on NATO support rather than its own resources.

Russia's missile and exploding-drone campaign have proven both the weakness of these tools in a strategic bombardment role, and the Russian limitations in the number it can launch simultaneously. Ukraine's attacks on Russia's rear are much weaker, however, and serve mainly as harassment designed to gain propaganda points.

Except for attack helicopters, which suffered heavy losses, Russian tactical air support for its ground forces was almost completely absent in the initial months of the war but gradually increased, adding new weapons such as precision-guided bombs of which it had very few at the start of the war. Ukraine's tactical air support was almost completely dependent on missile-launching drones. These were celebrated in the first few weeks of the war as very successful and then disappeared from view, as Russia deployed anti-aircraft systems that rapidly destroyed the majority of the Ukrainian drones.

Both sides have gradually shifted to smaller drones – shorter range, smaller payloads but more difficult to shoot down. Most of these are civilian drones improvised into weapons. They have proven to be capable weapons but, despite much enthusiasm in news reports, not battle-winners in themselves. Both sides have begun deploying electronic weapons to defeat these smaller drones, and seem to be achieving a fairly high rate of success. The available data reveals a relatively low target destruction rate compared to the numbers of drones sent to the front. The smaller drones are useful for surveillance and reconnaissance of the enemy or for control of one's own troops.

CONCLUSION – THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

A great number of modern technologies are being employed in this war – technologies that many theorists promised would create a revolution in warfare, making all previous military technologies and methods obsolete. Instead, what has happened is a merging of the new with the old with a clear emphasis on the old as determining the tactical and strategic results of battles. This is one of the reasons NATO is finding it difficult to provide Ukraine with what it argues it needs to win the war – NATO military industries had drastically reduced their ability to manufacture supposedly 'obsolete' hardware.

In some respects, the war in Ukraine resembles more the First World War – albeit with the inclusion of modern technology – rather than the revolution predicted by the military theorists. However, this resemblance should not be overstated. There are clear differences between the military capabilities of Ukraine and Russia on the one hand and those of NATO countries on the other. Had NATO militaries been directly involved from the start, their air power, much more capable than those of Ukraine and Russia, would have created a different model. Perhaps the Normandy campaign of the Second World War would have provided a closer analogy in that case – though Russia's air defenses against modern air attacks, relative to those of Germany in 1944, are considerably more capable.

The war has demolished theories that originate in Western international relations institutions, whether academic or governmental, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as to the state of the world and where it is headed. It has also demolished theories of the Western militaries – a version of which had also been developed in the Russian army, based on the supposed impact of a variety of modern technologies – especially on the centrality of cyber warfare, precision-guided munitions, and on small volunteer armies being sufficient to decide all wars. This is not the way things have turned out for either side in the Ukraine War. *

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**AFTER TWO
YEARS OF
THE RUSSO-
UKRAINE WAR:
THE ROLE
OF PRIVATE
CORPORATIONS**

Photo credit: STR via Reuters Connect



by Daniel Rakov

One lesson of the Russo-Ukraine War is the growing role played by private corporations, both through participation in or circumvention of economic sanctions and business decision-making that directly affects the course of the fighting.

The satellite company SpaceX is a prime example of the latter. Its owner, Elon Musk, agreed in February 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion, to provide Ukraine with Starlink communications terminals, operated by the company's constellation of satellites. This strengthened Ukraine's ability to defend its military and civilian communications infrastructure. Starlink's network (thousands of satellites in low-earth orbit) made it difficult for Russia to jam it. Starlink turned out to be a vital enabler without which the Ukrainian military could not synchronize its maneuvers nor carry out missile and drone attacks against Russia. Notably, it was an enabler no government would have been able to provide.

Musk presented his decision as motivated by solidarity with the Ukrainian people. But, in addition to generating positive public relations in Western markets, his decision made business sense. In 2022, Starlink had just reached technological maturity after a year of initial operations. Western governments paid SpaceX for a significant portion of the equipment and maintenance costs delivered in Ukraine. As a private firm without much business income in its early years (common to tech start-ups), SpaceX was able to use this Ukrainian income to boost the company's assessed net worth to more than 100 billion US dollars.

In early October 2022, Musk sought to further amplify his role. He posted on his social media a proposed political compromise between Russia and Ukraine. It later emerged that Musk was in quiet contact with the Kremlin on the issue. About a week after the failure of the mediation efforts, Musk demanded (and obtained) hundreds of millions of US dollars from the US government for continuing to deploy Starlink in Ukraine, threatening to cut off the network when it was clear that the Ukrainian military would not be able to continue the momentum of its achievements in the field without it.

SpaceX has continued to influence the war. In February 2023, the Ukrainian military could not use sea-based drones to strike Russian targets in Crimea because Starlink had deactivated its satellite network in that area. Crimea is internationally recognized as Ukrainian territory though Russia annexed it in 2014. Musk explained publicly that he wanted to prevent a major escalation following the Ukrainian attacks there, but he was actually concerned with possible retaliation against his company. Since Russia considers the peninsula to be its sovereign territory, Musk thought the use of Starlink in Crimea could be used to legitimize attacks (by Russia) on its infrastructure and satellites elsewhere, under the laws of war.

SpaceX is not the only corporate player in the war. Microsoft and Amazon, for example, have volunteered to help the Ukrainian government repel Russian cyberattacks against the country's civilian and military infrastructure, and to provide Ukraine with cloud services immune to Russian attacks. Social networks, such as Meta, have worked to limit the disinformation campaigns Moscow has sought to employ against Ukraine and Western countries, which the Russians look upon as part of an integrative military operating concept, often described as "Russian hybrid warfare."

Sometimes private sector inaction can also affect military outcomes. In the first months of the war, some Western corporations voluntarily exited from the Russian market, thereby intensifying pressure on Moscow. Later on, with the support of governmental sanctions, other corporations cut off supply chains to Russia's defense industry, which contributed to Russia's newfound reliance on Iranian support.

Technology companies are poised to have a continuing impact on warfare. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the global arms race, illustrating the shortage of weapons in a way that dramatically strengthens the market value and bargaining power of defense corporations vis-à-vis governments for years to come.

Economic and technological developments

in private corporations blur the distinction between the military and the civilian realms. They also require military and strategic planners (and intelligence communities) to factor in private corporate responses into careful preparation for the challenges that lie ahead. *

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THE OUTLOOK FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY: AN UNCERTAIN TRUMPET



Poland Celebrates 25 Years In NATO. Photo credit: Beata Zawrzel via Reuters Connect



by Klaus Naumann

The American general Maxwell Taylor wrote a book published in 1960 under the title “The Uncertain Trumpet” about American defense complacency in the Cold War. It triggered a change in strategy. The trumpets of Jericho brought down walls. Today, a trumpet is needed to break through Europe’s walls of inertia and a comfortable “business as usual” mentality.

