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Marxing America Great Again: Marxist Discourse in Right-Wing Populism and the Future of Geopolitics

by

Christopher A. Ford

Conservative intellectuals loosely associated with Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement have come to articulate a broad theory of what has gone wrong with American politics – and indeed *global* politics – over the last two generations. It revolves around a narrative of institutional capture in which a generation of educated elites associated with 1960s New Left political progressivism – that is, “liberalism” in the U.S. political sense rather than that of the classical Liberalism (with a capital “L”) traditionally associated with protecting personal liberties and free markets – managed to burrow their way into, and eventually seize control of, a range of U.S. corporations, banks, universities, political parties, national media institutions, and indeed government itself. This has, in the view of the MAGA movement, created “an all-encompassing, monolithic ‘regime’ of elite oppression (which they often refer to as the ‘enemy’)”¹ and which it is felt to be the responsibility of MAGA leaders to undo.

This narrative of elite capture of modern society is a compelling narrative for many thinkers on the Right, and it has become an important piece of the MAGA-era agenda. In the Western democracies, it has now become commonplace on the political Right to describe the ails besetting modern society as stemming from what effectively amounts to a conspiracy by educated elites in the professional, managerial, cultural, and academic spheres to secure and

perpetuate advantages for themselves at the expense of ordinary, working- and middle-class citizens who adhere to traditional social mores and religious values. Such analyses tend to see society as being pervaded by dynamics of contestation between (1) a cosmopolitan and highly educated elite determined to remake the socio-political environment (or, once in control, to perpetuate it) according to the dictates of its own ideological platform and in ways that tend to support its interests, and (2) other elements of society (e.g., “the people”) whose own interests lead them to resist such hegemony and hence oppose those elites.

According to Florida governor Ron DeSantis, institutions captured by the forces of political progressivism now make up an “anointed” regime of elite political ideological dominance that threatens American values and the country’s future as [“these institutions ... continue their unimpeded march through society.”](#) Similarly, Senator Josh Hawley has described a conspiracy by the country’s [“cosmopolitan class”](#) to oppress ordinary Americans. But this is not merely a narrative advanced by Right-wing politicians. It is one that draws support from a diverse ecosystem of Right-wing theorists, professors, writers, think tank scholars, and sometimes very colorful online personalities who may differ on the details of this analysis, but who fundamentally share this account of pernicious elite capture.

Indeed, these ideas have been quite extensively developed on the American political Right. As described by [Nathan Levine](#), a [former Visiting Fellow at the Heritage Foundation](#) and [at the conservative Hungarian think tank the Danube Institute](#),

much of what is commonly called “populist” politics can be more accurately described as part of an anti-managerial revolution attempting to roll back the expansion of overbearing bureaucratic control into more and more areas of life. ... [This understanding represents] the culmination of a once marginalized, now transformative strand of political thought about who really holds power in the

modern American system. Namely, that our democracy has been usurped by a permanent ruling class of wholly unaccountable managers and bureaucrats.

According to Right-wing² activists such as Christopher Rufo, Left-wing intellectuals and militants engaged over several decades in a “long march” through American institutions,³ slowly and methodically subverting them from within, and ultimately emerging triumphant and in control. The success of this march left those liberal elites – in the words of Julius Krein – “permanently occupying the commanding heights of culture, the economy, and politics,” creating what Curtis Yarvin contemptuously refers to as “the Cathedral”: the complex of institutions in the media, government, academia, and the corporate world that exert hegemonic control over modern minds. For thinkers such as Patrick Deneen, the result is a unique American form of corrupt oligarchy, “one of the worst of its kind produced in history.”⁴

(In a similar vein, former Trump Administration official Michael Anton has suggested that America’s current liberal elite should be considered the moral equivalent of the pre-Civil War “slave power” in the American South. More on the fringes of the modern Right wing, Constin Alamiru – who writes as “Bronze Age Pervert” – casts this elite hegemony in sexualized terms, referring to Yarvin’s “Cathedral” as a communal “longhouse” of oppressive, feminizing “gynocracy” which has locked society in an “iron prison” of “Iron Age” socialism and feminism that aims to degrade and delegitimize heroic and manly “Bronze Age” virtues.⁵ Meanwhile, the Internet personality known as “Raw Egg Nationalist” terms this collective cultural enemy “soy globalism.”⁶)

To right these perceived wrongs, Right-wing activists have mounted what Rufo terms a “propaganda war against public institutions” in order to “lay siege to elite institutions” and “smash” the bureaucracy⁷ by “recruit[ing], recaptur[ing], and replac[ing] existing leadership.” Thus can they, Rufo says, “win back the language, recapture institutions and reorient the state towards rightful

ends.” (For his part, Yarvin simply refers to the need to “[uninstall the Cathedral](#),” though he has also tried to popularize the acronym RAGE, standing for “[retire all government employees](#).”)

The American religious Right has also developed a version of this narrative of elite capture and its associated counter-revolutionary agenda that feeds into these political currents. What has become known as “Seven Mountain Mandate (7M)” thinking within [Dominion Theology](#), for example, revolves around an agenda of capturing society back from godless secularism. As the American University scholar Laura Field describes it, 7M is

a Charismatic, Pentecostal variation on Dominion Theology that delineates the seven distinctive ‘mountains’ that are ripe for Christian takeover and control: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government.⁸

Meanwhile, some Rightist scholars such as [Patrick Deneen](#) of the University of Notre Dame speak of the need to [empower a new Right-wing counter-elite](#) – what Deneen says would be a more virtuous aristocracy: a “genuine *aristoi*” at the helm of a new system of “Aristopopulism”⁹ – to [capture, control, and run the state instead](#). For his part, Curtis Yarvin goes characteristically further in his provocation, simply calling for the replacement of democracy by rule of a strongman, a sort of “CEO-monarch”¹⁰ with sweeping powers over society. (He describes himself as a “[royalist](#),” and hypothesizes a “neocameralist state” inspired by “cameralism, the governing philosophy of Frederick the Great,” in which “[there is no political freedom because there is no politics](#).”) Only by such extreme methods, such thinkers tend to assume, can the influence of the hegemonic Leftist ruling elite be extirpated. As [Kevin Slack of Hillsdale College has put it](#), the Leftist elite conspiracy is seen as creating the need for “a Red Caesar ... a leader whose post-Constitutional rule will restore the strength of his people.”

The need to push back against elite capture features prominently in the agenda of the Heritage Foundation, which produced the “[Project 2025” report](#) upon which President Trump appears to have based many of the early initiatives of his second term in office. In fact, the head of that think tank, Kevin Roberts, specifically described that effort as a reaction to the “long march of cultural Marxism through our institutions” that had produced the flowering of progressive political hegemony he termed “The Great Awakening,”¹¹ and which Project 2025 was devoted to dismantling.

Since Trump’s return to power after the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, Trump and his MAGA movement have embarked on a [broad effort to challenge centers of what they regard as liberal power](#), including universities, the courts, the federal bureaucracy, and the media. The new task of the political Right, therefore, is seen as being that of [using government power to strike back](#) against hegemonic Leftist elites and recapture the commanding heights of political, economic, judicial power – as well as the centers of culture- and knowledge-production – on behalf of the American people. MAGA thinkers such as Steve Bannon and Russell Voight thus stress the need to “[deconstruct the administrative state](#),” “[bend or break the bureaucracy to the presidential will](#),” and destroy “[the woke and weaponized bureaucracy](#)” of the hated “[Deep State](#)” that emerged as the Left colonized the federal bureaucracy.

These political narratives and their importance in shaping the U.S. political struggles of the mid-2020s are now increasingly understood. Less appreciated, however, is the degree to which – despite the fact that it has become commonplace on the U.S. political Right to describe one’s political opponents to the Left as “[Marxists](#)” or “[communists](#),” and for modern Rightist intellectuals to decry “woke Neo-Marxism” as the regnant ideology of the “Deep State”¹² – such elite-capture narratives actually represent a powerful point of *agreement* between the modern MAGA Right and a generation of American *Leftist* critical theorists in the late 20th Century. Even less well understood today is the potential for this agreement about

pernicious elite capture to reshape not merely domestic politics but 21st Century international affairs as well.

The surprisingly widespread acceptance of such narratives by both Right and Left wing intellectuals – as well as the growing political power of rightist groups associated with similar or analogous narratives in countries such as [France](#), [Germany](#), and the [United Kingdom](#), their degree of political power in [Poland](#), and their deep institutional entrenchment in [Hungary](#) – suggests the possibility that a new front of global political contestation between “populists versus cosmopolitans” may be emerging that is quite different from the North-versus-South, Capitalist-versus-Communist, or democratic-versus-authoritarian dichotomies into which observers have in the past often divided the international arena. This article examines these dynamics, exploring how the convergence of critical discourse between the new MAGA-era “Right-Marxism” and a more traditional “Left-Marxism” may reshape international politics in significant ways. In the final pages, it also speculates about how we might find a philosophically sound pathway out of the snake-pit politics into which the fanatically counterpoised certainties of modern Leftist and Rightist critical discourse threaten to plunge us.

Theories of Managerial Class Oppression

Such framings about elite capture and the need for ordinary Americans to push back against the Leftist intellectuals responsible are by no means entirely new in the United States. One can, for instance, see presagings of Vice President J.D. Vance’s declaration that “[the universities are the enemy](#)” – not to mention [Donald Trump’s war upon elite academic institutions such as Harvard](#) and upon the [ecosystem of policy community experts in Washington, D.C.](#), and the MAGA movement’s hostility to “fake news” in the traditional mainstream media – in [Richard Nixon’s bitter pronouncement](#) to Henry Kissinger to “[n]ever forget the press is the enemy. The press is the enemy. The establishment is the enemy. The professors are the enemy.” Even longer ago, as [Alan Brinkley has chronicled](#), Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin wove “issues of privilege, wealth,

centralized power, and of the failure of political institutions to deal with them” into their Depression-era populist demagoguery, contending that the community life of everyday Americans was being destroyed by centralized wealth and power.

More recently and more clearly, however, much of the intellectual basis for specific critiques prominent in the modern American Right’s anti-elite discourse can be found in the work of Samuel Francis – an advisor to the U.S. “paleoconservative” [MAGA-avant-la-lettre](#) politician and former Nixon aide Patrick Buchanan – who himself [drew heavily upon writings](#) of the mid-20th Century scholar James Burnham. In a 1941 book, [The Managerial Revolution](#), Burnham had argued that in the countries of the developed Western world, modern society had been essentially hijacked and coopted by a self-interested professional class of “managerial” elites. As the modern Right-wing thinker [Julius Krein has summarized](#),

... [i]n managerial society, according to Burnham, a technocratic elite of credentialed managers, exercising power through enlarged corporate and government bureaucracies, would occupy the commanding heights of the economy, politics, and culture. Private property would not disappear, but the state nonetheless would exercise a dominant role in the economy, and social and political arrangements would be radically altered. The managerial economy would be categorically distinct from previous forms of entrepreneurial capitalism, and the managerial regime would not be democratic or classically liberal in its essential characteristics.

Francis drew heavily upon Burnham’s construct in offering his own theory of modern America’s failures, just as Krein and other thinkers in the MAGA ecosystem have in turn [drawn upon Francis](#), often [explicitly](#).

Samuel Francis is certainly a controversial figure, often being [described today as having been a white supremacist](#) on account of his

warnings about threats to the “biological survival” of “white civilization,” and his advocacy for “a white reconquest of the United States” to restore “the supremacy of whites in a cultural sense.” Yet beyond simply such racism, his influence upon modern far-Right American political theories of elitist conspiracies against the working class seems profound.

In his book *Beautiful Losers*, Francis argued that traditional conservatism had repeatedly failed to achieve its objectives in the United States because of

its inability to attach itself to any significant social and political force after the managerial elite described by Burnham had displaced the bourgeois elite as the dominant force in American society. The new managerial elite, lodged in the large corporations and unions, the national bureaucratic state, and the bureaucratized educational, media, and cultural organizations, possessed radically different and antibourgeois interests and found in liberalism a useful formula for their expression and rationalization.¹³

Such Burnhamite analysis was a critical ingredient of Francis’ thinking. According to an essay he published in 1996,

... [t]he significant polarization within American society is between the elites, increasingly unified as a ruling class that relies on the national state as its principal instrument of power, and Middle America itself, which lacks the technocratic and managerial skills that yield control of the machinery of power. ... [T]he elites themselves are the real enemy ... [and modern America’s] cultural and moral destruction is in large part driven by the swollen state and the powers of social management it has usurped in education, the arts, and the imperial federal judiciary. ... The sooner we hear that message loudly and clearly ... the sooner Middle America will be able to speak with an

authentic and United Voice, and the sooner we can get on with conserving the nation from the powers that are destroying it.

This, in turn, was the basis for Francis' conclusion that some kind of upheaval was needed in order to break the power of the managerial elite. As [he put it](#),

sooner or later, as the globalist elites seek to drag the country into conflicts and global commitments, preside over the economic pastoralization of the United States, manage the delegitimization of our own culture, and the dispossession of our people, and disregard or diminish our national interests and national sovereignty, a nationalist reaction is almost inevitable and will probably assume populist form when it arrives. The sooner it comes, the better.

It is increasingly [well understood today](#) that there is a clear connection between Samuel Francis' theories and both the MAGA movement's claims of Leftist elite capture of American society and its approaches to mounting an ideological counteroffensive – what Francis termed a “[cultural and intellectual reconquest](#)” – against such elites. One can also see parallels between [Francis' call](#) for “[c]ontrol of the state by a social force or elite different from the forces that now control it” so that this new elite “could shape the state to support Middle American interests and values rather than crush them” and similar exhortations in recent years by Rightist thinkers such as Deneen. Meanwhile, Francis' call for “[dismantling the present state as the Ruling Class has constructed it](#)” also clearly presages the campaign against the “Deep State” urged by Bannon, Voight, and others.

A Conceptual Convergence

Yet one of the striking things today about this kind of broad critique of modern politics as having been captured in iniquitous ways by a self-interested technocratic elite is that this is not merely a Right-

wing obsession. To the contrary, such conclusions now seem to be widely echoed by broad swathes of the American political community. Where once they tended to be heard primarily on the far Left from politicians such as [Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders](#), today such critiques are remarkably common.

To begin with, such thinking has been increasingly “mainstreamed” on the political Right, including among conservatives much more restrained and less controversial (and less racist) than Samuel Francis. The commentator Thomas Sowell, for example, argues that an elite group of intellectual “producers of ideas and those whose role is the use and dissemination of those ideas” has seized a powerful position in society, arrogating for itself a role as the privileged custodian of truth. This elite of intellectuals, Sowell believes, aims to reconstruct the world on the basis of a vision in which society consists of a series of “problems” to be “solved” by the application of this group’s ideas.¹⁴ These intellectuals, he argues, act in their own class interest, seeking to legitimate their agenda by using control over societal idea-production (e.g., in universities and the media) to depict things that are in their own self-interest as a common good.¹⁵

Another contemporary conservative, the political scientist [Charles Murray](#), seems to agree. Citing observers as diverse as Robert Reich, David Brooks, and Richard Florida, Murray describes the emergence by the end of the 1990s of a new subset of the American upper class that consists of “the people who run the nation’s economic, political, and cultural institutions.” This new class, Murray says, is an affluent and comfortable one, basing its economic power in “the market value of brains.” This success, however, has produced a “new kind of segregation,” [termed by Robert Reich “the segregation of the successful,”](#) which has led to that class being almost entirely cut off – geographically, culturally, politically, and psychologically – from a new and increasingly troubled and challenged *lower* class of left-behinds.¹⁶

In his own take on such issues, [Julius Krein has claimed](#) that a new “class war” has emerged, not between stereotypical blocks of “capitalists and proletarians,” but rather *within* the West’s ruling elite itself. As he describes it, the “professional managerial class” – bristling with educational credentials and meritocratic self-regard, and yet also wracked by status anxiety as the financial costs of its own social reproduction have outstripped even its considerable incomes – has become increasingly radicalized and oppositional in its political demands (far more so than the *actual* working class) as it has lost ground within the overall ranks of the elite to a tiny, hyper-plutocratic subgroup that lives primarily off capital gains rather than professional labor. As with the others, Krein’s account leaves the door wide open to the possibility of populist electoral backlash by those in the lower-middle or working class who have reason to feel even more disrespected and left behind in such an age of inequality, and who may be *further* alienated by the increasing political radicalism of the intellectuals and intelligentsia that he describes – not to mention by these elites’ contempt and disdain for the less educated.

