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Not long ago in the sweep of history, countries that had once been buried behind the Iron Curtain, and even some Soviet republics, were transformed into members of the solidly democratic club. Some of those that weren't, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, experienced mass revolts against rigged elections and corrupt misrule amid widespread public yearning to join the West. Free trade was again celebrated as an instrument of peace; Kant's "democratic peace theory" enjoyed a revival.

Western democracy promotion, inept as it could be, struck fear into authoritarian corridors of power. Ever-shriller authoritarian denunciations of supposed Western conspiracies to foment "color revolutions" seemed to confirm a direction toward democracy. In the early 2010s, spontaneous uprisings rocked the heavily autocratic Middle East and

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North Africa. Hopes for political loosening persisted in the stubborn holdouts of China, Iran, and Russia. Large-scale demonstrations had broken out in Iran in 2009 and, in 2011–12, similar protests accompanied Vladimir Putin’s announcement that he would return to the Russian presidency after a brief stint as prime minister. Many clung to what they considered signs that Xi Jinping, who rose to become China’s top leader in 2012, would be a reformer.

In the blink of an eye, however, the authoritarians flipped the dynamic, driving the democracies onto the back foot, where they remain. Arab autocrats, Iran’s mullahs, and Putin cracked down viciously. In China, Xi elevated himself to something akin to emperor, driving an even more resolute version of authoritarianism. In well-established democracies, meanwhile, fear spread about the decay of liberal institutions and norms.

The authoritarians relied on an innovative set of tactics to suppress democratic influence from abroad or from within their societies: branding organizations that receive overseas funding as “foreign agents” (essentially, traitors) and using tax inspections to disqualify opposition candidates from running for office. These techniques were combined with the tried-and-true practice of dominating the media. And then, the coup de grâce: continuing to decry nonexistent Western plots to take them down, the authoritarians—thanks to technological innovations produced by free societies—developed new ways to meddle forcefully in democratic polities and sometimes even destabilize them. Now, the authoritarians watch as freely elected democratic leaders praise and emulate them.

And yet: beware those who once hailed “the age of democracy” and now proclaim “the age of autocracy.” Formidable as these regimes appear—and, in fact, can be—they are shot through with weaknesses. They can mobilize vast resources and personnel in pursuit of ambitious national projects but suffer debilitating incapacity stemming from corruption, cronyism, and overreach. They last far longer than generally anticipated but all the while remain prone to sudden runs on their political banks. With the right strategies, they can be jolted off balance. Democracies, despite a growing loss of confidence bordering on despair, retain innumerable strengths and deep resilience, and can get back on the front foot.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

What is authoritarianism? And what—and who—is an authoritarian? Given how important this phenomenon has always been and

the prominence it has recently reacquired, it might seem surprising how difficult it can be to answer those questions. At the most basic level, authoritarianism involves weak or near-absent institutional limits on executive power. Initially, authoritarians unabashedly ruled in the name of the few, but ever since the French Revolution, nondemocratic regimes have taken on the trappings of democracy: staged elections, rubber-stamp legislatures, constitutions granting nominal rights. “Modern authoritarianism,” as the political scientist Amos Perlmutter defined it, is the rule of the few in the name of the many.

Perlmutter, writing in 1981, singled out “authoritarianism/totalitarianism” as “this century’s most remarkable political phenomenon.” But the slash separating (or combining) the two terms concealed a challenge: namely, explaining the difference between them. As it happens, the sociologist Juan Linz had already taken this up, and his experience offers a cautionary tale. Born in 1926 in Weimar Germany, where hyperinflation bankrupted his father’s business, the young Linz witnessed the breakdown of democracy and the onset of Hitler’s dictatorship. Linz and his Spanish mother relocated to Spain in 1932, where Linz lived through the 1936 military putsch and the civil war that it provoked. During Franco’s dictatorship, he graduated from the University of Madrid. In 1950, he crossed the Atlantic to pursue a Ph.D. at Columbia University, where he soon began to teach. He later shifted to Yale and, in the decades that followed, became one of the world’s foremost experts on regime types and democratic stability.