EUROPE TODAY

Reflections on European security must begin with the actual conditions. The continent has been living with the reality of a war on its soil since 2014 and yet Europe, and Germany in particular, have irresponsibly neglected security. The focus has been on cooperation based on trust. Putin’s announcement of conflict in Munich in 2007 was not taken seriously. His annexation of parts of Georgia in 2008 and of Crimea in 2014, and then eight years of war in Donbass were met by the West with ineffective instruments and acts of appeasement. For the sake of its own well-being, the West devalued the central element of the European order: no forcible change of borders.

The shameful withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 then showed Putin that the risk he would incur should he attack Ukraine would be low.

Today, Europe is not capable of defending

itself against a Russian attack without American support. Russia may not be capable of such an attack at present, but it could be better positioned in around five years’ time, after compensating for the considerable personnel and material losses in Ukraine. In addition, despite British and French nuclear weapons, NATO depends on the nuclear protection of the US. This applies even more to the European Union, which at best has limited military capabilities.

Only NATO can effectively protect Europe, provided that America provides unrestricted support. While this is currently the case, the question of US support for Europe’s defense will have to be answered anew after the US elections in November.

A key condition for continued US support is that the Europeans contribute more to the common defense. There has been some improvement in the past ten years. Today, 18 out of 31 NATO countries are fulfilling their commitment to spend 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. This means, however, that almost half of European governments have not yet understood the seriousness of the situation. Significant gaps remain in armed forces, critical infrastructure, defense industrial capacity and the logistical ability to serve as a hub for transatlantic reinforcements. Total spending at more than 2 percent will therefore be required for at least ten years.

For Europe, the time of cooperative security is over because its prerequisite – mutual trust between Russia and NATO – has been destroyed



Ukrainian antitank obstacles. Photo credit: Future Publishing via Reuters Connect

by Putin. Nevertheless, it is not yet understood in Europe that confrontational security is required now. Only then can one try to rebuild trust with Russia. Over the long term trust is necessary because the democracies of Europe are located on the same continent as Russia, and it will remain a power owing to its nuclear weapons and wealth of raw materials.

THE INDISPENSABLE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE AT RISK

The US presidential election on November 5, 2024 could influence Europe's security architecture. If Donald Trump wins, he will not be able to withdraw from NATO – even if he wishes – because the annulment of a binding treaty requires an unattainable two-thirds majority in the Senate. But he could make the American commitment – and above all, the

irreplaceable and critical nuclear guarantee – dependent on whether Europe, especially Germany, achieves the defense spending target of two percent of GDP.

At the same time, Europe's geostrategic importance for America remains unchanged. Without a hold in Europe, America cannot easily project power into the critical spaces of the Middle East, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. Thus, although American protection helps Europe, it also serves the strategic interests of the US in providing a base for American projection of power and security.

THE NEAR TERM OUTLOOK

Doubts about the American security guarantee could encourage Putin. Europe and Germany must therefore be prepared for the fact that Russia could wage limited wars on

Europe starting from 2025/26 at the earliest, even if it could hardly launch a major attack on all European NATO states before 2029/2030. However, even a limited Russian success in the Baltic states could mean the end of NATO, would make Russia the dominant power in Europe, and would likely trigger domestic political upheavals towards illiberalism in almost all European states, including Germany. The goal of a buffer zone or “cordon sanitaire” protecting Russia would thus be achievable for Putin, and the dominance of the US on its European opposite coast, indispensable for America’s global importance, would be gone.

This is the core of the political challenge facing the West in 2024. It will be decided in Ukraine, which must therefore be supported even more resolutely. It must not be allowed to lose, and it will have to be rebuilt in the long term to give its people confidence in a better future.

Ultimately, Russia’s economic power is not much larger than that of Italy. Europe thus can face up to the challenge, provided it remains united, recognizes the danger, shows the strength to act now, and wins over its citizens.

Europe must protect its periphery and create as much independent defense capability as possible. This is Europe’s best protection against the uncertainties of the American election. Fulfilling NATO commitments is the first, unavoidable step in this direction. How Germany can achieve this and whether it can maintain the current ratio of investment to consumption expenditure in the federal budget is the unresolved political question in Germany, Europe’s keystone country.

NEEDED EUROPEAN SECURITY STEPS

Germany and Europe must now achieve not only the technical spending goal of two percent, and probably more, but also what it means in policy terms: to become defense-ready again and to maintain nuclear-sharing. This includes a limited projection capability to the periphery of

Europe – to the east, south-east, south and into the Arctic Ocean, which is becoming ice-free. It is strategically impossible to defend Europe without control of the North Atlantic, which requires strengthening navies and air defenses. At the same time, Europe should dismiss unrealistic ideas such as a European army and an independent European nuclear deterrent.

Defense readiness means deploying European components of NATO in all five dimensions of modern warfare – land, air, sea, space and cyber – throughout the entire NATO area and its periphery, making them operational and taking advantage of emerging technologies such as AI, quantum computing, bionics, and robotics.

In addition, European armed forces must be ready to assist in disasters worldwide, and in conflicts where the US expects European support, such as in securing the sea lanes in the Indo-Pacific. Some of these capabilities, with identical equipment and full interoperability with American and British forces, should be developed as multinational components that could be deployed by the EU alone, but preferably jointly with non-EU assets added by NATO. In addition, endurance and sustainability must be achieved. This applies above all to ammunition stocks, which must be available for at least 30 days.

Visible action in Europe is required; strategy papers are not enough. In addition, guidelines for business and industry must be developed to ensure wartime support in crises.

THE LONG TERM OUTLOOK

The development of our world will be determined in the long term by the competition between America and China, a competition between democracy and autocracy. The emergence of a new bipolarity is more likely than the often-mentioned vision of multipolarity. Russia, Europe and India will be essentially regional actors, despite their partial global influence.



NATO's Defender 24 Exercise in Central Europe.
Photo credit: Dominika Zarzycka / SOPA Images via Reuters Connect

Europe's role is limited, above all because the EU is and will remain divided. The lack of agreement between Germany and France has deprived the EU of its driving force, Brexit has taken away Britain's pragmatic power to shape the EU, and it remains to be seen how Poland can bring its growing weight to bear. However, Europe must quickly become capable of acting, possibly through the creation – for a start – of a core group of closely coordinated European powers.

The decisive factor will be the political will of the people to support change and face dangers. Europe's citizens have gone further than their politicians because they sense uncertainty and insecurity. They now expect their politicians to have the courage to tell them the truth, to

propose clarity and goals that they can follow. If this trumpet is now sounded in Europe, then the Americans will once again see the transatlantic bond as important to their future too, a bright, shared future. *

KLAUS NAUMANN

Klaus Naumann served as Chief of Staff of the German armed forces from 1991 to 1996 and as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, NATO's senior military commander, from 1996 to 1999.



ASEAN and Australian leaders at a summit in Melbourne, Australia, March 4, 2024.
Photo credit: George Chan / SOPA Images via Reuters Connect

ASEAN - Australia
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A Partnership for the Future



Melbourne, Australia



SOUTHEAST ASIA'S GROWING IMPORTANCE TO GLOBAL TRADE

BY TED OSIUS, MARC P. MEALY

The world is in the initial stages of an evolution in the structure of global trade. While popular narratives about the era of globalization described a wide dispersion of trade flows and supply chains to all corners of the world, the reality was different. Global trade remained very concentrated. For example, close to 40 percent of global trade involved importing nations relying on three or fewer trading partners in different key sectors.