Other recent conservative accounts also seem to support the idea that the ostensibly meritocratic and rationalistic but ultimately self-interested neoliberal optimism of the West’s professional and managerial class during the last generation has run into problems, and into opposition, as rising inequality has been coupled with displays of ideological arrogance and social condescension by the ruling elite toward those they feel to be their educational and social inferiors. [Christopher Caldwell wrote in 2020](#), for example, that during the 1980s “a new social class was coming into being that had at its disposal both capitalism’s means and progressivism’s sense of righteousness,” and which has been conspicuous in its willingness to overlook the plight of the *rest* of society as socio-economic inequality has increased.

Similarly, according to a book published in 2020 by Joel Kotkin, wealth in the economies of the post-industrial West had become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small “oligarchy,” often associated with the major technology firms. This plutocratic elite dominated the system in close conjunction with a supporting class of

thought leaders and opinion makers, which he calls the “clerisy” and which serve as “legitimizers” and “provide intellectual support for the emerging hierarchy.”¹⁷

This clerisy, whose role Kotkin likened to that of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, was described as an influential cognitive elite that sometimes acts as a check upon, but more commonly lends support and legitimacy to, the power and privilege of the oligarchy. It consists of “the people who dominate the global web of cultural creators, academia, the media, and even much of what remains of traditional religious institutions.” As Kotkin described it, membership in this neo-clerical class is in theory meritocratic, being based upon educational attainment and treating academic credentials as the key to status and authority. Nevertheless, in practice, the clerisy was becoming a hereditary one – what the American sociologist [Daniel Bell](#) called an “enclaved class” – with elite-schooled persons marrying persons of their own kind and retreating increasingly into self-perpetuating socio-economic bubbles sealed off from the rest of society.¹⁸

Such views have become increasingly commonplace, and not merely on the Right. As noted, of course, critiques of oligopolistic wealth and privilege have long been heard from those on the Left such as Sanders, who fulminates that “[people are tired of being ignored while the rich get richer.](#)” Contemporary critiques more from the political Center, however, have not merely become more frequent, but have also expanded beyond the mere invocation of traditional Leftist stereotypes about rich bankers and impoverished proletarians. Today, Center-Left critiques exhibit pronounced echoes of the anti-managerialism of Burnham and Francis.

As early as 1991, in fact, the abovementioned Robert Reich – who served as U.S. Secretary of Labor for President Bill Clinton – [decried](#) the degree that the “the fortunate fifth” of American society was essentially “seceding” from engagement with and concern with their less fortunate fellow citizens in the lower four-fifths.

The secession of the fortunate fifth has been most apparent in how and where they have chosen to work and live. In effect, most of America's large urban centers have splintered into two separate cities. One is composed of those whose symbolic and analytic services are linked to the world economy. The other consists of local service workers – custodians, security guards, taxi drivers, clerical aides, parking attendants, sales people, restaurant employees – whose jobs are dependent on the symbolic analysts. Few blue-collar manufacturing workers remain in American cities.

More than two decades later, the social critic [Thomas Frank](#) [similarly described](#) the rise of “a ‘professional-managerial class’ consisting of lawyers, doctors, professors, scientists, programmers, [and] even investment bankers.” These elites, he wrote, are mostly affluent and educationally-credentialed urbanites and suburbanites, who believe in meritocracy, but who “shun the kind of social policies that once gave a real leg up to the working class.”

All in all, according to the conservative commentator [David Brooks](#), “[t]he chief accomplishment of the current educated elite is that it has produced a bipartisan revolt against itself.” With such dire warnings of what is said to be state capture, it is hardly surprising that many such commentators – both on the Left and the Right – have warned that such dynamics would lead to a populist backlash.

As the writer [George Packer suggested](#) even before Donald Trump's first election, in a time of inequality and economic dislocation, such dynamics have led to pushback against elite agendas by those below those elites on the totem pole who have come to think “the game is rigged against them” and who feel “a sense of violated [societal] ownership ... that has come under threat.” Also writing in 2015, Thomas Frank warned of the [social conflict that he said will ensue as self-aggrandizement by this knowledge class provokes backlash from populists, from both the Left and the Right](#), against elites' power and

pretensions. If all this is the case, what could be more natural than for such people – at least eventually – to come to resist?

For his part, Joel Kotkin put the point more sharply, arguing that these dynamics might produce the modern equivalent of Medieval “peasant revolts” against injustice, as popular movements from both ends of the political spectrum rise against the globalized elites and the mass migration associated therewith this elite capture. “Even as a new feudalism appears to be setting in,” he wrote, “it is stirring up counter forces that promise turbulent times.” As a result, Kotkin said, “[t]oday there is a turning away from democratic liberalism around the world.”¹⁹

Significantly, moreover, the various examples above of the mainstreaming of such elite-capture critiques *predate* the Second Trump Administration that is now in power with its pronounced anti-managerial agenda, and indeed predate even the years in which the Republican Party under Donald Trump radicalized further during its period in exile after Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 presidential election. Since then, the abovementioned trends seem to have accelerated. Today, while prescriptions differ sharply about what exactly to *do* about the problem of overall societal mismanagement by a self-interested and highly educated meritocratic professional-managerial elite, there seems to be broader agreement than ever that such a problem exists.

The Marxian Influence

For present purposes, I will take no position on the *merits* of such theories, which may – or may not – accurately describe the ways in which Western political economy has evolved over the last generation. Nor, except for some tentative philosophizing at the end of this article, will I here endorse any specific set of prescriptions for addressing the problems said to have been created by capture of the state and socio-cultural institutions by the aforesaid managerial-professional elite. Nonetheless, it is hard for the observer not to be struck by the fact that three decades after the collapse of the USSR helped dispel

longstanding Cold War assumptions that the capitalist democracies existed in an oppositional counterpoise with countries whose political legitimacy narratives lay in Marxist theory, the rise of such elite-capture theories in Western political discourse suggests that Marxian discourse has circled back to the fore and reconstituted itself as a competitive organizing framework for both domestic and – as we will see – international politics.

Marx, Gramsci, Burnham, and Francis

For one thing, it is impossible to overlook the fact that in many respects, these seemingly ascendant theories are indeed all quite *Marxist*. I do not mean merely that, as a matter of historical record, James Burnham – the author, as we have seen, of the 1941 book that proved so inspirational to Samuel Francis – was himself a Marxist during the 1930s. As [Julius Krein has recounted](#), from 1934 to 1940, Burnham was “a prominent member of the Trotskyite faction of the international Communist movement and an occasional contributor to leftist publications.”

It is true, as Krein also notes, that Burnham later developed some “deep disagreements with Marxist theory.” Whether or not Burnham was “officially” a Marxist when he published *The Managerial Revolution* in 1941, however, Marxian notions of class conflict clearly strongly influenced his theories about how a managerial elite had captured and bent the state to serve its own class interest.

These ideas in turn also thus strongly colored the ideas of Samuel Francis, who added to them notions of ideological conflict that drew upon the work of the early-20th Century Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci on the role of hegemonic ideology as form of social control that assists a dominant class in manufacturing social “consent” for its domination.²⁰ As [Michael Brendan Dougherty has observed](#),

Francis’ political analysis always had a residue of Burnham’s Marxist sociology about it. He argued that the political right needed to stop playing defense – the

globalist left won the political and cultural war a long time ago — and should instead adopt the insurgent strategy of communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci believed it was an essential part of the project of the Marxist revolutionary to create a countervailing ideology and work to make it hegemonic instead.²¹ He also emphasized the need to understand and thereafter to counter “how the ideological structure of a dominant class is actually organized” by exerting the revolutionary’s *own* countering influence upon the press, civil groups and associations, and libraries – and indeed upon anything *else* that could help shape opinion and ideas, including even such things as “architecture and the layout and names of streets.”²² And so, too, Samuel Francis “argued that the political right needed to stop playing defense” and should instead adopt an insurgent strategy of ideological revolution.

Francis himself, in fact, was quite open about Gramsci’s influence upon his thought, at one point approvingly noting how right-wing political movements in Europe in the 1990s had begun to draw upon the Italian Marxist’s theories in their own campaigns against the center-Left governments of the period. In Francis’ own words as he advocated for an ideological counteroffensive against Leftist elite culture, the strategy by which his longed-for “new-American revolution” could take place “may well come from what was cooked up in the brain of a dying communist theoretician in a Fascist jail cell 60 years ago.” And today, it is not uncommon to hear Right-wing Americans such as the White supremacist Richard Spencer call for a “right-wing Gramscianism.”²³

Themes from American Leftist Social Analysis in the 1970s

There is also a considerable amount of Leftist scholarship in the 1970s that reached diagnostic conclusions that are remarkably similar to those offered today in *Right-wing* critiques of modern society in which a technocratic and cultural elite is described as having colonized university faculties beginning in the late 1960s and used them as a beachhead from which to hijack a much broader range of social

[institutions](#) in ways deeply inimical to the interests of ordinary, working-class people. This is presumably no coincidence, moreover, given the important ways in which such present-day critiques on the Right draw upon the work of Francis, who was not only (as we have seen) influenced by Gramsci and by Burnham, the former Trotskyite, but who also did his [Master's and doctoral degrees in modern history](#) at precisely the time that such Marxist theorizing was emerging.

The Ehrenreichs and “PMC” Theory

One of the clearest analytical parallels between modern-day Right-wing critical discourse and Left-wing critical discourse from the 1970s can be seen in the analysis of the rise of the “Professional-Managerial Class (PMC)” offered by Barbara and John Ehrenreich. These ideas – which they advanced in [an article published in 1977](#)²⁴ in [Radical America](#), a left-wing American magazine founded by two members of [Students for a Democratic Society](#) (SDS), and in a second, [follow-up article they wrote later that year](#)²⁵ – seem to have been quite influential. (Ideas about the emergence and dominance of a “professional managerial class,” for instance, show up not just in the work of [Thomas Frank](#) quoted above, but also in a sweep of generally Left-leaning scholarship and critique that explores the PMC’s role and influence in areas ranging from [contemporary art](#) to [the dynamics of gentrification in major urban areas](#), and from [the development of 20th-Century Broadway plays and audiences](#) to [the politics of climate change](#).)

In pointing to the existence of this PMC, the Ehrenreichs claimed to have identified the existence of a new class of “technical workers, ‘culture’ producers, etc.” who “must be understood as comprising a distinct class in monopoly capitalist society.”²⁶ This group, they said, had first emerged – in the United States, at least – during the huge expansion of professional and managerial occupations of the Progressive Era of 1890-1920.²⁷ They defined this PMC as

consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the

social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.²⁸

This class was not a monolith. Some members of the PMC, they argued, were “directly concerned with social control or with the propagation of ideology (e.g., teachers, social workers, psychologists, entertainers, writers of advertising copy and TV scripts, etc.).”²⁹ Others were “hidden within with process of production, as is the case with the middle-level administrators and managers, and other technical workers” whose functions were “essentially determined by the need to reproduce capitalist relations of production.” Nevertheless, “these occupational groups – cultural workers, managers, engineers[,] and scientists, etc. – share a common function in the broad social division of labor and a common relation to the economic foundations of society.”³⁰

In the Ehrenreichs’ telling, through the lens of Marxist class struggle theory, the interests and objectives of the PMC were fundamentally at odds with those both of the working class and of the capitalist class. The members of the PMC tended to have “anti-capitalist outlooks”³¹ – and hence gravitated toward socialist political radicalism – because they represented a technocratic managerial elite. As this class saw things, “[p]rogress demanded that the capitalists be swept away to make room – not for the working class – but for the rising class of experts.”³² Such conclusions made this rising class of experts fundamentally *anti-capitalist*. (Notably, moreover, to legitimize their own efforts at elite capture of American institutions in sweeping those capitalists out of power, the rising intellectuals of the 1960s Left propounded narratives of *resistance* to prior elite capture by the “military-industrial complex.”)

At the same time, however, their interests were also “objectively antagonistic” and “mutually contradictory”³³ to those of the laboring class on account of the PMC’s role in the reproduction of the economic and social structures that kept workers in *subjugation to the PMC* as it

“extend[ed] its cultural and technological hegemony over the working class.”³⁴ Hence this group was also hostile to working class.

As noted, the Ehrenreichs believed that some divisions existed *within* the PMC. Specifically, it was internally divided between “managers, administrators[,] and engineers on the one hand, and those in the liberal arts and service professions on the other.” (The latter tended to be more anti-capitalist in their outlook.) Nevertheless, the Ehrenreichs still considered the PMC to be “a single, coherent class,”³⁵ and asserted that all of its members displayed a “proclivity for a technocratic vision of socialism in which the PMC would be the dominant class.”³⁶

Before moving to explore *another* example of such parallels and connections between Leftist social critiques of the 1970s and Right-wing discourse in the present day, it is worth making some further observations about the Ehrenreichs’ conceptualization of the PMC. Specifically, it is striking how their theory contains additional elements powerfully resonant with modern conservative stories of how highly-educated Leftist intellectuals captured and weaponized universities, the media, cultural institutions, and the bureaucratic machinery of the technocratic “Deep State.”

As Barbara and John Ehrenreich put it in 1977, the rise of the PMC was closely connected to “the evolving role of the university” in American society.³⁷ For one thing, this stemmed from the PMC’s reliance upon education in the reproduction of itself *as* an elite – and it’s not hard to see why. Unlike those in the pre-capitalist landowning aristocracy or the capital-owning bourgeois elite of traditional Marxist theory, positions in the PMC did not descend by genealogical “blood” birthright or the inheritance of family wealth: they required professional credentials. The PMC was thus inherently a meritocratic class in the sense that its self-reproduction required *training* young people to succeed to positions of power in that class.

After all, management and administrative skills sufficient to run complex enterprises, advance scientific knowledge, produce elite

cultural forms, employ legal principles and precedents, and run engineering projects aren't things that just *happen*. They require long periods of training, typically mediated by elite institutional gatekeepers who demand some form of professional credentialling before the neophyte can be admitted to the ranks of the elect. Such training is essential, but it is also difficult, and success in such developmental pipelines of elite self-reproduction is never entirely guaranteed even for those who have the advantages of money and educational preparation that can come from being born into families *already* in the PMC.

Accordingly, the “common ‘culture’ or lifestyle” of the PMC was one suffused by deep status anxiety and an obsessive focus upon the value of – and the imperative of obtaining – professionalized education and training.³⁸ Educational credentialing was thus essential both to the PMC's continued survival as a class and critical to the PMC's ability to ensure its own dominance. Indeed, one might think it could scarcely have been otherwise. With the PMC devoted the self-aggrandizing ideological ideal of what the Ehrenreichs described as “a technocratic transformation of society in which all aspects of life would be ‘rationalized’ according to expert knowledge,”³⁹ it was vital for members of that class to secure enduring access to the fountainheads of that power-conveying knowledge.

And this meant the universities. Not for nothing was it the case, therefore, the Ehrenreichs made clear in their “case study” of the New Left of the 1960s, that “the first wave of student activists” on American campuses “typically came from secure PMC backgrounds, and were, compared to other students, especially well-imbued with the traditional PMC values of intellectual autonomy and public service.”⁴⁰ Nor was it a coincidence that U.S. universities thereafter became strongholds of PMC influence, for in the Ehrenreichs' critique the PMC was both the class that benefitted most from university credentialling and the one best suited to *staff* those universities in ways that would ensure its own future class self-reproduction.