When Linz entered the profession, the world was seen as divided between two basic regime types: democratic and totalitarian. Where, he wondered, should one place Franco’s Spain? It was patently not democratic, but also not totalitarian like Nazi Germany or the Stalinist Soviet Union. The classic schema advanced by the likes of Hannah Arendt, as well as Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, had no room for Iberia. In 1963, Linz presented a long paper titled “An Authoritarian Regime: Spain.” Despite its banal title, it constituted a breakthrough in explicating a third type. Linz offered a mostly negative definition: unlike totalitarianism, authoritarianism didn’t have a concentrated single source of power or a pervasive ideology, and it could muster only minimal mass mobilization. The major attribute authoritarian regimes possessed, rather than lacked, Linz suggested, was limited pluralism. The distinction remained uncertain, and for all his achievements, Linz never nailed it down. He tried “Sultanistic

regimes,” which fell flat, and by 2000 had come up with “chaocracy” (the rule of chaos and mobs). All the while, a consensus built around the too-broad rubric of “hybrid regimes.”

Typologies can sometimes help one grasp how such regimes sustain themselves or implode or are overthrown. For example, scholars have shown that authoritarian regimes that rely on hereditary succession tend to be more stable. But such insights do not translate into policy action. For that purpose, it is better to identify not types but constituent parts—what can be thought of as the five dimensions of authoritarianism—and their susceptibility to countermeasures. Admittedly, a policy-oriented framework will not satisfy those who prefer strict definitions and typologies. Nonetheless, it could serve as a foundation from which to push today’s authoritarian regimes onto the back foot.

THE IRON FIST

The first dimension is obvious: no authoritarian regime could survive without security police and military forces capable of domestic repression. Compared with their social spending or economic investment, authoritarian regimes extravagantly overcommit funds to the agencies, equipment, and training they need for massive repression. They expend staggering resources on surveillance and censorship of the Internet, social media, and related technologies and services, often alongside paid and voluntary human monitoring of neighborhoods and workplaces. Coercive apparatuses vary widely among authoritarian countries, which inherit legacy structures from previous regimes or previous incarnations of their own regimes. Think of the Iranian shah’s secret police, the SAVAK, which the revolutionaries angrily dissolved in 1979 only to carry over many of its practices, prisons, and even personnel into a new organization, SAVAMA.

Authoritarian regimes relentlessly reorganize their repressive apparatuses, but rarely to streamline their functions. On the contrary, they deliberately assign agencies and operatives to overlapping jurisdictions, ensuring that they are, to an extent, at daggers drawn. Sometimes such agencies engage in sabotage against one another, as officials regard going on the offensive as the best defense against colleagues poised to go after them. In communist China, the jockeying for supremacy between the security police and the People’s Liberation Army has at times been decisive in power struggles. In Russia, the civilian repressive apparatus persecutes the military, which leaps at

every chance for revenge. Meanwhile, anticorruption bodies—always more than one—are feared by all, including one another.

Professionals in repression, whether fingernail pullers or computer hackers (sometimes one and the same), have the means to take down not just their rivals but also their superiors and even their country's ruler. They at once ensure regime survival and pose the greatest threat to it. That is why, for example, presidential bodyguards are almost never integrated into the main repressive apparatus. In Russia under Putin, just as it was under Stalin, the bodyguard directorate (today known as the FSO) stands alone, separate from the main successors to the KGB (the FSB and SVR), the multiple counterintelligence units, and the also self-standing National Guard. Paranoia rules.

Cronies and mediocrities might run the critical security police or armed forces, a circumstance observed in Putin's war against Ukraine, which was planned and overseen until May 2024 by a former construction foreman with whom the dictator had spent some bare-chested time in the Siberian wilderness. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the repressive muscle or the capacity for learning and correction of these mechanisms and militaries. They monitor, disappear, imprison, and butcher. They are highly fractious, however, roiling with jealousies, resentments, and enmities, which rulers aggravate to exercise control. Intelligence agencies in the United States and other Western countries closely follow these cleavages, of course, and can sometimes recruit the disaffected or the ambitious to provide insider information.

These regimes take great pains to cultivate façades of unity and approval, which makes them vulnerable when disunity and disapproval are exposed. Many officials in authoritarian regimes chafe at the conflation of the ruler's interests with the country's, at cronies hoarding all the spoils, and at the concealed national debilitation that ensues. Washington and its allies should systematically call out these divisions, as well as the deep resentments felt within regimes over malfeasance and corruption, aiming to drive wedges between the elites and the ruler. Of course, naming specific disaffected individuals could cause their imprisonment or execution. Carelessness could backfire. Still, discontent, thwarted ambition, and offended patriotism are no secret, and available to exploit. When such regimes figuratively or literally push their officials out of windows—as they do without any Western pressure—democracies need to emphasize how

such barbarism reveals weakness, how it constitutes a tacit admission that dissatisfaction suffuses officialdom, and how the regimes fear its spread. “Outwardly strong, inwardly brittle,” an internal Chinese critique, should be the name of a relentless public campaign that forces the Chinese regime to continually deny it.