Multinational corporations see the growing importance of national security priorities and supply chain resilience in the trade policy of governments. Companies are responding with commercial decisions that gradually reduce the concentrated nature of global trade and shift supply chains, especially to India, Mexico, and Southeast Asia.

The ten member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) are at the center of global economic competition, representing a future Asian commercial rival to China.

THE ROLE OF TRADE POLICY

In 2015, the ten member nations of ASEAN formed the ASEAN Economic Community, which is now collectively the fifth largest

economy in the world (\$3.6 trillion in combined gross domestic product). With annual economic growth of five percent, this region is projected to be the fourth largest economy in the world by 2030 (smaller than only the US, China and Germany). With a regional population of over 650 million people and 915 million mobile connections, ASEAN is the world's fastest-growing internet market with a digital economy projected to exceed \$300 billion by 2025.

Since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, ASEAN's successful economic growth has been a result of various factors, with free trade agreements a prominent one. ASEAN nations individually and as a regional block have also been extensive users of bilateral and regional trade policy tools. After ASEAN became the first grouping to establish free trade agreements or FTAs with Asia's six largest economies, the block led the development of Asia's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, today the world's largest free trade area. Four ASEAN nations (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam) are members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. On a bilateral basis, Singapore leads the region with its participation in twenty-seven bilateral and regional FTAs, followed by Vietnam which has signed eighteen.

Members of the US-ASEAN Business Council, who have invested billions of dollars in the region, often tell us that free trade agreements are one of the top five reasons they select an ASEAN nation over other nations to invest in.

As ASEAN nations pursue their socioeconomic priorities and the region focuses



ASEAN Summit, March 2024. Photo credit: AAPIMAGE / Joel Carrett via Reuters Connect

on the theme of “enhancing connectivity and resilience,” trade will continue to be a critical element in ASEAN’s policy tool kit.

REGIONALIZATION AS A TRADE POLICY PRIORITY

In recent years, two trends illustrate the evolution of Asia’s regional trade architecture, with implications for global trade.

First, intra-regional trade within Asia, as a share of Asia’s total trade, has increased gradually, led by the growth in trade of intermediate goods (for example, textiles used to make clothing or computer chips to make cell phones). In recent years this trend has been strengthened by the growth in the amount of Asia’s export value added being absorbed by final demand and consumption in Asia particularly by consumers in China, India, and ASEAN.

Second, the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement (which includes China and all of

ASEAN’s other Asian free trade agreement partners except India) will make international trade within Asia more efficient for Asian businesses, relative to businesses located outside of Asia. The regional partnership’s share of global exports is expected to exceed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership by 2040. China’s total trade with these nations reached nearly \$2 trillion dollars in 2022.

Despite the presence of continued global economic headwinds, geopolitical challenges and potential shocks, ASEAN’s regional growth outlook in 2024 is positive in large part owing to the diverse sources of its economic growth. These include international trade, foreign investment, and domestic consumption. ASEAN’s exports to the world are forecast to exceed \$3 trillion annually by 2031. Inflows of foreign direct investment into ASEAN reached \$224 billion in 2022.

Following are key ASEAN trade policy initiatives in 2024.

Regional Agreement on the Digital Economy

In November 2023, ASEAN’s leaders launched negotiations on a Digital Economic Framework Agreement, expected to be concluded by 2025, with the potential to add between one to two trillion US dollars in value to the ASEAN region by 2030. The Agreement seeks region-wide rules in nine areas: digital trade; cross-border e-commerce; payments and e-invoicing; digital ID and authentication; online safety and cybersecurity; cross-border data flows and data protection; competition policy; cooperation on emerging technology topics; and talent mobility and cooperation.

A Future Free Trade Agreement with Canada

In 2021, ASEAN and Canada announced an agreement to start negotiations on an ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement, aiming to conclude negotiations in 2025. Canada and Mexico already have preferential market access trade relationships with Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam as members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Free Trade Area agreement. ASEAN is currently one of Canada’s top five trade partners and, according to one estimate, an ASEAN-Canada FTA could add over \$2 billion to Canada’s GDP.

Upgrading the Free Trade Agreement with China

China has been ASEAN’s number one trade partner for over a decade, and in recent years ASEAN has moved ahead of both the EU and US to become China’s number one trade partner. In addition, ASEAN-China total two-way trade flows are now approaching the levels of the world’s largest bilateral trade relationships like the US-Canada, US-Mexico, and US-EU.

ASEAN and China are currently negotiating new commitments to upgrade the ASEAN-China 3.0 Free Trade Agreement with the fifth round of

negotiations held in January in China and a sixth round scheduled to be held in April in Singapore. The government of Thailand, which chairs the ASEAN negotiating team, announced that talks covering small and medium-sized enterprises, trade competition, consumer protection, technical regulations, goods standardization, and inspection and certification processes have been concluded. Areas still being negotiated include digital trade in goods, investment, customs, green economy, and trade facilitation.

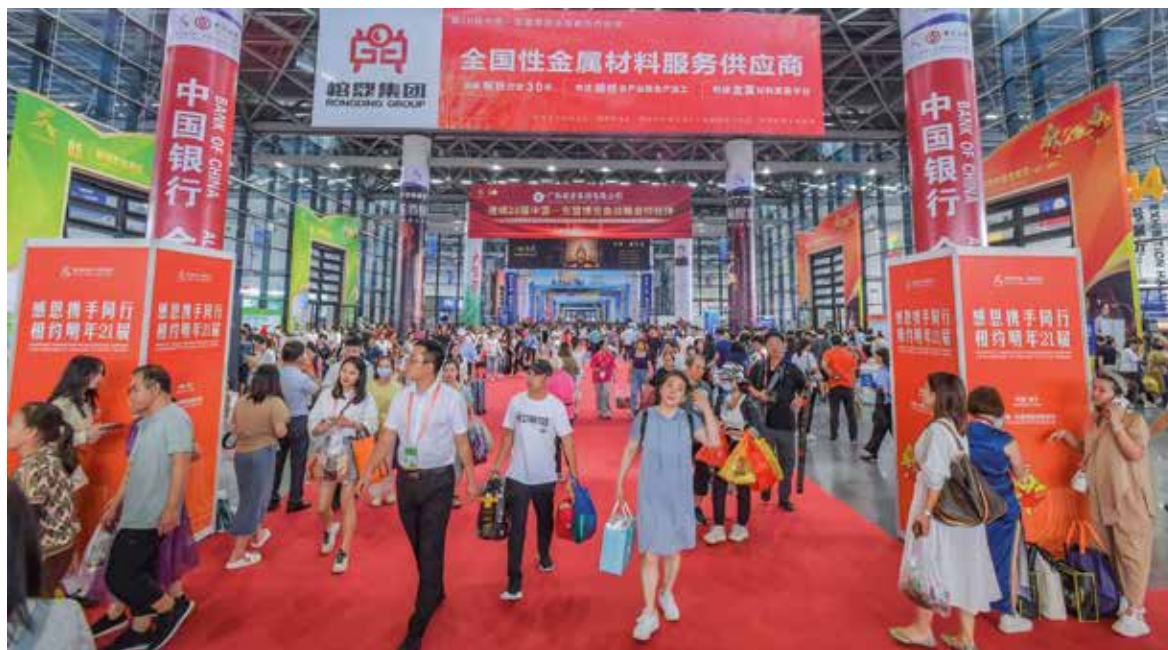
Upgrading the Intra-ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement

