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Table of Contents



Note from the Editors	p. 0
Rethinking the Boundaries of Political Violence <i>Sophia Farrand, SC '26 Editor: Cybille Irrisou, PO '27</i>	p. 1-4
En-Garde: Conservative Resurgence and Securitization in Contemporary Japan <i>Sam Hanson, PZ '27 Editor: Zabei Frank, PO '26</i>	p. 4-10
Developing Counter-Terrorism Strategies Against Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan <i>Utku Ozgur, PZ '29 Editor: Priscilla Matthews, PO '28</i>	p. 10-12
Armenia's Strategic Shift Away from Russia <i>Alec Kong, PO '29 Editor: Jocelyn Cho, PO '28</i>	p. 12-15
China and Brazil: How Investment Has Led to Economic, Environmental, and Social Destruction <i>Maddie Huq, PZ '28 Editor: Priscilla Matthews, PO '28</i>	p. 15-16
Trinidad's Dragon Gas Deal: Small-State Energy Agreements and Structural Instability <i>Reanna Mohler, CMC '29 Editors: Jun Kwon & Priscilla Matthews, PO '28</i>	p. 17-19
Between Revelation and Revolution: Islamic History and State Formation in Iran and Afghanistan <i>Sara Ketabi, PO '29 Editor: Priscilla Matthews, PO '28</i>	p. 19-22
Khamenei's Succession and Western Interference <i>Aashi Singh, SC '29 Editors: Utku Ozgur, PZ '29 & Priscilla Matthews, PO '28</i>	p. 22-25
Manufacturing Consent: How U.S. Mass Media Builds Public Support for Foreign Policy <i>Sinan Walji, PO '28 Editor: Tania Rachidi, PO '27</i>	p. 26-29



Note from the Editors



This academic year has been one of growth, collaboration, and renewed commitment to fostering a vibrant intellectual community across the Claremont Colleges. We were proud to partner with fellow 5C publications like the Claremont Journal of Law and Public Policy and GRAFT to host joint socials and strengthen connections among writers and editors. We are especially grateful for the dedication shown by our writer-editor pairs, whose commitment to critical thinking and analysis is evident in every piece we publish.

This edition is our largest to date, featuring a diverse range of work that spans the globe. From Russia-Armenia and Pakistan to Japan, Iran and Afghanistan, Trinidad, and China-Brazil, our contributors examine issues relevant to current international discourse. One article also explores political violence, a topic that remains critically relevant as the foundations of international law face increasing challenges worldwide.

In addition to our print publication, we expanded our digital presence this year by launching short-form content on social media. By increasing our social media presence, we aim to promote awareness of international affairs to a wider audience.

Finally, we would like to extend our sincere thanks to Lina Chang, whose leadership as Editor-in-Chief in Fall 2025 laid the groundwork for this publication and set a strong foundation for our continued growth.

Sincerely,

Zabei Frank, Editor-in-Chief, Pomona College '26

Sarah Chianglin, Digital Content Editor, Pomona College '27

CLAREMONT JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

*Fall 2025 – Spring 2026***Rethinking the Boundaries of Political Violence****Sophia Farrand** | *Editor: Cybille Irrisou*

What is political violence? The term is deceptively simple, but beneath its face lies a myriad of philosophical, methodological, practical, and ethical quandaries that have perplexed political scientists for decades. Are state repression, famine, or pollution all examples of violence? Or is that definition too expansive to be analytically useful? The boundaries of this concept shift depending on its context, and there are massive consequences—not only for communities and individuals, but also for policy, international aid, international law, and domestic governance depending on how it is defined. This article argues that the ambiguity in the term "political violence" is not merely pedantic but has tangible consequences for whose suffering gets recognized, whose voices are heard, and whose experiences get legitimized. By discussing the philosophical, political, and practical concerns, from philosophical dichotomies to database methodologies, this article argues that the seemingly objective task of definition carries epistemological implications and can result in real-world consequences. How violence is defined shapes the responses, solutions, and audiences prioritized in efforts to reduce it worldwide.

Political violence should, on its face, be a combination of its two constitutive parts, "political" modifying "violence." The most basic definition of violence is "actions that are intended or likely to hurt people or cause damage."¹ This includes individual acts such as assault and collective phenomena such as interstate war, terrorism, or state repression. The phrase "intended or likely" means that it can be both accidental or intentional, thereby avoiding the legal

difficulty of proving intent. This isn't true of all definitions, however: the UN definition of violence is "a social phenomenon that involves forceful acts or behaviour that are intended to cause harm," requiring both intent and force.²

The phrase "hurt people or cause damage" from the Cambridge definition, and "cause harm" from the UNDRR definition expand the scope of violence to include property destruction and environmental damage, even when no sentient subject directly experiences pain. However, this still retains a basic binary of perpetrator (who "acts") and victim (who or that is hurt or damaged). Galtung's informal definition of violence is "any avoidable insult to basic human needs, and, more generally, to sentient life of any kind, defined as that which is capable of suffering pain and enjoy well-being."³

As for the second term, Goodin suggests that "politics is the constrained use of social power."⁴ The "political," then, would be anything that relates to the nature and constraint of that social power. In other words, political as an adjective modifying violence can be understood as violence that shapes or contests social power. This is so broad that it risks encompassing nearly all forms of violence, echoing the idea that politics is "who gets what, when, how."⁵ For this article, I define political violence as violence that is used instrumentally or symbolically to influence the organization of power in society, its preservation, or its redistribution. Political violence structures society, its dynamics, its functions, its subjects, and its goals. In practice, it leads to the assumption that violence is "a specific thing, the effects of which we can observe, count, measure, and potentially eliminate,"⁶ which is more efficient

as a definition, but leaves the more complex, intersubjective experiences of violence and harm uncommunicated.

Political violence, from these two different parts, is violence that is politically motivated, executed, or oriented "at inflicting physical, psychological, and symbolic damage to individuals and/or property with the intention of influencing various audiences for affecting or resisting political, social, and/or cultural change."⁷ This is clearer, but the intent-based definitions make violence difficult to define, let alone prosecute. The role of intent and the degree of harm remain deeply contested. For instance, structures like racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and transphobia produce sustained harm over and above discrete events or easily measurable dynamics. These are legal, political, social, and epistemological gray areas, but their impacts are very real.

So, while a basic working definition of political violence exists, it generates a series of conceptual tensions.

Theoretical understandings of political violence, not as tightly constrained by pragmatic concerns, define violence more broadly. While an objective definition is desirable, these approaches still rely on underlying assumptions. For instance, is violence the "natural equilibrium" (as in Hobbes, with war as the natural state of all against all), or is peace the natural state (wherein violence is the result of weak, illiberal, or ineffective power)?

Violence is also closely tied to the concept of the state. Theoretically, the state is the result of a social contract, exchanging individual freedoms for collective security. On the other hand, Michael Mann's seminal work *The Autonomous Power of the State* asserts that the state is defined by its "monopoly on the means of physical violence."⁸ In this view, violence is foundational to state power. Mbembe further argues that the state cannot exist without violence, making violence and statehood mutually constitutive.⁹ This leads to a paradox: the

state both produces violence and claims to protect against it.

Tilly amends Mann's earlier idea of violence by defining the state as the actor with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This introduces a normative dimension: "violence refers to damage that does not enjoy legal protection."¹⁰ Crime is violent, but state repression, in this framework, may not be. Conversely, some argue that a state becomes illegitimate when it harms its citizens.

With the onset of the Global War on Terror by the United States in the early 2000s, violence came into conceptual conflict with its earlier ties to the state. State violence, though legally sanctioned, was increasingly viewed as morally illegitimate. This raises questions: can legitimate states commit illegitimate violence? Can violence itself confer legitimacy?

The third conceptual entanglement concerns the relationship between violence and peace. If "peace is the absence of violence," the definition becomes circular.¹¹ But if peace is human flourishing absent of suffering, then peace is a Platonic ideal that is impossible to realize in practice.

Another gray area is slow violence, defined by Rob Nixon as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight."¹² This challenges event-based understandings of violence. Given climate change, violence becomes diffuse and pervasive; this forces peace to be understood as a spectrum rather than an absolute.

