Everything Old Is New Again

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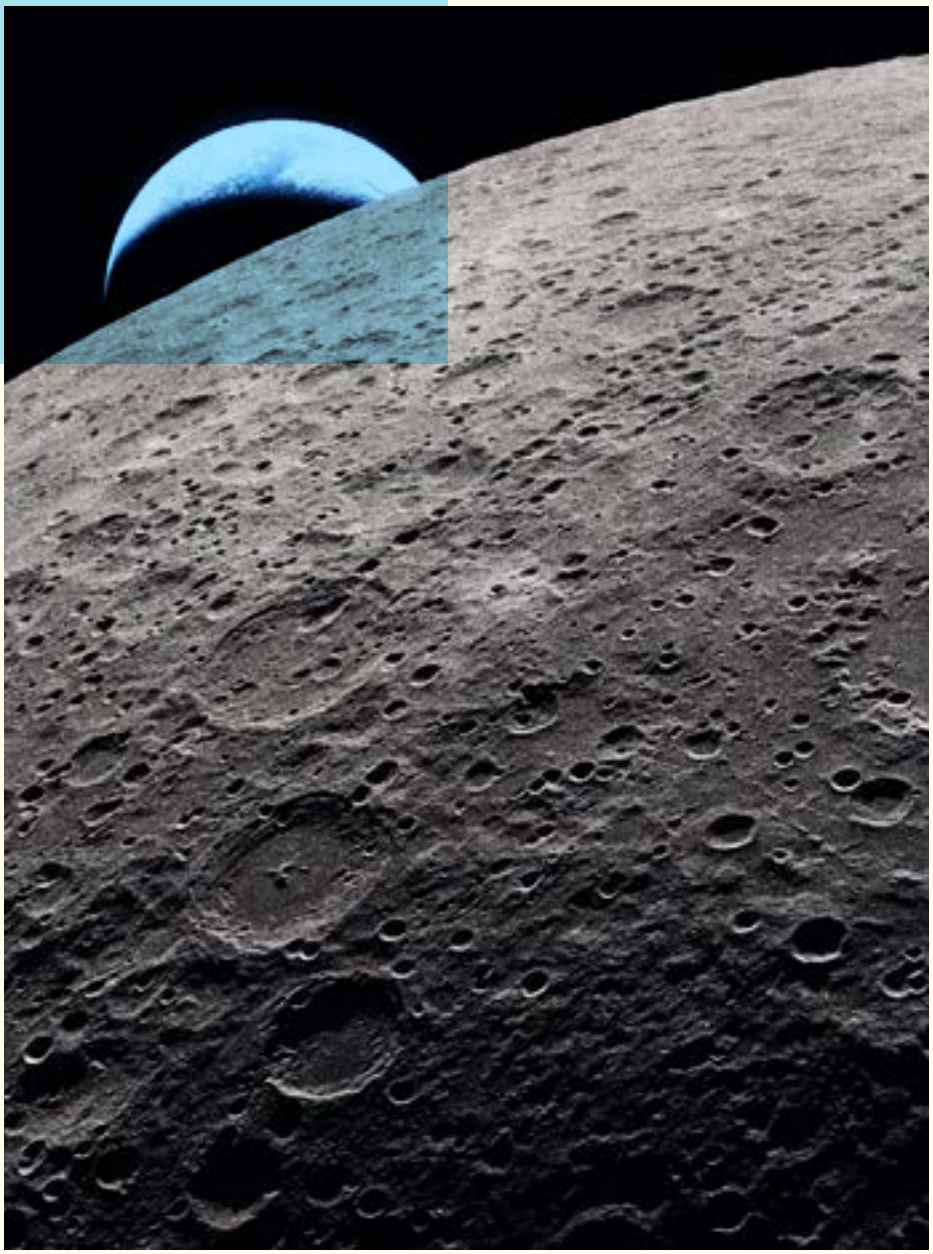
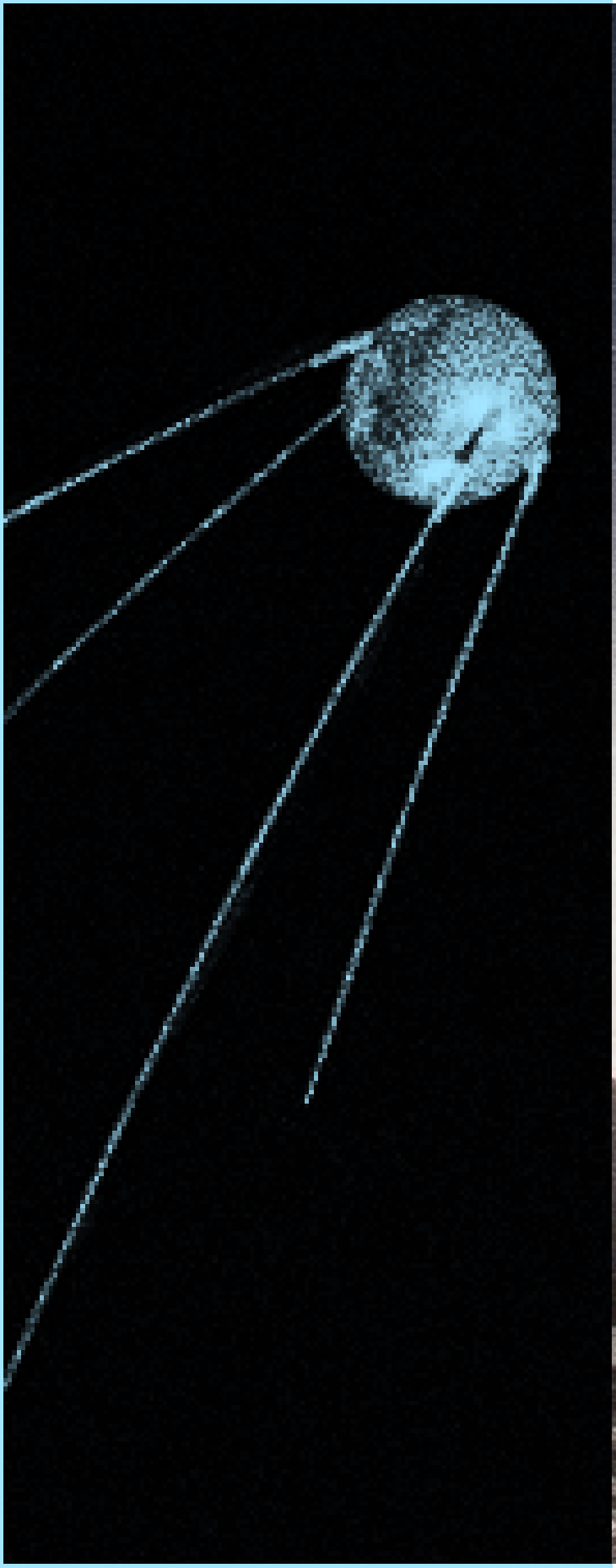


Editor's Corner

Nikolas K. Gvosdev &
Lawrence Rubin

When Robert Strausz-Hupé launched ***Orbis*** in 1957, World War II had only been over for 12 years and the West had to process the trauma of the "fall" of Eastern Europe and China to communism while preparing itself for defense against the threat of nuclear war. It was also only four years since the unsatisfying stalemate of the Korean War, which suggested that the Cold War was no temporary aberration but likely to endure as the defining feature of international affairs for the foreseeable future.



Meanwhile, technological advances promised both boon and bane. The thermonuclear revolution was well underway,[1] opening the possibility that human beings would have the capacity to destroy the species several times over, but major jumps in medical science (from penicillin to advances in trauma care) made, for the first time in human history, combat operations much more survivable. In the year of *Orbis'* founding, the launch of Sputnik I warned that no spot on the Earth's surface would be safe from attack while also opening the gateway to the heavens. Another milestone, three years after the journal began publication, was the creation of the first operational semiconductor integrated circuit—the basis of the modern computing revolution that has so transformed our entire lives.

But the journal appeared only months after the twin crises of 1956: Suez and Hungary. One threatened to shatter the Western alliance and the other solidified the division of Europe. While the Western powers were in the throes of decolonization, the Soviet Union seemed poised to make inroads in regions that had been vacated. Strausz-Hupé concluded that "the West was not winning the Cold War and its technical lead … was being fiercely challenged by Soviet achievements."[2] Moreover, he believed that the existing outlets were not asking the right questions and were too enthralled by "backward-looking ideologies."

In the same year as *Orbis* began publication, Henry Kissinger published *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy,* his effort to provide a new theory of how to wield power in the international system in light of the reality of nuclear weapons. It was in this environment of geopolitical rivalry and technological transformation that Strausz-Hupé launched *Orbis* because, as he wrote in the inaugural editorial, "The salient characteristic of a revolutionary age is the precariousness of institutions and associations."[3] An appeal to past precedents or any effort to "restore" a previous status quo in world affairs was doomed to fail because "the pace of technological and scientific development imparts to politics an acceleration for which there is no precedent in history."[4] Understanding how international affairs were driven by the dynamic interplay between geopolitics and technology would be critical for policymakers to craft successful strategies for coping with these changed conditions.

In words that seem to echo our current predicaments, he wrote, "The United States has many and mostly intelligent policies for coping with all kinds of current crisis situations, but it has not a

1 Mark Trachtenberg, "American Thinking on Nuclear War," in Carl G. Jacobsen (ed.), Strategic Power: USA/USSR (Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-20574-5_32.

2 Harvey Sicherman, "Robert Strausz-Hupé: His Life and Times," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 7, 2023, https://www.fpri.org/article/2003/05/robert-strausz-hupe-life-times-2/.

3 Robert Strausz-Hupé, "The Balance of Tomorrow," *Orbis* 1:1 (1957), 10.

4 Robert Strausz-Hupé, "The Balance of Tomorrow," 13.

coherent vision of the future, its own and that of mankind."[5] He called on US policymakers to understand and utilize the tools of what he termed "federative power"—the ability to generate positive connections using all tools of statecraft to bring together countries in common cause—where American economic and technological power, in particular, could be deployed in a "partnership to mutual advantage."[6]

where technology has shrunk decision time, blurred the balance of offense defense, and added more uncertainty.

Towards the end of his life and career, Strausz-Hupé expressed concerns about the impact of demographic, technological, and ecological challenges on the conduct of geopolitics.[8] Two decades later, his musings have proven correct as countries struggle to ensure

The United States has many and mostly intelligent policies for coping with all kinds of current crisis situations, but it has not a coherent vision of the future, its own and that of mankind. - Robert Strausz Hupé

Orbis was created at the dawn of the Third Industrial Revolution and in the midst of the Cold War. Sixty-nine years later, we now stand at the threshold of a Fourth Industrial Revolution which is proving to be just as revolutionary and unpredictable in its effects on society, politics, economics, cyber warfare and the battlefield.[7] A chaotic and unpredictable international environment is characterized by renewed rivalries between major powers exists today, the health, energy, economic, and technological security of their societies, and the geographic dimension of national security increasingly is viewed in terms of supply chains, natural resource deposits, and industrial centers.[9]

But why relaunch and refocus *Orbis*? Because a refresh is very much in the intellectual tradition of Strausz-Hupé, who in the last years of his life eschewed a recapitulation of his past writings because "the new world is fun-

5 Robert Strausz-Hupé, "The Balance of Tomorrow," 21.

6 Robert Strausz-Hupé, "The Balance of Tomorrow," 23.

7 Dennis Murphy and Lawrence Rubin, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution and International Security," Survival, 67(1), 2025, 159–172, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2459023.