There are obviously very close parallels here to present-day conservative critiques of universities, or at least the elite ones, as bastions of Leftist privilege and power that work to the detriment of “ordinary” citizens unlucky enough to lack the meritocratic credentials that the PMC prizes. In 1951, after all – more than two decades before the Ehrenreichs’ arrival on the intellectual scene – the conservative intellectual William F. Buckley published his famous book [*God and Man at Yale*](#), in which he complained that professors there were trying to indoctrinate young people into atheism and collectivism.

Yet the Leftist indoctrination to which Buckley objected in 1951 was then still mainly the province of the occasional wayward Left-leaning professor, acting individually, and his prescription in response to their activism was simply to urge that professors hew more closely to the then-generally *conservative* institutional views of the University as a whole. As others have [more recently asserted](#), however, Buckley’s critique did not foresee the degree to which the PMC would succeed in establishing its *own* values as the dominant institutional norms of the modern university – after which it could begin undertaking such indoctrination systematically, and at scale. Present-day Right-wing critiques [claim that this is precisely what happened](#), and Donald Trump’s war upon elite institutions of higher education in the United States is one consequence.

One can also see in the Ehrenreichs’ arguments about the rise of the PMC echoes of an earlier social critique offered by the British sociologist, social activist, and Left-wing politician Michael Young, who published a book entitled [*The Rise of Meritocracy*](#) in 1948. In that book, as [David Civil and Joseph Himsworth](#) summarize,

Young’s fictional vision of a meritocratic society explores the consequences of a society where each citizen is judged according to the formula “I.Q. + Effort = Merit.” The successful meritocrats hoard ever-greater rewards for themselves, crystallising into a rigid and repressive elite

who rule over an increasingly powerless and depressed underclass.

In what Young himself later described as having been a “warning ... against what might happen to Britain,” his book offered a fictional and satirical – but fundamentally serious – admonition against “rule by an elite who have determined exactly the educational qualities necessary to promote economic growth and who are then selected [on the basis of] and rewarded for those special skills.” It was intended as a cautionary tale about how such a meritocratic ruling class could become a parasitic aristocracy, concentrating upon reproducing itself and ruling in its own self-interest at the expense of those who were less well-off. And Young, too, warned that such developments might ultimately produce a populist backlash – specifically, in the form of a “final revolt against the meritocracy” that his satire described as occurring in the year 2033.

This speculative warning by a Left-wing British Labour Party politician who in 1981 defected to the Social Democratic Party (SDP) accords well with the Ehrenreichs’ arguments in 1977 about the rise of the PMC. It also has clear parallels with arguments by today’s conservative intellectuals – among them David Brooks – about the contemporary hegemony of an ideology of meritocracy that valorizes intelligence and training at the expense of civic virtue and of engagement with and concern for one’s fellow citizens. Here too, therefore, the Left-analytical roots of modern Right-analytical discourse seem clear.

Alvin Gouldner, the “Marxist Outlaw”

An even richer example of the Marxist themes that resonate in modern-day *Right-wing* social complaints about Leftist elite-capture can be found in the writings of Alvin Gouldner, a radical American sociologist in New York and self-described “Marxist outlaw”⁴¹ who published an important trilogy of Marxist theoretical works – The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology, The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class, and The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in

the Development of Theory (The Dark Side of the Dialectic) – between 1967 and his death in 1980.⁴² As the reader will see, there are strong parallels in his work both to the Ehrenreichs’ analysis and to current MAGA-era narratives about the tyranny of progressive political elites and the “Deep State.”

Much of Gouldner’s career seems to have been devoted to the somewhat heretical task of turning the lens of his Marxist historical analysis upon the development of Marxism itself. More specifically, he was fascinated by the emergence of the class of intellectuals who developed Marxist theory in the first place – no toiling proletarian manual laborers they, after all! – and who have been its most enthusiastic proponents ever since, asking of them “how do they account for *themselves*?”⁴³ As he put it,

... [t]he Marxist scenario of class struggle was never able to account for itself, for those who produced the scenario, for Marx and Engels themselves. Where did the *theorists* of this class struggle fit into the supposed cleavage between proletariat and capitalist class?⁴⁴

As a Marxist student of the phenomenon of *Marxists*, as it were, Gouldner saw the origins of the leftist intelligentsia in the dialectics of class conflict.

By his account, “[i]n all countries that have in the twentieth century become part of the emerging world socio-economic order, a New Class composed of intellectuals and technical intelligentsia” has emerged.⁴⁵ Of these two sub-groups, the *intelligentsia* consisted of those “whose intellectual interests are fundamentally ‘technical,’” while he termed *intellectuals* those “whose interests are primarily critical, emancipatory, hermeneutic[,] and hence often political.”

Both of these groups within the New Class employed “elaborated linguistic codes” in their political and moral discourse, signifying their move from what the British sociologist Basil Bernstein called “restricted” codes into “a culture of discourse in which claims

and assertions may *not* be justified by reference to the speaker's social status," and in which any such "*authority-referring* claims [are hence] potentially problematic."⁴⁶ Both were also committed to what Gouldner termed the "Culture of Critical Discourse" (CCD).⁴⁷

This idea of the CCD was for him a foundational concept. As Gouldner saw it,

... [t]he culture of critical discourse (CCD) is an historically evolved set of rules, a grammar of discourse, which (1) is concerned to *justify* its assertions, but (2) whose *mode* of justification does not proceed by invoking authorities, and (3) prefers to elicit the *voluntary* consent of those addressed solely on the basis of arguments adduced. ... *The shared ideology of the intellectuals and intelligentsia is thus an ideology about discourse.*⁴⁸

These groups' commitment to the CCD, in turn, was the key to the political radicalism of this New Class, for by its nature critical discourse "presses to undermine all societal distinctions."⁴⁹

The grammar of critical discourse claims the right to sit in judgment over the actions and claims of any social class and all power elites. From the standpoint of the culture of critical discourse, all claims to truth, however different in social origin, are to be judged in the same way. Truth is democratized and all truth claims are now equal *under* the scrutiny of the CCD. The claims and self-understanding of even the most power group are to be judged no differently than the lowliest and most illiterate. Traditional authority is stripped of its ability to define social reality and, with this, to authorize its own legitimacy. The "credit" normally given to the claims of the rich and powerful now becomes a form of deviant, illicit behavior that needs to be hidden if not withdrawn. ... To participate in the culture of critical discourse, then, is to be emancipated *at once* from lowness in the conventional social hierarchy, and is thus a

subversion of that hierarchy. To participate in the culture of critical discourse, then, is a political act.⁵⁰

As with the Ehrenreichs' distinction between "managers, administrators[,] and engineers" and "those in the liberal arts and service professions,"⁵¹ Gouldner admitted that there were some tensions within the New Class between the "technical intelligentsia" and "intellectuals."⁵² And just as the Ehrenreichs felt that the liberal arts and service sector members of the PMC were more Leftist in their views than the managers and administrators,⁵³ so too did Gouldner see the "intellectuals" within his New Class as having a more "clear party preference in the United States" in that "[t]hey are united in their distaste for the Republican Party and by their preference for the Democrats."⁵⁴ Yet as also did the Ehrenreichs with their PMC, Gouldner saw the New Class as being fundamentally united in its self-interest vis-à-vis all other classes in society.

Writing as a Marxist sociologist, Gouldner offered a complex account of the historical origins of this New Class. In his view, its emergence as a social force in Western society – as well as the peculiarities of its internal differentiation, its political radicalism, and its influence in undermining traditional values, identities, and institutions – was the result of a number of factors:

- 1) Secularization, which "de-sacralizes authority-claims and facilitates challenges to definitions of social reality made by traditional authorities linked to the church";
- 2) The rise of diverse vernacular languages;⁵⁵
- 3) The "breakdown of the feudal and old regime system of personalized *patronage* relations between the old hegemonic elite and individual members of the New Class as cultural producers";

- 4) The growth of “an anonymous *market* for the products and services of the New Class, thus allowing them to make an independent living apart from close supervision and *personalized controls by patrons*”;
- 5) The multi-national character of European society and a “European-wide communication network” in which “their often extensive travel led many intellectuals to share a cosmopolitan identity transcending national units and enhancing their autonomy from local elites”;
- 6) The waning of extended family system and its replacement by a smaller nuclear family construct in which “hostility and rebellion against paternal authority can become more overt” and “increasing difficulty [is] experienced by paternal authority in imposing and reproducing social values and political ideologies in their children”;
- 7) The emergence of higher education as “the institutional basis for the *mass* production of the New Class of intelligentsia and intellectuals,” and the increasing availability of jobs for educators, with the result that “[a]s teachers, intellectuals come to be defined, and to define themselves, as responsible for and ‘representative’ of society as a *whole*, rather than as having allegiance of the class interests of their students or their parents”;
- 8) “The new structurally differentiated educational system [becoming] increasingly insulated from the family system, becoming an important source of values among students divergent from those of their families,” so that “[t]he socialization of the young by

their families is now mediated by a *semi*-autonomous group of teachers”;

- 9) The development of the public educational system into “a major *cosmopolitanizing* influence on its students, with a corresponding distancing from *localistic* interests and values”;
- 10) The shift of this new school system to a value system that revolves around the claims and assumptions of the CCD;
- 11) The eagerness of “[t]his new culture of discourse” to question and challenge traditional “assumptions fundamental to everyday life, tending to put them into question even when they are linked to the upper classes”;
- 12) The spread of literacy, as a result of which “humanistic intellectuals lose their exclusiveness and privileged market position, and now experience a status disparity between their ‘high’ culture, as they see it, and their lower deference, repute, income[,] and social power. The social position of humanistic intellectuals, *particularly in a technocratic and industrial society*, becomes more marginal and alienated than that of the technical intelligentsia. The New Class becomes internally differentiated”; and
- 13) “Revolution itself becomes a technology to be pursued with ‘instrumental rationality.’ The revolutionary organization evolves from a ritualistic, oath-bound secret society into the modern ‘vanguard’ party. ... The [new type of] vanguard organization ... de-ritualizes participation and entails elements of both the ‘secret society’ and of the public political party. In the vanguard organization,

public refers to the public availability of the *doctrine* rather than the availability of the organization or its membership to public scrutiny. Here, to be ‘public’ entails the organization’s rejection of ‘secret doctrines’ known only to an elite in the organization The ‘vanguard’ party expresses the *modernizing* and elite ambitions of the New Class as well as an effort to overcome its political limitations. Lenin’s call for the development of ‘professional’ revolutionaries, as the core of the vanguard, is a rhetoric carrying the tacit promise of a *career*-like life which invites young members of the New Class to ‘normalize’ the revolutionary existence.”⁵⁶

For Gouldner, the New Class was structurally antagonistic both toward the Old Class of the moneyed bourgeoisie and toward the working class. As for the workers, while the New Class – in its Leftism – *claimed* to support the interest of proletarians, its Leninist ideas of revolutionary advance led by a vanguard party represented merely the cloaked self-interest of the intelligentsia and intellectuals who made up that party. Marxism pretended that the working class would set itself free, Gouldner wrote, but this wasn’t actually the case: “the class *to be set free* [by such Leftism] ... in fact ... is the cultural bourgeoisie” – that is, the New Class, which would thereby take over from the bourgeoisie and run things itself. The Leninist idea of the vanguard party, and its variants, was thus designed “to protect the purity of the *teoretiki from the working class*.”⁵⁷

As for the Old Class, Gouldner wrote that the New Class began as the ally and servant of the capitalist bourgeoisie against the old aristocracy.⁵⁸ After their joint triumph in that campaign, however, the New Class soon arrayed itself against the old bourgeoisie as well, with which it engaged in “a *contest* for control over the machinery of production and administration.” This battle pitted “the class which has *legal ownership* of the mode of production” against the New Class, “whose technical knowledge increasingly gives it effective *possession*

of the mode of production.”⁵⁹ And, over time, power thus accreted to the New Class.⁶⁰

The influence of the New Class spreads over the *investment of capital* as well as to the management of production. The old investing class is slowly transformed into a privileged but functionless status group, into a ‘nobility’ without a function in production and administration ... [and those who] manage the new means of production and administration ... acquire at-hand control over the new means of communication and of *violence*. [As a result,] the functional autonomy of the old class wanes.⁶¹

Before long, the members of the New Class came to assert a hegemonic role within what was now an essentially technocratic society, “arrogating to themselves not only administrative decisional competence but, finally, even the role of judges and regulators of the normative structures of contemporary societies.”⁶²

Significantly, it is critical to the power and role of the New Class – in Gouldner’s account – that it is as much a *cultural* and *intellectual* elite as a traditionally “economic” one, and it seeks to build and maintain its hegemony in fundamentally ideological and discursive ways. In what Gouldner terms the “political economy of culture,” the New Class is “a new *cultural* bourgeoisie whose capital is not its money but its control over valuable cultures.”⁶³ Its members’ “special privileges ... are grounded in their *individual* control of special cultures, languages, techniques, and of the skills resulting from these.”⁶⁴

The central *mode of influence* used by and characteristic of the New Class is *communication* – writing and talking. Unlike the old class, they do not *buy* conformity with their interests but seek to *persuade* it. Unlike politicians, they normally do not have *force* available to impose their goals. The New Class gets what it wants, then, primarily by rhetoric, by persuasion[,] and argument through

publishing and speaking. ... [This makes their power] uniquely dependent on their continuing access to media, particularly mass media, and upon institutional freedoms protecting their right to publish and speak.⁶⁵

As to *what* the New Class spoke *about*, Gouldner saw the promulgation of a distinctive ideology of “professionalism” to be an important part of the group’s hegemony:

The more that the New Class’s reproduction derives from specialized systems of public education, the more the New Class develops an ideology that stresses its [own] *autonomy*, its separation from and presumable independence of “business” or political interests. This autonomy is said to be grounded in the specialized knowledge or cultural capital transmitted by the educational system, along with an emphasis on the obligation of educated persons to attend to the welfare of the collectivity. In other words, the *ideology* of “professionalism” emerges. ... While not overtly a critique of the old class, professionalism is a tacit claim by the New Class to *technical and moral superiority* over the old class, implying that the latter lack technical credentials and are guided by motives of commercial venality. Professionalism silently installs the New Class as the paradigm of virtuous and legitimate authority, performing with technical skill and with dedicated concern for society-at-large.⁶⁶

The monopolization of such special, intellectualized knowledge and presumed wisdom was central not just to the power but also to the arrogance of the New Class, which claimed – Gouldner asserted – “that it can solve the fundamental requisites of the universal grammar of societal rationality: *to reunite both power and goodness*.”⁶⁷ The culture of discourse of the New Class thus

seeks to *control* everything, its topic and itself, believing that such domination is the only road to truth. The New Class begins by monopolizing truth and by making itself its guardian. ... The New Class sets itself above others, holding that its speech is better than theirs; that the examined life (*their* examination) is better than the unexamined life which, it says, is sleep and no better than death.⁶⁸

According to Gouldner, these conceits create a surpassing arrogance:

The New Class believes its high culture represents the greatest achievement of the human race, the deepest ancient wisdom[,] and the most advanced scientific knowledge. It believes that these contribute to the welfare and wealth of the race, and that they should receive correspondingly greater rewards. The New Class believes that the world should be governed by those possessing superior competence, wisdom[,] and science – that is, themselves. The Platonic Complex, the dream of the philosopher king with which Western philosophy begins, is the deepest wish-fulfilling fantasy of the New Class.⁶⁹

In the service of its own self-interest, the political agenda of the New Class revolves around the creation of “[a] ‘welfare’ state and a ‘socialist’ state” – ideally the latter, since “in a socialist state, the hegemony of the New Class is fuller, its control over the working class is greater.”⁷⁰ The members of the New Class are particularly attracted to socialist politics because socialism represents “the final removal of ... limit[s]” on their own societal advancement, and socialism’s “inevitable consequent ... is to pave the way for cultural capital; *i.e.*, the New Class.”