CASH RULES EVERYTHING AROUND ME

The second dimension of an authoritarian regime is the nature of its revenue streams. All governments require sources of funding, of course, and most get them through a wide array of taxes. Taxes render governments dependent on their people, and although authoritarian regimes do not mind obtaining revenues that way, they are loath to depend on the consent of the people if they can get away without doing so—and many can. They have alternative sources of revenue, often gushing right out of the ground.

Among the most stubborn misconceptions about authoritarian regimes is the idea that they rest on a *de facto* social contract, whereby the regimes raise living standards and in exchange the people surrender their freedom. Obviously, if an authoritarian regime fails to raise living standards, its ruling circle does not admit its failure to fulfill its side of the contract and leave power. Nor can the people force its exit by taking the rulers to court for failure to comply. Authoritarians are happy to have GDP growth, but they do not require it, and they feel no imperative to satisfy the material aspirations of ordinary people. Unfree people can sometimes be more easily pacified if their incomes are rising and opportunities for their children are expanding. But in China, the authoritarian country where such a contract is most frequently alleged to exist, those conditions have never held for large segments of society. The Chinese people understand the true contract under which they live: if they keep disappointments and doubts largely to themselves and publicly profess loyalty, then the authorities might not come after them.

Authoritarian regimes can survive with little or no economic growth, thanks to those wielding truncheons, but not without cash flow—and the best source of that comes from material that nature deposited into the earth hundreds of millions of years ago, which can be sold on world markets for hard currency. Beyond mother lodes of oil or natural gas, ready cash can also be generated with diamond or gold mines, precious metals, and rare minerals. All it

takes is some extraction equipment, labor (often forced), railroads, and ports. But these regimes also find new ways to generate cash flow. North Korea once counterfeited U.S. \$100 bills at scale. Then it innovated, discovering that it could hack its way into foreign central bank accounts and cryptocurrency exchanges. The regime also rakes in cash, especially in foreign currencies, the old-fashioned way: by dispatching soldiers and laborers abroad for a fee.

In authoritarian regimes, paranoia rules.

In the case of Putin's Russia, oil and gas exports help fund the regime—so much so that such revenues have covered as much as a quarter of the costs of the war against Ukraine. China, India, and Turkey have together purchased close to \$400 billion in Russian oil since 2022, sometimes to consume it, sometimes to resell it at a markup. Moscow has innovated, too, assembling a shadow fleet of decrepit tankers as well as a coterie of sketchy insurers and shell companies (a time-honored Western invention) to evade a U.S.-devised price cap.

But the need for cash also creates vulnerabilities. Oil becomes money only when it traverses seas or crosses international land borders and is then refined and shipped to consumers. Washington and its partners could sanction oil refineries in China, India, and Turkey, raising those countries' costs and lowering Russia's revenues while helping coordinate alternative sources. A new EU draft proposal would allow member states to board and detain shadow-fleet tankers, which are already under sanctions. As for pipelines, cyber-capabilities can cause repeated temporary disruptions, reducing Russia's revenues.

At first glance, China might look like an exception to the idea that Western countries can exploit an authoritarian regime's need for cash. China consumes most of its own natural resources, and is the world's largest importer of raw materials. It also collects taxes, including a value-added tax that is its biggest source of income. But its other big source is what it earns from finished-product exports, which account for roughly 20 percent of China's GDP and on which corporations pay taxes. Retaliatory tariffs and other trade restrictions could thus choke off much of the regime's cash flow if they are executed by a broad coalition of cooperating countries, which would need to invest substantially in their own reindustrialization and in alternative supply chains—which they should be doing, anyway.

TALL TALES

The third dimension of authoritarianism is the stories a regime tells about itself, its people, its history, and its place in the world. Authoritarians always try to suppress the stories they do not want their people to see. But they understand that even effective suppression is insufficient on its own; they also need to propagate visions of the nation and the world that resonate with ordinary people. These stories vary across regimes, but elements recur. They aim to spread fear to bolster national cohesion, featuring the collusion of internal and external enemies: ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, labeled as terrorists; elites, intellectuals, democrats (usually but not always in scare quotes); the International Monetary Fund, Jews, George Soros, foreigners; the Great Satan (the United States), the Little Satan (Israel). Authoritarian narratives also evoke a period of national greatness in the past that was undone by hostile forces but will be restored as soon as today's enemies are vanquished by the nation's sole savior: the regime and current ruler.