The ASEAN Economic Community aims to develop a regional economy that increases cross border movement of goods among member states. In 2022, ASEAN governments agreed to start negotiations to upgrade the existing Trade in Goods Agreement. The goal is to further regional economic integration to ensure ASEAN stays abreast of global economic trends, including building more resilient supply chain and taking advantage of the changes in the U.S.-China economic relationship.

Currently individual ASEAN nations like Vietnam and Malaysia position themselves as alternatives to China, as companies expand to locations outside of China as part of their supply chain resilience strategies. However in many industries China’s ability to scale up production simply can’t be matched by other individual countries. Therefore, the ASEAN strategy is to improve regional economic integration with the goal of enhancing the region’s attraction as a commercial alternative to China by allowing greater region-wide scaling of supply chains.

ASEAN as an Regional Economic Bloc Matters to America

Four ASEAN nations are ranked in America’s top twenty trade partners (Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand). Vietnam enjoys an especially booming economic relationship with America, now ranked as America’s eighth largest partner in two-way goods trade in the world.



ASEAN Expo in Nanning, Guangxi Province, China, September 2023. Photo credit: CFOTO via Reuters Connect

For the United States, launching free trade policy initiatives has often been a bipartisan political “no go” in an election year, given the disparate effect of such policies on different parts of the country. This trend is likely to continue in 2024, but America cannot be complacent. For the ASEAN nations, international trade policy will continue to be a strategically important tool to support their economic priorities.

ASEAN’s growth as a regional economic block has elevated the value it places on developing region-wide trade policy. Many of America’s leading competitors either already have preferential trade agreements with ASEAN as a region, or are negotiating new agreements with the region. More importantly, these regional trade agreements provide competitors with opportunities to influence ASEAN in the development of regional commercial regulations, rules and standards (all of which can benefit America’s competitors).

America’s current economic position in ASEAN was determined by decisions made years ago. The future of America’s economically competitive position to effectively engage ASEAN tomorrow will be determined by the decisions made today. *

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A LIBERTARI SHAKES UP ARGENTINA

Javier Milei waves to his supporters from a balcony of the government palace after taking office as president on December 10, 2023. Photo credit: Florencia Martin/dpa via Reuters Connect

AN



BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

Promising libertarian economic shock therapy and a new foreign policy, President Javier Milei is taking Argentina's political scene by storm.

A MANDATE FOR CHANGE

With an eleven-percentage point electoral victory on November 19, President Milei claims a mandate for radical change. His inauguration speech on December 10 broke with a tradition of addressing the legislature. Instead he spoke to a mass gathering of supporters and lashed out at the political elite that has repeatedly bankrupted the economy.

Before becoming a deputy in Argentina's lower house of Congress for his party "Liberty Advances" (La Libertad Avanza, LA), Milei had risen to public prominence as an eccentric television personality who fulminated against the political establishment, labeling them a "political caste." Young voters found his willingness to speak out appealing. And the country's economic conservatives liked his background as a committed libertarian with private sector experience. The country's worsening economic debacle – the world's second highest inflation rate, a poverty rate climbing over 40% and a deep-rooted debt crisis – provided the backdrop to his decisive defeat of

Sergio Massa, the outgoing Economy Minister and candidate of the ruling Peronist coalition.

On the campaign trail after the first round of votes on October 22, Milei made an electoral alliance with two center-right establishment figures, former President Mauricio Macri and Patricia Bullrich. After battling with Milei during the initial phases of the 2023 campaign, Bullrich campaigned for Milei in the second-round. She has joined his government as Security Minister. However, Bullrich's party, the Republican Proposal (PRO), is in crisis over her decision to support Milei, and it is too early to tell if the PRO's congressional delegation will join the administration's coalition.

Milei's vice president, Victoria Villaruel, is a well-known figure in conservative circles, with a reputation for revisionist questioning of the country's dominant narrative regarding the military junta's campaign of terror and human rights abuses (1976-1983). The economic team is headed by Luis Caputo, a Macri-era finance minister. Caputo specializes in financial markets and has drawn skepticism from economists regarding his lack of experience in macro-economic restructuring.

IT'S DEFINITELY THE ECONOMY

Milei in his first days as president has not called for a snap dollarization of the economy or for closing the Central Bank, as he did on the campaign trail. But after assuming office on December 10 Milei insisted Argentina has "no money" and is already in hyperinflation. As a



Presidential inauguration of Javier Milei in Buenos Aires.
Photo credit: Federico David Gross / Hans Lucas via Reuters Connect

result, he concluded, there is no alternative to a shock adjustment to reduce the public sector, in order not to affect the private sector.

In fact, on day one of his administration Milei announced a decree to halve the number of government ministries, from eighteen to nine. On day two, the government announced twenty spending cut measures, some symbolic, such as reducing the salaries of senior officials, while others were substantive, such as cutting central government transfers to provinces, reducing subsidies, restructuring pensions, and suspending public works projects. In total, the spending cuts could amount to 3.0% of GDP and have the goal of eliminating the primary budget

deficit. These were announced alongside a much expected 54% devaluation of the currency.

Milei noted these measures are painful in the short run but will end a “hundred years of decadence” and generate an era of economic growth. The International Monetary Fund, Argentina’s largest creditor, praised the government’s “bold initial actions.” Milei plans to honor its upcoming financial obligations to the IMF while his economic team seeks to “reformulate” their debt agreement with IMF authorities.

Milei has been consistent in underscoring that radical economic reform constitutes his core agenda. In his inauguration speech on



Foreign Minister Diana Mondino. Photo credit: Reuters/Agustin Marcarian

December 10, Milei blamed the political class for the country's endemic economic mess. By not talking about the country's constitution or his commitment to democracy, he also raised questions about whether his use of decree powers will be his preferred method going forward for achieving policy ends.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN FOREIGN POLICY

Milei's foreign minister, Diana Mondino, is a business economist with extensive private sector experience. She has made clear her intent to bring Argentina's geo-economic agenda in line with Milei's vision. This includes strengthening current relations with commercial partners Brazil and China while exploring ways to deepen

strategic partnerships with key markets such as the United States.

Mondino has also reversed Argentina's position on joining the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China); the previous government had accepted the group's invitation to join but had not completed the steps to become a member. Milei's free trade orthodoxy could clash with the South American regional trade group Mercosur, though he may not prioritize a withdrawal from the group as he prioritizes economic stabilization at home.