Political Violence in Practice

The conventional, practice-oriented understanding of political violence draws on early theoretical definitions. If violence was originally understood "as something done by an individual or a group to other individuals or groups...deployed for specific purposes" and was seen as something that "involves a causal relationship," it is assumed that the phenomenon should be "both visible and

measurable."¹³ When this kind of practice-oriented understanding informs measurement of violence, it usually takes the form of "battlefield deaths, homicide rates, or other forms of body counts."¹⁴ The evolution of theory among liberal scholars in the 1980s led to the conclusion that "the spread of liberal institutions," including democratic norms and structures, correlates with lower levels of interstate violence,¹⁵ while stronger states are associated with reductions in domestic and other forms of violence.¹⁶

The shift toward a focus on terrorism and state repression in the early 2000s redirected attention to violence occurring outside traditional conflict zones, and expanded the range of actors who could commit (or be impacted) by political violence beyond of a rigid perpetrator-victim framework. Traditionally, violence was implicitly attributed to actors assumed to possess the capacity for violence, particularly state institutions. In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, scholarship sought to explain the motivations, uses, and consequences of violence deployed for political ends.¹⁷

Data-derived and empirically based definitions of political violence emerge from the methodology of conflict-mapping databases, which often reflect this liberal tradition. ACLED, for instance, codes instances of violence by event, actor group(s), and number of fatalities.¹⁸ It further differentiates between categories such as repression, insurgency, atrocity, terrorism, and foreign military engagement. For these categories, a violent event is typically recorded only when it meets a threshold of 10 battle-related deaths. UCDP-PRIO, another famous conflict-coding database, sets a higher threshold—25 battle-related deaths—to define an active conflict, and conceptualizes violence as the "deliberate use of armed force."¹⁹ The design of these datasets requires conflicts to be coded with clear start and end dates and organized around discrete events. This focus, however, often fails to capture ongoing realities of violence, harm, and insecurity that can exist outside of these coded categories.²⁰

Consequences and Results

Is it beneficial for the term to be so flexible? On the one hand, flexibility allows for the inclusion of marginalized or non-dominant experiences of violence, and can accommodate feminist, poststructuralist, Queer international relations, and other critical approaches that emphasize intersectional forms of harm. On the other hand, a lack of conceptual clarity around a term as central as violence can lead to a weak consensus, policy stagnation, and misinterpretation.

Theory is too broad, but praxis-based definitions are too rigid. Yet a definition remains necessary. Quantitative databases designed to inform policy cannot easily capture ambiguous factors like intent. Qualitative analysis, often based on case studies, is difficult to compare across contexts. A shared definition can facilitate policy change. The dangers of under-defining a concept include a lack of rigor and actionable solutions. The dangers of over-defining include excluding or misrepresenting those most affected. But defining violence with the aim of eliminating it entirely introduces further complications. Efforts to standardize and manage violence through state institutions may also reproduce the structures that enable it.

In short, the binary between theoretical and practical approaches is inherently unstable, as the binaries between peace and conflict, violence and state security, victim and perpetrator. We should define with an eye to what a project of definition should do—enable effective action²¹—while remaining attentive to the people such definitions are meant to serve.

Looking to the future, a more nuanced view of political violence can help us better understand how climate change, AI, global migration, and other large-scale transformations will impact people in complex and interconnected ways.

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En-Garde: Conservative Resurgence and Securitization in Contemporary Japan

Sam Hanson | *Editor: Zabei Frank*

Introduction

With the exception of a scattered few in the 71 years since post–World War II constitutional reforms, Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, more widely known as the LDP, has been the majority leader of the Japanese Diet. The unique adaptability of the party known as "Big Tent" theory has allowed the party to maintain legislative control even amidst significant internal political changes. However, in recent years, many political scientists and curious onlookers alike had thought the demise of this trend to be all but assured. The entrance of definitively moderate office-holders in former Prime Ministers Suga, Ishiba, and Kishida curtailed the party's base of conservative leaning voters, much while the party's larger public eye became saturated with financial corruption scandals, frustratingly unproductive policy agendas, an unimproving economy, and inaction against strategic decay. Preceding the 2025 Diet elections, the departure of the LDP-supporting Komeito party from the governing coalition and an underwhelming entry from their replacement, the Japan Innovation Party (JIP), was widely thought to have cemented those suspicions.

Enter Sanae Takaichi. A veteran LDP ultraconservative, Takaichi spent much of her career under the wing of former late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, both the longest serving Prime Minister in Japanese democratic history and Japan's most

prominent conservative leader since the end of the Second World War. Takaichi emerged in quick succession as the first female president of her party and then subsequently as the first female Prime Minister of Japan after her electoral victory in October 2025, capturing influence and authority at an unprecedented pace on the way to the PM's seat. One startlingly clear example of that popularity was the impact she has had on young voters, a group Japan's conservative elites have long denoted a lost cause. Polls show the historically progressive "under 30" polling group has pivoted in support of the LDP despite Takaichi holding extremely conservative positions on issues like immigration and economic policy.¹ Though Takaichi's dynamic blend of hardlined policy goals and social warmth did more than provide the direction the LDP needed to escape implosion. After a massive snap election victory in early February, she now finds herself, amidst the chaotic and ever-shifting climate of current international relations, leading an LDP party in its most powerful and unobstructed political position ever.²

Dynamism in the international security environment is as visible and potent in Japan and the greater Indo-Pacific Theater as it is for any other region of the world: China continues to expand their military capabilities in all facets of the name—unmanned weaponized drone swarms, rapid sea and air vessel production, and widespread surveillance upgrades, to name a few—and exhibit their assertiveness by conducting large-scale operational exercises around the island of Taiwan;³ the second term of U.S. President Donald Trump has thoroughly shaken the status quo of global cooperation, destabilizing the legitimacy of alliances and international institutions and, apprehensively, shifting the trend of general strategic thought further from liberalism and closer to a realist perspective; and the criticality of Japan's economic stagnation inches closer to existential in the face of birth rate and aging crises, growing demands for higher spending on social services and infrastructure, and growing concerns about geopolitical safety.

The re-representation of the Japanese Far-Right under Takaichi in the post-Abe era and the destabilization of international and geopolitical security have placed the possibility of increased securitization of Japanese foreign policy in plain view. The idea of Japan utilizing securitization techniques to justify dissonance between commitments to pacifism and gradual geopolitical reposturing has been suggested before, but I argue now that Takaichi wields the popular legitimacy to realize this hypothetical. In blending the historical geopolitical context of Japan's conservative movement with analysis of the current political climate, I will explain why this has occurred and what contributing factors should be most closely observed.

What follows is an argument in three parts. The first introduces Copenhagen School securitization theory in conversation with the presence of Japanese conservatism in Japan's LDP party and posits securitization exposure as a driver of conservative stability despite longstanding popular controversy. The second establishes a strategic foundation for the two most affecting relationships in Japanese foreign policy which usually promote securitization: Sino-Japanese mutual antagonism and the U.S.-Japan security alliance. They have together created the conditions under which Japanese conservative securitization periodically surges, and understanding those conditions is prerequisite to understanding why the current moment is different in degree and magnitude than previous surges. The third examines the consequences of this convergence against a new framework for securitization "success,"⁴ arguing that the three dimensions of "successful" securitization—those being the dominance of security logic in policy discourse, the relational implications for Japan as both referent object and regional security provider, and the collapse of desecuritizing agents—are all more completely satisfied than at any prior point in postwar Japanese history.

Origins of Conservative Securitization in Japan

The Copenhagen School of securitization theory, made known by Barry Buzan and his collaborators (Wæver, De Wilde, etc.), eludes the core framework of the securitization theorem to when a political actor successfully constructs a threat as being existential to the security of the state, thus constituting political action that is beyond "normal" measures.⁵ A few clarifications must be made for the purposes of the argument. Traditional interpretations of Copenhagen School associate a certain grandeur with the idea of "political action," wherein it must be assigned to a specific incidence where the existential threat was invoked, such as a public speech or parliamentary session. In other words, securitization must be directly observed for it to exist. This interpretation of Copenhagen School is outdated and improper in the age of information, where we may retrieve any fact about any political actor from any point in time instantaneously, and where even those political dealings meant to be conspicuous are regularly exposed and affectual of a political actor's public perception. Modern reception of Copenhagen School thought has since clarified that "political action" is not inherently singular, and that it can appropriately represent a strategy or agenda which encompasses multiple examples and stretches across longer periods of activity.

There is also an issue with defining "normal" political measures when they are understood in the context of Japan's security identity, that issue being that the idea of Japan's remilitarization and reemergence as a global military actor is literally referred to as the "normalization" of the state from a non-military-acting alternative.⁶ This clarification does not have an existing solution because there is no scholarly work on the application of Copenhagen School to Japan's current political situation.

Copenhagen School securitization theory is clearly evident in Japan's postwar history. It is no more clear than in what has now grown to be a humongous contradiction of their postwar identity, often labelled by scholars as legislative dissonance or institutional lag.⁷ Since the end of World War II, Japan has been relying on a form of "desecuritization" to drive

foreign policy progress in the Indo-Pacific. That is, purposefully de-threatening themselves in order to appear more approachable by offering attractive economic packages, such as Official Development Assistance (ODA), to their neighbors, and otherwise becoming a dependable cooperator with global partners. Many scholars have thus denoted Japan as a "civilian" state as a way of referring to this alternative to the militarily active status quo of state actors.⁸ This de facto "civilizationization" was set in motion by Article 9 of the 1947 Japanese Constitution. Better known as the "Peace Clause," it states Japan "forever renounce[s] war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes."⁹

The economic and social growth that came in the decades after the implementation with the developmental aid of the U.S. prevented any far-right nationalist movements from gaining traction on the issue in the LDP, which mostly maintained Japan's "desecuritized," "civilian" status.¹⁰ However, Japanese ultraconservatives advocating for Japan's remilitarization and reconsolidation of power have nonetheless maintained a place in the LDP party, which has kept Japan from fully embracing an identity of pacificity and liberal cooperation even in periods of conservative dormancy. This happens for two reasons. First and foremost, unlike traditional political parties, the LDP holds an uncanny ability to pivot their focus from one political root to the next and remain uncommitted to any long-term addendum. With this flexibility comes the liberty to elect whatever official best serves the party's immediate needs without constraining it to a concentrated section of the political spectrum.