In collectivizing the means of production[,] the power of the moneyed old class is destroyed. In transferring the means of production to *state* control, thus swelling the bureaucratic apparatus of the state, socialism extends the

domain within which the New Class' cultural capital holds sway.⁷¹

Gouldner thus claimed to offer a Marxist historical sociology of the emergence of Marxism itself. In his telling, the emergence of Marxist discourse is the result of the emergence and socio-political hegemony of this New Class of intellectuals and technical intelligentsia. In a summarization that also stresses how closely he feels the New Class to be associated with the influence and control of social institutions such as universities and the media, Gouldner observed that

the top ranks of the Old Bolsheviks consisted overwhelmingly of intellectuals, who were middle class in origin, well travelled and who read broadly and wrote extensively. ... Marx and Marxism are the creations of a library-haunting, book-store-browsing, museum-loving – and hence leisure-possessing – academic intelligentsia. They are unthinkable without the entire panoply of libraries, bookstores, journals, newspapers, publishing houses, even party schools, whose cadre and culture constitute a dense infra-structure at whose center there is the Western university.⁷²

And universities *were*, in Gouldner's account, absolutely critical to the emergence and the power of the New Class. Whereas the Old Class of the moneyed bourgeoisie had been "grounded in property," the New Class was "grounded in education,"⁷³ and its emergence became possible as "as the public school and university system was reformed and expanded, and as it became a substantial labor market for intellectuals' services." The educational system thereupon

became a mechanism through which part of the unattached intelligentsia was slowly transformed into a new kind of corporate intelligentsia, more deeply integrated with the state and indirectly with the dominant social classes.⁷⁴

Indeed, this made the modern university into a *particularly* potent mechanism for self-reproduction by the New Class, as it was the central mechanism by which credentialed intellectuals were “mass produced.”⁷⁵

The university today is the key modern institution for the training of ideologues: it is also that single institution from which most modern ideologues derive their livings. Indeed, the university today is the single largest producer both of technocrats and ideologues, of *both* science and ideology.⁷⁶

Control of the universities would therefore be, for the New Class, “a means to a larger societal reconstruction.”⁷⁷ Writing in 1967, at a time when a rising cadre of radicalized students and junior professors was actively working to ensconce itself into the American academic and intellectual establishment in the United States, Gouldner observed that

... [t]he current contest for the control of educational facilities is radically new and consequential. Colleges and universities are no longer, as they once were, merely peripheral spheres of political mobilization or of incidental ideological embellishment. They may well be a holding ground of the public sphere and the main rallying ground of a new political power.⁷⁸

Gouldner the Marxist – perhaps feeling himself to be more faithful to the CCD than the members of the New Class among whom that discourse originated⁷⁹ – obviously finds much to dislike about the hegemony of the New Class. Despite its pretensions and ambitions to social justice, it had in his view become a hegemonic and exploitative class in its own right: just another “elite concerned to monopolize [its own] incomes and privileges.”⁸⁰

Despite its commitment to the CCD,⁸¹ the New Class “believ[es] its own culture best” and “wishes to advantage those who most fulfil and embody it.”⁸² But it is not the case, Gouldner believed, that the values and practices of the New Class really *are* ideals deserving such status. “Marxism,” he wrote, “is the false consciousness of cultural bourgeoisie who have been radicalized.”⁸³

Their commitment to the primacy of ideas and to “doing things in the right way and for the right reason” encourages members of the New Class to “value doctrinal conformity for its own sake,” giving them “a native tendency toward ritualism and *sectarianism*.”⁸⁴ This makes them consummate *ideologists*,⁸⁵ and at the same time engenders dogmatism.⁸⁶ In its obsessive commitment to ideas and their rectitude, the New Class displays both an “inflexibility and insensitivity to the force of differing contexts,” and an “inclination to impose one set of rules on different cases.” This implies

a certain insensitivity to *persons*, to their feelings and reactions, and open[s] the way to the disruption of human solidarity. Political brutality, then, finds a grounding in the culture of critical discourse; the new rationality may paradoxically allow a new darkness at noon.⁸⁷

Accordingly, “the New Class is hardly the end of domination.” While its emergence produces an end to “the old moneyed class’s domination, the New Class is also the nucleus of a *new* hierarchy and the elite of a new form of cultural capital.”⁸⁸ And this, for Alvin Gouldner, was far from a good thing. (Acidly, he quoted [Mikhail Bakunin](#) that “the rule by socialist savants ‘is the worst of all despotic governments.’”⁸⁹)

According to Gouldner, the tension between New Class’s culture of critical discourse, which “presses to undermine all societal distinctions,” and its desire to privilege and advantage itself “contains the New Class’s ‘seeds of its own destruction,’”⁹⁰ for it creates the need for a sort of *further* revolution *against* this revolutionary class. This would not, however, merely be a revolt of the oppressed against their

oppressors. More intriguingly, and in a notably Marxist fashion, Gouldner believed that the very ideology of the New Class – its commitment to the CCD and to the ideal of rationally ordering society around the set of ideas and ideals developed and articulated *by* that New Class – contained internal contradictions that would over time lead it to undermine itself.

Rationality is here construed as the capacity to make problematic what had hitherto been treated as given; to bring into reflection what before had only been used; to transform resource into topic; to examine critically the life we lead. This view of rationality situates it in the capacity to think *about* our thinking. Rationality as reflexivity about our own groundings premises an ability to speak about our speech and the factors that ground it. Rationality is thus located in metacommunication. But the critique of a set of assumptions depends, in its turn, on using a set of assumptions; and these, in turn, must also be susceptible to critique *ad infinitum*.⁹¹

The commitment of the New Class to the CCD and the ideal of rationality, he felt, therefore conduced to “potential revolution in permanence, the ‘permanent revolution.’” The critical discourse of the New Class, in other words, *could not* create a stable hegemony in part precisely because it *was* grounded in critical discourse. “It is the drive toward unending perfection, that unceasing restlessness and lawlessness, that was first called *anomos* and later, *anomie*.”⁹²

The ideology of the New Class rooted itself and its adherents in claims of objective merit, one might say, even as the *critical* aspects of its critical discourse undermined the very possibility of such enduring objectivity. This self-undermining posture – akin, perhaps, to the famous “[liar’s paradox](#)” of Epimenides,⁹³ a self-deconstructing deconstructionism – could hardly be anything other than unstable, for its very criticality denied it the ability to generate trust in the legitimacy and enduring value of its ends.

As Gouldner noted, the vaunted technical expertise and educational attainments of the New Class were not really, in themselves, enough to justify its rule, since mere skill at managing a system does not necessarily translate into wisdom about the *ends* toward which that system is steered.

Technical expertise is not sufficient to generate legitimacy, when this expertise is *not* exercised on behalf of the values, goals, or interests of those others who are expected to bestow or withhold that legitimacy.⁹⁴

This, Gouldner perceived, confronted the New Class with an echo of Kurt Gödel's famous [incompleteness theorem](#) in mathematics, which Gouldner said was "of epochal importance" because it demonstrated "that formal systems are unavoidably lacking in self-sufficiency and must rest on assumptions *outside* their own stipulations."⁹⁵

Yet the ideology of the New Class, though its critical discourse had been hugely successful as a solvent for the political power and legitimacy of *other* social classes, had no real ability to lean upon such exogenous value-groundings itself – that is, to provide a secure ideological foundation for its own hegemony – precisely because that solvent worked equally well when applied to the New Class. "Critique and Critical Marxism, then, require a value grounding for choice and for the criticism of what is," Gouldner observed, "*but they do not actually have one.*"⁹⁶

As a group unprecedentedly committed to the power of rationality and symbolic discourse, and to bringing about the unity of theory and practice by ensuring that real-world systems conformed as closely as possible to the ideal, the New Class *as an elite of theoreticians* was perhaps uniquely vulnerable to this. (As Gouldner put it, "[a] theory ... is expected and permitted to be at war with other theories but not with itself."⁹⁷) Yet that is precisely the conundrum in which the New Class found itself, and why its domination also contained the seeds of its ruination.

In his final book, *The Two Marxisms*, Gouldner contrasted what he described as the two main strains of Marxist theory: “Scientific Marxism” and “Critical Marxism.” The first, he wrote, embodies a rationalistic ambition to discern and hew to the underlying laws of history, and it valorized the technocratic skills associated with understanding and manipulating such laws. The second places more emphasis upon subjectivity, voluntarism, and the transformative power of ideas. Elements of each of these “Marxisms” can be seen in Gouldner’s account of the rise, activities, and ideology of New Class – including in the internal differentiation he described between the technical intelligentsia and intellectuals.

Both forms of Marxism had long intellectual lineages, but Gouldner felt that each of them also contained the possibility of pathology – giving rise, in turn, to two potential “nightmares” for Marxist theory. Loosely speaking, one might say that these two nightmares correspond, respectively, to Joseph Stalin’s systematic terror and oppression and to the endless upheavals and self-immolating anarchic madness of Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution.

For Scientific Marxism, the potential (Stalinist) pathology lay in slippage into “ritualism and revisionism.”⁹⁸

... Scientific Marxism stresses the importance of technical skills rather than will or motivation; in holding that expertise is more important than “redness,” it ultimately delivers the economy to the control of specialists, alienating the proletariat from the revolution. ... [I]n the nightmare, socialism does not mean that the proletariat becomes the ruling class, but that the state becomes the dominant force – the infrastructure – and its bureaucracy the new ruling class; in the nightmare this new collectivist state brings a new stagnation to the economy, rather than a new productivity; in the nightmare the expropriation of the bourgeoisie is not the basis of a new emancipation but of a new, many times worse, domination.⁹⁹

For its part, the potential (Maoist) pathology of Critical Marxism was “adventurism.”¹⁰⁰ This was “a negation-grounded Marxism,” which “continually exhibited its own grounding in the negating dialectic by repeatedly emphasizing, as Mao himself did, that ‘It is *always* right to rebel.’”¹⁰¹ For Critical Marxism, the nightmare was thus

the lurking fear that it is not really a truly “scientific socialism,” not a theory about society or of the objective conditions that will change it, but only another disguise of the political will, an old utopian project masquerading as a new science. In other words[,] [this] nightmare of Marxism is that it is [just] another religion of the oppressed – a revolutionary messianism, as Georg Lukás once described his own Marxism. This nightmare broke into the theorizing of Critical Marxism, which is nucleated with utopianism, and, at the political level, emerged openly in Maoism.¹⁰²

Gouldner does not clearly suggest a way out of this labyrinth, either toward a more genuinely emancipatory answer faithful to the ideals of the CCD – of which, of course, he showed himself a skilled practitioner as he turned its harsh light upon the CCD’s evangelists in the New Class themselves – or to something that is at least stable and avoids self-erosion. Perhaps, for a committed critical dialectician like Gouldner, no such “solution” to the problem was really possible. (We shall return to this question, however, in the concluding portion of this essay.)

Left-Right Congruence

The reader can hardly fail to miss, however, the remarkable parallels between Gouldner’s Marxist analytics of Marxism in the 1970s and what modern-day Right-wing pundits claim about today’s progressive technocratic elites. Indeed, setting aside some fairly superficial differentiations in jargon, these two critiques – the *Left-Marxism* that Gouldner both described and applied, and the *Right-Marxism* of the modern Euro-Atlantic Right – are clearly the closest of

familial relations. (If not perhaps identical twins, they are at least fraternal ones.) And, if anything, it is noteworthy how deeply *unoriginal* modern-day Right-wing intellectuals are in their social critique.

Both accounts make sharply parallel claims about the self-interested and exploitative nature of modern ruling elites, about the hegemonic status of the meritocratic and technocratic ideology such elites propound, and about the various bureaucratic and other institutions – universities, the mainstream media, and the apparatus of the “Deep State” – that these elites are said to have colonized and warped into instruments of socio-cultural and economic domination. Both see the idealistic pretensions of these elites as tending, in practice, toward some combination of bureaucratic tyranny and culturally relativistic *anomie* and social degradation, and both envision the potential that this elite hegemony will itself face revolutionary upheaval fueled both by the anger of those left behind in a world of elitist technocracy and by the internal contradictions and relativistic intellectual bankruptcy of elite ideology itself.

To be sure, Left-Marxism is arguably more securely committed to the CCD than Right-Marxism, which not only invokes abstract ideals of justice against oppression, but also often tries to appeal to supposedly timeless verities of culture, nation, religion, human nature, and socio-cultural “place” as it pushes back against what it feels to be the deracinated, rootless, and godless elite cosmopolitanism of the New Class. This is indeed an important point of distinction from Left-Marxist discourse, which is more unvaryingly committed, at least in its rhetoric, to emancipatory narratives *against* inherited systems of control and oppression.

Nevertheless, contemporary American Right-Marxism still distinguishes itself to some extent from traditional reaction in that – with its fulminations against progressive “cancel culture” and the stultifying weight of “woke” ideological conformity, its claims to defend free speech and expression, and its warnings about how elite institutional capture works against the interests of the Common Man

– it *does* claim to pursue emancipatory relief from oppressive socio-political power structures in ways that are strikingly reminiscent of Left-Marxism.¹⁰³ Furthermore, even those supposedly timeless verities to which Right-wingers often appeal are at least to some degree ideological constructions and ahistorically “imagined communities”¹⁰⁴ of just the sort that New Class intellectuals excel at invoking and manipulating – and that, as a matter of historical fact, New Class intellectuals played a central role in “imagining” in the first place as Euro-Atlantic polities transitioned from modalities of merely dynastic loyalty to the narratives of the modern nation-state.

Moreover, the intellectual project of trying to demarcate and appeal to such supposed timeless verities as the conceptual grounding for a political project is also just the sort of thing that New Class intellectuals – in contrast to all other historical social classes – characteristically *do*. Since Gouldner believed that “Marxism is the false consciousness of cultural bourgeoisie who have been radicalized,”¹⁰⁵ after all, it is not hard to imagine him concluding that whereas *traditional* Marxism is the false consciousness of the Left-Marxist, *Gott-und-Volk* nationalism is the false consciousness of the Right-Marxist.

At any rate, the very Right-Marxist thinkers who offer such narratives today are themselves no less typical *products* and *examples* of Gouldner’s New Class than the middle class intellectuals and intelligentsia he described as making up “the top ranks of the Old Bolsheviks.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, such modern-day *anti-New Class* members of the New Class, often themselves the product of elite Ivy League educations, now all but openly follow Lenin’s “Vanguard Party” theory as they seek to build and deploy “an ‘anti-elite’ elite against the ‘Deep State.’” (And there are no small number of them. In her book on the intellectuals of the MAGA movement, Laura Field generally restricts her examination to “individuals who have received PhDs from prestigious institutions of higher education,”¹⁰⁷ but nonetheless finds enough material for an entire volume.)

As noted earlier, in fact, thinkers such as [Patrick Deneen](#) today openly envision, as Ross Douthat put it in 2023,

the rise of a new elite, meaning more people who agree with Patrick Deneen in government and industry and academia ... [leading to] the replacement of America's present elite caste, its post-Protestant Ivy League-educated liberal mandarins, with a ruling class that's religious rather than secular, oriented toward conservation and tradition rather than a dream of constant progress, connected to the common good of ordinary Americans rather than imagining itself as a cosmopolitan and post-American elite.

Deneen – who has [described himself as formerly being a man of the Left](#) – might even seem to agree with Gouldner's critique of the pathologies of Critical Marxism, for he sees liberal political discourse as being the victim of its own success as its very openness and critical thinking leads it to topple into a relativism that demolishes human sociality, convention, and community.¹⁰⁸

In other words, as these Rightist elites seek to defeat and supplant the Leftist ruling cadres whose own prior "revolt of the elites" – a phrase coined by the "[left-conservative](#)" writer [Christopher Lasch](#) in a book that MAGA luminary [Steve Bannon has called one of his favorite books](#) – put in place an exploitative system that has abandoned the middle class and the poor, the new Right-Marxists might seem to Gouldner merely to be partisans in a civil war *within* the New Class over *which faction* within that New Class elite is to rule.¹⁰⁹ Alvin Gouldner's critical analysis, then, can perhaps speak not only to the origins and characteristics of Marxists and Marxism, but also to those of the thinkers and movements on the Right today who claim to array themselves *against* those Marxists' inheritors but nonetheless express fundamentally Marxian thoughts in their own understanding of the world, its problems, and the requisite solutions.