8 Harvey Sicherman, "Robert Strausz-Hupé: His Life and Times."

9 Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Energy: Still the Geopolitical Coin of Our Time," Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2, 2024, https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/10/energy-still-the-geopolitical-coin-of-our-time/.

damentally different."[10] The mission of the relaunched *Orbis* to the bridge the gap between scholarship and policy by asking strategic questions, interpreting technological change, and examining emerging geopolitical competition. Yet, the purpose of *Orbis* remains what it was in 1957: to help scholars, policymakers, and practitioners understand a world where power, technology, and political order are constantly being reshaped.

This issue contains two sections that relate closely to the vast changes taking place in the international system and America's role in it—in keeping with Strausz-Hupé's charge.

The first section of this inaugural issue presents three perspectives that converge around the relationship between emerging/disruptive technologies and political and social order. Each author engages with a central question: What is the most consequential challenge shaping the international system today?

Adm. James Alexander Winnefeld, Jr. (ret) points to the decline of what he calls the "Global Operating System." His term refers to what others describe as the international order, although he emphasizes the role of long wave geopolitical cycles. In his account, periods of stability emerge after major wars when leading states convert new techno-economic foundations into enduring structural advantages. These advantages allow the leading power to shape the rules and agenda of the international system, as much as Strausz-Hupé hoped the United States would do in the early Cold War, and what he called for in the first issue of *Orbis*. Winnefeld argues that the current system is under strain and calls on leaders of Western free-market democracies to make the choices necessary to preserve the conditions that have historically supported human advancement.

Stacey Dixon highlights the societal dimension of technological change. She argues that the democratization of technology has generated remarkable benefits but has also coincided with an erosion of what once functioned as a shared or assured reality. This shift has contributed to growing fragility within the international system. Emerging technologies act as accelerants that amplify existing political and social tensions. Dixon leaves readers with a pressing question: Are societies eager to embrace the benefits of technological innovation prepared to confront the ways in which these technologies intensify existing challenges?

Daniel Byman focuses on the capacity of governments and societies to regulate emerging technologies. For him, this represents one of the most consequential challenges facing the world today. He identifies several obstacles to effective governance, including the pace of technological change, the diversity of actors involved, and the contradictory incentives that complicate cooperation among states and institutions. The cen-

10 Harvey Sicherman, "Robert Strausz-Hupé: His Life and Times."

tral question, in Byman's view, is whether governance will emerge through foresight or only after crises force action. How societies respond to these technologies will shape political and social order in the years ahead.

In the second section, we've asked three respected and esteemed commentators to connect their thoughts, warnings, and concerns expressed in previous issues of *Orbis* to the current moment. Dov Zakheim, Janine Davidson, and Kori Schake all issued what now appear to be prescient alerts to trends if, left unaddressed, would create future problems for US policymakers. In 1957, Strausz-Hupé worried about unfocused American policies that would produce not a world of order and prosperity but one of "chaos."[11] Each of our three commentators similarly worry about US choices (or lack thereof) producing worse outcomes, not only for the United States but for the world as a whole.

In 1957, *Orbis* appeared to help guide the helmsmen of the ship of state, to ensure safe passage through unpredictable geopolitical and technological currents "towards the shores of power and plenty" instead of becoming engulfed and lost.[12] That north star remains our lodestone for the second iteration of *Orbis*.

11 Robert Strausz-Hupé, "The Balance of Tomorrow," 21.

12 Robert Strausz-Hupé, "The Balance of Tomorrow," 13.

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The Fragility of Governance

Exploring the relationship between emerging and disruptive technologies and political and social order.

The World's Hidden Accelerants

Technology, Trust, and System Fragility

Hon. Stacey Dixon

When asked to identify the most consequential challenges shaping the international environment today, it is difficult not to begin with the changing role of the United States in the world. This issue frames most contemporary debates about global peace and security. Yet focusing too narrowly on shifts in American foreign policy risks obscuring deeper forces and trends that are driving, and may continue to drive, instability across regions and societies.

This essay will introduce three themes as consequential challenges, which cut across traditional policy domains and accelerate existing problems in underappreciated ways. These three themes are: the democratization of technology, the erosion of trust, and the growing insecurity of interconnected systems. All of these have elements of continuity and change. But taken together, they help explain why familiar challenges now feel more frequent, more intense, and harder to manage.

The Democratization of Technology

The first theme is the democratization of technology, whereby advanced and disruptive technologies once developed and monopolized by global powers and advanced states have diffused to less developed states as well as non-state actors. These capabilities that once required years of development, significant industrial capacity, and state level investment are now much more accessible to a variety of actors. Countries that would never have developed these technologies on their own within relevant time frames now have access to them and often acquire them through commercial markets or for free via the internet.

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) provide a good illustration. Drones have been used in major interstate and intrastate conflicts by countries that previously lacked these capabilities. In many cases, actors simply obtained funding, purchased drones, and used them in ways that significantly altered the balance of power within their conflicts. The ability to influence a conflict by providing relatively low-cost, low barrier weaponry is far greater than it once was. This diffusion of capability empowers actors engaged in both proxy wars and internal struggles. The political implication is that it complicates efforts to contain violence.

Artificial intelligence (AI) presents a similar dynamic. Using large language models (LLMs) requires little more than internet access. Countries that would not have developed these capabilities independently now have access to tools that can be used for highly tailored and sophisticated information operations. Phishing attempts that were once easily identified because of spelling or grammatical errors now appear professional and culturally fluent. These emerging technologies enable a qualitative shift in the scale and sophistication of manipulation and fraud.

The consequences of the diffusion of these technologies have clear political, societal, and economic consequences. The proliferation of AI is reshaping labor markets and economic structures. Certain jobs are already disappearing, and societies are not clearly prepared for the political and social effects of that transition. Most countries and societies already lack the capacity to support populations facing economic displacement. A rapid increase in this displacement only makes the challenge more difficult. Technology driven shifts

Ukrainian flags decorated with paper planes and bombs is seen during a daily demonstration of solidarity with Ukraine at the Main Square in Krakow, Poland on January 13th, 2024. Photo by Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto

can increase instability by widening inequality and weakening governments' ability to meet basic needs.

This adoption of technology also brings infrastructure costs that feed into political discontent. The expansion of data centers, for example, raises energy demands and can shift costs onto local populations. These economic and infrastructure effects can generate opposition and further strain social cohesion. In this sense, the democratization of technology acts as an accelerant of capability as well as a potential societal grievance.

Trust and the Erosion of Assured Reality

The second theme is the erosion of trust, particularly the declining ability of individuals to assess what is true and what is not. The critical thinking necessary to evaluate information does not appear to be applied at sufficient levels anywhere, including in the United States. Individuals do not seem to be consistently taught how to determine whether a source is credible or how to verify claims before accepting, or worse, widely sharing the information.

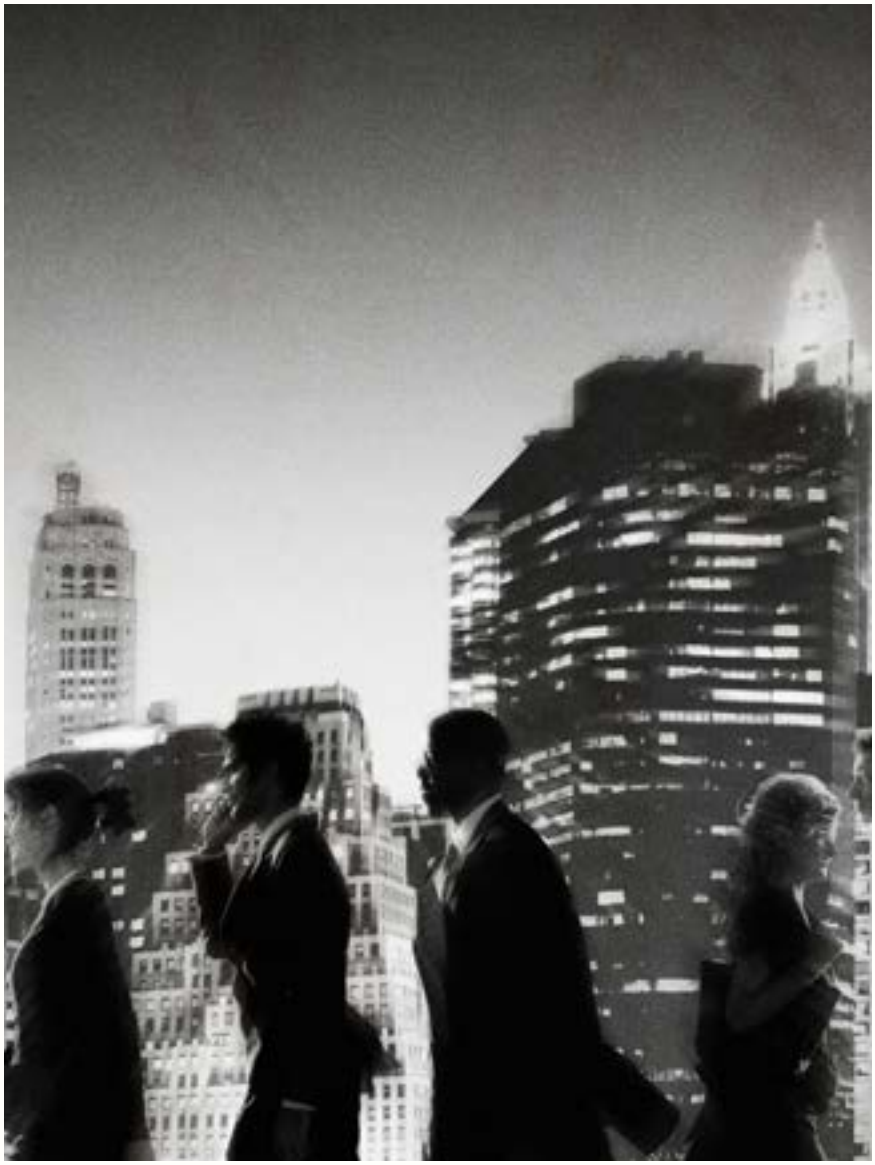

Photo by Curated Lifestyle on Unsplash

Technological advances have magnified the distrust in institutions, authority, and expertise. Even before LLMs reached the commercial market, there were serious concerns about image manipulation, deep fakes, and the integrity of data. The challenge remains to detect manipulation and to promote confidence in verification. Today, the volume and speed of information, and quality of the manipulations, make these tasks difficult.

Relatedly, misinformation and disinformation do not operate in isolation. They interact with existing beliefs and emotions. Many individuals are inclined to accept information that aligns with narratives they already hold, without taking the additional step of evaluating the source. When that tendency intersects with deliberate disinformation by adversaries or malicious actors, the effects can be profound. False narratives have been shown to erode trust in institutions, polarize societies, and undermine governance.

The strategic implications are significant. During crises, whether public health emergencies, natural disasters, or security incidents, governments depend on public trust to mobilize effective responses. When trust is weak, adversaries can exploit confusion. Even when authorities can demonstrate that information is false, reversing beliefs once they have taken hold is extremely difficult.

Efforts exist to address this challenge, including initiatives to compare reporting across political perspectives and to label unreliable information. Yet these measures remain limited in reach and complicated to execute. The deeper issue is the absence of widespread habits of verification. Teaching critical thinking at early ages, in a way that is not politicized, is essential. The goal is not to impose conclusions, but to equip individuals with the ability to pause, trace sources, and make informed judgments. Without this foundation, the information environment remains vulnerable to manipulation.