This leads into the second reason for the prevalence of conservatives in the LDP, which is that ideas derailing from the mainstream image of pacifist and cooperative Japanese diplomacy but flexible enough to maintain in the party have been regularly presented and called upon by political elites in the LDP since its inception. One example is Nippon Kaigi, the largest ultraconservative

non-governmental organization in Japan of which Abe was and Takaichi is currently a member. The group campaigns on "traditional sovereignty," constitutional reinterpretation, and a return to politics that protect the state's reputation and the lives of its citizens.¹²

For most of the party's history, Japan's conservative historical image has been inefficient in supporting the goals of the LDP far-right movement, as the majority of other groups in the party and in the greater Diet disagree with the pillars of its argument. What causes conservative surges in spite of that conflict is precisely what this article attempts to identify as an opportunity for securitization: geopolitical crisis. For example, during the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996, China conducted missile tests and military exercises around maritime Taiwan prior to their first democratic presidential election.¹³ This raised public concern for Japan's security. The first DPRK Taepodong missile launch in 1998 and sightings of DPRK naval vessels in Japanese waters in 1999 likewise made some believe North Korea was a legitimate safety threat as well.¹⁴ In 2001, the Diet elected new Prime Minister Jun'ichiro Koizumi, who gained power and immediately began implementing Japan-first foreign policy which took hardlined stances on Chinese and North Korean policy, including suspending foreign aid to China for the first time in decades, even though he was a moderate reformist by credential.¹⁵

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe capitalized on the same situation when he gained office. As he took the PM's seat, Sino-Japanese conflict over the Senkaku Islands escalated to its hottest point in decades,¹⁶ China's assertiveness and A2/AD capabilities in the South China Sea alarmed Japan and several other nations, and North Korea batted several long-range missiles well in-range of Japanese territory.¹⁷ In the first year of his term, Prime Minister Abe exemplified an effective securitization of these concerns, producing a wide support base for an array of significant policy changes. He announced Japan's departure from the 1947 Yoshida Doctrine and the introduction of his

own "Abe Doctrine" which promised to reinstate Japan as a world power and facilitate the reconstruction of Japanese foreign policy.¹⁸ This included an expansion of the US-Japan Security Treaty, the creation of the Japanese National Security Council, and most importantly, the redesignation of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) as a fully operational military body, a move that was in clear disagreement with Article 9.¹⁹

Strategic Implications: The Adjacency Dilemma

China and the U.S. are crucial to explaining the motivations of Japanese security strategy, and by extension their exposure to securitization. Unresolved issues with historical identity and war memory often means forcing China and Japan to meet on equal terms leads to contradictions of Chinese and Japanese strategic interests. Consolidation of Japanese-American relations has exacerbated this issue and sometimes, though not always, works counteractively to Japan's security goals. Thus if in the future Japan were to reemerge as a military power while keeping their strategic relations with China stable, it is unlikely they would be able to maintain their current security cooperation with the U.S.; opposedly, if Japan were to confront China in a realistic defense of their national interest, it is unlikely they would be able to do so without the assistance of the United States. This is the "adjacency dilemma" Japan faces.

The Senkaku Islands hold significant strategic value due to their location in the Nansei island chain near Taiwan in the East China Sea. This has caused both countries to incorporate its protection and/or acquisition into policymaking to such an effect that its symbolic power has become more the imperative than its actual usefulness.²² It is logical that China may securitize the issue. Japan's current control over the islands can be made up to be an antagonizing factor and illustrate them as an aggressor, much the same as they invoke anti-Japanese sentiment in calling attention to unresolved wartime issues.

Furthermore, the wartime actions of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) during World War II remain a prevalent point of contention between Japan and China. From 1957 to 1994, various Japanese political and military leaders discussed the problematic history of the Japanese imperial army, but never issued a formal apology which directly blamed Japan for specified atrocities like the Nanjing Massacre or the Comfort Women System.²⁴ The Diet Resolution of 1995 was planned to be the first official document commemorating Japan's wartime responsibility, in which the government released a statement acknowledging the aggression and unlawful colonization carried out by Japan during World War II.²⁵

Most effective in building strategic tension between the two states in contemporary relations has been the way in which both Japan and China are encouraging an offensive interpretation of one another's military spending increases. Most notably, Japan's defense policy stance has suggested that Japan is critically threatened by the possible annexation of Taiwan. Prime Minister Takaichi has already affirmed this interpretation. When asked in congress if a Chinese naval blockade would be a threat to Japan's survival, she said it would "constitute a life-threatening situation" which policy-wise could invoke Japan's right to collective self-defense.²⁷

Japanese-American relations on the other hand have remained relatively stable throughout many periods of global political turmoil. The U.S. is an avid supporter of Japanese conservative policy and has periodically encouraged Japan to increase their military spending and prioritize developing counterstrike capabilities over other policy issues. However Japan's commitment to security cooperation with the U.S. now complicates their remilitarization efforts and greater conservative agenda, and the rapidly changing global image of the U.S. yields significant contingencies in the U.S.-Japan relationship.

The Prospect of Successful Securitization

The recently published analytical framework "Understanding Securitization Success" by Karyotis et al. (2025) defines successful securitization in most recent terms of theory by three dimensions: "(1) [of] the dominance (or otherwise) of discourse and policy measures with a security logic; (2) of relational implications for the physical and ontological security, concurrently, of both the 'referent object' and the 'referent subject'; and (3) of its implications for (de)securitizing agents."³¹

I will suggest the first dimension in Japan's terms as the dominance of security-oriented policymaking through the latter two of its three primary sections: diplomacy and economy. The diplomacy angle clearly shifted from desecuritizing to securitizing in 2013 following the release of the aforementioned National Security Strategy by Prime Minister Abe, which introduced the "pro-active contribution to peace" (PACP) term and thoroughly detached Japan from an image of outward diplomatic pacifism.³²

The reemergence of "Abenomics" under Takaichi, nicknamed "Sanaenomics," is similarly a significant reason for her popularity. The defining characteristic of "Sanaenomics" is government investment into a category labelled "crisis management," which among what one would expect to be in such a package includes investment in semiconductors, defense spending, large-scale renewable energy sources, and supply chain sovereignty.³⁴ Takaichi has openly attributed dependence on China as the predominant strategic threat that necessitates this "crisis management" spending, which takes advantage of a populist-based security logic to strengthen economic policy.

Moving to the second dimension, since the end of World War II, Japan has been relying on a form of "desecuritization" in order to appear more approachable by offering attractive economic packages such as official development assistance (ODA) to their neighbors. Japan's ODA policy is specifically relevant to the second dimension because it has evolved to encompass strategic

security objectives over strictly economic and social ones. Beyond 2013, the ODA charter began to provide non-combative military assistance in a variety of contexts including surveillance upgrades, naval escorts, and intelligence sharing.

However in building this profile, Japan has also asserted themselves as a regional diplomatic leader, which in tandem with collective security involvement has greatly improved their military legitimacy. Japan has established a commanding position in quintessential security agreements like the QUAD, which Abe revived during his tenure with the introduction of FOIP. In 2023, Japan signed a deal with the U.K. and Italy to begin developing the next generation of fighter jets, and Japan has already secured export bids from India, Canada, and the U.K. They have also made noticeable upgrades to their counterstriking ability, most notably Tomahawk sea-launched and JASSM-ER air-launched cruise missiles.³⁷

Conclusion

My argument in this article is that the emergence of Takaichi is the product of the extended culmination of decades of conservative groundwork and the immediate effect of geopolitical pressure, which may allow for securitization to significantly influence strategic recalibrations. The convergence of China's accelerating military expansion, the erosion of American alliance credibility under Trump, and the structural economic vulnerabilities that "Sanaenomics" has reframed as national security imperatives has created a political opening that previous conservative surges never saw manifested. Whether this shift ultimately stabilizes the Indo-Pacific by improving Japan as a regional security actor, or deepens the Sino-Japanese security dilemma to dangerous new levels, will depend largely on the diplomatic plasticity with which Takaichi navigates the contradictions inherent to Japanese remilitarization.

Given the current Japanese political status and my own understanding of that status as a product of

securitization, the course of action Japan takes during the tenure of Takaichi will most likely be one of the following: (1) "Anchor": Japan will look to utilize American aggression to position themselves as a loyal ally against China, using their ties to the U.S. to further reassert themselves as a military power in the Indo-Pacific theater; (2) "Detach": Japan will, at some point in the near future, attempt a quasi-decoupling from the U.S. and further diversify their cooperative profile with regional allies, aligning with a greater global trend of American exclusion; (3) "Delayed Compromise": Japan will blend the two courses of action, attempting to appeal to all external factors and delay making a significant step one way or the other.

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Developing Counter-Terrorism Strategies Against Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan

Utku Ozgur | Editor: Priscilla Matthews

1. Introduction

Although violent terrorism coupled with radical fundamentalist ideas in the Greater Middle East has been around for decades, it has become one of the biggest threats to global security in the new millennium. Among the countless terrorist organizations with sharp ideological differences that often cause unnecessary bloodshed, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as a noteworthy patchwork of various militant groups stationed in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. While Pakistan, with its protracted conflicts throughout its history, is certainly not a stranger to disputes giving rise to armed struggles for socio-political power, the TTP is a more dynamic enemy, one that's impossible to beat in a set-piece battle, with ethno-nationalist local sympathizers and potential international accomplices from across the most wanted terrorist circles.