Perhaps for this reason, many on the modern American Right seem increasingly to be adopting approaches not nearly as different as one might expect from what Alvin Gouldner described as the traditionally Leftist policies of the New Class. The reader will recall, for instance, that Gouldner felt the New Class to be particularly focused upon ideological “ritualism and sectarianism,” and hence committed to ensuring “doctrinal conformity for its own sake.”¹¹⁰ He also saw it as being drawn to “transferring the means of production to state control” because “socialism extends the domain [of government power] within which the New Class’ cultural capital holds sway.”¹¹¹ Now that the MAGA movement itself holds government power in the United States, however, parallels between modern Right-Marxist politics and the policies of Gouldner’s New Class seem to be accumulating.

As it turns out, for instance, despite their earlier fulminations about Leftist “cancel culture” as “[the very definition of totalitarianism](#)” and criticism of [Biden Administration efforts to chill disfavored speech](#) – not to mention [Vice President J.D. Vance’s own more recent criticisms of European governments for restricting free expression](#) – it now appears that modern Right-Marxists do not *really* loathe the enforcement of ideological conformity and suppression of disfavored speech after all; they apparently merely want to ensure it is done by the right people (*i.e.*, by the Right). As made clear by [Attorney General Pam Bondi](#) and [Vice President Vance](#) in the wake of the assassination of Rightist activist Charlie Kirk in September 2025 – and by President Trump’s repeated [threats to cancel the broadcast licenses of television stations that give him unfavorable coverage](#) – America’s MAGA Right seems comfortable with the suppression of disfavored speech as long as they get to pick the targets.

As for free markets – which one might ordinarily expect to be especially prized by a political movement led by a man who calls his domestic opponents “[communists](#)” and “[radical-left lunatics](#)” – MAGA policies have come to include measures that [look not entirely unlike socialist economic statism](#). The U.S. Government, for example, has now taken a “golden share” in the U.S. Steel Corporation that

President Trump describes as giving him “[total control](#)” over major business decisions; it has [acquired a nearly 10 percent equity share](#) in the U.S. semiconductor manufacturing company Intel; it has taken over as the [largest investor in the rare earth minerals mining company MP Materials](#); it has demanded and been given a [15 percent cut of the profit from two major producers’ semiconductors sales to China](#) and a [25 percent cut of sales to China of high-end Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) chips](#); and it has steered the Congressionally-mandated sale of the social media app TikTok [at fire-sale rates](#) to a consortium of investors made up of [wealthy political supporters of the president, some of whom also happened recently to have invested \\$2 billion in a cryptocurrency firm controlled by the Trump family](#). President Trump has also [told the Coca-Cola company what sweetener to use in its iconic soft-drink](#), directed the software company Microsoft to [fire its newly-appointed head of global affairs](#), demanded that the semiconductor firm Nvidia [fire its chief executive officer](#) and that [several private broadcasters sack television hosts](#), demanded that U.S. universities [screen academic hires on the basis of political viewpoint](#), [pressured major American law firms into providing free legal services to the government](#), and used government approval of corporate mergers to [pressure CBS News into revamping its programming to become more conservative](#), paying Trump a [multimillion-dollar settlement in a lawsuit](#), and [spiking unfavorable coverage](#).

Despite some continuing differences in phrasing and nuance between Left and Right, there would thus appear to be a considerable degree of convergence not just in the master narrative of revolutionary uprising against invidious elite capture – which is now deployed against the current *status quo* just as the New Left tried to deploy it against the “military-industrial complex” two generations ago – but also even in the types of measures each elite end of the political spectrum now thinks are needed in order to solve America’s problems by feathering their own political, ideological, and economic nest. It looks a bit, one might say, like vanguard party elites and New Class CCD policies all the way down. With apologies to [Richard Nixon’s famous 1971 comment about the economist John Maynard Keynes](#), it might seem that *we are all Marxist critical theorists now*.

Hints of a New Geopolitics?

Even assuming, *arguendo*, that this analysis of the convergence between – and indeed consanguinity of – Left-Marxist and Right-Marxist critical discourse is sound, the reader may well still be wondering why this is being published in a journal of defense and strategic studies. In the pages below, however, I outline the impact that these ideas may be having on international relations and global security relationships by virtue of their effect upon United States foreign policy, as well as their growing significance in a number of additional countries. I will also offer some speculations about what their *further* impact might be – in the event that present day trends were to continue – in at least partially (and potentially very significantly) reordering the terrain of geopolitical contestation in the mid-21st-Century security environment.

U.S. Dynamics

At the time of writing, the Second Trump Administration has still only been in office less than a year, so it would be unwise to generalize too much about the overall thrust and direction of its notoriously volatile policy choices. Nevertheless, it is already possible to discern some themes suggesting that Right-Marxist discourse is indeed an important factor in the formulation not merely of that administration's domestic policy, but also of its approach to international relations.

Specifically, the Right-Marxist belief in a conspiracy by a class of highly educated intellectuals and technocrats – a cabal dedicated to colonizing and controlling society's universities, mainstream media organizations, prestige culture-producing organs, and government bureaucracies, to warping these institutions to its will and using them to advance the interests of that class, and to the imposition of progressive “woke” ideology upon ordinary middle-class and working-class citizens – is one that seems to resonate powerfully as the MAGA looks at the international environment. In particular, this

Right-Marxist discourse seems to have powerfully colored the Second Trump Administration's approach to relations with Europe, or at least with the populist Right's *idea* of "Europe" and the countries that U.S. officials associate with that idea.

The modern American populist Right appears to approach international relations in large part through the prism of U.S. domestic politics. Through this lens, the countries of "Europe" are *de facto* extensions of the domestic political opposition to President Trump. The "Europe" I mean here, however, is not really a geographic entity, but rather a sort of socio-cultural archetype. It is a *figurative* continent – one that is modern and highly developed, but also typified by post-industrial economies, elaborate social welfare state institutions, intrusive regulatory bureaucracies, and politically-progressive politics and social values. (This "Europe," in other words, *excludes* European countries such as Hungary and Italy where right-wing parties have managed to win power, and *includes* even geographically distant Canada.) It is a "Europe," in other words, of the things Right-Marxists tend to hate.

Notably, too, this "Europe" of Right-Marxist imaginings is not merely politically progressive in terms of the domestic political order and value-systems of its constituent countries: it is also *transnationally* progressive. It is the Europe of the European Union – with that institution's continuing dreams of subsuming individual national identities into some broader unity administered by unelected technocrats. For these reasons, this figurative Europe represents something of a socio-political "worst case scenario" for Right-Marxist thinkers. It is, to them, a dangerous cesspool of progressive political and cultural mores, one that is toxic and hostile to traditional social values, religious norms, and national sovereignties alike. This "Europe," in other words, feels to them like the ideological epicenter of godless, "woke," and degraded cosmopolitanism, and the great political redoubt of the global Leftist New Class hegemony that the MAGA movement sees as its mortal enemy. It was not for nothing, therefore, that President Trump as early as 2018 said that "I think the European Union is a foe, ... they're a foe."

Such attitudes seem to have hardened and sharpened during the MAGA movement's period of radicalization after Trump's election loss in 2020, and during its preparations for a return to power. Today, they represent a powerful strain in the Second Trump Administration's foreign policy thinking.

As [I have pointed out elsewhere](#), this shift can be seen in things such as Vice President J.D. Vance's speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2025, in which he decried the role of European governments and EU "commissars" in suppressing disfavored speech, comparing them explicitly to what he said were the policies of the Biden Administration in the United States. According to Vance, the biggest threat in Europe was not Russia, China, or "any external actor," but rather "[the threat from within](#)" he said was posed by those seeking to enforce progressive political norms upon the European population. (It should perhaps not have been surprising, then, that on that same trip, Vance [chose not to meet with German Chancellor Olaf Shultz but did meet with the leader of Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland \(\[AfD\] party](#). In fact, then-Trump senior official Elon Musk publicly [urged Germans to vote for the AfD](#). Similarly, on holiday in the United Kingdom in August 2025, Vance [met with Right-wing Reform Party leader Nigel Farage but avoided Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch](#).)

Additionally, the U.S. Department of State under Marco Rubio [published a paper](#) – written by someone named [Samuel Samson](#), who was described as a "Senior Advisor for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor" – that emphasized the importance of building and maintaining relationships with "civilizational allies" in Europe. Who these allies are and what civilization is referenced were not precisely specified in Samson's paper, but that same document defended the AfD and far-right French politician Marine LePen as being victims of progressive Leftist suppression. It also defended "[Christian nations like Hungary](#)" against charges that their politics have turned authoritarian and self-avowedly "[illiberal](#)" under rulers such as [Viktor Orbán](#). And indeed, Darren Beattie – a former Right-

wing activist known for his criticism of the “Global American Empire”¹¹² – now serves as the acting [U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs](#).

Such perspectives may also help explain not just the Second Trump Administration’s ambivalence about – and even hostility to – Western Europe, but also the sympathies that some in the MAGA ecosystem seem to show toward Vladimir Putin and his vastly *more* illiberal and authoritarian regime in Russia. Putin, after all, has embraced narratives that outdo many MAGA partisans in their hostility to modern Western progressivism. To hear Putin tell it, for instance, the values of the modern West represent nothing short of “[Satanism](#).” He says he believes the West to be a hotbed of “[paedophilia](#),” and his regime gleefully [persecutes the Russian LGBTQ community under sweeping laws that criminalize “extremism.”](#) All this is quite congenial to some on the modern American Right.

Accordingly, if a figurative “Europe” is America’s *foe* due to its commitment to progressive political values, it’s not too hard to imagine [Right-wing Americans assuming that Russia must therefore be something not unlike our friend](#) on account of its detestation for modern “woke” value-structures. And indeed, President Trump has already opted to [trust Putin’s assessment of Russian election interference over that of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI), adopted Putin’s talking points that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a “[dictator](#)” responsible for [starting the Ukraine war](#), and [endorsed Russia’s negotiating position in early efforts to start peace talks between the two](#). (His Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, also [preemptively conceded Russia’s minimum negotiating positions at Ukraine’s expense](#) before any negotiations had begun, and Trump himself seems to have modeled the 28-point “peace plan” he tried to pressure Ukraine to accept in late 2025 [upon Russia’s negotiating position](#).)

Such thinking may also help explain why then-Trump senior advisor Elon Musk could [call one U.S. Senator a “traitor” merely for](#)

[having visited Ukraine](#). Since [the U.S. Code specifies](#) that the crime of treason consists of levying war against the United States or adhering to its enemies, for an American to be a “traitor” for supporting Ukraine, it must therefore be the case that Ukraine is our enemy – making *us*, one might infer, Russia’s *ally*. To be fair, it may be that Musk’s particular comment was intended more for purposes of social media trolling than as a serious philosophical statement. Nevertheless, such talk is at least suggestive of an attitude infused with Right-Marxist antipathies, and it is certainly quite far removed from traditional U.S. views of the Putin regime.

At the very least, the Second Trump Administration has shown a notable lack of any feeling of *threat* from Russia, and an equally notable unwillingness to criticize Putin and his government. To be sure, President Trump – apparently surprised by the Russian dictator’s entirely unsurprising refusal to stop [attacking Ukrainian civilians](#) and refusal to bolster [President Trump’s campaign for a Nobel Peace Prize](#) by negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine – did once call Putin “[CRAZY](#)” (and in all-caps), has [speculated about imposing more sanctions on Russia](#), and reportedly [released new U.S. military intelligence information in 2025 to help Ukraine target its missiles](#). His administration, however, has also [sided with Russia against Europe at the United Nations](#) on matters related to the Ukraine war, and the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State at one point accused NATO of being essentially needless: “[a solution in search of a problem](#).”

All this clearly seems to signal that Right-Marxist discourse has helped fuel a significant reinterpretation of U.S. foreign policy priorities. These new narratives may not yet be entirely *dominant* in the Second Trump Administration, but they have clearly been growing, and are today quite powerful. As Aaron MacLean [summarized things recently in The Free Press](#),

... [t]he tent of Trump’s political support is large enough to include numerous attitudes toward Ukraine, ranging from traditional Republican antipathy toward Russia and support for invaded American partners, to “realists” who

have long called for warmer relations with Moscow in deference to a rational calculus of power politics, to those who enthusiastically wish for Ukraine's outright defeat. The latter two groups form their own operational coalition on the question of Ukraine.

Why would some Americans enthusiastically seek Ukraine's defeat? Because (in the view of this third group) America's liberal grand strategy since 1945, and especially since the end of the Cold War, has propped up a world system inimical to its values. Ukraine is an outpost of an essentially unjust and oppressive liberal imperium; Russia, meanwhile, is a potential partner in an anti-liberal concert that could maintain world order, perhaps even in coalition with China itself. The hostility to liberalism is the overarching idea, and Ukraine is but one question in a broader exam for humanity.

Many of these strands seem to have come together in the Second Trump Administration's [2025 National Security Strategy](#) issued in November 2025, which nowhere describes Russia as being in any way a threat to the United States but does complain about "elite-driven, anti-democratic" policies in the European Union and among America's allies in Europe. "Our goal," proclaims the strategy, "should be to help Europe correct its current trajectory," and it expresses "great optimism" about "the growing influence of patriotic European parties" pushing back against "unstable minority governments" there. The United States, in fact, quite clearly *sides* with those "patriotic European parties" *against* their governments, as Washington seeks to "restor[e] Europe's civilizational self-confidence and Western identity."

If media reports are to be believed, an [earlier or internal version of the 2025 National Security Strategy](#) was reportedly even more specific, declaring that the United States' objective is to "Make Europe Great Again" – in part by working with Rightist governments in Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Poland "with the goal of pulling them

away” from the European Union. Moreover, it added, “we should support parties, movements, and intellectual and cultural figures who seek sovereignty and preservation/restoration of traditional European ways of life.”

Such thinking has close and clear parallels in the views of MAGA intellectuals who for years have decried what former Trump Administration official Michael Anton – in a reference to the World Economic Forum meetings held at a Davos – has called “[the Davoisie oligarchy](#),” and who have voiced support for insurgent Right-wing political movements in Europe. Christopher DeMuth, for instance, has written approvingly of European Rightist parties who fight the “[international elite with its own self-serving agenda](#),” while delegations from such groups (as well as from Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist India) are frequent guests at “National Conservatism” conferences in the United States.¹¹³ Right-wing scholars such as Patrick Deneen, and Gladden Pappin, and Harvard Law School’s Adrian Vermeule “have consistently hyped the leaders of Europe’s far-right” in Hungary, and Poland.¹¹⁴ (Vermeule, in fact, has also rather generously described British Reform Party leader Nigel Farage as “[the defining mind of our era](#).”) Nor is the Second Trump Administration alone on the Right in loathing the cosmopolitan internationalism of the European Union, which Israeli nationalist theoretician Yoram Hazony has labeled a “[messianic cult](#).”

The Right-Marxist discourse of the MAGA movement thus seems already to be having important implications for U.S. foreign relations. It may be no exaggeration to see here the early stages of what Laura Field has called an “international nationalist imagination”¹¹⁵ of global Right-wing solidarity against what President Trump’s Department of Defense (now colorfully relabeled the “[Department of War](#)”) calls “[the evil of globalism](#).”

The internationalization of the polarities and hyperbolic vehemence of modern U.S. domestic political discourse, moreover, is not just a phenomenon of the Right. Just as the Right sees itself as being in a desperate, existentially-fraught battle against inveterate

value-enemies, so also are such framings reflected in the rhetorical pitch and emotional intensity with which *Left*-leaning leaders have approached international relations.