The Increasing Fragility of International Systems in an Interconnected World

The third theme is the increasing fragility of international systems. Modern societies rely on complex, interconnected systems that enable extraordinary efficiency. But these efficiencies also create vulnerabilities in cybersecurity and critical infrastructure. Less aware of the threat, countries routinely underinvest in critical infrastructure protection. This makes cyber vulnerabilities attractive targets for criminals and state and non-state actors. Because these systems are increasingly networked, a single point of failure can have far reaching effects. The possible disruptions to energy, transportation, or communications systems can degrade a government's ability to provide services and put political stability at risk.

In many countries, system fragility is exacerbated by decentralized governance. States and localities often make independent decisions about infrastructure and technology. This can result in uneven security standards. While decentralization has benefits, it also increases exposure by multiplying the number of weak points that adversaries can exploit. Convenience has further increased vulnerability; remote access and connectivity have replaced manual oversight in many sectors.

These vulnerabilities extend to supply chains and advanced manufacturing. Concerns about the security of critical components, including semiconductors, have existed for years. What has changed is the scale of dependency and the potential impact of disruption.

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The same is true in space. Many countries are highly reliant on space-based systems for daily functions, from transportation to communications to finance. While there is a growing reliance on space worldwide, many countries are less dependent, meaning that asymmetric vulnerability becomes a strategic concern for those with greater dependency.

Continuity, Change, and the Role of Accelerants

In all these themes, there are several accelerants which may exacerbate existing problems. Cybersecurity, supply chain risk, information manipulation, and infrastructure vulnerability have

been concerns for years. What makes the threat greater now?

Weather-related stresses provide a useful analogy. Severe weather events that occur where there are already infrastructure issues overwhelm governments' abilities to respond. Resulting pressures often exacerbate political and economic weaknesses, increasing the likelihood of conflict and instability. Ignoring those underlying conditions does not prevent crises; it merely delays and magnifies them. The same logic applies to technology, trust, and system fragility. These factors shape how societies experience and respond to shocks. They influence whether a crisis remains manageable or spirals into something more dangerous. More generally, what has changed is the scale, the speed, the interconnectedness, and the consequences of failure.

Conclusion

Despite these concerns, embracing technology has potential benefits across numerous aspects of our life. But the challenge is to recognize and address the less obvious ways in which it amplifies risk. Strengthening critical thinking, investing in resilient systems, and adapting governance to a rapidly changing technological landscape are central to managing the security and stability challenges of the coming decades.

The world will continue to confront familiar threats. What will determine their impact is how well societies understand and address the hidden accelerants beneath them. Ignoring these factors increases vulnerability in ways that are difficult to reverse.

While societies are eager to embrace the potential benefits of emerging technology, are we ready to address how emerging technology accelerates and exacerbates existing challenges?

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The Principle Challenge:

Arresting the Decline of the Global Operating System

Adm. James Alexander Winnefeld, Jr. (ret)

For millennia, humans have lived within long-wave geopolitical cycles that are hard to discern within a single human lifetime. Inherent in these cycles are systems of laws, rules, standards, agreements, and customs established by a lead entity that enable nations to cooperatively achieve relative stability and prosperity. Though some call this "the rules-based international order," I prefer to call it "the global operating system." These systems have a natural tendency to exist in long-wave geopolitical cycles that end in devastating convulsions, leading to a new cycle.

The most important question facing us today—looming over other challenges such as climate change or how we manage the emergence of artificial intelligence—is whether the leaders of Western free market democracies can summon the wisdom required to recognize and then counter the factors that tend to end these cycles. Failure to do so could result in a catastrophe far worse than previous cycle-ending events due to the existence of weapons of mass destruction.

Cycles Start . . .

There is considerable academic work on this subject. Among others, theorists such as George Modelski (***Long Cycles in World Politics***), Hal Brands and Charles Edel (***The Lessons of Tragedy***), and Ray Dalio (***How Countries Go Broke: The Big Cycle***) argue that world politics shows recurring waves in which a leading state rises, organizes a global order, is challenged, declines internally, and is eventually replaced.

Long cycles typically start in the wake of a catastrophic event—usually a war—when a victorious state converts a new technoeconomic base (naval power, industrialization, digital networks) into structural capabilities (sea control, trade finance, global reach) and begins building institutions and imposes rules others must accept. The lead nation sets the agenda and leads the formation of institutions, and offers benefits such as alliances, freedom of navigation, a reserve currency, and open markets.

A self-sustaining group of major actors find it in their interest to align with the leading nation, and the cycle enters a mature phase during which that nation enjoys economic and technological superiority, relative military overmatch, and institutional authority, which stabilizes the system and suppresses great power war.

However, eventually the cycle reaches a peak and begins to unwind, for several overlapping reasons.

And Cycles End . . .

A rising power

Over time, highly ambitious rising states emulate the leader, start to catch up technologically and economically, and begin to challenge the existing order. This is amplified when the rising nation is authoritarian in nature. These regimes are adept at obeying international norms and laws only when it is convenient for their interests. They weather suffering on the part of their populations due to highly effective controls over internal dissent. And because they rig their elections (should they even hold them) their leaders are not subject to serious electoral threats. These factors enable authoritarian regimes to think more strategically than democracies do in the long term.

Today, an angry and resentful Russia still poses an existential threat to its perceived antagonists, but that nation is weakening and is only a peripheral factor. Rather, it is widely recognized that China is the rising, ambitious power

bent on overthrowing the existing global operating system in its own favor.

A declining power

As the cycle progresses, the leading nation tends to over-extend itself militarily, assume increasing fiscal burdens, and experience deep internal political divides that gradually erode its relative edge. This is especially true of democracies, whose elected officials err towards short-term strategies to preserve their political capital and chances for re-election. Policymaking aligned to constituents' desires rather than thoughtful, often difficult, long-term choices exacerbates the factors that lead to decline and distract from the impending danger.

Economically, the US national debt-to-GDP ratio stands at 120 percent compared with China's 90 percent. The US now annually pays more in interest on its debt than it does for defense. The most recent US budgets point to a chronically large structural deficit, rising interest burdens, and a debt ratio that is drifting higher rather than stabilizing, which together signal deteriorating fiscal health over the medium to long term. There is no sign yet of a policy turn that would meaningfully change that trajectory, even though year-to-year deficits have edged slightly down from their pandemic peak as a share of GDP.

Politically, rising ideological differences between the two parties in Congress and the near disappearance of moderates in each party are reminiscent of gaps during the 1850s and the Gilded Age. Polarization has risen sharply since the 1970s and is now at historic highs, mostly due to ideologically aligned 24-hour news media and the rise of social media echo chambers. Voters and elites increasingly "sort" so that liberals are overwhelmingly Democrats and conservatives are overwhelmingly Republicans, with little room for compromise at the edges and a vacuum in the center. As

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Militarily, over-extension on the part of the United States over last two decades, notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, crept beyond its truly vital national security interests. That in turn sapped the investment and innovation (in the strategic, operational, tactical, and technical aspects of war) required to outpace a technologically proficient rising power. This is problematic when the Western Pacific, where conflict could occur, is so far away, and the opponent has such strategic depth.

a result, it is difficult for Congress to pass existing required budget and policy legislation, much less laws designed to counter downward cycle trends. There is little credible prospect for a third party to emerge that could bridge the gap.

As the competition heats up, the lead nation can fall into the trap of drifting towards same contempt for law exhibited by the rising nation, in which the ***rule of power*** begins to triumph over ***the rule of law***. Symptomatic of this trend, America's contemporary drift away from international (and even domestic) law began before but has accelerated under the Trump administration.

Photo by Eric Dekker on Unsplash

Generations forget

As John W. Gardner once said: "History never looks like history when you are living through it." Recollection among populations of the terrible cost of cycle-ending disasters decays over succeeding generations, gradually diluting the urgency of countering the trends that lead to disaster. It is difficult for societies, with their capacity for taking things for granted, to recognize when a cycle is reaching its end. It often seems that only historians are sensitive to the danger. Even when alerted, people fall into the trap, described by novelist Herman Wouk, of "the will not to believe."

Eventually, the prevailing order collapses, usually triggered by unanticipated events that lead unwitting politicians—with little sense of the danger—to sleepwalk into a catastrophic war. Historian Graham Allison aptly describes such cycle ending conflict in his book ***Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?***

The length of succeeding cycles seems to have shrunk over time, potentially because of the increasing speed of information flows that accelerate the

trends causing a cycle's downfall. Indeed, in the Western context, the gaps between the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, and the combined World Wars of the 20th century are 150 and 100 years, respectively.

Today, we are 80 years into the latest cycle. Based on the evidence, it's hard to argue that today's geopolitical cycle is not trending towards an accelerating decline. Are we due for another disastrous end?

Can We Salvage This?

Although momentum towards decline seems to be gathering, it is not possible to know exactly how close the world is to the precipice of a major convulsion. We only know that every cycle eventually comes to an end. The end is usually sudden but unknowable until it happens. If indeed it's possible to arrest or even reverse the descent, what actions might be necessary to accomplish that difficult project?

Perhaps the most important effort lies in better educating the American people and other like-minded nations' publics regarding both the danger and the need for change. This would begin with more historical context presented in secondary education and beyond. It could benefit from an information campaign intended to expose social media echo chambers (including better awareness of the foreign trolls that amplify divisive messages), as well as more balanced media coverage that exposes harmful policy choices on both sides of the political spectrum.

Unfortunately, like a third political party, it will be very difficult to establish a truly independent, widely accessed, impartial media outlet due to the economics involved.[1] However, if the education effort is successful, it would enable the American people to understand and buy in to the need for near term belt-tightening for the benefit of our long-term prosperity and security.

Many politicians privately understand this need, but it is routinely eclipsed by the simple need to be re-elected and the influence of political primaries. However, should the political class recognize the American people are awakening to the dangers of a declining power, it could liberate them to close their ideological gaps and better work together to prevent the decline.

If so, more far-sighted legislation would involve both spending cuts and tax increases, relying on a balanced package of entitlement reforms, base broadening tax changes, and selective discretionary budget cuts. Congress would also need to adopt explicit medium-term fiscal rules—a debt or expenditure anchor with operational deficit ceilings—so that, over time, primary balances could

1 That said, I am interested in the eventual veracity of recent statements made by the CBS network, which was recently acquired by Trump-friendly Paramount, while introducing Tony Dokoupil as its lead news anchor. In a statement, Dokoupil said, "You come first. Not advertisers. Not politicians. Not corporate interests." Dokoupil, Tony. "Tony Dokoupil: Don't Just Trust Me. Make Me Earn It." CBS News, 1 Jan. 2026, **https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tony-dokoupil-trust/**.

move into surplus and debt ratios would stabilize.

It the meantime we should refocus national security into more achievable strategies. For example, rather than going explicitly toe-to-toe in the "hot zone" with China militarily to prevent coercion of Taiwan, a more thoughtful strategy would be to target the Chinese leadership's perception of its grip on power. This would require challenging China in new ways in the diplomatic, information, economic, and military domains—along synchronized and well-constructed escalation ladders—to energize their principal fear, namely, that of their own people. Thoughtfully done, this could lead to a more affordable military.

It would be helpful along the way to increase the collective ability, knowledge, and professionalism of government officials and workers tasked with designing and implementing policies intended to arrest descent. This would require enlisting capable, experienced people into government—including on short employment terms—which would in turn require vastly different pay rules.

On the international economic front, a shift from reactive containment policies and seemingly randomly applied tariffs to structured competition, alongside limited decoupling in critical technologies and supply chains, as well as carefully applied industrial strategies, could preserve managed interdependence that stabilizes the system while sustaining US economic strength.