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, established in 2007, has grown to become a powerful force that should not be underestimated by Pakistani or global security

authorities, given its proven capacity to initiate successful assaults on northwestern provinces and disrupt regional stability. The TTP has successfully taken advantage of socioeconomic inequalities, poor administrative frameworks, and territorial heterogeneity to retain its operational capabilities. The United Nations Security Council has taken various measures to tackle the problem at hand, like including the TTP in the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al-Qaeda Sanctions List and declaring its full support in the struggle against any and all forms of terrorism.

The group upholds a fanatical worldview and strives to enforce its hardline reading of Islam while simultaneously undermining the Pakistani central government's legitimacy and authority. The TTP has carried out a variety of terrorist acts, such as planned assassinations, suicide bombings, and coordinated assaults on military facilities, which have resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians and caused major infrastructural damage.

2. Geography of the Region

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is one of the four provinces in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The northwestern province shares a border with Afghanistan to its west, Balochistan to the south, and Punjab to the southeast. "The terrain consists of mountain ranges, undulating submontane areas, and plains surrounded by hills."¹ The Hindu Kush region, with its mountainous landscape, is to the north. The historic Khyber Pass is "strategically important as the most easily negotiable route between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent."³

The Pashtun, known for their autonomy, make up the majority of the population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. They "comprise many tribes and clans, each taking great pride in its genealogy."⁴ The tribal areas, "formally designated as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) from 1970 until 2018, were also a major staging area for mujahideen fighters entering Afghanistan."⁶

3. Origins of the TTP

Since the founding of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, there has not been significant state control on the border with Afghanistan. As is the case with Islamic extremism in Pakistan in general, the TTP attracted many jihadists who had previously been taught and indoctrinated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Afghanistan. The remnants of the Mujahideen that were left behind when the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan gave rise to the TTP. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban largely retreated to the Pakistani borders and continued its armed struggle from there. These well-trained combatants established several militant organizations in Pakistan, Kashmir, and Afghanistan; these organizations eventually fostered the rise of other groups, such as the TTP.

Following 9/11, the government in Islamabad backed the U.S. war against the Taliban. The intervention of the army in FATA was met with fierce resistance by the tribes. After the Lal Masjid operation in 2007, the organizations that clashed with the army in the FATA announced that they were united under the TTP umbrella. Thus, in 2007, the Pakistani Taliban was officially established, with thirteen local organizations operating in the FATA coming together under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud.

4. Rise and Growth of the TTP

The group's leadership bolstered its ties to Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban to "increase its local and international legitimacy."¹⁰ The Afghan Taliban's insurgency against the U.S. and its coalition partners was backed by "Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen as well as Deobandi and Salafist seminaries, Islamist parties, and other jihadi groups," which saw the conflict as a jihad to drive out Western infidels.¹¹ As a result, the TTP gained credibility by aiding the Afghan jihad with material support. In 2009, the group took the lead in the suicide bombing of the CIA facility in the Khost Province of Afghanistan. Hundreds of tribal

elders who opposed the TTP's militancy in the tribal belt were murdered by the group.

5. Expansion and Urban Presence of the TTP

Over time, the TTP transformed into "a focused anti-state militant movement."¹⁷ TTP leader Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud declared in 2020 that "the TTP can only be victorious in Pakistan if it follows in the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban."¹⁸ Attacks involving bombs, especially suicide bombings, are the TTP's most frequent attack type. The primary targets for these terrorist attacks range from the Pakistani security forces themselves to the schools that "educate girls or the children of Pakistani servicemen, in order to strike psychologically at its enemies."¹⁹

The group has a mafia-esque presence in large cities like Karachi. Security experts have "cited the TTP's presence in Karachi as particularly concerning, as it threatens the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal."²² This worry was confirmed when the group assaulted "a naval base in Karachi suspected to house part of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal" in August 2014.²³

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the TTP not only congratulated the Afghan Taliban on regaining control but also "publicly renewed its pledge of allegiance to its ally."²⁶ The group was responsible for the "highest monthly average attack rate in the last five to six years" after the Taliban's capture of Kabul.²⁷

6. Ideology of the TTP

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is a united group of several Taliban forces that mostly operate in South Waziristan. The group's main aim is "removing foreign presence [i.e., mainly the Western non-Muslim secular presence] from Pakistani soil."²⁹ The TTP supports "the restoration of Khilafat and the establishing of a Shariah-based homeland" in Pakistan by overthrowing the democratically elected republican government.³⁰ The group strives for an

Islamic revolution to ensure the liberation of Pakistan from Western rule, since it shares "a common culture and anti-Western world-view" with jihadist organizations all over Pakistan.³¹

7. Past, Present, and Potential Counter-Terrorism Approaches

The Pakistani government has tried to jettison militant groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the formerly Federally Administered Tribal Areas by organizing military operations against the TTP at various times. The consequences of Zarb-e-Azb, the first significant, well-coordinated attack against the TTP, combined with the effects of U.S. drone strikes and internal struggles, "caused a large number of TTP militants, including key leaders, to abandon the FATA. Pakistani security forces were subsequently able to clear most of the TTP's hubs and dismantle about 70 percent of the TTP's infrastructure in FATA."³³ Thanks to these military operations, the number of suicide bombings decreased in 2015.

Furthermore, the absence of communication between the armed forces of Afghanistan and Pakistan during Zarb-e-Azb allowed terrorists from North Waziristan to find refuge in Afghanistan's mountainous terrain. After the Taliban took control of the country, the TTP gained de facto political asylum, and the group was not shy about utilizing "its improved political status in Afghanistan to step up cross-border attacks."³⁴

A political compromise is another possible solution. Due to its links with the Afghan Taliban, who are again in control of Kabul, the TTP now believes an agreement is in its best interest. However, the group will not give up its weapons until Pakistan adopts its strict version of Shariah law, a red line for Pakistani officials.

Improving the level of education and making it more accessible to the general public is also essential in the struggle against fundamentalist terrorism. "There is a need to monitor the curricula taught in the madrassas, hot-beds, and training grounds of

extremism."³⁷ Economic steps must also be taken by United Nations organizations to ensure that Pakistan's tribal regions are as developed as the other provinces. The situation is dire and very complicated to solve. The current struggle between the government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the TTP, as one journalist observed, "is a fight for the very future of Pakistan."³⁸

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Armenia's Strategic Shift Away from Russia

Alec Kong | *Editor: Jocelyn Cho*

Introduction

On August 8, 2025, United States President Donald Trump hosted a "historic peace summit" at the White House, bringing together the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite 30 years of intermittent conflict and historical tensions going back a century, Trump has seemingly achieved a foreign policy victory between two previously irreconcilable enemies. The summit comes only two years after Azerbaijan seized the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh previously under Armenian control, decisively

shifting the regional power balance in Azerbaijan's favor.

During the summit, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a groundbreaking statement "agreeing to avoid further conflict." The two leaders also initiated a 17-point agreement that normalizes diplomatic and political relations after decades of tensions. Pashinyan and Aliyev also approved a plan for a new Armenian-owned road-and-rail corridor linking Azerbaijan, and Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani exclave surrounded by Armenia and isolated from the Azerbaijani mainland. Under the agreement, Armenia has given development rights to the 27-mile corridor to an American company, with the route to be named the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP).

Although the summit and the agreement have gone relatively unnoticed in the West, Trump's diplomatic achievement and furthering of American involvement in the region represents a radical departure from the status quo as the TRIPP plan replaces a previous agreement from 2020 that would have granted Russia development rights to the same corridor. By signing on to the TRIPP plan, both Armenia and Azerbaijan signal a desire to avoid Russia as the primary powerbroker in the region, with Washington presenting itself as a potential replacement.

Historical Context

The significance of a lack of Russian participation in the peace process is quite important but must be put into context to fully understand the significance of such a change. Historically, the relationship between Armenia and Russia has stemmed from security needs and mutual interest, albeit asymmetrical in terms of power dynamics. In the early 1800s, Russia served as an ally and defended Armenia against the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, as czarist regimes looked for Christian allies against the Muslim empires. This trend continued into the First World War with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire

eastward, where Armenians saw Russians as their allies against Turkish invasions, especially in the context of the Armenian Genocide.

Contemporary relations between Armenia and Russia have mostly been dictated by the issues surrounding the legal status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, but made up of an Armenian ethnic majority. However, Gorbachev's policy of Glasnost resulted in the revival of tensions between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Soviet republics. In December of 1989, the Armenian Supreme Soviet made the decision to "promulgate the incorporation of Nagorno Karabakh into the Armenian republic."³ By 1992, full-scale war broke out.

The Collapse of Armenia-Russia Relations

Despite Pashinyan's pro-Western tendencies, Russo-Armenian relations only significantly deteriorated after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. In September 2020, the Azerbaijani military launched an offensive into Armenian controlled Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey was a crucial factor of Azerbaijan's military buildup, providing modern military capabilities and assistance in an effort to "recast the military from a Soviet-style force to a NATO-style force."⁵ Due to these drastic military imbalances, the Armenians lost control over most of the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 44 days, ending with a ceasefire brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Unlike the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, overt Russian support for Armenia was noticeably absent. Russia's inaction was especially surprising given that 5,000 Russian troops were stationed in Armenia in 2020. Despite obvious Russian shortcomings in meeting treaty obligations from Yerevan's perspective, Putin's actions re-asserted Moscow's centrality as the main powerbroker in the region.