Anti-Westernism is the core trope of today's authoritarian regimes, and they can frequently draw on Western sources for material. Some of the greatest hits: NATO attacked Russia, the West encourages coups and installs puppet governments, the West is striving to maintain hegemony over the world majority. And then there is the simplest and most effective of all the authoritarian stories: "The East is rising, the West is declining."

People living under these regimes, however, do not accept regime narratives at face value. Plausible enemies, saboteurs, and spies must occasionally be paraded before them, and plausible tales of U.S. hostility toward China or Russia (preferably straight from the mouths of Americans themselves) must be cited alongside implausible ones. Regime stories must speak to ordinary people, to their sense of violated fairness, their struggles and aspirations. Not everything in these narratives will comport with their experiences, but many people will excuse discrepancies as long as some of it does. The Chinese nation and the Russian nation were, in fact, great imperial civilizations, and few inhabitants of those places dispute that they deserve to be great again.

The centrality of narrative in the operation, legitimacy, and survival of authoritarian regimes makes them vulnerable. They are especially exposed where they are most active: in wielding history. China drills home stories of what it calls its "century of humiliation" beginning in the 1800s, and these resonate with large numbers of Chinese people.

But there are also compelling stories about the more than half century of self-humiliation under Chinese Communist Party rule: the CCP has killed far more Chinese people than foreign interventions ever did. Similarly, the CCP takes credit for China's economic miracle, but the boom resulted primarily from the diligence and ingenuity of the Chinese people; party officials have often been parasitic on the country's economic success, expropriating businesses once they have become successful. The party casts itself as the great defender of Chinese civilization and Confucianism. But the CCP continues to be the desecrator of philosophical and religious traditions as well as innumerable monuments, and the persecutor of monks, writers, artists.

To tell those stories, democracies would have to invest more in penetrative communications and persuasive content. The glory days of the Voices, as American and European radio stations broadcasting into the Soviet Union were known, were gone even before the Trump administration eliminated their funding earlier this year. It has become difficult to maintain virtual private networks (VPNs) that allow people to evade Internet restrictions in countries such as China; then again, Washington has barely tried. The CCP, meanwhile, controls the algorithm on the app TikTok, which serves as a dominant source of news for nearly half of Americans under the age of 30.

THE DECIDERS

The fourth dimension of authoritarianism is the control that a regime exerts over life chances: the way the state reaches deep into the lives of its subjects. The more the state serves as the principal employer, the harder it is for people to refuse to praise it, let alone speak out against it. In regime hands, housing becomes a weapon, whether via state ownership, licenses to register property ownership, or residency permits, such as in China's urban *hukou* system of household registration. State-controlled education means that the authorities can deny children admission to school if a parent or family refuses to perform whatever political tasks might be demanded of them. Individuals and families begin to volunteer to serve the regime, even if they detest it, in the hopes of obtaining or retaining employment, a place to live, or educational opportunities; having a chance to vacation at state-owned resorts; or just securing a passport or an exit visa. In some ways, control over quotidian affairs empowers regimes more than their repressive apparatuses—and does not require far-reaching forms of “tech authoritarianism.”

Few states control life chances fully, of course. Black markets and corruption flourish, providing alternative spaces and options. But the more the state controls your life chances, the more the state has power over you and the less power you have. At the highest levels of such control, authoritarian states become totalitarian. They push subjugation to the maximum, incentivizing denunciations of any perceived nonconformity. Neighbor is pitted against neighbor, coworker against coworker, as the people themselves undermine the social bonds and trust that might otherwise enable a modicum of autonomy from the state.

An authoritarian regime's control over its subjects' life chances is yet another source of strength that also creates weaknesses—albeit fewer than do the other dimensions. The private sector can, in theory, provide a vital antidote. If you can start your own business, join others in doing so, or move freely from one private employer to another based on your qualifications and hard work, you are less subject to state control. The same holds for one's ability to buy or rent private housing, attend nonstate schools, or form nongovernmental organizations.