Within the current cycle, we have always been co-dependent with like-minded international partners for our collective prosperity and security (despite healthy competition). It's all about trust. We should draw a lesson from the military leadership principle that "the leader does more than the led." Rather than pushing our partners away, we should invest heavily in alliance systems, multilateral institutions, and rule-setting (including trade, finance, and technology standards) while holding our allies accountable for carrying their fair share of the load. The intent would be to channel China's behavior and preserve a favorable balance of power without requiring unsustainable unilateral shows of force.

In practice, this kind of program is about both a series of disciplined "nos" (to

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extreme politicians on left and right, to unfunded permanent tax cuts, to marginal wars, to weak burden sharing) and "yeses" (to better and somewhat smaller government, to domestic and allied renewal, to wiser engagement with competitors, and to greater social media awareness) that will underwrite long-term power.

Are these required actions feasible? I am personally skeptical but hopeful. They all hinge on the first imperative above, namely education.

There are a host of previous examples of a cycle declining and succumbing to a final catastrophe. The end is less about a single disastrous decision that ends the cycle than it is about the failure to thoughtfully act on the way down. Unfortunately, Georg Hegel tells us that "History teaches us that we do not learn from history." Societies rarely recognize looming structural change, yet this decline is the central concern I carry into 2026.

We fail to take the difficult and painful steps required to preserve this cycle, whose end could include a nuclear exchange, at our grave peril. As Oona Hathaway, quoting Ernest Hemingway, reminds us: bankruptcy happens "gradually and then suddenly."[2] Will we act to prevent events from suddenly getting out of hand?

2 Oona Hathaway, "The Great Unraveling Has Begun," The New York Times, Jan 6, 2026, **https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/06/opinion/peace-conflict-war.html**.

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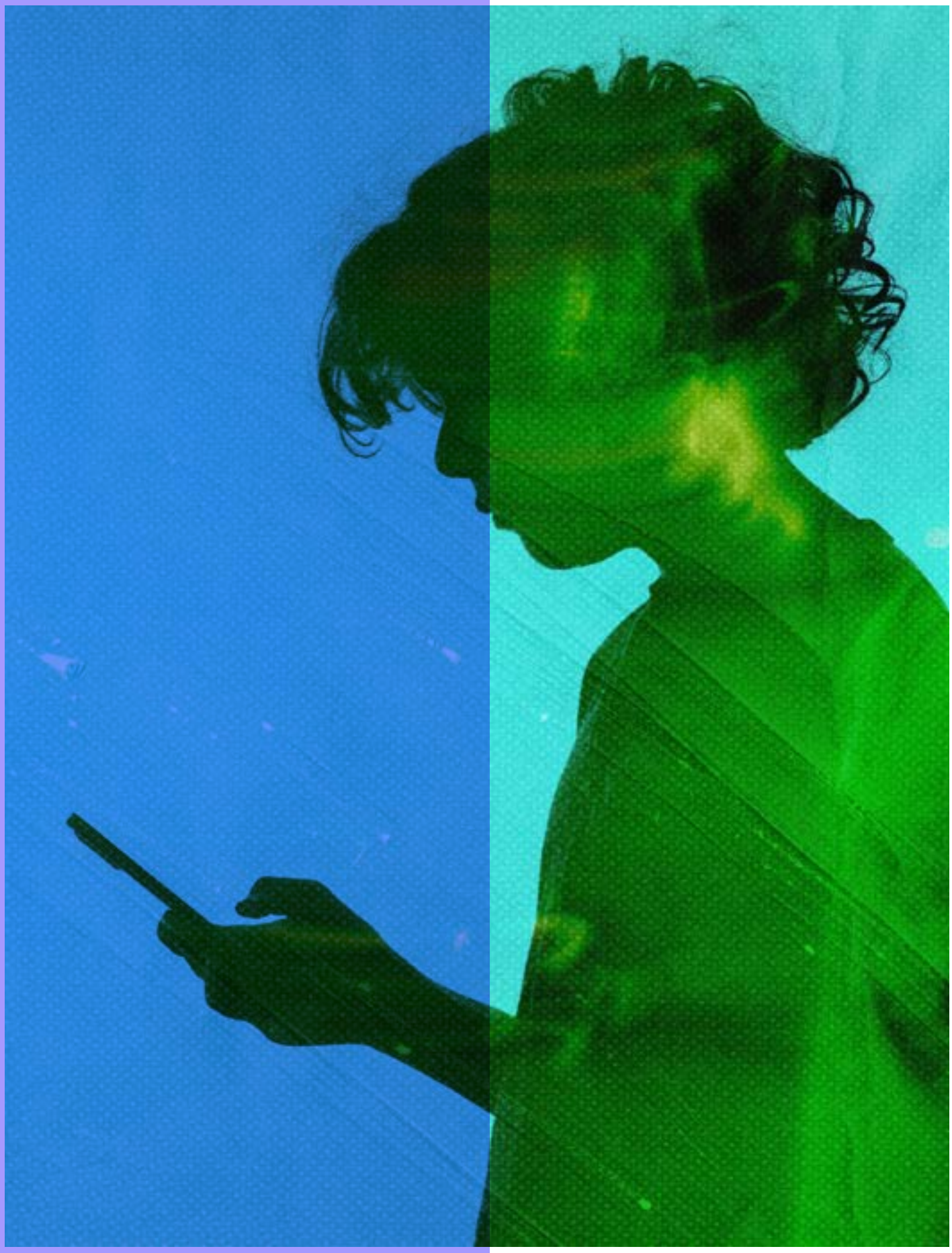
Governing Emerging Technologies

Daniel Byman

The most consequential challenge facing the world today is the capacity of governments and societies to understand, govern, and regulate powerful, fast-changing technologies whose effects are reshaping economies, social orders, and the balance of national security. Artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and nanotechnology (and possibly quantum technologies) stand out among these technologies for their transformative potential.



Each is already delivering extraordinary benefits, yet each also poses risks that are global in scope, difficult to manage, and poorly matched to existing regulatory and political frameworks. The failure to develop effective governance for these technologies would not merely exacerbate existing problems; it would create new and potentially irreversible ones that affect people around the world and lead to devastating consequences.

To be clear, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and nanotechnology offer immense power for good. AI has already demonstrated its ability to improve medical diagnosis, accelerate scientific discovery, optimize logistics, and expand access to knowledge—for example, AI systems that detect cancer from imaging scans more accurately than human clinicians, or that help design new drugs in a fraction of the traditional time. (AI can also help research and write essays for policy journals—it helped with this article.) Advances in biotechnology hold the promise of curing genetic diseases, extending healthy lifespans, strengthening food security, and responding rapidly to pandemics as seen in the unprecedented speed with which mRNA vaccines were developed and deployed during COVID-19. Nanotechnology enables new materials with extraordinary properties, from more efficient energy storage to targeted drug delivery systems and advanced sensors such as nanoparticles that deliver chemotherapy drugs directly to tumors, reducing damage to healthy tissue. Together, these technologies could help address some of humanity's most persistent challenges, including disease, hunger, environmental degradation, and economic inefficiency. Their positive potential is not speculative; it is already visible in laboratories, hospitals, and markets around the world.

Yet it is precisely because these technologies are so powerful that they pose such a profound governance challenge. They are evolving at remarkable speed, often faster than policymakers, regulators, and even domain experts can fully comprehend their implications. AI systems that seemed experimental a decade ago are now embedded in financial markets, military planning, and everyday consumer applications—from algorithmic trading systems capable of triggering market volatility to AI-enabled targeting tools used in modern warfare. Biotechnology techniques such as CRISPR gene editing have moved from obscure academic tools to widely accessible methods with profound ethical and security implications, including experiments that alter embryos or enhance pathogens in ways that blur the line between medical research and weapons development. Nanotechnology continues to advance incrementally but steadily, often invisibly integrated into other systems, making its cumulative effects harder to track as in advanced coatings, batteries, and sensors that are embedded deep within supply chains.

Major technological shifts can transform societies in unpredictable ways. The printing press, for example, did

far more than make books cheaper. It reshaped religious authority, enabled mass political mobilization, accelerated scientific exchange, and ultimately contributed to revolutions and wars such as the Protestant Reformation and the political upheavals that followed the spread of mass literacy. The industrial revolution reorganized labor, urbanization, and state power, producing both unprecedented wealth and profound social dislocation including child factor labor, urban poverty, and new forms of class conflict. Nuclear technology transformed international politics by introducing the possibility of instant, catastrophic destruction and forcing states to develop new doctrines and institutions to manage existential risk such as deterrence theory, arms control treaties, monitoring bodies like the International Atomic Energy Association, and crisis hotlines. In each case, technology did not simply add new tools; it altered the structure of society and the nature of power itself.

AI, biotechnology, and nanotechnology are likely to have similarly far-reaching effects, but with two crucial differences. First, they are developing simultaneously, interacting with one another in ways that may amplify their impact. AI accelerates biological research; biotechnology generates vast datasets that feed AI systems; nanotechnology enables new hardware for both, such as AI-driven protein folding models that rely on massive biological datasets and specialized computing hardware. Second, they are diffusing globally at unprecedented speed. Unlike nuclear weapons, which required enormous industrial and financial resources and were directly controlled by a small number of governments, many of today's most powerful technologies are accessible to small teams, private firms, and even individuals as demonstrated by open-source AI models, inexpensive gene-editing kits, and cloud-based computing resources. This diffusion complicates efforts to control misuse and increases the risk of surprise.

It is precisely because these technologies are so powerful that they pose such a profound governance challenge. They are evolving at remarkable speed, often faster than policymakers, regulators, and even domain experts can fully comprehend their implications.

Regulating these technologies is exceptionally difficult for several reasons. The first is their intrinsic complexity. AI

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systems, particularly those based on deep learning, are often opaque even to their creators, with decision-making processes that cannot be easily explained or audited. Biotechnology involves intricate biological processes that can behave unpredictably outside controlled environments as illustrated by gene drives that spread beyond intended ecosystems. Nanotechnology operates at scales that challenge human intuition and traditional testing methods where small changes in structure can produce radically different effects. Policymakers, who already struggle to keep pace with more familiar domains, are often asked to regulate systems they do not fully understand. Much of the expertise is in the private sector, where companies have an incentive to limit regulation or use it to undercut competition. This knowledge gap creates a structural disadvantage for regulators and encourages either overbroad rules that stifle innovation or under-regulation that leaves societies exposed to harm.

Second, these technologies are developing across multiple countries, often in highly competitive environments. Research talent, venture capital, and industrial capacity are globally distributed. A regulatory approach adopted by one country may be undermined if others choose not to follow suit, as seen when firms relocate data centers, laboratories, or manufacturing facilities to jurisdictions with looser oversight. Indeed, countries that regulate may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage for some aspects of these technologies as firms can relocate research activities, and knowledge can cross borders with relative ease. This creates classic collective action problems: States may recognize the long-term benefits of

regulation but fear that unilateral restraint will leave them economically or strategically disadvantaged. The result is regulatory fragmentation or paralysis.

Third, the rapid pace of technological change makes it difficult for regulation to catch up. Traditional regulatory processes are slow by design, emphasizing deliberation, consultation, and legal robustness. These virtues become liabilities when technologies evolve on monthly or even weekly cycles such as rapid improvements in generative AI models that leapfrog prior benchmarks within months. By the time a regulatory framework is implemented, the underlying technology may have changed substantially. This lag encourages reactive governance, in which rules are written in response to crises rather than in anticipation of them, often after damage has already been done.