In Yerevan, it was clear that relations with the Russian-led CSTO were rapidly deteriorating.

Pashinyan took steps to broaden its international presence by opting for an EU civilian monitoring mission. It was only until December 2022 when the final "nail in the coffin" occurred with Azerbaijan's initiation of a blockade on the Lachin Corridor, cutting off the remaining Armenian holdouts in Nagorno-Karabakh from the Armenian mainland. After months of maintaining the blockade, in September 2023, Baku commenced its final military campaign to capture the entirety of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which it completed in just a day.

In response to the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive, Armenia signed the Rome Statute, recognizing the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court despite Russian warnings against doing so.⁸ Yerevan followed up its ratification of the Rome Statute by freezing its participation in the CSTO in February 2024.⁹

Armenia's Search for New Allies

Armenia is still economically dependent on Russia and remains a formal military ally. However, there is overwhelming public support for broadening foreign ties, and eliminating Yerevan's reliance on Moscow for protection. According to a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, the number of Armenians who described Yerevan's relations with Russia as "good" fell from 93 percent to 31 percent between 2019 and 2023. Armenia's GDP growth in 2024 reflects the benefits of increased trade volumes with Russia, being almost double what it was in 2021. Perhaps most crucially, Armenia is highly reliant on Russia for food and fertilizer imports and almost completely reliant on Russia for gas, with over 70 percent of Armenia's generated electricity coming from Russian fuel.

As part of Armenia's effort to broaden its ties, Pashinyan has looked to France, specifically for military assistance. Most crucially, Armenia acquired French 155mm artillery that conforms to NATO standards. This decision makes any future procurement of Soviet/Russian weaponry and

ammunition virtually impossible due to the incompatibility of different calibers, signaling Armenia's shift away from the CSTO and Russian influence.¹⁰

In addition to looking westward, Pashinyan has also looked to India as both a military and economic partner. After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, Armenia made significant purchases of Indian air defense systems and rocket artillery systems, becoming the largest importer of weapons from India from 2020 to 2024, with an estimate of around \$2 billion USD worth of materiel purchased.¹² At the time of writing, Armenia is currently in negotiations with India to buy \$3 billion USD worth of SU-30MKI fighter jets, Armenia's largest defense procurement to date.¹³

As Armenia seeks to assert its independence from Russia, Yerevan has been able to turn to Iran, who has long been a historical ally. After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, trade between Armenia and Iran has skyrocketed. Most controversially, Armenia has made efforts to normalize relations with Turkey. For Armenia, the TRIPP plan serves as an opportunity to open its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey and rapidly accelerate economic development, as Armenia has been isolated by the majority of its neighbors for the past three decades.

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China and Brazil: How Investment Has Led to Economic, Environmental, and Social Destruction

Maddie Huq | *Editor: Priscilla Matthews*

As China has grown into a global superpower, it has sought to position itself as a leader among the Global South, aiming to compete with the Global North in technology, trade, and other areas. To accomplish this goal, China is expanding its influence in Latin America by funding development, boosting trade, and undermining American

influence. Brazil has emerged as China's closest ally in the region due to its vast Amazonian resources and position as Latin America's largest economy. Brazil is also known as the world's largest producer of soybeans, sugarcane, and coffee, and the second largest producer of beef, adding to its economic prosperity.¹

Partially because of its existing individual power, Brazil refused to join China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is investing in over 150 countries nationwide through physical and digital infrastructures; it is widely speculated that Brazil did this to keep its existing relationship with the U.S. and to maintain its political autonomy.² Currently, the two countries are partnered on projects outside the BRI. Still, there has been criticism in Brazil regarding China, especially from indigenous groups in rural regions suffering from the effects of climate change. China's influence on Brazil through exports, infrastructure investments, and mining has led to conflicts with the U.S., a weakened Brazilian economy, and environmental degradation. As an indirect result of Chinese investment, ecological consequences such as deforestation and climate change migration have become common in the Amazon region.

Brazil and China's relationship today is the strongest it has ever been due to their importance in their respective regions. The two countries are members of the BRICS framework, which originally consisted of them, Russia, India, and South Africa; it has now expanded, with Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates added as recently as 2023. BRICS is an economic alliance meant to increase the power of its member countries, with China, a founding member, acting as its unofficial head.⁴ Both China and Brazil see themselves as leaders of the developing world, and thus seek to use each other to gain power in their respective regions.

This geopolitical tension directly affects Brazil's trade dynamics with both powers. Due to their close economic ties, Brazil exports roughly \$90 billion in

goods to China per year, especially petroleum, coffee, soybeans, and iron.¹⁰ Furthermore, China's demand has rapidly risen over the years, which has increased Brazilian prices and profits on commonly-exported goods: for example, the prices of soybeans and sugar have risen by 6% and 9%, respectively.¹¹ However, because China is Brazil's top export market, there is concern that Brazil's economy may become overly dependent on China, especially given that Brazil is only China's seventh-largest export partner.¹²

To add salt to the wound, China has begun dumping goods like steel in Brazil, meaning that they sell the goods much below their actual cost, which harms local producers who cannot compete with these low prices.¹³ Furthermore, China has imposed high tariffs on Brazilian goods, harming small producers (such as farmers) and forcing them to stop exporting to China. Brazil initiated anti-dumping tariffs on select Chinese goods, like steel, while China has escalated its tariffs on Brazilian soybeans, leather products, and paper.¹⁴

Chinese investment in all of Latin America has been widespread. Just as Chinese EV companies are investing in Bolivia and Brazil for mining purposes, Chinese companies are also building railways, ports, and renewable energy facilities in Brazil.²⁰ As a result of these new facilities, Brazil has gained more global power, despite the investments clearly showing that China is supporting Brazil, not the other way around.

This infrastructure development has led to environmental degradation in the entire Amazon rainforest region. There has been widespread deforestation and ecosystem damage due to industrial degradation from Chinese factories and energy facilities built in Brazil. Chinese companies have also enacted weak environmental standards over their Brazilian mines, leading to deforestation from excavation and accelerating climate change through increased carbon emissions. Additionally, mine tailings can cause toxic chemicals and heavy metals to pollute soil and water sources.²¹

This rapid acceleration of climate change has caused droughts in the Amazon and intense floods and landslides farther south in Brazil. Because of these natural disasters, there have been agricultural and food scarcity problems in the Amazon region. The Cerrado region, where 41% of Brazil's agriculture occurs, is experiencing soil loss and a decline in native vegetation. Because crops like soybeans, coffee, and sugar make up such a significant portion of Brazil's economy, millions of people rely on these crops to survive.²⁴

Because of this environmental degradation, climate migration has become common, especially internal migration in Brazil. The most common types are migration from rural areas to cities and from coastal regions to farther inland, both to avoid climate disasters. Brazil's lack of security funding has also made it difficult to deal with human trafficking, which has become a significant issue in the country. With all the political turmoil in Venezuela (partially caused by its debt), over 500,000 Venezuelans have come to Brazil either freely or against their will, often working in remote regions in garimpos (illegal gold mines).³⁰

Therefore, while China isn't directly responsible for the ecosystem degradation or trafficking going on in Brazil, it is clear that its control over Brazil is causing more harm than good. There are definitely benefits to Chinese investment in Brazil, but right now, Brazil is becoming too dependent on Chinese money and has suffered irreversible damage as a result. In the future, Brazil should diversify its export destinations, protect the Amazon rainforest from climate change, and address issues of trafficking and unsafe migration.

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Trinidad's Dragon Gas Deal: Small-State Energy Agreements and Structural Instability

Reanna Mohler | *Editor: Jun Kwon and Priscilla Matthews*

Introduction

Trinidad's ongoing struggles to secure a source of energy, namely through the Dragon Gas Deal, reveal a flaw in the structure of how small states design their energy agreements: deals whose viability depends on third-party approval do not secure energy but are instead tentative in nature. This article examines the instability of the Dragon Gas Deal as a case study for the vulnerability of small-state energy agreements.

Background

Most of Trinidad's natural gas is exported as LNG, making it one of the largest LNG exporters in Latin America. As fields in Trinidad mature, production and exports are both decreasing. Consequences of this decline are already visible in Trinidad's export infrastructure, with the first LNG Train idling since 2020 due to an insufficient supply.¹ In 2016, Trinidadian Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports totaled 24.4 million cubic meters,² and in 2024, they dropped to 16.6 million cubic meters³—a 31.8% decrease. The energy sector itself makes up a significant portion of Trinidad's economy, making up 36% of nominal GDP in 2022.⁴

Trinidad's Dragon Gas Deal with Venezuela was expected to mediate declining production. The Dragon Field contains an estimated 4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, a volume that would bolster Trinidad's LNG exports and potentially counteract declining domestic oil and gas extraction. The deal, initially agreed upon in 2018, has stalled several times due to political instability and U.S. sanctions on Venezuela. Due to Venezuela's sanctions, approval from the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is required for the development of a cross-border field like Dragon. Following an early 2025 revocation of U.S.-issued licenses, Trinidad's energy infrastructure took an immediate hit.⁵

Analysis

Following OFAC's revocation of authorization in April 2024,⁶ volatility in the deal increased, with extraction likely to be successful only if companies with existing presence in Venezuela have compatible interests with the United States. In October of last year, a new OFAC license was granted, but it mandated the inclusion of U.S. companies in the development.⁸ The license allows negotiation until April 2026, leaving a narrow window to secure the deal.