Overall, Mondino will face the challenging balancing act of maintaining good relations with regional governments while Milei engages his global alternative right network, a group of individuals as varied as Hungary's Prime

Minister Victor Orban, former President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, Spain's Vox Party Leader Santiago Abascal, and Elon Musk.

The Biden administration appears to be strategically refocusing the bilateral relationship on economic investment opportunities.

Argentina is the world's fourth largest producer of lithium. The White House and Argentina are in negotiations about ways for Milei to benefit from the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act, which disincentivizes bilateral lithium trade opportunities for countries (like Argentina) that lack a free trade agreement with Washington.

Argentina's relationship with Israel seems likely to deepen under Milei. Raised Catholic, Milei has announced plans to convert to Judaism and has made clear his personal passion for the Jewish faith. His first post-election trip was to New York, where he visited the grave of the former leader of the Chabad movement, the Lubavitcher rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Home to the largest Jewish community in Latin America, Argentina often has good relations with Israel and prior presidents have championed this relationship, most recently when former President Alberto Fernández made his first international trip to Israel.

Milei may also implement a campaign pledge to move Argentina's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a proposal he's made on numerous occasions. However, it seems unlikely that he will do that at present, with many Argentine nationals among the hostages still held by Hamas.

CAN HE CARRY OUT HIS AGENDA?

Argentina has long been dominated by labor-based center-left politics. Milei, the country's first libertarian economist to become president, was a stunning campaigner but his ability to govern is untested. His party controls outright 10 percent of the seats in the Senate, 15 percent of the seats in the House of Deputies, and zero

governors, thus raising questions about whether he can form a stable governing coalition.

While Milei would like to avoid the gradualist path of former President Macri and instead administer economic shock therapy, he may not have ample time to implement his libertarian vision. The main reason he may run out of time is that, just as we have seen before in Latin America (including in Argentina), sudden economic change could generate significant societal pushback before it produces manifest signs of stabilization.

When societal backlash occurs, the Milei government will face a pivotal test. He lacks an established party organization and his alliances with coalition partners remain in a trial phase. But he is not without sources of popular support. Youth voters are among his most fervent backers and may represent the most important constituency he built on the campaign trail. Pre-electoral polling suggested that 70% of voters 24 years of age and younger would vote for Milei over Massa. Thus, one of the most pressing challenges that Milei will face will be to solidify the support of Argentine youth so as to mobilize them on his behalf during the inevitable pushback to his reforms. *

MICHAEL MCCARTHY

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WHAT MIGHT DETER XI JINPING?



BY DREW THOMPSON

The past two years have witnessed several failures of deterrence – Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Hamas’ attack on Israel in October 2023. The invasion of Ukraine heightened global awareness that military force by a state actor is not a relic of the past and could occur in other flashpoints around the world, particularly Taiwan.

Since being named General Secretary of the Communist Party in 2012, Xi Jinping has made unification with Taiwan a legacy issue for his rule, terming it a component of his China Dream of National Rejuvenation. Xi designated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army in 2027 a political milestone for developing military capabilities to deal with Taiwan. He has eliminated political rivals through anti-corruption campaigns, dismantled the collective-leadership system established under Deng Xiaoping (a reaction to Mao’s one-man rule) and overseen the world’s largest military buildup since World War 2. The question is what would deter Xi Jinping from using force against Taiwan.

The United States government is increasingly fixated on deterring China, recognizing that deterrence requires a combination of military capability, perception of credibility, and the ability to communicate with the adversary. Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff General CQ Brown observed, “You’ve got to think about deterrence as a cognitive aspect. You’re trying to convince somebody, and if you don’t understand how they think and operate, it’s hard to deter them.”

A “NEW ERA” UNDER XI JINPING

Is Xi Jinping different from other leaders when it comes to deterrence? According to academic theories of deterrence, the key factors that affect an ability to deter a leader include his or her rationality; assumption of unitarity; dyadic and triadic relationships; strategic intentions; and cost-benefit calculations. There is no question that Xi Jinping is rational, that he is a unitary actor in control of the political and military apparatus of the Party and State. He is comfortable dealing with the US-China dyad, as well as handling Taiwan’s leaders which he freely chooses to engage or isolate. Xi Jinping’s strategic intentions towards Taiwan are crystal clear, though there is some subjectivity in how he might calculate the costs and benefits of using military force. Understanding Xi Jinping’s perceptions of risk versus reward is central to understanding what would deter him from using force.

Taiwan is integral to Xi’s China Dream of National Rejuvenation and his declaration of a “new era for socialism with Chinese characteristics.” Unification with Taiwan is not just an unresolved aspect of the Chinese civil war. It is a source of the Party’s legitimacy, tied to the perceived success of China’s



Taiwanese soldiers in a military exercise simulating responses to a potential Chinese invasion, July 2023.
Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

governance and governing model, reflecting Beijing's antagonistic relationship with liberal democracies and rejection of Western political ideals. While Xi's thinking certainly includes a balance of political and military calculations, political considerations undoubtedly outweigh military ones. Economic issues are also a factor (the economic cost of a conflict would be high for China) but based on Xi Jinping's approach to China's markets and economy today, he is clearly prepared to sacrifice some economic growth for political objectives.

Washington sees Taiwan as one issue in a complex bilateral relationship with China, while Beijing sees Taiwan as the issue. The US is committed under the 1979 Taiwan Relations

Act to maintain the means to defend Taiwan and provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character, infuriating Beijing which believes the US is using Taiwan as a strategy to weaken and contain China, and part of a larger contest between the two powers that comprises ideological, political, military, economic, and technological contest for supremacy.

READINESS OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

Xi Jinping is close to having something that no previous leader has had – a viable military option in his Taiwan policy. Since 2000, the US Department of Defense has reported on the

People's Liberation Army (PLA) modernization in an annual report to Congress. Taiwan is the focus of a build-up supported by defense spending increases averaging around 10 per cent per year. After almost 25 years of expansion, the PLA is on the cusp of achieving Xi's goal of having the ability to invade Taiwan. Having the capability does not necessarily mean Xi Jinping has the intent, but it likely affects his calculations.

A Taiwan operation is fraught with difficulty, presenting Xi with three key risk factors.

The largest is the complexity of conducting an amphibious invasion across the 100-mile wide Taiwan Strait. In 1944, the Joint Staff crafted Operation Causeway, the invasion of Taiwan (then called Formosa) as part of the island-hopping campaign leading to Japan's home islands. President Roosevelt heeded the military's advice that Formosa's mountainous terrain would make an invasion too costly, and he opted to land troops directly on Okinawa instead. The risks of invading Taiwan have only increased, particularly as Taiwan's military continues to adopt asymmetric defense strategies and invest in anti-invasion capabilities such as ground-launched anti-ship cruise missiles, sea mines, and unmanned vehicles.