But authoritarian regimes can exert massive influence over the private economy, and particularly over the largest employers, when a single person or a small group sometimes owns the enterprise (or the housing stock). What is more, harsh economic sanctions designed to punish regimes often instead end up punishing ordinary people and driving private enterprises either out of business or into the hands of the regime for help. That is what happened in Russia after the imposition of Western sanctions following Putin's widening of the war against Ukraine in February 2022. Moreover, even when private markets are allowed to flourish, they can entrap people, as happened when Xi decided to puncture China's property bubble, leaving untold millions with crushing debts, incomplete homes, and job losses—and thus often more vulnerable to and dependent on the regime. Still, the freedom that derives from legal, smaller-scale market activity can be a godsend.

CONDUCTIVE OR CORROSIVE?

The fifth and final dimension of authoritarianism is not a feature of a regime per se but the geopolitical environment in which it exists. A global order can be conducive to or corrosive for authoritarian regimes, and is almost always some combination of both, but what matters is the degree and the trendlines.

This is the dimension in which the United States has the most potential wherewithal to unsettle the autocrats. For a system putatively constructed to ensure that democratic ideals and free markets flourished, the U.S.-led world order has for a long time been remarkably conducive to authoritarian regimes. Consider, for example, the fact that such regimes usually require mass transfers of technology, since they have generally lagged behind the world's most advanced economies, which are democracies. The latter have been more than happy to have their private sectors supply nondemocracies, including Putin's Russia and communist China, with what they needed to develop. In 2016, according to the *Financial Times* journalist Patrick McGee, Apple pledged to invest \$275 billion over five years to help Xi transform China into a crucial supply-chain hub and skilled-worker behemoth.

Authoritarian regimes also desperately need access to the lucrative markets of the West to sell their commodities and finished goods. The decisive U.S. domestic market was opened to communist China in 1980 and to Russia in 1992, when they were respectively granted "most favored nation" trading status. Both were also eventually admitted to the World Trade Organization without having to meet all the conditions required for admission and without being part of the U.S. security order. Authoritarians were allowed to make free use of the global financial system and receive foreign direct investment, which in the case of China was often routed through British-ruled Hong Kong. Today, Chinese-language commentary on the country's trade with and investment in India pointedly warns not to repeat the mistakes that Washington made with China.

European countries, in particular Germany, became the crucial customers of Russian energy products, which could be developed at scale solely in cooperation with Western oil majors and service firms. At its peak before the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian gas accounted for 45 percent of European imports in terms of volume. Even some four years into the Kremlin's attempted eradication of Ukrainian sovereignty, Russia is still responsible for around 12 percent of European gas imports. In 2024, European countries spent more money importing Russian energy than they did aiding Ukraine financially, effectively footing the bill for Russia's aggression.

Japan proved to be one of authoritarian China's most important sources of technology transfer and foreign direct investment, but

Europe deepened its dependence on China, too, becoming a lucrative market for Chinese exports as they advanced up the value chain. In this regard, however, the United States is the main offender. The deliberate transfer of American manufacturing and critical supply chains to a country ruled by a communist monopoly regime was one of the most breathtaking gifts ever given to an authoritarian country, greater even than the bonanza of advanced technologies that the United States and European countries bestowed on Stalin's Soviet Union. The wealth generated by Western technology transfers made China the first country in history to become the world's greatest trading nation without a real navy; China gladly relied on the U.S. Navy to secure global sea-lanes. Beijing then used the proceeds to build its own navy, which is now eclipsing the American one.

Criticizing such folly comes easily. The intention, however, was never to support authoritarianism but to undermine or at least soften it—to carry out what the West Germans dubbed *Wandel durch Handel*, or “change through trade.” Western governments and pundits could look back on the spectacular successes of postwar West Germany and Japan, as well as those of the latter's two former colonies, South Korea and Taiwan, and imagine that related transformations could be brought about in postcommunist Russia and even communist China. But Eurasian landmass empires have been stubbornly autocratic for nearly their entire existence, despite repeated attempts at democratic revolutions. They have refused to bend to the West, even as they borrowed technologies and ideas from it, and proudly uphold their civilizations as superior.

When Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping articulated a policy of “reform and opening,” in the late 1970s, it was not a commitment to become a responsible stakeholder in the U.S.-led international order. It was a strategy to use that order to modernize a woefully poor China, depressed by Communist rule, while hiding its intentions and biding its time, for however long it took, before assuming its rightful place in an alternate international order shaped by Beijing. It happened far faster than Deng or anyone else had imagined it could. The CCP was also mindful that past communist parties that had pursued political liberalization had come to realize that they were in fact liquidating themselves, as happened in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and in the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Had the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev never come to power or never attempted to liberalize, the

CCP might have embarked on its own suicidal political liberalization. Instead, the Chinese leadership learned history's lesson.