It is impossible not to think, for instance, that the remarkable degree to which U.S. President Joe Biden made progressive, cosmopolitan identity-political issues into important planks of his national security agenda did not color the fervor with which he responded to the notoriously illiberal, gay-bashing, transgender-persecuting, and religiously chauvinist Vladimir Putin. With the Biden Administration's [2022 National Security Strategy](#) expressly declaring things such as being “responsive to the voices and focus on the needs of the most marginalized, including the LGBTQI+ community” [as among its “national security” priorities](#), how could things have been otherwise?

On the Left as well as on the Right, then, the international behavior of American leaders seems to be increasingly affected – and the emotional fervor of that behavior accentuated – by valences of conflict between what one might call “cosmopolitan” and “populist” or “traditionalist” values. This, I think, could have very important implications, especially if such attitudes become more widely prevalent.

Broader Dynamics

Notably, the convergence of Right-Marxist and Left-Marxist critical discourse seems to be having important repercussions in other countries as well. There is today much speculation, for example – and at least some corroborating evidence from political polls and election results – about the [possibility that the rise of right-wing parties in various additional countries in Europe could lead to MAGA-analogous governments across the continent](#).

Tensions analogous to those that have emerged in U.S. politics can be seen in the [struggles between culturally-rooted, nationalist, and Euroskeptic conservatives in the United Kingdom and their politically](#)

liberal and Europhilic fellow citizens over immigration policy and BREXIT. They can also be seen in the strength in France of rightist political parties appealing to Catholic identity and anti-immigrant sentiment, and in ongoing debates even within government circles over what are claimed to be the dangers and excesses of American-style “woke” politics as even centrist intellectuals decry the “colonization of French universities by the American left.”

Nor are phenomena of socio-cultural polarization confined just to the trans-Atlantic world. In India, for example, the ethno-nationalist *Hindutva* politics of Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have increasingly sought to reengineer Indian democracy around the concept of India as a national-populist ethnic democracy by and for the Hindus of India. This vision – of an Indian people “united by blood ties, a culture, and community codes” as well as a political framework – combines “society, culture, and nation” in one, and is thus uncomfortable or even hostile to the latitudinarian social norms and political toleration of liberal democracy. Today, it has also been reported, both BJP-affiliated vigilante gangs and police increasingly target not only Muslims but also “secularists” and “liberals,” including intellectuals and journalists,” both “because of their ideas ... [and] on account of their lifestyle, which betrayed the Hindu orthopraxy.”¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, the state of Israel also seems to have become fiercely divided against itself, and was for a time all but paralyzed by controversy over efforts by the conservative coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu to bring the country’s previously independent (and politically liberal) judiciary under control of the current (Rightist) parliamentary majority. Though political attention was for a time been distracted by security crises such as the atrocities of October 7, 2023, the ongoing Gaza war, and the campaign against Iran, Israel is today in the throes of a bitter division that some commentators have described as occurring between Israelis who have completely different (and incompatible) visions of their country’s essence: a contest between the ideal of “a liberal secular state” and that of “a more nationalist theocracy.”

In fact, in quite a few places around the world, including in Russia,¹¹⁷ there is said to have developed an increasing divide between “ordinary” people and a new cosmopolitan elite – a new *type* of person, if you will, who may have his or her point of origin in some particular country but who is genuinely and fully rooted in none, and who is perfectly comfortable moving and living almost anywhere in the developed world where opportunity might knock. For such subjectively global citizens – whom David Goodhart labels “people from anywhere,” in contrast to those “people from somewhere” who have identities far more rooted in and tied to localized traditions and cultures¹¹⁸ – borders and sovereignty might just as well already have disappeared. (If provided merely with a laptop, broadband Internet, and a decent coffee bar, perhaps, such “anywheres” could work, live, and be reasonably happy ... well, *anywhere*.)

It is just such people, of course, that Right-Marxists and Left-Marxists alike would tend to assign to the ranks of the hated New Class. It might therefore not be too much, on this admittedly anecdotal but proliferating evidence, to wonder whether all this is a trend – and whether “anti-cosmopolitan” discourse might represent a supra-national populist phenomenon that is in some sense as *global* as the alleged New Class conspiracy that Right-Marxist discourse decries.

Such a conclusion, at least, would certainly not surprise the Indian essayist [Pankaj Mishra](#). Indeed, though while most other commentators still tend to focus primarily upon the role of such populist discourse in the sociopolitics of the postindustrial West, Mishra generalizes these phenomena of elite neoliberal arrogance and populist rebellion into a truly global phenomenon.

As Mishra sees it, the post-Cold War era was characterized by elite agendas predicated upon expectations of “worldwide convergence on the Western model.”

It was simply assumed by the powerful and the influential among us that with socialism dead and buried, buoyant

entrepreneurs in free markets would guarantee swift economic growth and worldwide prosperity, and that Asian, Latin American[,] and African societies would become, like Europe and America, more secular and rational as economic growth accelerated.¹¹⁹

When things did not quite work out as congenially as those elites had planned, Mishra feels, the dislocations and inequalities of the resulting system – in which “formal equality between individuals coexist[ed] with massive differences in power, education, status[,] and property ownership” – have led to a widespread backlash, not just in Western democracies but also (manifesting itself in various forms) in the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. Out of this backlash, he suggests, a populist global counter-culture has emerged, a radicalized cultural community has emerged that is dominated by the “ambitious lower-middle class,” and that has “*ressentiment* as [its] defining feature.”

Within this counter-movement, Mishra asserts, large numbers of people indulge “the suspicion, which was previously mostly found among paranoid conspiracy theorists, that their own political elite has become the enemy of freedom, not its protector.” In this “militant secession from a civilization premised on gradual progress under liberal-democrat trustees,” he writes, “[m]any people ... aim their rage against an allegedly cosmopolitan and rootless cultural elite.” These divisions, Mishra declares grimly – and in an unmistakable echo of Joel Kotkin’s warning about the modern equivalent of Medieval “peasant revolts” against entrenched elites and a general “turning away from democratic liberalism around the world”¹²⁰ – represent “today’s civil war.”¹²¹ (Mishra was writing in 2017, but the year 2025 might seem to support his thesis, for it was characterized by widespread protests driven by “frustration over rising inequality, underemployment, corruption[,] and a deepening doubt among students and young workers that they’ll ever enjoy the kind of lives their parents had” that roiled politics in multiple countries around the world, even to the point of toppling leaders in Nepal, Madagascar, and Bulgaria.)

If indeed this is a kind of “civil war” – at least figuratively, anyway – it is thus not surprising to see some of its putative “combatants” trying to organize themselves into effective coalitions. Despite the oxymoronic nature of a transnational *global alliance of antiglobalists*, Right-wing intellectuals from various countries have increasingly made common cause, not merely coordinating and encouraging each other online – and rallying support for Rightist political candidates in places such as [Romania](#) and [Poland](#) – but also periodically meeting at conferences such as the “[Age of Patriots” event](#) organized in 2025 by the [Conservative Political Action Conference](#) (CPAC) in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, a government [idolized by modern Right-populists](#) for its [resolute “illiberality.”](#) The American MAGA figure Steve Bannon, in fact, has [talked openly about trying to organize a trans-national alliance of national-populist conservatives](#) to stand up against what he feels to be the corrupting influence of globalist progressivism.

An Emergent “New Geopolitics” of Culture War?

For the student of international relations, this would therefore seem to be a pregnant moment, raising fascinating questions about what would happen if such trends continued to the point of reordering traditional geopolitical divisions, affinities, and antipathies. What would the world look like, in other words, if this kind of “globalized anti-globalism” continues to grow, leading to the emergence of important collective geopolitical fault lines that are based not upon traditional dichotomies (e.g., East/West, North-versus-South, developed-versus-underdeveloped, capitalist-versus-communist, or democratic-versus-authoritarian) but instead upon a new frontier of socio-cultural contestation between “cosmopolitans” and “traditionalists”?

One can still only speculate about this, of course, but the possibility is certainly worth flagging. It is not impossible to imagine the emergence of what might even be termed a new geopolitical era – one in which ideational narratives of identity focused upon socio-cultural ontology are at least as important as issues related to the more

concrete resources over which nations have always struggled, and in which such identitarian disputes create a *new conflict axis* in the world. In such a new political geography of moralistic conflict, the main disputants would be, on the one hand, the identity structures and value constellations of post-Cold War neoliberal cosmopolitanism, and on the other, an array of regimes and populations claiming to represent traditional values and mores *against* that cosmopolitanism.¹²²

The former (the cosmopolitans) would feel themselves to represent the highest and best fruits of modernity – liberal democracy, human rights, humanist secularism, and social tolerance – and see something backward, atavistic, repressive, and retrograde in their opponents. The latter (the traditionalists), meanwhile, would claim to have suffered identity-based affronts and grievances at the hands of this cosmopolitanism, which they regard as immoral and corrupting, and they would seek to push back against its normative hegemony with their own *counter-hegemonic* narratives of chauvinist and particularistic national or socio-cultural essence. Both would be highly moralistic, and each side would both despise and constantly seek to delegitimize and stigmatize the other.

Blurring of Geographic Frontiers

In a world powerfully divided between partisans of such cosmopolitan and traditionalist camps, contestation would occur both *across* and *within* existing national frontiers. Because the vicissitudes of various countries' domestic political processes would determine "which side" prevailed in controlling each national government, the geopolitical fault lines between the two camps would to some extent fall along existing territorial frontiers. Individual states would therefore tend to fall into one or the other of the feuding camps depending upon which faction happened to have won in the most recent national elections, making deep engagement in *national-level* contestation critical to both sides.

At the same time, because socio-political fault lines would also exist within each domestic jurisdiction, struggles would also occur within countries. In this sense, therefore, the geopolitical terrain would be more complex than that of Europe during most of the Cold War, when Communist political parties were only infrequently competitive at the national level in Western democracies and Communist governments simply precluded the existence of domestic opposition groups at all. By contrast, in our hypothesized competition between “trads” and “cosmos,” *all* terrain would be in some sense “up for grabs.” As described earlier, we see some such polarized contestation already manifesting itself in U.S. foreign relations. American Right-populist antipathy to politically progressive governments and support for populist Right-wing opposition groups in Europe clearly – and now, with the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy, *explicitly* – colors Washington’s relationship with its NATO alliance partners, even while engendering sympathies for regimes such as that of Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Vladimir Putin in Russia.

But there would also be no guarantee that countries would *stay* on “their” side of the factional dividing line in this future geopolitics of conflict, particularly in democratic polities subject to periodic elections and in which neither cosmopolitan nor traditionalist constituencies hold an enduringly dominant position. Indeed, some countries might be susceptible to periodic – and unpredictable – “flips,” oscillating between partisan positions on either side of the socio-political divide (*i.e.*, sometimes being cosmopolitan and at other times traditionalist) depending upon who happens to be in power at any given time. This would add considerably to the complexity and instability of the international security environment, particularly if one or more structurally important major countries – such as the United States – were among those subject to such oscillation.

Yet traditional national frontiers would also themselves be to some degree *contested*, too. For traditionalists, national frontiers would remain of huge inherent importance, for such thinkers tend to see national sovereignty as a central locus of political and personal identity, in contrast to cosmopolitan opponents who often prize such

affinities less, or may even be suspicious of them. Against the sovereigntist predilections of the traditionalists would be counterpoised the instincts of cosmopolitans, particularly in the context of European politics, where already proponents of the European Union have struggled for years not just against British secession but also against anti-liberal populist governments in [Poland](#) and [Hungary](#) which have at various points worked to undermine EU mechanisms and processes from within. (The European Commission, for instance, at one point [brought suit against Poland under EU law](#), while [withholding funding from Hungary](#).) In their specifics, such squabbles are about the details of specific national policies and EU requirements, but in broader terms they are contests over the primary locus of sovereignty between cosmopolitan ideals of constructively “pooled” identity and traditionalist ideals of absolutist nationality. Such debates and contestation seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon, and would surely be accentuated in a future “Cultural Cold War” between traditionalist and cosmopolitan camps.

Indeed, in some respects, a future world of contestation between cosmopolitans and traditionalists would also be one in which national frontiers were in some sense *porous*, for as noted, the axis of conflict between these socio-cultural camps would also run *within* existing territorial nation-states rather than just between them – that is, along cross-cutting demographic as well as just geographical lines. If there is an historical analogue to this, it might perhaps be found in the fraught domestic politics of Western European socialism in the 19th Century, or in the contested confessional politics of European religious divisions after the Protestant Reformation. Such developments could powerfully complicate the “inter-state” dynamics of contemporary international relations.

To the extent, moreover, that *wars* were to occur in such a hypothetical future world pitting against each other countries that fall into opposite camps across the traditionalist/cosmopolitan divide, such conflicts might thus be notably “multifront” in nature – that is, waged as a complex mix of direct military conflict, proxy conflict within the policy communities of belligerent countries (and

elsewhere), and perhaps even domestic subversion, sabotage, and electoral interference. (At the very least, things would become more chaotic and unpredictable in time of conflict.) War would be more likely, as well as more likely to be *intractable* in this future world, even as wartime dynamics would be more prone to involve complex factionalisms and ally-of-convenience tradeoffs, further challenging effective coalition-building within and between nations. On the whole, an international environment of pervasive and to some degree cross-cutting ideational factionalism would likely exacerbate the challenges of modern conflict.

Intractability of Conflicts

To the degree that such socio-cultural schisms became the focus of broad identity-political geopolitical divisions and contestation, moreover, it is possible that this would engender more *problematic* conflicts by evoking particularly strong emotional valences and by being unusually resistant to the negotiated compromises of diplomacy. At the very least, this hypothesized future world would not seem likely to be a calculatingly *realpolitikal* one, but rather an environment in which various charged and emotive identities competed for attention and levied compelling and incompatible demands for moralistic vindication.

The key to these challenges would lie in the extent to which geopolitical contestation between cosmopolitans and traditionalists would come to feel *personally existential* as a result of the close connection between such conflicts and questions of individual participants' personal identity. In principle, at least for a Marxist critical theorist, disputes between the New Class and those rising up against domination by such that technocratic elite might seem to be "only" about these groups' respective class interest. Nevertheless, things would surely be vastly more complicated in practice.

In Alvin Gouldner's telling, after all, the New Class is an *ideologized class par excellence*. ("The shared ideology of the intellectuals and intelligentsia is ... an ideology about discourse."¹²³)

The members of the New Class, in fact, are specialists in and masters of the manipulation of symbolic systems, and the imposition and maintenance of ideological hegemony is central to their primacy. As Antonio Gramsci himself might have agreed, theirs is a domination less over the direct control of capital or labor than over that of *culture and thought*. Accordingly, there is essentially no way for contestation over their rule *not* to be a fundamentally ideological struggle over ideas and internalized identities.

This is certainly how Right-Marxists like Samuel Francis appear to have seen it, at least. And, as we have already seen with recent “culture war” politics in the United States, disputes between “liberal elites” and “ordinary Americans” are deeply entangled in fierce and intractable identity-existential questions – such as over religious imperatives or gender identity – that are not always amenable to compromise, even in theory. A *geopolitics* that came to be rooted in such culture conflicts might thus be a charged one indeed.

After all, where narratives of grievance become associated with socio-cultural issues of *identity* (*i.e.*, questions related to *who* one is, and the needs or demands that flow from contestation over or perceived challenges to that identity) – rather than being, say, over the division of resources (*i.e.*, questions of who gets what “things”) – disputes seem likely to become both particularly emotively and politically “hot” *and* particularly intractable. Identity-political “goods” are not always *divisible* ones in the way that material ones can be.

One might perhaps imagine resolving an international dispute over resources by sharing access to those resources, for example, and the same might be said of conflict over markets or territory. Disputes centered on questions related to *who one is*, however – or what one is *owed* as a result of such identity – are likely to be much more intractable, and less likely to be soluble through negotiated compromise.