In late 2025, following the docking of the U.S. Naval ship USS Gravelly in Port of Spain, Maduro suspended the deal on the Venezuelan end, citing concerns about the pro-U.S. stance of new Trinidadian Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar.⁹ For small states like Trinidad, insulation of energy agreements from decisions made in entirely separate policy domains seems impossible. This impossibility is intrinsic to the design of the Dragon deal: OFAC has stated that with "any general or specific license" they are prepared to revoke authorization "to support U.S. foreign policy and national security priorities."¹⁰

Alternatives

Trinidad has other domestic projects that stand as alternatives to the Dragon deal. None of them, however, resolves the immediate supply issue Dragon originally intended to address. The Manatee Field, currently under development by Shell, holds 2.7 trillion cubic feet of gas, and the first output is expected in late 2027.¹² BP has two projects, Cypre and Ginger. Cypre began ahead of schedule in 2025, and Ginger is expecting its first output in 2027 at 350 million standard cubic feet per day (mmscf/d), the same amount Dragon was expected to peak at. These projects, though optimistic, cannot retroactively fill the gap Trinidad is expected to face.

The new OFAC licensing proves that, even with a pivot towards securing the Dragon deal with U.S. company inclusion, third-party dependency is unavoidable. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio

said the United States will not support further reliance on Venezuela for energy. This leaves Trinidad in a situation where developing the Dragon field cannot be done without serving U.S. commercial interests.

Conclusion

The Dragon Deal's chronic instability demonstrates that durable energy security cannot be achieved through bilateral agreements structurally contingent on approval from a third party, regardless of how commercially viable the underlying resource is. Such agreements should be treated as options rather than guarantees, and energy planning should take into account their volatile nature.

For Trinidad, with domestic alternatives present but still years away from production and diplomatic relations with Venezuela severed, this structural instability remains unresolved. The case stands as a representation of what happens when a small state is too reliant on a deal that depends on foreign commercial and political interests outside of its control.

The implications extend to other small states in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) region. Domestic renewable capacity, unlike fossil fuel agreements, does not require foreign licensing and is not subject to sanctions or relationships between other states. Dragon demonstrates what happens when energy strategy is built around a good commercial resource that is structurally inaccessible.

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Between Revelation and Revolution: Islamic History and State Formation in Iran and Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article argues that state formation in Iran and Afghanistan is best understood through a historical institutionalist framework that highlights the interaction between religious authority, environmental constraints, and imperial legacies. Rather than treating Islam as a static ideological force, the article conceptualizes it as an adaptive institutional resource integrated within longer trajectories of governance. Through comparative institutional analysis and looking at limited ethnographic evidence, the article demonstrates how patterns established in the 18th and 19th centuries continue to structure contemporary state–society relations. In doing so, this article links environmental and material conditions, a central theme in Persianate history, to modern cycles of political mobilization and state legitimacy.

Introduction

Why do revolutions in some societies produce centralized ideological regimes, while in others they result in fragmented or cyclical conflict without stable, democratic outcomes? Iran and Afghanistan present a compelling comparison. Both are deeply shaped by Islamic political traditions, imperial legacies, and external intervention. In spite of this, their revolutionary trajectories diverge significantly.

Instead of positioning revolution as a singular or "one-off" event, revolution can be understood as a recurring process embedded in historical institutions. The focus shifts from whether revolution occurs to how it unfolds over time: how protest cycles emerge, how resistance adapts, and how fragile or failed states respond. This approach allows for a comparative explanation of why Iran's revolutionary arc culminated in a durable theocratic state, while

Afghanistan's repeated uprisings have not produced centralized democratic or ideological consolidation.

This article argues that revolutionary emergence in Iran and Afghanistan follows distinct institutional paths rooted in 18th–19th century state formation, producing different outcomes: the consolidation of a centralized theocratic state in Iran versus the persistence of fragmented, non-democratic authority in Afghanistan. Using protest data, historical comparison, and ethnographic evidence, the article traces an arc of history in which cycles of mobilization are not episodic disruptions, but iterative processes shaped by institutional feedback loops between state repression and public resistance.

Historical Foundations: Institutional Divergence in the Persianate World

The institutional divergence between Iran and Afghanistan emerged most clearly in the late 18th and 19th centuries, when both regions faced the collapse or transformation of earlier imperial orders but responded through distinct configurations of authority. In Iran, the rise of the Qajar state (1789–1925) did not eliminate competing sources of legitimacy; instead, it produced a political order in which sovereignty was negotiated between the monarchy, urban elites, and an increasingly autonomous Shi'i clerical establishment. The clerical class consolidated influence through control over religious endowments (waqf), judicial authority in shari'a courts, and independent revenue streams such as khums taxation. By the mid-19th century, this produced a durable infrastructure for mass mobilization, visible in episodes such as the 1891 Tobacco Protest.⁴

In contrast, the Durrani Empire emerged under markedly different structural conditions. Founded by Ahmad Shah Durrani, the empire relied on tribal confederations and shifting alliances rather than bureaucratic consolidation. Authority was negotiated horizontally among tribal leaders rather than vertically imposed through centralized institutions. Religious figures, primarily Sunni ulema, were

embedded within these local structures and often dependent on patronage from tribal elites, limiting their ability to act as independent, supra-local organizers of political action.⁵

Environmental and material constraints further entrenched these differences. Iran's relatively cohesive plateau, with established urban centers and caravan routes linking regions such as Kerman, Nishapur, and Isfahan, enabled the circulation of goods, people, and ideas, facilitating the formation of interconnected political networks. These conditions supported the development of what can be understood as scalable institutions: structures capable of extending influence across regions by operating through existing commercial and social networks. This capacity for rapid scaling is reflected in modern protest cycles, where repression is similarly coordinated across space; for example, at least 323 verified deaths during the November 2019 protests alone.⁷

By contrast, Afghanistan's mountainous terrain and fragmented ecology limited such integrative circulation. Trade routes were often oriented outward toward South Asia, Central Asia, or Iran rather than internally cohesive, and political authority remained tied to localized control over territory rather than networked exchange systems.⁹ As a result, grievances were less likely to scale beyond local contexts or organize into nationwide movements. Instead, conflict has historically taken the form of prolonged, fragmented violence; the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) resulted in over one million deaths.¹⁰

Revolutionary Emergence as a Historical Process

Revolution in Iran and Afghanistan is better understood as a series of cycles rather than discrete events. These cycles are characterized by three recurring elements: triggering grievances, mobilization through institutional networks, and state adaptation through repression or cooptation.

Iran: From Constitutionalism to Theocratic Consolidation

Iran's revolutionary trajectory can be traced from the Persian Constitutional Revolution to the Iranian Revolution and into contemporary protest cycles. Each phase builds on institutional capacities developed over time: 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution; 1978–1979 mass protests resulting in 2,000–3,000 deaths; 2009 Green Movement (at least 70–100 deaths reported); and the 2022–2023 protests triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, spreading to over 150 cities with human rights organizations estimating 500+ deaths and 20,000+ arrests.

What distinguishes Iran is not simply the scale of protest but the continuity of mobilization through institutional channels. Religious networks historically facilitated coordination, but contemporary movements increasingly operate through decentralized and digital means. Forms of resistance have also evolved: protest art, graffiti, and public performances function as tools of counter-narrative, challenging state ideology. As documented in Ajam Media Collective (2023), visual culture during the 2022–2023 uprising reappropriated state symbols, transforming them into critiques of authority and gender norms.¹⁵

Afghanistan: Fragmented Cycles Without Centralization

Afghanistan's revolutionary cycles follow a different pattern, marked by fragmentation and external intervention. The 1978 Saur Revolution brought a communist government to power, initiating radical land and social reforms that provoked widespread resistance. The subsequent Soviet intervention escalated the conflict into a prolonged war, resulting in over 1 million deaths.¹⁶ Following the Soviet withdrawal, competing mujahideen factions fought for control, leading to tens of thousands of deaths and the destruction of urban centers such as Kabul, before the eventual rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s.¹⁷

After the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, conflict persisted in the form of insurgency rather than coordinated mass protest. This period resulted in over 170,000 total deaths, including civilians, Afghan security forces, and insurgents.¹⁸ The 2021 Taliban takeover saw the rapid collapse of the Afghan government with limited large-scale, sustained protest mobilization at the national level, reflecting the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of coordinating widespread civilian resistance across regions.¹⁹

Why Outcomes Diverge: Institutional Feedback and the Arc of History

The divergent outcomes in Iran and Afghanistan can be explained through the concept of institutional feedback loops. In Iran, each cycle of protest reinforces centralized structures of authority, even when challenging them. The 1979 revolution replaced a monarchy with a theocratic system, but it preserved the principle of centralized ideological governance. In Afghanistan, feedback loops reinforce fragmentation. Attempts at centralization provoke localized resistance, leading to cycles of conflict.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of Iran and Afghanistan reveals that revolutionary emergence is not defined solely by ideology or immediate political conditions but by long-term institutional trajectories. Patterns established during the 18th and 19th centuries continue to shape how protest emerges, how resistance is organized, and how states respond. In Iran, repeated cycles of mobilization have reinforced centralized authority, producing a durable theocratic system that adapts without collapsing. In Afghanistan, cycles of conflict have reinforced fragmentation, limiting the possibility of sustained democratic or centralized governance.