In warmly welcoming closed, illiberal regimes into the open, liberal global order, Washington and its allies were not demonstrating an ignorance of history. They just chose the wrong history as a guide. Sometimes the global order was, as designed, corrosive to authoritarianism. Still, it allowed and even incentivized the United States and other democratic countries to make choices that were conducive to autocrats. Vital market and tech access constituted the greatest leverage the United States and the West had over the authoritarians. It was essentially squandered.

The opportunity remains, however, to push back vigorously. Russia's exports of oil and gas and China's exports of manufactured goods remain their lifelines. China can ramp up its purchases of Russian oil and gas, for instance, but it cannot make up for all the revenue that Russia would lose if Europe managed to wean itself off imports of Russian energy. And Russia can buy more finished goods from China, but it cannot make up for all the revenue that China would lose if the United States and European countries significantly reduced their own imports of such goods.

Despite the clarity of these vulnerabilities, the United States and its friends cannot make up their minds on whether (and how) to "de-risk" their relationships with China or to effectuate a rapprochement or even some sort of grand bargain. They struggle to gird themselves against Russia as global energy demand continues to rise, especially with China controlling much of the alternative energy supply chain. At the same time, Washington has turned on its allies over their security free-riding and shortcomings in trade reciprocity, both of which the United States itself had partly encouraged. The failure of the West's big bet on corroding the great Eurasian authoritarians has, for the time being, turned the West against itself. Meanwhile, authoritarian cooperation, above all between Beijing and Moscow, keeps getting deeper. Yet those countries ultimately face significant limits, which become visible when their partnerships are stacked up against the combined wherewithal of Western countries and their partners.

Alliances are built on trust and attraction, otherwise known as soft power, and they are the most effective tools that democracies have

A regime's need
for cash creates
vulnerabilities.

in their struggle with autocracies. To be sure, anti-Western and particularly anti-American sentiment retains perennial purchase in all corners of the globe (and in the United States, too), owing to the very real histories of European and American imperialism and the sheer preponderance of U.S. power. This ideology provides considerable opportunity for authoritarian regimes—but many of the people living under them continue to be attracted to Western ideals, institutions, and lifestyles. That soft power is largely an emergent property, rather than something that can be guided by a government. Still, a successful democratic example with good governance, high living standards, social mobility, and freedom will always be the most corrosive force against authoritarianism. But the United States is perhaps as far from that, in various ways, as it was in the 1970s.

MAN IN THE MIRROR

Now comes the elephant in the room: U.S. President Donald Trump, whose second term has aroused domestic and international trepidation about American authoritarianism. After all, if the president is an authoritarian, or if the United States is becoming an authoritarian country, how could it lead the democratic world in a fight against authoritarianism?

Warnings about the breakdown of American democracy derive partly from disappointments over policy reversals on contentious issues: immigration, crime-fighting, energy, abortion, foreign alliances. The ferocity and scope of Trump's counterrevolution have stunned progressive revolutionaries and the far larger number of Americans on the center-left who for decades had complied (or had been intimidated into silence) as left-wing orthodoxies swept through and reshaped establishment institutions. What many of them see as an authoritarian assault on such institutions, more Americans see as an overdue restoration of common sense. This back-and-forth struggle to dominate American institutions testifies to their surpassing value and to their insusceptibility to permanent subordination.

One American institution, however, could be viewed as problematic, just as the Antifederalists argued in the 1780s and Linz argued two centuries later: namely, presidentialism. Trump's exercise of presidential power should surprise no one. Executive orders—which are not expressly provided for in the Constitution—go back to George Washington, and too many presidents have had recourse to them. Impoundment (the delaying or withholding of congressionally

mandated spending) is also absent from the Constitution, but presidents of both parties have practiced it. The power to issue absolute pardons, explicitly stipulated in the founding document, has been exploited with bipartisan intemperance. Trump is a shameless, concerted abuser of this lamentable executive inheritance. But his predecessors would recognize it.

The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., published *The Imperial Presidency* in 1973. He went easy on the phenomenon's gold standard, Franklin Roosevelt, whose policies he favored. (Democrats tend to like presidential power when their party holds the office.) The Caesarism inherent in the original American presidency got turbocharged not just by the New Deal but also by the country's ascension to superpower status. Still, it would matter far less if Congress were doing its job. Following Richard Nixon's abuses, Congress did seek to constrain the imperial presidency, but as the decades have passed it has largely failed to stick to the task. On the contrary, congressional majorities have often sacrificed the institution's prerogatives to presidents of their own party and sabotaged their institution's operations with debilitating procedural changes, such as centralizing power away from congressional committees.