This dilemma is difficult to overcome. Imagine lawmakers who want to put guardrails on large language models (LLMs). Between initial conceptualization, hearings, drafting, and eventual signing, many months might pass, and the capabilities being regulated would have changed dramatically. For instance, models may gain multimodal abilities, autonomous task execution, or vastly expanded training data during the legislative process.

Fourth, it is unlikely that US lawmakers would enter these choppy waters, as the United States is not consistently taking the lead in shaping global norms and institutions for these technologies. Historically, the United States played a central role in establishing international regimes for trade, finance, and arms control. Today, its approach to emerging technologies is fragmented and often domestically focused. While US firms remain leaders in many aspects of AI and biotechnology, the federal government has been hesitant to articulate a clear vision for global governance in these areas beyond ad hoc executive orders and nonbinding frameworks. This vacuum creates opportunities for other actors, notably China, to shape norms in ways that may not align with liberal democratic values or long-term global stability, such as state-centric approaches to data governance and surveillance.

There is limited appetite for regulation within the United States. Political polarization, distrust of government, and concern about hindering innovation have all constrained regulatory ambition. Technology policy debates are often framed as zero-sum contests between economic competitiveness and public safety, rather than as efforts to align innovation with societal values as seen in debates over AI safety, content moderation, and data privacy. This environment makes it difficult to sustain the long-term investments in expertise and institutions that effective regulation requires. It also discourages politicians from taking positions that might be portrayed as anti-growth or anti-innovation.

Fifth, many of these technologies have significant military applications, which complicates transparency and regu-

lation. AI is increasingly central to intelligence analysis, autonomous systems, and command and control. Numerous weapons use AI with only a limited role for human intervention, and autonomous systems are increasingly likely to interact with other autonomous ones, creating emergent situations that are difficult to anticipate and control such as autonomous drones responding to other automated defenses at machine speed. Biotechnology has implications for biodefense as well as the potential development of novel pathogens including engineered viruses with enhanced transmissibility or resistance to existing countermeasures. Nanotechnology contributes to advanced materials, sensors, and weapons systems. Military interest often brings secrecy, classification, and urgency, reducing opportunities for public debate and international confidence-building. In some cases, systems may be rushed into deployment under the pressure of strategic competition, increasing the risk of accidents or unintended escalation.

Sixth, existing arms control and nonproliferation structures are weak or poorly suited to these technologies. Many Cold War-era agreements were designed for relatively discrete, observable weapons systems like missiles and stockpiles of fissile material. They relied on verification mechanisms that are difficult to apply to software, biological research, or dual-use manufacturing processes where the same laboratory or codebase can serve both civilian and military purposes. Efforts to adapt or expand these regimes have struggled, in part because trust among major powers has eroded and in part because the technologies themselves defy traditional categorization. Indeed, they are struggling to regulate well-known technologies like nuclear weapons and missiles—Russia, for example, refused to extend New START. The absence of robust international institutions leaves states without forums to manage risk collectively.

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Seventh, private companies cannot be expected to regulate themselves effectively. While many firms emphasize ethical principles and responsible innovation, they operate in competitive markets that reward speed, scale, and first-mover advantage. Voluntary guidelines and corporate social responsibility initiatives are insufficient. They lack enforcement

mechanisms and are usually abandoned when they conflict with commercial incentives. Moreover, firms are not accountable to the public in the same way that governments are, particularly when the consequences of technological deployment extend beyond national borders such as the global spread of AI-generated misinformation or bioengineering tools.

Addressing this challenge requires a rethinking of how societies approach technological governance. Regulation must be adaptive, informed by technical expertise, and coordinated internationally—an easy sentence to write, but a hard one to implement in practice. Governments need sustained investment in scientific literacy within regulatory agencies and legislatures. Unfortunately, in the United States, much of this expertise and capacity is being dismantled while trust in experts is declining, making this difficult task even harder. International cooperation should focus not only on prohibition but also on transparency, confidence-building, and shared standards such as common reporting requirements, safety benchmarks, and incident-notification mechanisms. Importantly, governance frameworks should aim to shape the direction of technological development, not merely to constrain its excesses. The goal is not to slow progress, but to ensure that progress serves broadly shared human interests.

Ultimately, the ability to regulate emerging technologies will be a test of political imagination and institutional capacity. These technologies will shape the future regardless of whether societies are prepared for them. The central question is whether governance will be proactive or reactive, inclusive or fragmented, guided by foresight or driven by crisis. If the world fails this test, the consequences will not be confined to any single domain. They will reverberate across economies, security systems, and social orders, defining the trajectory of the 21st century in ways that may be difficult to reverse and could be catastrophic.

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Past Insights
Present Stakes

Connecting thoughts, warnings, and concerns expressed in previous issues of *Orbis* to the current moment.

The Death of the International Order?

Janine Davidson

It's been 10 years since I delivered the keynote address at the US Naval War College's 67th Annual Current Strategy Forum.[1] As Under Secretary of the Navy, I knew the audience of senior naval officers, civilian students, and faculty was eager to hear my views on operational art, maritime strategy, weapons systems, and funding priorities.

1 Janine Davidson, "CSF 2016 | Janine Davidson: Strategy Formulation in the New Security Environment," YouTube video, posted by "US Naval War College," accessed April 21, 202

Instead, I started with grand strategy. I said that a good grand strategy needs an "end state" or a "vision" for the world we want to create for ourselves and our grandchildren. I suggested that at that moment, in 2016, we should ground that end state not in what we wanted to change, but in what we were trying to preserve—the global world order.

This system, although not perfect, was foundational to whatever peace and prosperity America and the world enjoyed in the 70 years following World War II. I was deeply worried that this system was at risk in two ways. First, the system was being threatened "from below and within" by "transnational challenges such as climate change, refugees and migration, piracy, economic shocks, global pandemics, and violent extremism." Second, it was "under active attack" by nation states such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, all of whom saw the system as unfairly benefiting the West and not them. Even more concerning, these states seemed to "understand the system's weaknesses—and the degree to which it depends on the United States—maybe a little bit better than we do."

Indeed, I have long believed too many in America and the West take this system for granted. As each generation, increasingly distanced from the horrors of World War I and World War II, has come to see this global order as a "natural set point for global affairs," when in fact the system is a remarkable anomaly in the extremely violent history of the world.

I reiterated these fears two years ago in the pages of *Orbis*, adding complacency to these two threats. "The younger generations even in the West are so far removed from the horrors of World War II (even their grandparents were of the postwar generation) that they take the order they grew up in for granted—a world characterized by the lack of great power war, and the benefits of a globalized supply chain. And so, they feel that they can focus on 'disrupting' things."[2]

These sentiments are matched by a lack of appreciation for America's role in designing the international system, actively managing it, and underwriting it with American economic, military, and soft power.

Developments over the last several years have done nothing to reverse these trends. Today, as we watch the Trump administration berate our NATO allies, threaten the sovereignty of Greenland, whiplash the global economy with on-again and off-again tariffs, and conduct unilateral military operations in South America and the Middle East, I am chagrined to have not seen the possibility of the greatest threat of all—ourselves. That is, the leadership of our own country.

Elsewhere in this current issue Dov Zakheim addresses the salience of the China-Russia challenge. But, just as concerning, is that many Americans

2 Janine Davidson, "Guest Editor's Corner," Orbis 68:4 (2024), 514.

A child stands next to a missile after it fell near Qamishli International Airport, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Qamishli, Syria, March 4, 2026. REUTERS/Orhan Qereman

seem to have little concern that disruption, or even the outright death of the postwar system, is a problem. There is little recognition of the fragility of the webs and sinews upon which modern life depends, despite the warnings of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

What is even more worrisome is that the current stress on the international system comes from deliberate American action, driven by the perception that the United States has somehow been exploited in the creation and maintenance of the global order; and that disruption will lead to changes that will be more beneficial for American interests. In particular, the willingness to take action against close allies and partners, whether the imposition of tariffs or even the threat to use force if US demands aren't met, is widening the erosion of trust upon which US alliances are built. Unfortunately, the wise warning that "we cannot surge trust" is already beginning to ring true.

America and Israel's actions against Iran and its proxies lays bare the limits of this transactional approach and a lack understanding for what underlies the

very power President Donald Trump is attempting to wield. America's global reach and military might is enabled and, in many ways, amplified by our deep network of alliances. Over 70 years, our military has built bases abroad, trained with counterparts, and, critically, integrated the resources and support these alliances have pledged to provide into strategies and operational plans. It has been well understood by generations of American diplomats and presidents that nurturing these alliances requires active leadership as well as political and economic investment to build the trust that sets the stage for these military-to-military relationships.

Instead, many Americans have focused on what they have lamented are the up-front costs for US global leadership, even as 70 years of these investments has given the United States not only military basing rights, but also "convening power." This means the United States has been able to set the agenda for critical global issues. Whether dealing with nuclear security, securing supply chains, or combatting pandemics, the United States has held the chairmanship at every table. On the flip side, when the United States withdraws from international organizations (like the recent exits from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and various UN agencies), it isn't just saving money; it is surrendering the right to write the rules. If the United States isn't at the table for bodies like the International Civil Aviation Organization or the International Telecommunications Union, it is China or Europe that will define the manufacturing and safety standards for the 21st century. As the United States stops "policing" these standards in favor of poorly defined domestic interests, the overall quality of global goods falls, eventually harming American consumers who rely on those global supply chains.

Many Americans believe that these problems can be overcome by what we might term the "walled-off" fallacy, in which the United States creates a sphere or zone of privileged interests.

Many Americans believe that these problems can be overcome by what we might term the "walled-off" fallacy, in which the United States creates a sphere or zone of privileged interests. Indeed, the 2026 National Security Strategy has effectively revived a modernized Monroe Doctrine, viewing the Western Hemisphere and the Arctic as exclusive American domains. Shockingly, the United States also began a new push to acquire Greenland, and has threatened to take forcible action if Denmark—a

NATO ally—was unwilling to sell or cede the territory.

While concerns over Chinese mining in Greenland may be valid, the US shift toward aggressive pressure—including threats of tariffs on Denmark and talk of "acquiring" the island—has turned a cooperative security issue into a territorial dispute. The willingness of the United States to turn to forcible economic or military action, like the 2026 raid into Venezuela to seize Nicolas Maduro, or tariff threats against NATO allies, may seem to work in the short term to compel behavior, but it forces allies to look for "workarounds."

These examples, like the most recent attacks on Iran, reflect a concerning trend. While reasonable people can agree on threats, challenges, and problems, such as the horrendous state of affairs in Venezuela, the potential resource grab by China in Greenland, the threat of Russian aggression in the Arctic, or the regional and global threats from Iran and North Korea, leaders can disagree significantly on the proper approach to these problems.

There have been tensions in US relations with allies and partners before, such as the temporary withdraw of France from NATO and over the US strategies for Iraq and Afghanistan in the "war on terror." But Iraq, while it might have acted as an irritant, did not fundamentally rupture relations or fracture the global order. It is possible to recover from mistakes; it is much more difficult to regain trust after it has been broken.

That our heretofore stalwart European allies have resisted US requests for use of their territories and US bases in their countries to support US and Israeli operations in the Middle East demonstrates the limits of a transactional approach to global affairs. Previous US-led operations have seen American leaders go to great lengths in advance to build international coalitions and the legal justifications under international law. These consultations were not only critical for the operations themselves, but for when things did not go as planned.