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Khamenei's Succession and Western Interference

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On February 28th, 2026, American and Israeli airstrikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, ending a 37 year reign that empowered the Islamic Republic's repressive ambitions. For millions of Iranians who were under decades of political brutality, economic shocks, and authoritarianism, the news resulted in celebrations in Tehran and other cities; there were crowds of women dancing without their scarves and huge populations of people chanting phrases supporting the assassination (PBS). Yet even as these images circulate, a far more concerning and complex question is to be asked: In the aftermath of Khamenei's assassination, will American support for Iranian "liberation" delegitimize the principles it claims to strengthen and prove?

To answer this question, this paper proceeds in six parts. First, it establishes the theoretical and historical framework for understanding how external support affects domestic political legitimacy. Second, it examines the foundational trauma of the 1953 Mossadegh coup and its enduring imprint on Iranian political consciousness. Third, it analyzes the more recent case studies of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya as cautionary tales. Fourth, it develops a theoretical mechanism linking foreign endorsement to delegitimization. Fifth, it situates the argument within the broader regional context of the Gaza war and its erosion of the US moral authority. Sixth, it concludes with policy implications and a return to the research question of legitimacy and democracy.

This paper argues that immense endorsement from the US in the post-Khamenei transition, which would be angled as freedom and democracy, would likely risk undermining the credibility of those ideals among common Iranians. This argument rests on several interconnected claims. The historical record of the U.S. intervening in Iraq, Afghanistan, and

Libya demonstrates that interventions justified as liberation and freedom have consistently resulted in instability politically and economically, unbreakable cycles of violence, and deep distrust in Western motives. Beyond these cases, the 1953 CIA-backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh remains a foundational trauma in Iranian political memory, shaping how any American intervention is interpreted today. Combined with the broader regional context, specifically with the ongoing conflicts with Gaza, which international legal observers including UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese have characterized as war crimes and potential genocide, has also has strengthened that distrust as well by revealing what many in the region perceive as a fatal contradiction in US claims to moral authority.

Before turning to the Iranian case, it is useful to situate this argument within the broader scholarly debate on democracy promotion and regime change. One school of thought, associated with scholars such as Francis Fukuyama, argues that the US has both a moral obligation and strategic interest in promoting democracy abroad. From this perspective, authoritarian regimes like the Islamic Republic derive their staying power from repression and popular apathy; external support for opposition movements can balance in favor of democratic forces.

A second school, represented by scholars such as William L. Robinson and Chalmers Johnson, offers a more skeptical perspective. Robinson argues that US democracy encouragement is often an imaginative cover for the advancement of neoliberal economic interests and geopolitical dominance. Johnson uses the term “blowback” to describe the consequences of covert and overt interventions, which frequently produce the very instability and anti-Americanism they were intended to prevent. A third school, associated with Thomas Carothers and Marina Ottaway, takes a middle ground believing that democracy promotion can succeed under certain conditions such as stronger indigenous civil societies, regional democratic neighbors, and sustained multilateral commitment. However, it

would fail when these actions are given with half the effort. This paper aligns most closely with the skeptical and conditional schools, arguing that Iran currently lacks the enabling conditions for successful external democracy promotion, and that US intervention would likely produce the opposite of its effects.

Scholars of political legitimacy have long recognized that the source of a regime's authority matters just as much as the performance of one. Max Weber famously distinguished traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational legitimacy, but a fourth form is also relevant here called nationalist legitimacy. This is the claim to rule based on the defense of national sovereignty against foreign domination. As political scientist David Beetham has argued, legitimacy is not merely a matter of popular consent but of congruence between a regime's claims and normative beliefs of the population. Hence, when a regime can claim to be the defender of national independence against external threats, it gains a powerful source of legitimacy, even when it performs poorly on human rights.

This insight has been very crucial to understanding the Iranian context. The Islamic Republic has spent 45 years creating an ideology of resistance to foreign domination, mainly in the memory of the 1953 coup and the subsequent decades of American backing for the Shah. While many Iranians despise the regime, they don't really reject the idea of nationalist suspicion of foreign interference. This creates a dilemma for any opposition movement that accepts the US support: by doing so, it risks being framed as a traitor to the national cause, allowing the regime to reclaim legitimacy through anti-imperialist rhetoric. This trap on legitimacy is what I believe is important to the argument.

To understand this dynamic, one must first acknowledge that the republic was deeply repressive under Khamenei - a truth that should never be minimized. The system under Khamenei executed thousands of political prisoners, brutally suppressed the “Woman Life Freedom” movement in

2022-2023, and killed hundreds of women and children (Bazafkan). The celebrations following the death are a testimony to a genuine relief that Iranians felt after decades of suffering. Yet, the current power vacuum is dangerous and unstable.. As factions struggle for control in a rapidly transitional environment, the United States should recognize that its history in the region has given the concept of Western liberation as dangerous.

No analysis of Iranian perceptions of foreign intervention can begin without the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Mossadegh, a democratically elected nationalist, had committed two unforgivable sins from the Western perspective: he nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and then refused to submit Iran to British and American economic desires. In response, the CIA and British intelligence orchestrated Operation Ajax, a coup that overthrew Mossadegh, reinstalled the autocratic Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and inaugurated 26 years of American backed dictatorship. As historian Ervand Abrahamian has documented, the coup remains a “collective trauma” that continues to shape Iranian political consciousness more than 70 years later.

The Shah’s regime, propped up by the US military and economic aid, became a brutal police state. Its secret police force, SAVAK, became infamous for torture arbitrary detention, and political executions. The democratic aspirations that had animated Mossadegh’s movement, free elections, parliamentary sovereignty, and an end to foreign domination, were crushed not by Iranians themselves but by American operatives. When the 1979 revolution finally swept the Shah from power, its anti-American character was not an accident or an ideological aberration; it was a direct response to the lived experience of the American-backed dictatorship. As political activist Mahmood Mamdani has argued, the 1953 coup established a durable template in Iranian political culture: American intervention, whatever its stated justifications, produces dictatorship, suffering, and eliminates democracy and its future opportunities.

The collective memory of U.S interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya has been a cautionary lesson for Iranians. The 2003 invasion of Iraq left the state unstable and amounted to a civil war that created a power vacuum and created ISIS emerged, committing genocide against Yazidies and other minority groups (International Human Rights Clinic, 2023). As political scientist Emma Sky, who served as an advisor to the US military in Iraq, has documented, American policymakers consistently underestimated the destructive consequences of their interventions. The decision to remove the Iraqi army and the Ba’ath Party officials from government created a vacuum that sectarian militias rushed to fill. Two decades in Afghanistan ended with the Taliban’s return to power within weeks of the US withdrawal, exposing the superficiality of the democratic structures imposed from above (CFR, 2026). The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, trained at a cost of over 80 billion dollars, collapsed not because they lacked equipment but because they lacked the political legitimacy that can’t be manufactured by foreign powers. The 2011 NATO intervention in Libya devolved into a failed state of militias and open slave markets where African migrants were bought and sold (Ogburn, 2021). As international relations scholar Alan J Kuperman has argued, the Libyan intervention produced far greater civilian suffering than it prevented; estimates suggest that the death toll in the post-Gaddafi chaos exceeded the number of civilians killed by the regime prior to intervention. For politically aware Iranians, these were not isolated failures from the West and more like a pattern of the West believing they were politically superior and consistently damaging the state. This history makes new Iranian leaders automatically assume that accepting any U.S. endorsement would have the public view them as their next victim of instability.

This distrust is compounded by the broader regional context such as the ongoing genocide in Gaza. International observers, including the UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, have depicted Israel’s war actions as war crimes and genocide. The United States continued military and political

support for these operations creating a contradiction for populations in the Middle East (CFR, 2025). When American politicians emphasize democracy and human rights in Iran, they simultaneously are involved in mass wars and violence elsewhere. This hypocrisy ends up delegitimizing the U.S credibility and their appeals to freedom are not seen as genuine and rather as a cover up for geopolitical power and influence.

Given this context, American support would likely produce the opposite effect that its intentions for freedom and liberation. Iran's political culture is defined by the distrust of historical foreign involvement from the West. Conservatives in the regime would believe that American endorsement would result in a proxy. This framing would not only convince the regime but also many citizens who lean on nationalism even if they don't align with the old regime, either way opposing any foreign interference. Consequently, democratic principles such as open elections and liberties would be less associated as liberation amongst dictatorships and rather more as Western malice. The result would empower or strengthen authoritarianism amongst the public and allow them to consolidate power through arguing against imperialism.