Trump's second term does have novel aspects: for example, his assertions of absolute authority over all federal government bodies and personnel, the so-called administrative state. These actions claim support from a theory known as "the unitary executive." The current Supreme Court has generally shown strong backing for this form of sweeping presidential power, in the name of holding career officials accountable. Conservatives have long decried how Republicans get elected president only for the federal bureaucracy to obstruct their policies. The problem is real, although exaggerated. And Trump's response—political purges and enforced sycophancy across the executive branch—offers no remedy. The unitary theory might add a veneer of legitimacy to his commanding the Department of Justice to pursue vindictive indictments of his critics and ease up on his law-breaking supporters, but it will bequeath that same validation to his successors.

Trump has also made a show of deliberately exceeding his constitutional authority, including by imposing, suspending, and reimposing tariffs and using fig-leaf declarations of "emergencies." (One stand-out in his sewer of social media posts: "He who saves his Country

does not violate any Law.”) His strong-arming of universities, law firms, and media companies is a response to real problems, but his actions seem aimed more at harming those entities—and expanding his dominion over them—than at crafting enduring fixes. Although the courts move slowly and through multiple levels, judges appointed by presidents of both parties have ruled many of these steps illegal.

Critics of Trump’s authoritarian wishes and methods have a significant point, one shared by a solid majority of voters, who justifiably

Combating
authoritarianism
requires patience
and resolve.

look askance at his pathetic envy of strongmen, demonstratively brutal enforcement of immigration law, performative deployment of National Guard units to urban areas, bullying, and epic self-dealing. Trump and his supporters celebrate his singular imperative to transgress—then, when institutions move to hold him to account, they complain that

he is being singled out. Still, even at his picaresque worst, Trump’s presidency has not placed the United States on some irreversible slide to authoritarianism.

Nothing delivers a better appreciation of democratic resilience than close study of authoritarian regimes. The United States has no real coercive apparatus, let alone one that consumes the lion’s share of its budget. For revenue, the government depends not on some cash-flow machine but entirely on taxpayers (and voters) who operate in a vast, open-market economy. Storytelling is endlessly contested, and recourse to propaganda provokes resistance and derision. The state exercises little control over life chances. Nothing the term-limited, lame-duck Trump has done, or might yet try, could significantly move the needle on any of those dimensions. As for the fifth dimension, China’s power is having a corrosive effect on democracies, including in the United States, which has clumsily adopted measures that resemble the CCP’s mercenary mercantilism. But such steps cannot coalesce into wholesale self-destruction of the open U.S. model.

Rather than institutionalized authoritarianism, what threatens the United States is bipartisan fiscal insanity, a deep erosion of basic government performance, severely diminished public trust in institutions, and the absence of a shared national narrative, all of which are interrelated. Trump didn’t start these fires, and he won’t put them out. He and too many of his opponents feed off and contribute to

the country's extreme distraction and its resulting inability to craft a robust strategy of national renewal that would put the authoritarians on the back foot.

The seductions of immutable hierarchies, an imagined golden age, or the transformative power of violence can persist in open, tolerant societies, and political entrepreneurs can, for a time, make hay with them. Populism in all its guises surfaces problems but rarely solves them. The erosion of government performance helps get populists elected, but their governing tends to worsen that erosion, and this dynamic, alongside flagrant corruption, erodes their popularity. One of the abiding strengths of any genuinely liberal order—domestic or international—is that within it illiberalism can exist, and do damage, without posing an existential threat to it. Institutions and citizens of such an order should neither overrate the risk nor underrate their own strength and potential to prevail.

NO GUARANTEES

Linz's primary subject, Franco, is long dead, and so is his authoritarian Spain. Every strongman and would-be strongman in power today will be dead, at some point. For authoritarian regimes, survival is uncertain, and never more so than during inescapable successions.