Historically, the United States benefited from an "excess of trust." Even after major blunders like the Iraq War, the order remained intact because the United States led through consultation with allies and partners. In turn, our partners gave the United States the benefit of the doubt because they felt like partners in a shared values-based system. There was a shared understanding of the problems we were trying to address and the approach to be applied and were thus bought into the successes as well as failures.

That grace has dissipated. A subtext running through the 2025 Halifax International Security Forum and the 2026 Munich Security Conference is that allies are asking if they can ever trust the United States again, and what steps they might need to take to protect themselves from growing American unpredictability, or even hostility.

If the United States signals it is governed by the logic of "America First" in all of its international interactions, then other states, including close allies, will adjust as needed. They will seek to cut their own deals and make separate arrangements—and this will not be with us. The lesson many heads of state are taking from the 2026 Munich Conference is that there is danger in being vulnerable through overreliance on an unpredictable partner in the United States.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's speech at Davos marked this era of "strategic hedging." Middle powers (including not only India, Brazil, or Turkey, but also countries like Canada and Australia) are actively building coalitions and considering how to operate in a "post-American" world, where security guarantees, like the nuclear umbrella Australia has presumed for decades, may not be relied upon going forward. These states are "multi-aligning" to hedge on their ties with the United States through separate deals with each other, as well as with China or Russia, to lessen their risks.

Economically, as the world becomes purely transactional, other nations will naturally look for the "best deal," which increasingly may not involve the US dollar. Countries around the world are already settling trades in local currencies to avoid being vulnerable to US financial sanctions or shifting policy whims. De-dollarization holds risks for the United States because a major source of its influence—its ability to wield convening power—came from the reliance on the US dollar and the American financial system to lubricate a global system of trade. In addition, reliance on the dollar as the world's de facto reserve currency has created an incentive for the world to purchase US debt and maintain the value of the currency, allowing the United States for decades to run "deficits without tears."

The "death of the international order" suggests a shift from a world of rules and shared leadership to one of raw power and transactional deals.

The "death of the international order" suggests a shift from a world of rules and shared leadership to one of raw power and transactional deals. In this 2026 landscape, we are seeing the transition from a "Global Table" where the United States held the permanent chairmanship to a series of "closed rooms" where influence is bought, bartered, or enforced.

This approach assumes that a country can wall itself off from global problems and get its way through coercion rather than cooperation. However, game-changing disruptions—pandemics, loose nukes, and climate-driven migration—ignore borders and demand cooperative global approaches.

Instead of disrupting and destroying the existing order, we should make it work better for today and the future. We should be focused on the very real threats to our nation in the South China Sea, the Red Sea, the Middle East, and Ukraine. We should be planning for the increasing number of challenges to our space and cyber national security infrastructure. We should be racing to reinstate deterrence in an age of hypersonic weapons, AI, and nuclear proliferation. The United States may find that in this new era, compulsion can create compliance in the short run, but genuine consultation creates institutions and arrangements with longevity and the power to solve transnational challenges.

The vacuum left by the United States is being filled by a fragmented landscape where power is the only currency. This "transactional" world might be profitable in the short run but will fall short when the next global crisis hits. The post-World War II order withstood many shocks and proved remarkably resilient. But this time will be different. We will not simply "go home again." Once an international order is dismantled, like Humpty Dumpty, it cannot be rebuilt, even with "all the king's horses and all the king's men."

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Can America Rebuild International Trust?

Kori Schake

The most consequential development of the 21st century is the destruction by the most powerful state in the international order of its own primacy. No dominant power in history has had as many advantages as the United States created for itself in the past 80 years. And no dominant power in history has so quickly destroyed the wellsprings of its own security and prosperity as has the United States.

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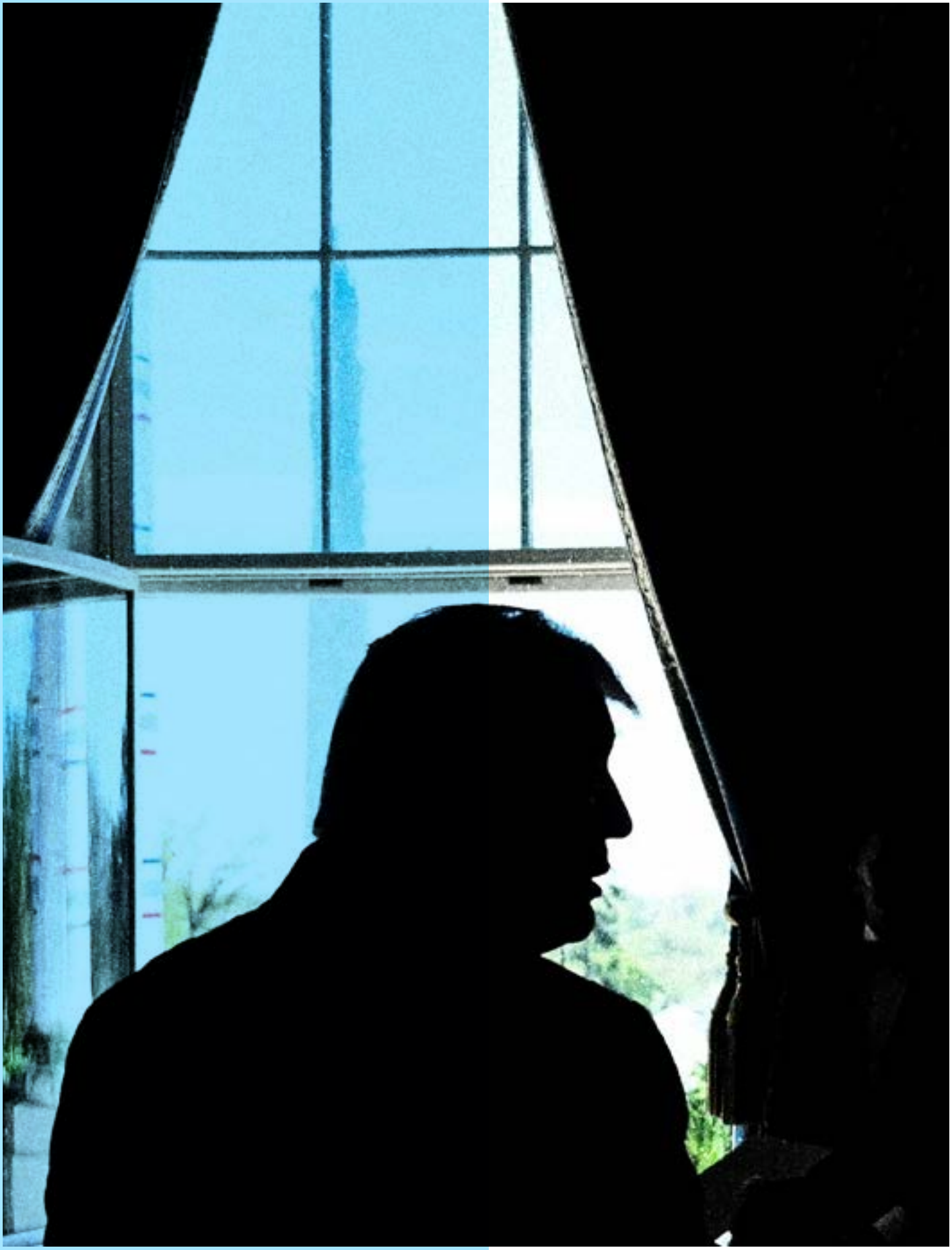

I have always been concerned with how the United States could maintain its position of leadership in the global system. In 2009, I offered suggestions as to changes the United States might make to reduce the cost to the United States of managing the system and warned against the dangers of being profligate with our power.[1] In the pages of *Orbis* 12 years ago, I worried about the possibility of overstretching and concluded, "Our country urgently needs a more cost-efficient strategy."[2]

Today, however, the challenge is not just management and fiscal prudence, the issues that concerned me over the past decade and a half. Instead, it is the actions taken by the United States, starting with the steps enacted in the first year of the second Trump administration, which seems to be a suicidal rejection of the United States' leadership role and a disengagement from responsible global action. When close partners and allies of the United States—who saw themselves as collaborators with Washington in maintaining a stable international order—now lament the active role of the US government in dismantling and destroying what it had spent decades creating, something fundamental has indeed changed in the world. It is a "malicious abandonment," or, as I put it, "hegemonic suicide."[3]

A Choice, Not an Accident

Donald Trump did not burst onto the scene and initiate the destruction; there are important antecedents. Even before the catalyst of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the US government had become itchy at the degree of constraint other countries—principally American allies—wanted to foster. President Bill Clinton balked at committing the United States to the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court, even though that judicial body was designed to intervene only where countries lacked legal processes of accountability.[4] President George W. Bush withdrew from the anti-ballistic missile treaty. [5]

But Trump's behavior is a difference in kind, not just a difference in magnitude, from previous American presidents. He is not simply opting out of denser webbing of international order as Clinton did, or seeking to balance American dominance with advancing cooperation as George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden did. Trump is an arsonist of the existing order, which he seems to genuinely believe is destructive to

1 Kori Schake, Managing American Hegemony: Essays on Power in a Time of Dominance (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2009); also see Kori Schake, "Choices for the Quadrennial Defense Review," Orbis 53:3 (2009), 439-456.

2 Kori Schake, "Security and Solvency," Orbis 58:3 (2014), 325.

3 For some of the reaction of key partners, see Ulrich Laderner and Bernd Ulrich, "Ursula von der Leyen: We Have no Bros and no Oligarchs," Die Zeit, 15 April 2025, https://www.zeit.de/politik/2025-04/ursula-von-der-leyen-eu-usa-donald-trump-english; and Henry Farrell and Abraham J. Newman, "The Enshittification of American Power," Wired, July 15, 2025, https://www.wired.com/story/enshittification-of-american-power/.

4 President Bill Clinton, "Statement on Signature of the International Criminal Court Treaty, Washington, DC, December 31, 2000," US Department of State, **https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/swci/001231_clinton_icc.html**.

5 President George W. Bush, "Remarks Withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, December 13, 2001," American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-announcing-the-united-states-withdrawal-from-the-anti-ballistic-missile-treaty.

President Donald J. Trump updates members of the media on the rescue of missing US airmen in Iran, Monday, April 6, 2026, at the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House. (Official White House Photo by Molly Riley)

American interests.

As Daniel Drezner and Elizabeth Saunders characterize it, Trump has pioneered hegemonic instability, collapsing the post-1945 international order by making the dominant power an agent of chaos and destruction.[6] The difference can be illustrated by attitudes toward the International Criminal Court: Clinton declined to submit the treaty for ratification, and subsequent presidents declined to be bound by it, but Trump issued an executive order imposing sanctions on Court staff and banning their travel to the United States.[7] In response, 79 countries, including America's closest allies, issued a statement of support for the Court.[8] The United States has transformed from being an architect and enforcer of international order to its antagonist.

The destruction was enabled by three important developments: technological breakthroughs creating unmoderated instantaneous global communication, the triumph of partisan politics, and the social displacement of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6 Daniel W. Drezner and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Trump's Year of Anarchy," Foreign Affairs, January 20, 2026 https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trumps-year-anarchy.

7 "White House Imposes Sanctions on International Criminal Court," The White House, February 6, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/imposing-sanctions-on-the-international-criminal-court/.

8 Nadine el-Bawab, "Trump sanctions against ICC could 'erode international rule of law,' court warns," ABC News, February 7, 2025, https://abcnews.go.com/International/trump-sanctions-icc-erode-international-rule-law-court/story?id=118587149.