Today’s ongoing war in Ukraine *might*, for instance, be conceptualized as a dispute over who controls things such as the agricultural land, coal, and territory of the Donbas, or the coastline of

the Black Sea. Yet it is not. Rather, the conflict is seen by its contestants as a contest over *whether or not Ukrainians are Russians*. This makes it an issue not of “what one has” but “who one is,” and on *that* there is presumably less ground for negotiation. The stakes for Ukrainians are thus existential almost by definition, and the rhetoric of the Putin regime suggests that even modern Russians may feel something viscerally and personally threatening here (*e.g.*, in the idea that the locus of the ancient kingdom and cultural fountainhead of Kievan Rus is not actually *Russian*).

To the degree that what is perceived to be at issue is fidelity to one’s national *self* or the fulfilment of one’s destiny, compromise can feel like national erasure, and moderation can feel like betrayal. A world riven by the politics of moralistic oppositionalism and grievance discourses tied to a supposedly identity-existential clash between cosmopolitan progressivism and traditionalist reaction might therefore be one with many international tensions or conflicts that are more intractable even than those we confront today.

None of this necessarily means that traditional international concepts such as deterrence or a balance of power could not possibly work in a geopolitics of contested identity. It may be, however, that tempers and rhetoric run would especially hot in such a world of *idealpolitik*, making compromise and bargaining more challenging.

A system of *idealpolitik* might also be more idiosyncratic than today’s world even in terms of what is felt worthy of fighting *over*, compared to what one might expect under the traditional statesman’s *realpolitik* aspiration to coolly calculate the balance of objective interests. Identity-political wars, in fact, could perhaps occur even when there exists no actually *material* harm or basis for disagreement or affront at all. Through an *idealpolitikal* prism, fighting a war over “mere words” might not seem unreasonable. If discourse is the New Class’ currency of power and such words are in fact *constitutive* of socio-political reality, why would they *not* be worth fighting over? In an arena of zero-sum socio-cultural identity politics, adversarial language and ideas might seem to be “violence” no less aggrieving

than bombs or bullets – as indeed some in American politics have been suggesting for some time. Internationally, the addition of mere *disfavored speech* to the list of things deemed to constitute a legitimate *casus belli* between states would certainly be a recipe for additional danger and instability.¹²⁴

A More Unstable World

Rather than dividing into stark Cold War-style blocs, this posited future world would be characterized by competing *networks* that lack clear or stable frontiers, and in which members of the competing factions seek not simply to seize and maintain power against their value-enemies at home, but also to mobilize webs of like-minded partisans elsewhere – and everywhere – and in which those enemies themselves work hard to return the favor. Such competition dynamics would not end more traditional great power rivalries, but would constitute an *additional* layer of potential conflict which would not map cleanly onto traditional national or geopolitical divisions, dividing *some* countries to some extent geographically and *most* countries to some extent demographically.

As for the preservation of democracy itself as an organizational form for political life, it might even be that in this hypothesized future environment, democratic forms of governance would begin to lose their attraction for the participants in such identity-politicized contestation. Even in today's world, we have already seen the rulers of illiberal and more traditionalist regimes such as those in Turkey, Hungary, and India place increasing restrictions on domestic democratic contestation in order to reduce the chances of their more cosmopolitan domestic political opponents winning power. As described earlier, moreover, the MAGA intellectual ecosystem of the modern American Right-wing also contains some thinkers whose hatred and fear of their ideological enemies is such that authoritarian rule by a "Red Caesar" or a "CEO-Monarch" feels preferable to taking the chances involved in allowing leaders to be picked in free elections. Where the threat from the domestic "enemy within" is perceived as

being genuinely existential, it is perhaps only a short step from having an Orbán-style “illiberal” democracy to having no democracy at all.

For analogous reasons, moreover, even politically progressive cosmopolitans might come to sour on democratic governance if they felt it likely to lead to a radicalized Rightist hegemony imposed by the votes of benighted traditionalist masses. (Such a betrayal of the right to democratic political participation, for example, might be rationalized being necessary in order to prevent the loss of “all” the *other* rights prized by liberal cosmopolitans if radicalized traditionalists were to come to power.) As both sides demonized each other ever more fervently and successfully, it might thus be that the strongest partisans of *each* camp could come to see the democratic process *itself* as a threat, for it would be the ballot box that might allow the other side to take control. To the degree that values competition becomes ever more intense and polarized in the domestic and international arenas, therefore, *all* players could thus be driven toward illiberality, intolerance, and – ultimately – domestic repression of the hated “Other.” Once again, this would not be a pleasant or peaceful world.

A Taijitu of Reconciliation

These are, of course, merely speculations about one possible future world out of many. Such a world would represent a metastatic projection of some of the dynamics already at play within Western democracies today, and one in which major themes of political contestation would draw heavily upon critical discourses advanced, in our own time, not just by Leftist dialecticians like Alvin Gouldner but also by Right-wing intellectuals like Samuel Francis. This essay is not, however, a *prediction* that such a world will come about, but rather only an effort to identify and describe the *possibility*, for better or for worse.

Nor is this essay in any way an endorsement of the political, sociological, or moral positions of either the Left-Marxist or the Right-Marxist camp. I take no position here on the actual merits of *either* of

those sibling critical discourses – nor on whether the fact of their discursive convergence around conspiracy narratives of malevolent elite capture suggests the accuracy of such conclusions as a sociological description of modern Western society. (It may, or it may not.)

My point in these pages is merely twofold. First, I believe it is both interesting and significant that these two critical discourses *are* so sharply convergent. Their parallels and apparent intellectual consanguinity are worth understanding as part of the history and genealogy of ideas, but also because they suggest a powerful and potentially very influential “mainstreaming” of critical discourse by both the political Left and the political Right. Despite the Left’s general abhorrence of Rightist thinking and the Right’s palpable disgust with “Marxist” intellectualizing, they both seem to agree on some important points, and both actually *sound* notably *Marxist* – at least in a somewhat 1970s-era vein. This odd process of reciprocal intellectual legitimation, moreover, may have significance in real-world decision-making as leaders and polities are influenced by such ideational structures.

Second, with respect to how such real-world developments may unfold, I submit that this Left-Right convergence in critical discourse is *already* helping shape the international environment of political and security relationships between the world’s major states. If such trends were to continue, moreover – though, of course, there is no guarantee of that – they have the potential to reorder the geopolitical environment in significant ways, conceivably even to the point of creating a new “axis of conflict” around a “Cultural Cold War” that is quite different than the contestational dichotomies to which statesmen and international relations scholars have hitherto been accustomed.

Whether or not such a speculative future conflict environment of generalized geopolitical competition between cosmopolitan and traditionalist camps ever actually emerges, however, I believe it is important to understand the intellectual dynamics of these critical discourses on their own terms and in their own voice. That is, I believe it is important to grasp the ways in which Left-Marxism and Right-

Marxism share a common view of society that seems likely to give their partisans a perceived stake in particular agendas and courses of action in the years ahead that could have notable consequences. I hope this essay will contribute to such understanding.

As for whether there may be some *escape* from the polarized politics of extremity pushing societies towards such reciprocally hyperbolic antagonisms, our collective way forward seems somewhat unclear. As noted earlier, Alvin Gouldner himself did not offer a clear solution to the problem of the self-undermining Epimeniden tendencies of New Class critical discourse. Nor did he identify a clear alternative to the professional-managerial primacy of the New Class. Short of simply concluding that these problems are unfixable and resigning ourselves to domination by that New Class – or perhaps, *selon* Patrick Deneen and others, a like domination by a Right-wing replacement elite, which Gouldnerian analysis would expect to be no less moralistically oppressive and self-aggrandizingly tyrannical than its “woke” predecessor – is there thus any hope?

Perhaps it is not too outlandish to imagine the tentative outlines of an answer. It seems possible, for instance, to envision an approach that tries to remain broadly faithful to the basic justice-seeking, exploitation-hating, society-improving, and rationality-valorizing ideals of the CCD, while yet leavening this discourse and preventing it spinning out of control into ideological pathologies by *also* embracing what Thomas Sowell has termed the “constrained vision” that “accepts tragedy as an unavoidable part of being human and seeks to make the best of things.”

This, in fact, is a dichotomy already envisioned by Gouldner, who contrasted the “ideologic vision” with the “tragic vision,” while describing the former as being particularly associated with the rise of the New Class:

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, th[e] ideologic vision succeed[ed] the tragic vision as the salient form of consciousness. It does not, however, replace or destroy,

but, rather, primarily *represses* the tragic. The ideologic vision is grounded in an optimistic estimate of man's power and, as such, reinforces man's confidence in himself and his ability to reconstruct society, as well as increases his sense of moral responsibility to do so. ... While the tragic vision is not at all incompatible with the existence of a public sphere and of political struggle, as in ancient Greece, still the tragic vision places firm limits on what politics can do.¹²⁵

Would it be too much, then, to embrace a fundamentally, albeit guardedly, optimistic philosophy that *seeks* to improve the world but that still recognizes the inherent constraints placed upon this ameliorative project by human imperfection, the impossibility of exercising direct and predictably efficacious linear control over massive, open, complex adaptive systems, and indeed – at least for those of a Christian persuasion – the very *Fallenness* of Man? Is there room for an approach genuinely animated by ideas and ideals, but that thus avoids rigidity and dogmatism by remaining sensitive, in Gouldner's words, "to *persons*, to their feelings and reactions, and ... [to the richness of] human solidarity"¹²⁶ – not just because those things are intrinsically worthy, but also because achieving *perfect* outcomes is unavailable in this imperfect world and because *pursuing* such perfection can exact such a huge cost to those values?

In Laura Field's book-length study of the Right-wing intellectuals of the MAGA ecosystem, she returns repeatedly to the metaphor of Aeschylus' famous play, the three-part Oresteia, which won first prize at the Dionysia festival in ancient Greece in 458 B.C.E. In the final play of that series, *The Eumenides*, after a tragic sequence of events chronicled in the first two plays, the hero Orestes is fleeing the vengeful Furies, those fierce and implacable ancient deities of vengeance and retributive justice. However, through the intervention of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, Orestes is subject to a jury trial, which deadlocks before Athena herself casts the deciding vote in favor of his acquittal. This angers the Furies, who regard him as having

escaped justice, but Athena placates them by incorporating them into the justice system of the Athenian city-state.

For Field, the *Oresteia* suggests the need for a “magnanimous Athena” to prescribe for the toxicities of modern American politics a salutary agenda that will allow Wisdom to “vote ... down” the Furies of contemporary discourse, “offer peace, [and] bind up the nation’s wounds.” (Her suggested agenda, for instance, includes organizing an emphatically *moderate* liberal patriotic education program based not upon valorizing Manichean narratives but on debating and seeking the good in the context of political pluralism.)¹²⁷ But Field’s account leaves the reader with the impression that the Furies – to which she etymologically likens the “Furious Minds” of the Right-wing intellectuals she studies in her book – are *problems* that Athena’s wisdom must overcome: angry spirits the grim energies of which must be *defeated* in the interests of making possible civilized life in the *polis*.

Yet to my eye, that seems a bit too simple, Field’s own somewhat moralistic account perhaps betraying the political biases of her self-admitted liberalism, for she is plainly horrified by much of what she chronicles in MAGA intellectualism. A richer reading of the metaphor of the *Oresteia* in the context of modern American politics, however, might remind the reader that the secret to Athena’s solution is less in “voting down” the Furies than in reaching a deep sort of *accommodation* with them. That is, Athena’s answer is to *adopt* but *domesticate* their ferocious energies of righteous anger and retributive justice to serve the *polis* as a kind of “engine” to *drive* the quest for Justice, while yet keeping that search within boundaries set by the quasi-constitutional constraints of *process wisdom* so as to keep the *polis* from tearing itself apart in counterproductive spasms of vengeance and counter-vengeance.

The point for Aeschylus, then, is perhaps not that the Furies’ dark energies are *inappropriate* and must be *overcome*, but rather precisely that they are – like the caustic critical scrutinies of Gouldner’s CCD – both *justified* and yet also *dangerous* when unbounded because they are so prone to metastasize into systemic self-destruction if not

kept somehow in check. To return to a more Gouldnerian framing, the “ideologic vision” – which may come in both Leftist and Rightist modes, to the extent that those still differ at this point – is not *bad* but in fact *valuable*, while also being notably *incomplete* as a formula by which humans can live successfully in community, for it requires the “tragic vision” to temper its excesses and prevent the system from spiraling into self-defeating excess.

For its part, moreover, the tragic vision *also* requires a dynamic counterpoint from the ideologic vision, lest there be *no* force optimistically driving society toward the better. (Surely life cannot *all* be tragic, can it? Whereof love, beauty, and hope?) It is thus arguably in the juxtaposition of and dynamic tension between these two forces – their reciprocal domestication, if you will, in service of the *polis*, making civilization possible – that Aeschylus signals to us that the wisdom of Athena lies:

Yea, even from these, who, grim and stern,
Glared anger upon you of old,
O citizens, ye now shall earn
A recompense right manifold. ...
These alien Powers that thus are made
Athenian evermore ...
Lead onward, that these gracious powers of earth
Henceforth be seen to bless the life of men.

Thus incorporated and made enduringly of constructive service, the Furies are no longer to be labeled *Furies*, at all, but rather now – as Aeschylus entitled his third and final play in this cycle – as the “Eumenides,” or “Gracious Ones.”

Such an ideological synthesis may also help provide us at least a partial response to the problem of the hegemony of the New Class. It may well be that the modern world cannot function without the technocratic expertise of the Ehrenreichs’ PMC. But as Gouldner himself understood,¹²⁸ such expertise can only be seen as legitimate when exercised on behalf of values that are themselves legitimate, and

the question of *values* is not a merely technocratic one. However much the New Class may assert the right to determine societal ends, it can thus claim no special prerogative in this respect. Hence it is necessary to look elsewhere – or at least, more specifically, beyond *just* the New Class, for it would seem inappropriate to *deny* them a voice in such questions – for how to determine the ends towards which socio-political activity is to be directed.

In that respect, I have suggested [elsewhere in the pages of this journal](#) with Nigel Biggar the need for an approach to the political constitution of the community that reconciles the rights of human citizens *as individuals* with those of human citizens together *as the polis* – and I think that this approach can perhaps help us answer the question of legitimate societal “ends definition” unanswered and unanswerable by the New Class as well. In our argument, Biggar and I contend that a “minimum package” of rights must be given to every adult individual in a society in order to protect those individuals’ right and ability, by choice, to constitute a sovereign community capable of governing itself, of asserting rights of sovereign separation and non-interference vis-à-vis other such entities, and of collectively deciding upon the ends toward which social life should be directed.¹²⁹

This “Minimum Package of Rights” (MPR) need not necessarily be very extensive, and indeed probably *should not* be, for it is intended to *ground* rather than to *supplant* a human society’s choice of what to prize in its collective life and what ends to pursue. The MPR aims to leave *most* such decisions to the community that is constituted by its individual members. Nevertheless, protecting *their* ability to undertake such social constitution – through ensuring the elementary protections of voting rights, freedom of expression and association, and due process vis-à-vis power-holders – is essential if the resulting community is to have legitimacy in the first place, including the legitimacy needed to exert claims of sovereign prerogative against *other* communities, as well as that necessary to resist the relativistic solvents of New Class critical discourse.

Applied in the context of the problems examined in this essay, our MPR approach could help provide some institutional check upon the hegemony of the New Class without rejecting the value such elites can provide – and the relative degree of social privilege they can thereby legitimately *earn* – as skillful stewards of the technocratic processes upon which modern life depends. This approach would also be *democratic* and *individualist* in the most important of ways, yet without eroding the importance or value of human community, including the lifeways, mores, and traditions that develop and take root as communities act over time *as communities*. The MPR, in other words, aspires to provide a legitimating bridge – an Athenian accommodation, if you will – between individualism and sociality.