A second area of uncertainty is the US response. After decades of operations in the Middle East, the US Department of Defense is increasingly fixated on readiness for a future war with China. From the Marines exchanging tanks and artillery for Marine Littoral Regiments armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, to the replicator program scaling up large numbers of low-cost unmanned systems, the US military is adapting itself to fight a peer-competitor. Security cooperation assistance to Taiwan has increased dramatically during the Biden administration, with increased levels and regularity of arms sales, transference of munitions and systems from US stocks, as well as increased training for Taiwan's troops.

A third risk factor lies in potential political forces that could be unleashed inside the PLA.

Xi has enacted a once-in-a-generation reform of the military command structure and imprisoned multiple PLA generals for corruption (a running joke in PLA circles is that Xi Jinping has killed more generals than the Japanese or Chiang Kai-shek.) He has ensured the Communist Party has complete control over the military, and that it continues to put the political security of the Party as its main mission. How the PLA would view the order to invade, or how it would respond to defeat, are risks that Xi must consider. Despite Xi's centennial goals, the PLA may not be as ready to fight as Xi would like.

THE RISK OF MISPERCEPTION AND MISCALCULATION

To deter China from using force, one must take into account Xi Jinping and the Communist Party's mindset, as well as appreciate differences in perception, interests, and respective cultural concepts for deterrence. As two American military scholars of China observed, "While Western thinkers will look for the linear cause to a problem, or expect a coercive effort to have a linear effect, the Chinese will evaluate the system and the external environment surrounding the issue along with the impact of these surrounding inputs."

One key input Xi may consider is the negative political trendline in Taiwan itself. The outcome of the January 2024 presidential elections in Taiwan, as well as consistent polling of public opinion, reveal that the people of Taiwan no longer self-identify as Chinese and there is virtually no support within Taiwan for unification.

With little to no prospect for peaceful unification, China would need coercive efforts to deter Taiwan from moving towards independence. US efforts to preserve peace and stability might be superficially seen as a common interest with Beijing, but it is increasingly apparent to Beijing that efforts to preserve the peaceful status quo bring it no closer to its desired end state of unification and only



US President Joe Biden meets Chinese President Xi Jinping, November 2023.
Photo credit: Reuters/Kevin Lamarque

create time and space for what it calls “Taiwan independence forces” to ensconce Taiwan’s de facto independence. While the US focuses on deterring China from using force to create space for a future peaceful resolution to the satisfaction of people on both sides of the Strait, China increasingly sees its non-military or “grey zone” coercion efforts failing and the prospect of unification becoming more remote, leaving threats of the use of force as its main means of deterring Taiwanese independence, which explains Beijing’s insistence that it will not renounce such use.

Western and Taiwanese theorists have floated various conventional military strategies for Taiwan including “Hard ROC 2.0” and the Overall Defense Concept, but strengthening

conventional military capabilities are not sufficient to deter Beijing on their own. There is also the dubious “Silicon Shield” concept which posits that Xi will be deterred and the world will come to Taiwan’s defense because of its semiconductor industry. Unfortunately for Taiwan, chips are fungible, and Xi’s political calculation towards Taiwan is not part of an industrial strategy. In addition, the credibility of US security commitments may be measured by US allies in terms of support for Taiwan, but it is not measured in chips.

Deterrence is not measured in chips but it can be measured in nukes. China could miscalculate the credibility of its own deterrence against Washington. Despite Beijing’s “no first use” pledge, PLA General Xiong Guangkai once

told US diplomat Chas Freeman that he thought, “Americans care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan,” implying that China might use nuclear weapons against US cities if Washington intervened militarily in a Taiwan invasion. Escalation is another area where deterrence could spectacularly fail. Extensive unclassified writings by PLA institutions such as the Academy of Military Science and individual officers discussing the PLA’s views of deterrence, include unique and little-understood concepts of offensive and defensive forms of deterrence, and the use of escalation and limited, or pre-emptive strikes to deter. There is no possibility Washington would interpret pre-emptive strikes as intention to prevent a conflict, however, underscoring the potentially horrific consequences of misperception and miscalculation.

IS XI JINPING DETERRABLE?

There may be no greater challenge in the next decade than preventing the outbreak of conflict over Taiwan. Appreciating cultural differences and perspectives in both Beijing and Washington will be critical for understanding deterrence dynamics. Despite being a rational actor, Xi Jinping may determine that the correlation of forces on Taiwan are inexorably working against him, threatening the Party’s survival, and leaving him no choice but to use force, despite the uncertainty of success and certainty of the tremendous costs. Xi Jinping may not be easily deterrable, but it is worth reminding ourselves that up to now, deterrence has worked. US officials often repeat the mantra that war with China over Taiwan is neither imminent nor inevitable, revealing their confidence that deterrence will continue to prevail.

The US cannot, however, be complacent. Understanding what deters Xi Jinping (not just mirror imaging of what would deter us) is vital. Conveying US resolve to intervene in the event of a threat to Taiwan is a challenge for



Washington. Not having allies makes it difficult for Beijing to understand the encumbrances of Washington’s alliance network. Taiwan is the canary in the coal mine for US security commitments to all its allies: failure to defend democratic Taiwan against communist China would end Washington’s credibility with its allies globally, potentially driving Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear



A send-off ceremony for new recruits, Lianyungang, China, March, 2024.

Photo credit: CFOTO via Reuters Connect

deterrent, and leaving smaller states throughout Asia to re-align their security relationships towards China. Deterrence cuts both ways, and could come down to a contest of resolve between two leaders facing stark choices about the future success or decline of their nations. *

— DREW THOMPSON

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THE RISE OF GEERT WILDERS: MAKING SENSE OF THE DUTCH ELECTION RESULTS

Geert Wilders. Photo credit: Reuters/Piroschka van de Wouw



BY URI ROSENTHAL

A few days before the Dutch general election of November 22, 2023, the polls indicated a close finish. Each of three parties vying for the top position was expected to get just below 20 percent: Labor (in a common list with the Greens); the center-right Liberals; and the far-right Freedom Party. The winner would have a good chance to claim the prime ministership.

A SURPRISE WIN FOR THE FAR-RIGHT

The polls turned out to be wrong. The Freedom Party of Geert Wilder was the surprise winner with 25 percent of the vote and 37 of the 150 seats in the Second Chamber (House of Commons). Labor (25 seats) and Liberals (24 seats) were far behind. A new center party – The New Social Contract led by Christian-Democrat deserter Pieter Omtzigt – performed well, gaining 20 seats. For the first time in many years there is a fair chance for a rightist coalition cabinet to be formed.

Wilders’s success has sent a shockwave through Europe. Over the years, Wilders has been a prominent figure on the populist right of European politics, known for his critique of Islam. Owing to a life-threatening fatwa issued nearly 20 years ago, he lives under personal security protection. His triumph stems from the following three issues:

- * Mass immigration, accompanied by a growing influence of Muslims and fear that Christian norms and values are under threat;
- * Europeanization, symbolized by an impenetrable and highly paid European Commission bureaucracy and by the European Parliament that moves between conference halls in Brussels and Strasbourg at astronomical costs; and
- * Globalization, feeding popular distrust of multinational corporations that seemingly don’t care about national and local needs.