To conclude, the death of Ali Khamenei represents a genuine opportunity for the Iranian people who have desired a freedom from decades of suffering. However, the path to liberation must not be through Western interference. If the U.S. genuinely desires to aid Iran, the most effective strategy is to peacefully protest and restrain from patterns in the past. Rather than embracing a specific faction, U.S. policy should focus on lifting any policies that harm Iran's citizens frequently and avoid using the military to allow for conservatives to cling onto power.

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Manufacturing Consent: How U.S. Mass Media Builds Public Support for Foreign Policy

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The interconnected nature of mass media and state power is a critical juncture of study in international relations. Few mechanisms are more consequential than the media's role in manufacturing public consent for foreign policy, and this process operates through structural filters that are embedded in corporate news organizations. Noah Chomsky and Edward Herman's *"Manufacturing Consent"* developed a way of understanding this through their propaganda model. It identifies how mainstream media systematically enables political and economic elites to shape public opinion without coercion. This effectively creates a facade of democratic deliberation while simultaneously narrowing the bounds of acceptable discourse. This essay examines a U.S. invasion and a U.S.-funded regime change to demonstrate how mass media manufactures consent through reliance on official sources, producing flak, and marginalizing dissent. Through this analysis, this essay argues that U.S. mass media functions as a propaganda machine that helps legitimize foreign policy choices for domestic audiences.

Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model contains five filters which information must pass through before reaching the public. First, media ownership is concentrated within large corporations whose executives share ties to the existing political and military establishments.¹ These ties are binding and force censorship in order to protect these crucial relationships. Next, advertising tends to create pressure in order to avoid offending powerful corporate sponsors. In 2005, advertising accounted for 82% of total U.S. newspaper revenue,² and even as digital newspapers rose in popularity, advertising still made up 58% of journalism revenue in 2012.² The overwhelming amount of control advertising revenues have on the newspaper industry cannot be ignored when analyzing rhetorical choices and omission of information in news stories. Third, the media depends on government officials and other

establishment institutions as primary news sources. When it comes to foreign policy, it is difficult since the public lacks personal experience and therefore depends entirely on government sources and media interpretation. Chomsky notes that mass media claims to be objective, so these "official sources" help protect them from criticisms of bias. Although government sources often exhibit bias upon closer examination, the media continues to extensively rely on them, creating a circular notion of credibility. Fourth, the threat of negative responses from powerful interests discourages critical reporting. Individuals or groups with substantial resources can produce "flak," which can be costly to the business of newsmaking. The U.S. is a highly litigious society and the corporate community has created institutions like The Media Institute, specifically focused on media failings in foreign policy. Lastly, a unilateral agreement on the value of capitalism, militarism, and American exceptionalism frames how news is selected and presented. Chomsky specifically focuses on anticommunism and how it was used to control the American public. For example, in the Vietnam War, only the reports of the abuses of "worthy victims" can pass through this filter.¹ This meant injustices against Vietnamese were subdued for a time, given the association between American soldiers and their perceived bravery in fighting against communism.

The main insight of this model is that media does not equally balance competing viewpoints and instead filters information to support powerful interests. This could not be clearer during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Prior to the war, major U.S. newspapers like the *"New York Times"* and *"Washington Post"* amplified the Bush administration's claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Though they cannot solely be held responsible, the consequences of their actions cost hundreds of thousands of lives in a gruesome war. A 2016 analysis revealed the depth of this bias during the five days following Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council, just a month before the invasion was launched. The articles are assessed on the author's personal stance, who besides the writer is given a

platform, which arguments are given, and who is quoted within the article. Using this methodology, between February 6th to 10th of 2003, the *New York Times* featured 104 total articles concerning the prospect of the war. Of these, 53 were pro-war (51%), 16 balanced, and 35 anti-war.³ When looking specifically at the editorial section, of the 8 published articles, 6 were pro-war and 2 were balanced. The *Washington Post* had 77 total articles, with 44 being pro-war (57%), 12 balanced, and 21 anti-war.³ Within the 9 posted by the editorial board, 8 were pro-war, and 1 was balanced. Neither editorial board published a single anti-war editorial, exposing that the editorial staff themselves fully embraced the government framing.

This example falls into the sourcing filter. Both newspapers overwhelmingly rely on White House and Pentagon officials as sources while marginalizing skeptics. The *Washington Post* editorial board posted an article titled "Irrefutable" after Powell's UN presentation, proclaiming that "it is hard to imagine how anyone could doubt that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction."⁴ This explicitly ridicules skeptics, implying a sense of stupidity for even questioning Powell's assertions. Another analysis by the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland found that by October 2002, President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's repeated linkages to terrorism, WMDs, and Iraq had engraved the three as a triple threat in American media.⁵ This is a structural reality that blurs the line between official government propaganda and reliable news reporting.

Another article reinforcing this idea is Judith Miller and Michael Gordon's "U.S. Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts," published in September of 2002. It claims that Iraq's purchases of aluminum tubes are directly correlated to pursuit of nuclear weapons.⁶ The article continuously cites fraudulent WMD claims, which creates a self-reinforcing cycle where the administration cited the *Times* story and the *Times* reported them as confirmation. A key lens in understanding media manipulation during this time is former radicals who have come to "see the light." In the Miller and

Gordon article, they commonly cite Iraqi defectors who claim to have been part of the nuclear program. Chomsky builds on this, noting that "in a country whose citizenry values acknowledgement of sin and repentance, the turncoats are an important class of repentant sinners."¹ Since doubting Iraqi defectors could be framed as doubting the testimony of a "reverted sinner," news organizations imported their claims with minimal verification. The *New York Times* eventually admitted to their inadequate reporting, publishing a May 26, 2004 editor's note stating that the paper had not been "as rigorous as we should have been" in questioning WMD claims.⁷ Their framing of this error as a factual inaccuracy undermines the structural bias of prioritizing sources whose redemption arc made escalation to war seem virtuous.

This pattern of official reporting bias and marginalization of skeptics also occurs in earlier instances of U.S. foreign policy. The Iraq case reveals how the media amplifies official claims about military threats, but other U.S. foreign policy cases demonstrate how the propaganda model extends to more subtle forms of intervention. Reporting on U.S.-backed regime changes tends to observe the crisis at hand, but less so the U.S. role in creating them.

Chile under Augusto Pinochet offers an earlier example of how the propaganda model operates when the United States undermines a foreign democracy in the name of "stability." Salvador Allende became the first Marxist president elected through open and competitive elections in Chile. The Nixon Administration swiftly moved to prevent his success by authorizing a CIA plan to remove him from power. On September 11, 1973, the Chilean military led by General Augusto Pinochet overthrew Allende in a violent coup. Thousands were detained or tortured in the following years, all while the regime implemented neoliberal reforms backed by the U.S.

Coverage of the coup itself reveals how the ideological filter against communism helped normalize the violent overthrow of a democratically

elected government. The congressional committee that investigated the CIA operations in Chile found 726 articles, broadcasts, and editorials directly from the agency during the six-week period between Allende's election and inauguration.⁸ The volume of planted material exemplifies how U.S. audiences were put on a strict diet, consisting only of content aligned with Washington's strategic objectives. Mainstream outlets incorporated these narratives into their own coverage, making the military intervention appear tragic but understandable.

In the rare moments when U.S. television offered a critical view of the Chilean coup, flak and institutional pressure quickly shut it down. A month after the coup, WNET aired what they billed "American television's first in-depth profile" of the coup.⁹ It showcased scenes of repression, interviewed Allende supporters, and condemned the coup's violence. The director José García was swiftly dismissed, the rerun was cancelled, and the documentary disappeared from public view. Viewers sent in hostile letters denouncing the episode as "communist propaganda." Simultaneously, the CIA funded **El Mercurio**, which circulated pro-coup narratives for Chilean audiences.⁹ The flak directed at any content critical of U.S. foreign policy narratives scared newscasters into submission. WNET went on to never re-run this film and publicly downplayed its significance rather than defending their own journalistic integrity.

Even during Pinochet's eventual arrest, U.S. responses continue to weave into the propaganda model. A **New York Times** story on the ruling quoted a Chilean senator insisting that "the Senator is old, frail and sick, and on compassionate grounds alone should he be allowed to return to Chile."¹⁰ Providing vivid detail on Pinochet's age and health while offering no comparably humanized testimony from a torture survivor veers the article towards sympathy for the perpetrator. This moment calls upon the "worthy/unworthy" victims dilemma. The suffering of thousands of Chileans remains faceless while the former dictator is portrayed as someone worthy of compassion.

These cases show the structural pattern of how foreign policy is reported. In Iraq, national newspapers amplified existential threat narratives while leaning heavily on government officials and defectors for intelligence. In Chile, a U.S.-backed coup and years of state terror were framed as anti-communist precautions. This repetition across decades and regions suggests a pattern, rather than isolated instances of bad reporting. Ownership and funding structures, reliance on official media as primary sources, and flak that disciplines critics act as mechanisms that keep the propaganda machine alive and well. These filters do not eliminate all dissenting coverage, but they ensure that this reporting is perceived as risky and easily dismissed. Foreign policy coverage in mainstream U.S. media functions as the system for manufacturing domestic consent for decisions made long before. By the time the public is invited to "debate," the arena of acceptable speech has already been set. This underscores why media literacy is critical if the general public hopes to challenge policies carried out in the name of protecting them. How democratic can U.S. foreign policy be when the information citizens receive about it is molded in these ways?

Notes

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