Unleashing

The United States is unique even among free and prosperous societies for its risk tolerance. The American government tends not to regulate in advance of harm, businesses are fostered by Chapter 11 bankruptcy, and the American public is willing to accept incredibly high social costs in gun deaths, something that occurs in no other advanced country.[9] US risk tolerance also has positive consequences, including faster economic growth and more business innovation. So, it is unsurprising that communications breakthroughs, both technological and commercial, occurred first at scale in the United States. One of those breakthroughs was social media, which democratized the media landscape by making information accessible, removing elite gatekeepers, and upending for-profit media. As a consequence, the media landscape fractured, information became unreliable, and abusive and criminal behavior became rampant. Trump thrives in this new milieu, creating his own information platform and his own narrative. By doing so he stormed the castle of politics in the age of social media, outpacing fact checkers and fostering a personal connection with supporters that the vastness of the country and population would otherwise make impossible.

Bounced Check

The American political system was designed by geniuses to be run by idiots.[10] It has endured bad leaders, waves of dangerous populism, and dramatically damaging policy decisions. Its central element was famously described by James Madison in Federalist 51: "Its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places… Ambition must be made to counteract ambition."[11] The genius of the structure imposes checks on power among the branches of the federal government and between the federal and state go-

The American political system was designed by geniuses to be run by idiots. It has endured bad leaders, waves of dangerous populism, and dramatically damaging policy decisions.

9 I explore this idea in Contending with American Exceptionalism (Routledge, 2026).

10 The phrase comes from Herman Wouk's novel The Caine Mutiny, and is used to describe the US Navy. Herman Wouk, The Caine Mutiny, (Back Bay Books, 1992 reprint).

11 Federalist No. 51 is claimed by both Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, February 6, 1788, Founders Online, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0199. See also Roger H. Davidson, ""Invitation to Struggle": An Overview of Legislative-Executive Relations," The American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 499, Issue 1, September 1988.

vernments. But the founders did not anticipate the emergence of political parties becoming more important than institutional prerogatives. The failure of especially Congress as an institution to foreclose presidential authority has destabilized the American political system, enabling executive overreach.[12] Partisanship is now the defining element of American political activity, visible in the swings of public attitude toward the same policies when presidents of the different parties enact them.[13]

Pandemonium

The terror and mortal consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will cast a long shadow across the lives of those who experienced either the disease itself or the economic and social policies governments enacted to manage the global outbreak. Government uncertainty about the science of an emergent novelty—and dishonesty about some policies being enacted—left swathes of the public distrustful of government even while significantly reliant on it for safety. Students had both the educational and social experiences disrupted in trajectory-shifting ways. While most elements of the pandemic are not unique to the United States, it is nonetheless striking that in a country innovative enough to produce three different life-saving vaccines and prosperous enough to provide them without cost to its entire 340 million population, a full third of Americans would refuse a free, life-saving vaccine.

A Republic, If You Can Keep It

What the Trump presidency has destroyed cannot be reconstructed. Allies will never again consider an American security guarantee sacrosanct. Approval has collapsed for the United States in the public opinion of allied countries, as they perceive us as predatory. Countries are negotiating trade agreements and securing supply chains to circumvent American ability to weaponize any reliance on either components or payment mechanisms. The network effects of American power are faltering as states begin to opt out.[14] Insurmountable damage has been and continues to be done.

Yet both the domestic and international orders are modifying. The military maxim that the enemy gets a vote also applies in politics. Many Trump policies are likely to be repudiated by subsequent presidents, court rulings, and legislation at the state and federal level. Executive orders are eminently reversable. Congress has already restored most of the draconian 2025 spending cuts and is forcing withdrawal of a historically significant number of political appointees.[15]

12 Yuval Levin, interviewed in "Has Trump Achieved a Lot Less Than It Seems?," New York Times, January 16, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/16/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-yuval-levin.html.

13 Michael Dimok and Richard Wike, "America is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide," Pew Research, November 13, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/.

14 "What economics can teach foreign-policy types," The Economist, July 24, 2025, https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2025/07/24/what-economics-can-teach-foreign-policy-types.

15 Yuval Levin, "Has Trump Achieved a Lot Less Than It Seems?".

Photo by Ben Krb on Unsplash

Elections in November 2026 are likely to presage acceleration of reversals and perhaps impeachments. The "primitive anarchy" the Trumpian years has unleashed could well be repudiated as the checks built into the American political system and the adaptation of international actors find ways to address the challenges.[16]

The most optimistic case would be that the executive over-reach of the Trump years ushers in legislative and judicial actions that constrain future presidents, eliminating the room to manoeuvre that the Trump administration has capitalized on. Becoming trustworthy internationally again will rebuild international trust over time, especially as allies so desperately need us to be deserving of their trust. After all, even if the current mess is the most destructive, this is not the first time the United States has been unworthy. One model would be the way that Congress advanced legislative supremacy after Watergate. While not impossible, that would require enormous public pressure on Republican legislators that the partisan coherence of current voting districts militate against. The more likely outcome is a messy contentiousness domestically for the United States, marginal advances for malign actors internationally, and struggling cooperation among prosperous democracies to shield themselves from the stronger powers.

Another path to constructing a more robust domestic and international order could emerge as the trauma and dislocation of COVID-19 wears off. The red in

16 Daniel W. Drezner and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Trump's Year of Anarchy," Foreign Affairs, January 20, 2026, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trumps-year-anarchy.

tooth and claw trend in US politics does appear to be waning, as evidenced by the president's falling ratings and the repudiation of such tactics by two of the right's most vociferous practitioners, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Vivek Ramaswamy.[17] The most important beginning to repair of both the domestic and international order is political repudiation of the Trump agenda and practices. This would be especially likely if social media obsession proves a passing fad or gets restrained by regulation, dampening the enervating acceleration of information and the platform for incendiary falsehoods and their purveyors.

At the end of the day, Americans will have to either accept that we've chosen to live in a different kind of country and bequeathed a different kind of international order that is less secure and makes us less prosperous, or we will have to convince ourselves that what we had before was more beneficial and undertake the hard work of strengthening the foundations of American power and behaving internationally in ways that foster cooperation.

17 Dave Davies, "Marjorie Taylor Greene's Puzzling Political Transformation Explained," National Public Radio, January 6, 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/01/06/nx-s1-5668142/marjorie-taylor-greenes-puzzling-political-transformation-explained; Charlie Nash, "Vivek Ramaswamy Leaves Social Media After Angering Republicans with TPUSA Speech," Yahoo News, January 5, 2026, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/vivek-ramaswamy-leaves-social-media-014649837.html.

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Preparing For Simultaneity

Dov S. Zakheim

Four years ago, I expressed in these pages my worry that the United States was "not in a position to respond to the prospect of a 'triple move' by China, Russia, and Iran." I raised the prospect of "Eurasian simultaneity"—that adversaries of the United States "would have every incentive to exploit opportunities to change regional and global balances in their favor depending on how distracted the United States became."[1]

1 Dov S. Zakheim and Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan," April 8, 2022, 148, https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/04/the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/.


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The 2026 National Defense Strategy explicitly acknowledges my concern: "It is only prudent for the United States and its allies to be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters." This is an unwelcome development for the US national security community. From the end of the Korean War until its departure from Iraq and, later, Afghanistan, the United States never really had to cope with a two-front war. Indeed, even during the Korean War, when China's entry in late October 1950 both changed the nature of that conflict and prolonged it, America was not at war anywhere else, though the Cold War was at its height. NATO and the Warsaw Pact confronted each other along the inner German border and the Iron Curtain, but the two sides never actually went to war.

Nevertheless, American defense planners throughout the remainder of the 1950s and into the 1960s continued to postulate a possible two front war against the Warsaw Pact in Europe and communist China in Asia.[1] Even when it became clear after the Cuban Missile Crisis that the two communist powers had broken with each other, defense planners continued to size force requirements for possible simultaneous conflicts with both.[2] It was it was only some years after the Nixon breakthrough with China, as the Vietnam War was coming to a close, that the United States no longer viewed China as a threat against which to plan and program military forces.[3] The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact remained the major threat that concerned defense planners, and did so until the Pact's dissolution in July 1991 and the Soviet Union's collapse five months later.

Despite having planned for the possibility of multiple simultaneous conflicts, the United States and its NATO allies never actually went to war with the Warsaw Pact states throughout the entire span of the Cold War. As a result, the United States was never involved in more than a single conflict, whether that was a major war like Vietnam, or the first Gulf War, or lesser operations such as those in Grenada, Lebanon, Panama, or the Balkans.

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration did not jettison the notion that the United States might become engaged in two conflicts, but the Defense Department's so-called "Bottom-Up Review" (BUR) assumed that those conflicts would be "regional," similar to the Vietnam conflict. These wars were most likely to take place on the Korean Peninsula and the Middle East, notably against Iran, but they would not involve

1 See Lawrence S. Kaplan, Ronald D. Landa, and Edward J. Dea, "The McNamara Ascendancy: 1961-1965," Secretaries of Defense Historical Series (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2006), 526, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/secretaryofdefense/OSDSeries_Vol5.pdf.

2 Richard A. Hunt, "Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military: 1969-1973," Secretaries of Defense Historical Series (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2015), 357, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/secretaryofdefense/OSDSeries_Vol7.pdf

3 Edward C. Keefer, "Harold Brown: Offsetting the Soviet Military Challenge: 1977-1981," Secretaries of Defense Historical Series (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), 395-405, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/secretaryofdefense/OSDSeries_Vol9.pdf.

a conflict with a peer or near-peer competitor. Moreover, and perhaps because the threat was not from a true peer, or even what came to be called a "near-peer," the BUR postulated the notion of "win-hold-win." While fighting against one adversary, Washington would only need to commit forces to "hold" the other adversary's advance until America won the first conflict. Only then would it commit sufficient forces to defeat the second adversary.

However, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States had begun to draw down its forces to reap a "peace dividend." It simply did not have the wherewithal to fight two separate wars simultaneously if neither of its two adversaries was willing to wait until the other conflict had ended and thereby face the prospect of fighting the United States on its own. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated the weakness of the "win-hold-win" approach. Once the United States and its allies went to war against Saddam Hussein in 2003, Washington simply ceased to pay the same degree of attention to what until then had been a successful Afghanistan operation. As a result, both wars dragged on well beyond the length of any previous American conflict since the founding of the Republic. Moreover, America reprised its ignominious departure from Vietnam with a chaotic exit from Afghanistan. While it left an Iraq that was more democratic, it nevertheless had created an opening for Iran to exert far more influence in that country than it had for centuries, while also helping to incubate the Islamic State.

For much of the past three decades, Washington remained oblivious to the prospect that China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, all of which were actual or potential adversaries, might act in concert in pursuit of their efforts to challenge US leadership.

Moreover, while bogged down in these "forever wars," a group of key states dissatisfies with the parameters of the US-led international order were looking for ways to challenge and alter it more to their liking. Yet, for much of the past three decades, Washington remained oblivious to the prospect that China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, all of which were actual or potential adversaries, might act in concert in pursuit of their efforts to challenge US leadership. Successive administrations certainly responded, at least to some degree, to specific actions on the part of these four states, but certainly not to any degree

M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) conduct live-fire missions during Operation Epic Fury in the US Central Command area of responsibility. (US Army Photo)

that would have deterred them from further aggressive activity if they were to act in concert.

China has emerged as a major threat to the United States and its Pacific allies, notably Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. It has become increasingly aggressive in its claims to control the entre South China Sea. It has ramped up its strategic nuclear arsenal, moving at an unprecedented pace to reach 1000 warheads by the end of the decade. It has continued to expand its conventional military forces, notably the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Finally, it has forged ahead in space, cyber, and cutting-edge technologies, including biotechnology, where it threatens to overtake America's long-standing lead.