The victory of Wilders is a boon to the radical right throughout western Europe from the Flemish Interest in Belgium, Marine LePen’s National Rally in France, Vox in Spain, and Alternative for Germany. All of them, despite occasional setbacks, are on the rise but none have achieved direct power in government. In addition, Wilders may follow other far-right parties in countries where they are either in power or part of governing coalitions – Italy (Brothers of Italy), Hungary (Fidesz), Sweden (Swedish Democrats), Serbia (United Serbia), and until their failure in the recent elections, Poland (United Right).

Still, as of this writing in late December, it is doubtful whether he will become the next Dutch Prime Minister. The common wisdom in the Netherlands is one never knows what will be the final outcome of the coalition negotiations. But Wilders’s leverage in these negotiations will surely be on par with that of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and to a lesser extent Hungary’s Prime Minister Victor Orban.



Wilders celebrates with members of his party on November 23, 2023. Photo credit: Reuters/Yves Herman

BEHIND WILDERS' WIN

The rise to power of Wilders reflects widespread dissatisfaction, if not disaffection, of many in Europe towards the elites and especially the governmental authorities. But his achievements are also due to his political skills. During the electoral campaign he softened his stance on intensely disputed issues, and actually attained a kind of *salonfähigkeit* – social acceptability – which had been denied to him for years. His campaign thus could be a roadmap for other far-right politicians in Europe.

For more than twenty years Wilders had been an uncompromising politician, operating on the edges of the Dutch political order. In 2020, he was convicted by a court for a discriminatory statement about Moroccans.

During the recent campaign, Wilders softened his tone. The Liberal leader and, with some hesitation, the leader of the New Social Contract party both suggested during the campaign that they would not exclude the

Freedom Party from a possible role in a future governing coalition. This time a vote for Wilders would not be wasted.

For his part, Wilders said he would be willing to put quite a few (clearly unconstitutional) party platform items between brackets for as long as his party would be in the next coalition cabinet. Other controversial campaign promises, including on international affairs, would be negotiable. He also indicated open-mindedness about his potential prime ministership, as long as his party's position in the next coalition would reflect the election results.

Wilders policy positions also often find resonance in the Dutch public. He accused the government of failing to stand up against the “asylum tsunami.” He says Dutchmen “do not feel at home in their own land.” He embraces the German concept of the *leitkultur* – dominant culture – that feels threatened by Islamic law and culture.

Wilders and his Freedom Party echo what is commonly believed in the Netherlands

– namely, that non-Western minorities are disproportionately represented among perpetrators of crime. There is some statistical support for this claim, e.g., in a study by the Research Center of the Ministry of Justice and Security. Wilders notes that the police cannot use algorithms to verify such statistics, since it would violate the constitution’s anti-discrimination article and be guilty of ethnic profiling.

In his party platform Wilders pleads for an opt-out on EU asylum and migration decisions and “less Islam in The Netherlands.” He proposes to forbid the Koran and close mosques and Islamic schools. Last but not least, the manifesto wants to deny all asylum-seekers access to the country.

Still, it is not an aversion to asylum-seekers as such that would explain Wilders’s attraction. A majority in the Netherlands is willing to accommodate people fleeing from repression and war. But they do not accept economic migrants seen as taking advantage of Dutch social services. For instance, Dutch often are placed on waiting lists for years to acquire an affordable house or apartment. Those with asylum status are, under specific circumstances, given preferential treatment. In general, there is a growing distaste for the disproportionate use of public services by immigrants and their second and third-generation children.

Wilders and his Freedom Party can be described as populists. They are far-right on cultural issues, dismissing Islam as a perverse political ideology and detesting “Wokeism.” But in the socio-economic domain, they easily find common ground with leftist, indeed far-left parties. Without paying too much attention to financial rules and limitations, they endorse policies and measures which supposedly alleviate the toll of globalization on the working poor and those left behind. So they attract votes from both the right and the left side of the political spectrum.

Wilders’s unconditional emphasis on national identity and sovereignty implies a

deep antipathy towards the European Union. His platform is crystal-clear: it is high time for a referendum on “Nexit,” i.e., Netherlands following Britain’s “Brexit.” As to the Islamic world, he suggests scaling back diplomatic relations with Islamic law-dominated countries. Wilders does not cast doubt on the relevance of NATO, but he wants NATO to expel Turkey.

Wilders is a firm supporter of Israel. He wants to move the Dutch embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He has frequently said the Dutch diplomatic representation in Ramallah should be closed because “the Netherlands already has an embassy in Amman, the capital of the only true Palestinian state: Jordan.”

Here a personal note is in order. During my term in office as foreign minister (2010-2012), the Freedom Party gave parliamentary support to our minority coalition government. Wilders was very outspoken on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For instance, he did not talk about the West Bank but about Judea and Samaria. He attacked me for what I considered to be an even-handed approach to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, while the left and to a lesser extent the center parties characterized me as excessively pro-Israel. Wilders’ criticism usefully put distance between us, allowing me space to take issue with the all-too-pro-Palestine stance of the leftist parties. Our coalition fell when Wilders withdrew his parliamentary endorsement. It was a pity that he didn’t agree with me at the time that in the foreseeable future there would never be a government more willing to promote cordial relations with Israel. But I concluded that Israel was an important but not decisive issue for Wilders.

CONCLUSION – LOOKING FORWARD

As of December 2023, it is unclear what the next coalition cabinet will look like. Should the right fail to put together a stable coalition, the center-left would seek a coalition with the Liberals, but the gaps between their positions are probably too deep to bridge. Labor would



Kanaalstraat neighborhood of Utrecht, November 2023. Photo credit: Reuters/Piroschka van de Wouw

have to glue together six or eight small parties, another unlikely option. The real alternative to a Wilders-based government (not necessarily with him as Prime Minister) would therefore be a new round of elections.

A new rightwing government would certainly prioritize efforts to curtail immigration. But the international outlook of the Netherlands – a loyal NATO ally and a solid member of the EU – would not change. Wilder already had to walk back the promise of a “Nexit.” But the next government and a majority in parliament would be more critical of Brussels, not least in the financial domain. With the elections for the European Parliament in June 2024, Brussels should be concerned that anti-European sentiments in the Netherlands will spread.

As for Dutch policy in the Middle East, the far-reaching proposals of Wilders on relations with Israel will not be acceptable to his potential coalition partners. Any new cabinet that includes Wilders will have its hands full to calm anger in Turkey and the Arab world about his conduct and statements over the years.

For Europe, the remarkable victory of

Wilders and his Freedom Party should be a wake-up call of vital importance. Muddling through on core national interests, especially immigration and asylum policies, should be stopped. In the end, it is all about the necessity to guard and defend Western values against those who want to break them apart. The window of opportunity may be open to a European immigration pact and coordinated national efforts between the Netherlands and other countries, especially France and Germany. *

URI ROSENTHAL

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US FOREIGN
POLICY IN
AN ELECTION
YEAR,
A DISCUSSION
AT THE JST
BREAKFAST IN
WASHINGTON



A DISCUSSION AT THE JST BREAKFAST IN WASHINGTON



Ambassador Anne Patterson, General Jim Clapper, and former Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim – representing the worlds of diplomacy, intelligence and defense – led the discussion on February 29, at the Metropolitan Club in Washington.