But combating authoritarianism requires patience and resolve. It does not entail overthrowing every such regime or, indeed, any of them. The United States can topple weaker authoritarian regimes, but it cannot ensure their replacement by a better alternative. Time and again, Washington has demonstrated that it lacks the complex toolkit, cultural understanding, and sustained attention to establish enduring rule-of-law institutions and democratic political cultures on foreign soil, whether by force of arms, diplomacy, trade, or some combination thereof. Besides, Washington cannot directly bring down nuclear-armed authoritarian adversaries such as China and Russia without risking Armageddon. Instead, the goal should be to shape an environment that makes authoritarian regimes even less confident about their continued existence and, therefore, more preoccupied with their domestic affairs and less able to risk acting coercively abroad. The desired outcome is proactive multidomain competition and occasional cooperation—in other words, cold war instead of hot war.

Combating authoritarianism also requires that democracies get their own houses in order, which is particularly urgent in the United

States because of its weight. No single country in recorded history has amassed so much power across so many domains simultaneously. That Americans profoundly disagree on what promotes or threatens their country's strength, and also on the appropriate degree of U.S. involvement in world affairs, is itself a strength. What is not, however, is a loss of a shared sense of a positive national identity and purpose. Some argue that instead of expending resources and effort to knock its adversaries off balance, the United States should invest in itself and its distinct advantages, including existing and new relationships with allies, friends, and partners. That position relies on a false binary: reinvigorating national purpose and solidifying relationships is, in fact, knocking one's adversaries off balance.

Neither the United States nor China is going to vanish. Therefore, they must share the planet. Washington's path could not be clearer: build substantial leverage with which to negotiate (or, if necessary, enact with like-minded countries) more advantageous and stable terms for planet sharing. These should favor an open and secure global commons, economic arrangements that foster opportunity at home and abroad, and sovereignty—which coercive spheres of influence (masquerading as a multipolar world) profoundly threaten but which alliances enhance for all.

The U.S.-led postwar order did not fail. It succeeded. It aimed to facilitate “the rise of the rest,” and it did, spectacularly so. But the countries that built and led the order did not prepare for the predictable results of that success: a relatively smaller share of global GDP for the advanced, wealthy countries of the G-7 and a relatively larger share for everyone else, with corresponding demands for more voice. Now the global order must be updated for a new era, one in which China—a supreme beneficiary of the existing order—possesses the wherewithal, and not just the ambition, to try to supplant it.

After World War II, ordered liberty took hold across much of the world because the United States became a superpower and acted like one, for worse but also for better. Today, the demand for U.S. power is essentially unlimited: bring Ukraine into NATO, defend Taiwan, sign a security treaty with Saudi Arabia. The supply, however, is not. And so Washington must adjust. Commitments must come into alignment with capabilities. This is finally happening. As the United States necessarily (albeit erratically) rebalances its global posture to deal with new circumstances, it is possible to see

the advent of what might be called middle-power horizontalism: deeper economic and security cooperation, especially among the countries of northern Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This is a highly encouraging development, partly galvanized by Trump—a kind of latticework of additional integration that does not entail displacing the United States but enhancing its ability to lead. This will be the work of a generation.

All the major authoritarian regimes have shown themselves to be committed to achieving unencumbered sovereignty by driving U.S. power from their immediate regions and collapsing Washington's alliances. All share the goal of undermining and weakening the United States and its allies in any way they can. Despite not being subjected to aerial bombardment or amphibious invasion, open societies are under constant attack. China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and other anti-Western authoritarian regimes spread disinformation, exfiltrate confidential personnel files, purloin intellectual property, harass and sometimes abduct their own nationals on Western soil for exercising free-speech rights, pay criminals and gang members in Western societies to commit arson or sabotage, plant malware in financial, electrical, and water systems, and much more. "Peace" in the sense of that blissful time between wars has been lost. The gray zone is the new twilight zone.

Nonetheless, the future can still be shaped, and the open and secure global commons can be reinvented for another long run. The Ukrainians stood up to a full-scale Russian invasion and dragged the entire West into the fight. The Israelis knocked the teeth out of Iran's manifold proxies and even the Islamic Republic itself, and then pulled Washington in. The Taiwanese for three consecutive elections have selected the presidential candidate most despised by the CCP. The United States can neither eliminate nor transform the Eurasian authoritarians, but it can reenergize itself and, in the process, make it harder for the authoritarians to marshal their strengths and easier for their weaknesses to hold them back. The American experiment has always had to contend with bouts of disorder, disarray, and doubt. But the United States has also periodically rediscovered and renewed itself, sometimes in profound ways, and it must do so again. Its authoritarian adversaries are displaying audacity and resolve, but the nature of their regimes always presents an opportunity: their loyalists are their true enemies within. 🌐