North Korea has continued its own missile testing program and shows no signs of any interest in de-nuclearization. We have also seen that Iran has been unwilling to abandon its own nuclear and missile programs or to renounce its efforts to create a sphere of influence in the Middle East, despite increasing American economic and military pressure.

Finally, Russia seeks to reconstitute its position as a great power and restore as much of its empire as possible. As a Finnish diplomat who served in Moscow, and is one of that country's leading experts on Russia, told me, President Vladimir Putin had shifted the National Archives from the Ministry of Culture to the Presidential Office in order to acquaint himself with all Tsarist agreements that led to the expansion of the Russian Empire.

All of these developments continue to pose dangers to American interests on their own, but the most serious threat to American security consists of a combination of these aggressors acting in concert as an "Axis of Upheaval."[4] That alliance has manifested itself most

4 "Axis of Upheaval," Center for a New American Security, https://www.cnas.org/axis-of-upheaval.

clearly in the Ukraine war.

As of June 2024, North Korea is a formal Russian ally. Kim Jong Un and Putin signed a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty, which includes a mutual defense clause.[5] Approximately 12,000 troops from North Korea's special forces deployed to Russia four months later. They have been fighting alongside Russian troops in the Kursk region while 3,000 additional troops have deployed to replace battlefield losses. These forces have helped Russia reconquer some of the territory it had lost to Ukraine.[6] North Korea has sent thousands of construction workers to replace Russian personnel fighting in Ukraine.[7] It has also dispatched 1,000 combat engineers to Kursk to assist Russia's efforts to demine the area.[8] Since 2023 North Korea has delivered anywhere from $5–10 billion worth of arms to Russia. These shipments include "millions of artillery shells, mortar rounds and rockets, hundreds of artillery pieces and launchers, short-range ballistic missiles."[9] In July 2025, sources citing South Korea's Defense Intelligence Agency estimated that North Korea had sent more than 12 million artillery shells in total, with some Russian units at times coming to rely almost exclusively on North Korean-made artillery. [10] Finally, Russia has been deporting Ukrainian children to North Korea.[11]

For its part, Moscow has Russia has provided financial support to Pyongyang's defense programs. It has transferred advanced electronic warfare and air defense systems, as well as anti-aircraft missiles. Moscow is also aiding North Korean ballistic missile development. Finally, it has provided North Korea with anti-aircraft missiles.

Russia also signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Iran in January 2025, and in December the two countries signed a program for coordination on political, economic, cultural, defense and security matters.[12] The Russo-Iranian agreement does not include a mutual defense clause but, like North Korea, Iran has provided significant support to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This has unmanned aerial systems (UAS), artillery shells, and Fateh-110 short-range

5 Kelsey Davenport, "North Korea, Russia Strengthen Military Ties," Arms Control Association, July/August 2024, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-07/news/north-korea-russia-strengthen-military-ties.

6 Stella Kim and Mithil Aggarwal, "North Korea confirms it sent troops to Russia, calling them 'heroes'," NBC News, April 28, 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/world/asia/north-korea-confirms-sent-troops-russia-calling-heroes-rcna203245.

7 Jean Mackenzie, "North Koreans tell BBC they are being sent to work 'like slaves' in Russia," BBC News, August 12, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2077gwjlvxo.

8 Molly Carlough and James Kennedy, "How North Korea Has Bolstered Russia's War in Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations, November 25, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/article/how-north-korea-has-bolstered-russias-war-ukraine.

9 Olena Guseinova, "Unequal Partnership: North Korea's Uneven Bargain with Russia," Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, September 2025, 48-53.

10 "Over 12 Million North Korean 152mm Heavy Artillery Shells Sent to Russia: Pyongyang's Supplies Increasingly Vital to War Effort," Military Watch Magazine, July 13, 2025, https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/nkorea-12-million-152mm-shells-russia#:~:text=The%20Russian%20Armed%20Forces%20are,their%20munitions%20from%20the%20country.

11 Karolina Hird, "Russian Occupation Update," Institute for the Study of War, January 8, 2026. https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-occupation-update-january-8-2026/

12 Neville Teller, "Iran And Russia: Too Close For Comfort," Eurasia Review, January 9, 2026, https://www.eurasiareview.com/09012026-iran-and-russia-too-close-for-comfort-oped/.

ballistic missiles. Iran has participated in the construction of a UAS factory in Russia capable of producing thousands of military drones. Russia has supplied Iran with Yak-130 pilot training aircraft, Mi-28 attack helicopters, aid to Iran's space and missile programs, and domestic surveillance technology.

Finally, Chinese-Russian relations have gone from strength to strength, and are a far cry from the days when Beijing was a virtual American ally against Soviet Russia. In February 2022, just days before Russia invaded Ukraine, China and Russia announced a "no-limits" partnership. That partnership has manifested itself over the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Initially it appeared that China was providing Russia with sanctioned components and "dual use" technologies employed in the production of missiles, tanks, and aircraft.[13] In particular, just one year into the war with Ukraine, China accounted for 89 percent of Russia's microchip imports. In addition, approximately 47 percent of the chip-making equipment and 58 percent of spare parts used in Russia were of Chinese origin.[14]

By mid-2024, however, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy was accusing China of supplying Russia with weapons and gunpower, and Chinese citizens were working at a drone production plant in Russia.[15] Indeed, in late 2024 the US State Department confirmed that China was providing Russia with what then Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell described as "component pieces of a very substantial effort on the part of China to help sustain, build and diversify various elements of the Russian war machine."[16] Most recently Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service asserted that it had recorded evidence of China's transfer of satellite data to Russia, which was used to launch missile strikes on strategic targets, including

Chinese-Russian relations have gone from strength to strength, and are a far cry from the days when Beijing was a virtual American ally against Soviet Russia.

13 Katherine Spenser, "Kyiv accuses China of deepening involvement in Russia's Ukraine war," Atlantic Council, April 29, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/kyiv-accuses-china-of-deepening-involvement-in-russias-ukraine-war/.

14 Chris Miller, "The Impact of Semiconductor Sanctions on Russia," American Enterprise Institute, April 2024, https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Impact-of-Semiconductor-Sanctions-on-Russia.pdf?x85095.

15 "Zelenskiy says Chinese citizens working at drone production site in Russia," Reuters, April 22, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-says-chinese-citizens-working-drone-production-site-russia-2025-04-22/.

16 Stuart Lau, "US accuses China of giving 'very substantial' help to Russia's war machine," Politico, September 10, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/united-states-accuse-china-help-russia-war-kurt-campbell/.

President Donald Trump meets with Russian president Vladimir Putin in the Billy Mitchell Room at Joint Base Elmendorf Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska, Friday, August 15, 2025. (Official White House Photo by Daniel Torok)

objects owned by foreign investors.[17]

Russia has reciprocated. Most notably, Moscow has supplied components and training necessary for airborne and amphibious operations, which would be critical in a Chinese invasion of Taiwan,[18] but also would enable China to seize key islands, reefs and shoals in the South China Sea.

It is clear that the "axis of resistance" is very real—and that these partners form a strategic entente. This entente has adjunct partners elsewhere in the Global South, most notably South Africa. It is true that this "axis" or "entente" is not a formally constituted alliance, as Russia's unwillingness to provide more concrete assistance to Iran during its 12-day war with Israel in 2025 clearly indicates. The members of this entente are not prepared to see an attack on one as an attack on all.

Nevertheless, the 2026 National Military Strategy, like its predecessors, appears to overlook the implications of cooperation among the Axis states for American security. America is a Pacific power, and China's military expansion, especially if it were to conquer Taiwan,

17 "Ukrainian intelligence reported China's involvement in Russian strikes on Ukraine: what Beijing says," Priyamim, October 5, 2025, https://prm.ua/en/ukrainian-intelligence-reported-chinas-involvement-in-russian-strikes-on-ukraine-what-beijing-says/.
18 Rajoli Siddharth Jayaprakash, "Is Russia Repositioning Itself Inside China's Taiwan Strategy?," Observer Research Foundation, January 11, 2026, https://www.orfonline.org/research/is-russia-repositioning-itself-inside-china-s-taiwan-strategy.

could threaten Guam, American Samoa, and other American Pacific outposts. Yet China might not act alone. It could receive direct support from its partners in the Axis. Or, if America focuses on defending Taiwan, Russia might choose to invade a NATO country, North Korea might attack the South, and Iran might ramp up its support for its regional proxies, notably the Houthis, who would resume attacking Western shipping. China might also, in conjunction with its partners, look to create diversions in other theaters, not only in Europe and the Middle East but also in the Arctic, in sub-Saharan Africa, and in Latin America.

In short, the simultaneity challenge would not simply be to involve the United States in multiple conflicts but to spread US attention, resources, and capabilities thin across different and disparate theaters of action.

Two or more simultaneous conflicts clearly demand a significant increase not only in defense spending but even more importantly in defense production. There is a clear need for a much larger fleet and air force that can operate at strength in multiple theaters. There also is a requirement need for an expanded army force posture to deter further Russian expansionism, especially if America is engaged in a conflict elsewhere in the world. Expanding the US Army's long range strike capability is needed both for operations in Europe and as a key supplement to for maritime and air operations in East Asia. An increase in space and cyber capabilities must also accompany other force increases.

President Donald Trump has called for a $1.5 trillion defense budget for fiscal year 2027, an increase of more than 50 percent over the $901 billion fiscal year 2026 request. Yet there is a risk that most of those additional funds might be directed toward the president's Golden Dome project, which could amount to as much as $6 trillion.[19] He is also seeking a fleet of at least 20 new battleships that could cost as much as $15 billion each.[20] It is imperative that the budget increase be employed most efficiently to ensure that the United States has sufficient capabilities to address the simultaneity challenge.

To that end, the defense industrial base must expand to include as many new entrants as possible. In doing so it would enable the Defense/War Department to best exploit in timely fashion cutting-edge technologies for battlefield use, and thereby prevent America from falling behind China, which continues to surge its military capacity. In addition, an expanded industrial base would be best positioned to accelerate weapons and munitions production. Trump is pushing industry to be more responsive; whether he will succeed, and especially whether industry can get past the so-called "val-

19 Dov S. Zakheim, "The actual cost of a US 'Golden Dome' could be staggering," The Hill, May 16, 2025, https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/5302275-the-actual-cost-of-a-golden-dome-for-america-could-be-staggering/.

20 Mallory Shelbourne and Sam LaGrone, "Trump Unveils New Battleship Class; Proposed USS Defiant Will Be Largest US Surface Combatant Since WWII," USNI News, December 22, 2025, https://news.usni.org/2025/12/22/trump-unveils-new-battleship-class-proposed-uss-defiant-will-be-largest-u-s-surface-combatant-since-wwii.

ley of death," where many promising programs terminate, remains an open question.

Increasing the defense budget is a necessary, but insufficient condition for meeting the threat of a multi-front conflict. America needs her allies to bolster her own capabilities to deter adversaries in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. To be credible, however, both European and Asian allies must maintain, if not accelerate, the pace of their current increases in their own defense budgets.

In conclusion, if defense spending and programs can be reoriented to address the huge demand that the need for simultaneously confronting all members of the axis of resistance implies, and if America ensures that its allies remain committed to supporting the common defense, it will be far less likely that the United States will find itself actually fighting those increasingly interlocking anti-American states in the years to come.

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