JST publisher Ahmed Charai began by surveying the many challenges facing the United States in this year

- * China's economic and military might be vast – and it seems to want to use it.
- * Russia's war in Ukraine is NATO's biggest challenges since the Berlin Wall was bricked up – more than half a century ago.
- * And Iran's proxies are killing American soldiers – and trying to ignite a regional war.

Following are several key points that emerged from the discussion.

Are America's allies free riders on the regional and global security provided by America? The NATO allies are contributing more, one noted. Eighteen NATO countries are publicly committed to reaching in 2024 the benchmark of two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense spending – up from only three countries ten years ago. While several American presidents may take credit for this increase, it was another president – Putin – who actually provoked it by invading Ukraine and threatening NATO members.

Others thought defense spending of two percent of GDP was not an accurate measure of real contributions to collective defense. For instance, while Greece does spend two percent, it's nearly all on salaries and pensions with very little on hardware whereas several Nordic countries, currently below the two percent threshold, do contribute significantly to hard defense. The spending benchmark also doesn't take into account other forms of contribution – intelligence sharing

A DISCUSSION AT THE JST BREAKFAST IN WASHINGTON



and military basing. Another view was that the challenge ahead for NATO was not only increased defense spending but also greater interoperability between the different countries' militaries.

In East Asia, discussion centered on Taiwan, where defense steps in the face of increased Chinese assertiveness are comparatively less than similar efforts in Japan, Australia and the Philippines. A recent visitor to Taiwan noted a certain amount of complacency perhaps fostered by the lack of any military operations over the past 70 years.

On international trade, one participant was concerned with the similar positions of both American political parties in turning away from free trade initiatives. Outlining the negative impact of Brexit on the UK economy, he hoped the US wasn't about to engage in a similarly destructive international economic policy.

Another participant argued for a more pragmatic approach to US engagement in the world, with a focus on accepting the world as it was and meeting both partners and adversaries where they were, not where we wanted them to be. He contrasted American idealism with China's or India's pragmatism. Others thought that US commitments were different from those of India or China and thus the US couldn't adopt the same kind of transactional approach.

Turning to the Middle East, several experts were skeptical of the rumored US-Saudi deal (providing uranium enrichment technology for civilian nuclear power, together with a security agreement) but took comfort that any such deal would receive careful congressional scrutiny. Several were critical of Israel's failure to think strategically beyond the current war in Gaza and envision a way forward with the Palestinians, after Hamas is removed from power. One argued for a multi-national mission, organized by the US but including many others, to replace the Israeli military in Gaza.

There was some optimism that the India- Middle East corridor announced at last year's G-20 meeting – a series of coordinated national efforts to upgrade and build new infrastructure to boost trade between South Asia and Europe – would also serve to box in Iran and help to isolate it. *

A DISCUSSION AT THE JST BREAKFAST IN WASHINGTON

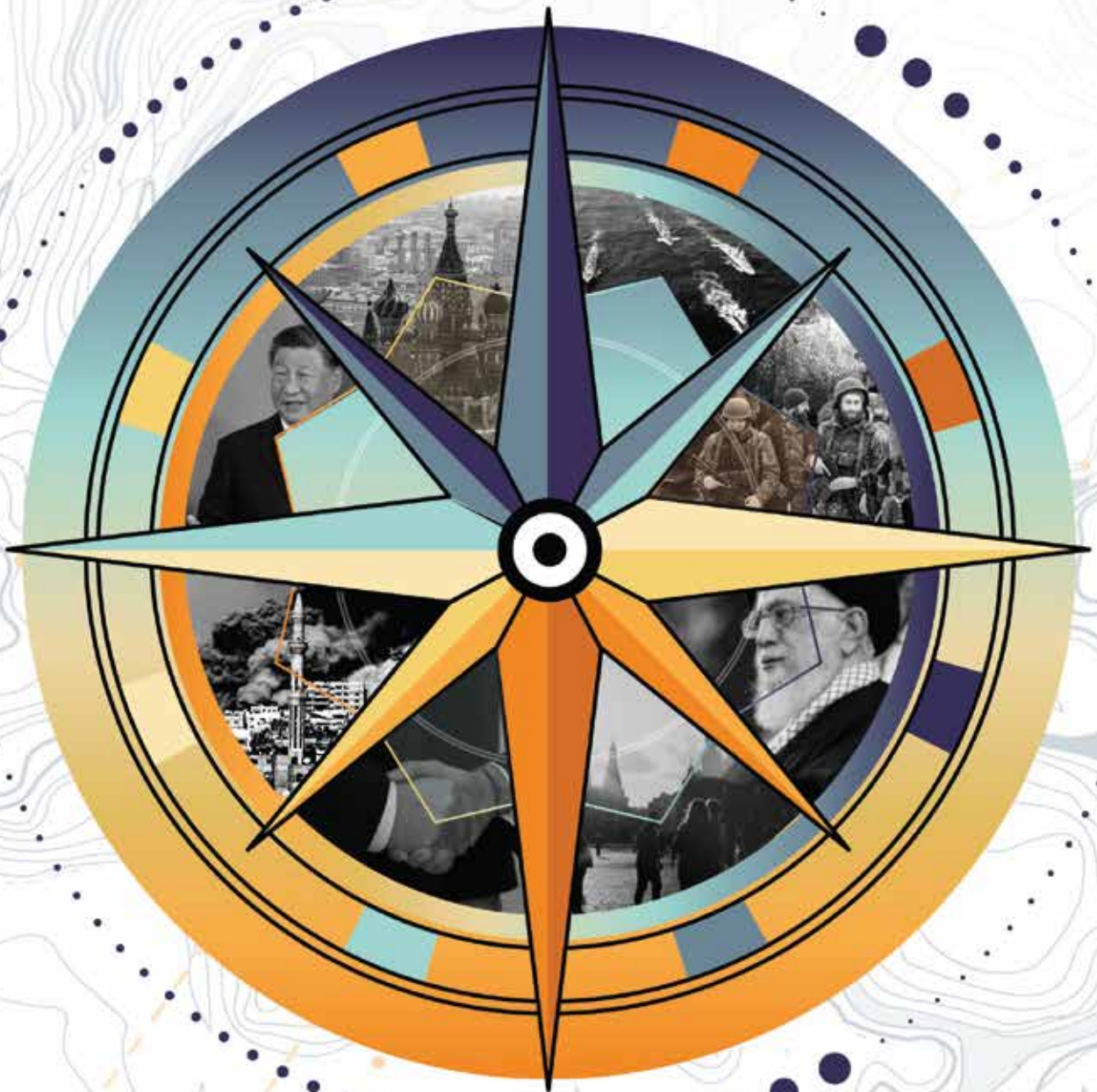




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