This is not really a radical vision; indeed it is a fundamentally conservative one, rooted in concepts of democratic self-governance in the classically Liberal (not “liberal”) tradition that have been around for generations. But it would represent a retreat both from the absolutist moralism and *rights-hostility* of modern Right-wing “Red Caesarism” and from the oddly relativistic *rights-credulity* of modern progressivism, which has gradually allowed an expanding array of mere policy preferences to adopt the mantle of inalienable “rights” that can be aggressively demanded of others, even while delegitimizing the idea that the collective can legitimately assert Truth claims against the individual. Yet the MPR would nonetheless give “ordinary people” enforceable claims against power in the best Liberal sense, enabling them to impose broad checks – if and to the degree that they wished – upon the policy choices of the New Class, which would be permitted to improvise on its own technocratic recognizance only *within* broad guidelines set by the democratically empowered population at large.

The dynamic tensions embedded within this approach, moreover – in which *nobody's* discourse would automatically be privileged, and rival claims would be forced to do what Gouldner reminds us that New Class discourse always *claimed* to do in prevailing by actually *persuading people*¹³⁰ rather than through the soft coercion of hegemonic *fiat* – could help us better balance the ambition of the

ideologic against the prudence of the tragic in our search for a genuinely livable political life. The idea of such an accommodation is perhaps not so novel, but we may yet have to reclaim it.

In the polarized politics of modern America, of course, such a Eumenidean vision of reconciliation – between the demands of the ideologic vision and the insights of the tragic, and between the demands of individual rights and the demands of collective sovereign ones – may not be entirely welcome to many partisans. As Gouldner would surely remind us, the ideologic vision is congenitally averse to compromise; it instinctively prefers to chase the perfect at any cost rather than to accept the acceptable. (As we have seen, to the ideologue, any compromise carries with it the whiff of betrayal, or even of “treason,” and must be resisted.¹³¹ For such a one, as Senator Barry Goldwater might have put it, extremism in the defense of one’s values is no vice, and “moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”)

Yet if we *are* to live together and civilization is not to tear itself apart, Aeschylus seems to suggest, the dark energies of the Furies must be embraced for the righteousness of their anger while nonetheless being tempered (and hence limited) by Wisdom and the process-values of civilization. Surely there is a sort of divine virtue in that. In *The Eumenides*, Athena grasps that to be vibrant and enduring, a civilization must harness the value of *both* of these elements through some dynamic *taijitu* of interpenetrating reconciliation, even if such accommodation proves distasteful to the ideologues therein. If we are to learn these lessons and not see both American domestic society and international politics consumed by a new Cultural Cold War between ideologized factions of Alvin Gouldner’s New Class, perhaps the great Greek tragedian still has something important to teach us.

* * *

About the Author

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Notes

- ¹ Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025), 4.
- ² A word on terminology is in order here. To this author, the term “Right-wing” seems more appropriate here than “conservative,” for as we shall see, many of these thinkers are only infrequently interested in *conserving* anything. Unlike traditional conservatives – who often do not oppose social progress *per se*, rather seeing the road to Hell being paved with good intentions and seeking to slow change and interpose limits and guardrails in order to prevent things precious to society from being thrown overboard amidst the blind haste of progressives’ march into the future – the modern Right-wing’s agenda more commonly runs to the revolutionary: to *breaking* institutions controlled by the elites who are seen as having commandeered society. The mantra of the modern Right-wing, is thus not to “conserve” but, as Rufo himself puts it, to “[revolt](#).”
- ³ This term apparently originates with the Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, of the Frankfurt School, who first supported militant confrontational politics but then shifted to advocate “[United Front](#)” [politics and a “long march through the institutions”](#) whereby activists could capture and subvert the institutions of capitalist society by working within them. Contemporary Right-wingers now interpret this aspirational Marcusean agenda as an accomplished fact – [seeing the Left as having successfully adopted Antonio Gramsci’s idea of a “war of position” in which one makes gradual progress toward a fait accompli](#) – and have made the Left’s capture of such institutions into their [master narrative of contemporary politics](#).
- ⁴ Field, *Furious Minds*, 245-46 (quoting Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change* (Sentinel Press: 2023), 25).
- ⁵ Field, *Furious Minds*, 139-40 (quoting Bronze Age Pervert, *Bronze Age Mindset* (independently published, 2018).
- ⁶ Field, *Furious Minds*, 257 (quoting “Raw Egg Nationalist” that “[t]he globalists want you to be fat, sick, depressed[,] and isolated, the better to control you and to milk you for as much economic value as they can before they kill you. That’s soy globalism in a nutshell. Own nothing, live in the pod, eat the soy.”).
- ⁷ Christopher Rufo, *America’s Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything* (Broadside Books: 2023), 280.
- ⁸ Field, *Furious Minds*, 291.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 245-46 (quoting Deneen, *Regime Change*, 153-57 & 185).
- ¹⁰ See generally, e.g., Sarmast Bahram, “The Technocratic Monarchist Movement in America: Theoretical Dimensions and Political Impacts,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2025), 3-5.

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- ¹¹ The term “woke” has its origins in vernacular Black American English, but has in recent years become associated with hyper-zealous and highly moralistic political progressivism, and today functions mainly as a sort of a catch-all word for Leftist social justice-oriented politics of the sort loathed by the modern Right wing.
- ¹² Field, *Furious Minds*, 118-19 (quoting Yoram Hazony).
- ¹³ Samuel Francis, *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (University of Missouri Press, 1993), 11-12.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (Basic Books, 2011), 7, 10, 95, 172-75, 191-202, & 500-13.
- ¹⁵ Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, 500 & 526.
- ¹⁶ Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (Crown Forum, 2012), 16-19, 33, 46-61, 68-70, 100-01, 124-208.
- ¹⁷ Joel Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (Encounter Books, 2020), 1, 28-29, & 49.
- ¹⁸ Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism*, 12, 7, & 51-54.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25, 9, 51, 113, & 120-25.
- ²⁰ See, e.g., Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935* (David Forgacs, ed.) (NYU Press, 2000), at 306-07.
- ²¹ Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 249-50.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 380-81.
- ²³ Field, *Furious Minds*, 129 (quoting Spencer as recounted by Tamir Bar-On, “Richard B. Spencer and the Alt Right,” in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Marck Sedgwick, ed.) (Oxford University Press: 2019), ch.14).
- ²⁴ Barbara Ehrenreich & John Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” *Radical America*, vol. 11, no. 2, March-April 1977, <https://library.brown.edu/pdfs/1125403552886481.pdf>.
- ²⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich & John Ehrenreich, “The New Left: A Case Study in Professional-Managerial Class Radicalism,” *Radical America*, vol. 11, no. 3, May-June 1977, <https://files.libcom.org/files/Rad%20America%20V11%20I3.pdf>.
- ²⁶ Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” 13.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 24.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ³⁴ Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, “The New Left: A Case Study,” 18.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ³⁸ Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” 29.

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- ³⁹ Ibid., 22.
- ⁴⁰ Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, "The New Left: A Case Study," 8-9/
- ⁴¹ Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology: The Origins, Grammar, and Future of Ideology* (Seabury Press, 1967), xii. As he put it, "most Marxists (like most academic sociologists) reject the idea that they and their theory are the bearers of contradiction, false consciousness, and mystification. The Marxist outlaw is characterized by the fact that he also speaks about Marxism; that he is reflexive about Marxism and that he does not simply view Marxism as a resource but also takes it as a topic. The Marxist outlaw is attempting to speak the rules by which Marxism lives; to discover and articulate the grammar to which it submits. The Marxist outlaw, then, holds that even Marxism must be subject to critique." Ibid., xiv.
- ⁴² Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*; Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (Seabury Press, 1979); and Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (Seabury Press, 1980).
- ⁴³ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 58. The emphasis is in the original; Gouldner, as the reader will see, was very fond of italics. (Hereafter, all italicized portions of quotations from Gouldner will simply replicate his own punctuation.)
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.
- ⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, 3.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 38.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 86.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 59.
- ⁵¹ Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, "The New Left: A Case Study," 27-28.
- ⁵² Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 48.
- ⁵³ Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, "The New Left: A Case Study," 27-28.
- ⁵⁴ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 8 & 16.
- ⁵⁵ Gouldner felt that the rise of vernacular languages and the technology of printing democratized the culture of writing and strengthened rational discourse by decontextualizing argumentation in ways that separated it, to some degree, from the contingencies of the immediate or local environment. This had the result of helping empower a new class of persons who, as it were, *specialized* in linguistically sophisticated discourses centered on that rationality. See Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 40-41. "Whatever their politics or their public project – whether reactionary or revolutionary – ideologies are regarded by their speakers as having their authoritative expression in writing." Ibid., 80. "The social movements of the modern world," Gouldner said, "are both ideology- and news-constructed." Ideologies became possible with the emergence of a mass printing culture because they are "symbol systems generated by, and intelligible to persons whose relationship to everyday life is mediated by their reading – of newspapers, journals, or books – and by the developing general concept of 'news,' as well as by the specific and concrete 'bits' of news now increasingly transmitted by the growing media, and is grounded in the experience of life as decontextualized events." Ibid., 100 & 105. There was therefore, he wrote, a "profound interconnection" between the 18th and 19th Century "Age of Ideologies" and "the 'communications revolution' grounded in the development of printing, printing technologies, and the growing production of printed products." The Age of Ideologies associated with the first emergence of the New Class was characterized by "that proliferating production of symbol systems that responded to the increased market for meaning; and, in particular, for *secularized* meanings" Ibid., 91 & 93.

- ⁵⁶ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 2-5.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 76.
- ⁵⁸ The Old Class of capital-owners has the function of reproducing capital and profiting therefrom, but its members face pressure “to rationalize their productive and administrative efforts and unceasingly heighten efficiency.” This creates the basis for the bourgeoisie’s alliance with the New Class, for such rationalization “is dependent increasingly on the efforts of the New Class intelligentsia and its expert skills. It is inherent in its structural situation, then, that the old class must bring the New Class into existence.” Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 18.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 12.
- ⁶⁰ Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 128-33.
- ⁶¹ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 17 & 49.
- ⁶² Ibid., 14-15.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 21.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 64.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 86.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 85.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 18.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 61.
- ⁷² Ibid., 54 & 57. According to Gouldner, “academic technicians” and Marxist vanguard party theorists such as Lenin and Karl Kautsky are alike in that “both define themselves as the repository of a superior knowledge that can and should be the basis of a social reconstruction. Both are elite conceptions that place other segments of society in a tutelary role, although one commonly serves to reform and integrate the *status quo* while the other seeks to revolutionize it.” Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 36.
- ⁷³ Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 133.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 180.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 63.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 185.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 186.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 190.
- ⁷⁹ One cannot imagine, of course, that Gouldner was not self-aware enough to see *himself* as a member of the New Class.
- ⁸⁰ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 81.
- ⁸¹ “The paradox of the New Class is that it is both emancipatory *and* elitist.” Ibid., 84.
- ⁸² Ibid., 86.
- ⁸³ Ibid., 75.

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- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 84.
- ⁸⁵ “Ideologists, in brief, believe in the power of the idea as vested in the word,” and are “oriented – either by inner conviction or outward circumstance – to a grammar of rationality.” Their ideology, in turn, both “permits the mobilization of power and, at the same time, allows its full and unrestrained discharge,” thus forming “a call to action – a ‘command’ grounded in a social theory – in a world-referencing discourse that presumably justifies that call.” Ideologists are thus committed to “the principle of the unity of theory and practice mediate by rational discourse.” Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 27, 29, 30-31, & 39; see also Ibid., 79 (“it is characteristic of the grammar of ideology that it calls for the unity of theory and practice; that it seeks to change the world; that it is discourse on behalf of public projects of social reconstruction”).
- ⁸⁶ “We might say that ideology has a certain ‘overconfidence’ concerning its own empirical grounding. It takes this grounding as given rather than treating it as problematic and as susceptible to critical reexamination. In effect, ideology acts as if all relevant empirical issues have been resolved satisfactorily. For ideology, then, there no longer seems to be any question of fact or, more exactly, questions of fact that have policy relevance.” Ibid., 46.
- ⁸⁷ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 84.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., 83.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 40.
- ⁹⁰ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 86.
- ⁹¹ Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 49.
- ⁹² Ibid., 49.
- ⁹³ “All Cretans are liars,” said Epimenides, the Cretan.
- ⁹⁴ Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 270.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., 43.
- ⁹⁶ Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms*, 55 (emphasis in original).
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 16.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 45.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., 53 & 382.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 45.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., 86-87.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., 381.
- ¹⁰³ Not for nothing, perhaps, do many of America’s MAGA movement seem to imagine themselves kindred spirits with the romanticized revolutionaries of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* – at least as that 1862 novel was [interpreted through the Bowdlerizing pop-culture prism of a Broadway musical](#) –fighting for the common Man against cynical forces of repression.
- ¹⁰⁴ This famous phrase, of course, originates with the Marxist historian Benedict Anderson. In his account, the modern “nation” is “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet the, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. ... [And it is] imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them ... has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.” In fact, he wrote, “all

communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991), 6-7.

105 Ibid., 75.

106 See, e.g., Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 54 & 57.

107 Field, *Furious Minds*, 123 & 126. These include men – and they *are* all men – who are currently professors at major universities such as Patrick Deneen and the “common good” theoretician Adrian Vermeule, but also Right-wingers such as Second Trump Administration official Darren Beattie (with a PhD from Duke University PhD), the Aleksandr Dugin popularizer Michael Miller (with one from the University of Toronto), and “Bronze Age Pervert” Costin Alamariu (a PhD from Yale).

108 Field, *Furious Minds*, 86-87 (discussing Deneen’s work).

109 [According to Curtis Yarvin](#), a “Coriolanus conservative is anyone with an upper-class background who, despairing at the utter bankruptcy of his class and the regime it staffs, defects to the barbarians.” Such “Coriolanus types,” he claims, are in many cases “already Marxists,” know “how to think in Marxist logic,” and are thus able to “use Marxist logic against the upper class.” “We are all Coriolanus,” says Yarvin.

110 Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 84.

111 Ibid., 61.

112 See Field, *Furious Minds*, 297.

113 See, e.g., Field, *Furious Minds*, 308.

114 See, e.g., Field, *Furious Minds*, 249.

115 See, e.g., Field, *Furious Minds*, 105.

116 Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 234, 399, 405, & 451.

117 Andrei Soldatov & Irina Borogan, *The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia’s Exiles, Emigres, and Agents Abroad* (Public Affairs Press, 2019), 258-65 (describing the emergence of “Global Russians”).

118 David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (Hurst & Company, 2017); see also, e.g., Joel Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (Encounter Books, 2020), 122-23 (discussing Goodhart).

119 Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2017), 14-15.

120 Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism*, 120-25.

121 Most of the previous two paragraphs draw upon Mishra, *Age of Anger*, 25, 31, 35, 76-80, 139-40, 271, 331-34, 339, & 341.

122 Alvin Gouldner would presumably remind us that the intellectuals, activists, and organizers of the anti-cosmopolitan axis are likely *themselves* members and products of the New Class – making the core of the fight in many ways a struggle for power *within* that globalized elite – but let’s leave that aside for the moment.

123 Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 28 (emphasis deleted).

124 Oddly, the leading proponent of such an approach in the world today would seem to be the People’s Republic of China, which has [proclaimed itself quite willing to go to war](#) if Taiwan does no more than officially to describe itself as “independent.”

125 Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 71.

126 Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 84.

¹²⁷ Field, *Furious Minds*, 122, 310, & 315-23.

¹²⁸ Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, 270.

¹²⁹ Christopher Ford & Nigel Biggar, “Rebutting Sino-Russian Political Discourse and Getting Rights Right,” *Defense & Strategic Studies Online*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 2025, 17-24.

¹³⁰ Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*, 64.

¹³¹ For the zealot, moderation on one’s own side is perhaps even more frightening even than a rival extremism; its very *reasonableness* must feel both deeply alien and dangerously seductive. For the fanatic, moderation is apostasy, and apostasy is a greater sin than mere nonbelief.

The “4D Directive”: Confronting the Fentanyl Crisis as a National Security Threat

by

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The Fentanyl Crisis as a National Security Threat

Illicit fentanyl has become the deadliest force behind the United States’ overdose crisis and a rising threat to national security. Unlike plant-based narcotics, fentanyl is entirely synthetic, inexpensive to manufacture, easy to traffic in minuscule quantities, and highly potent – 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.¹ Because traffickers thus only need small shipments to flood consumer markets, the economics of fentanyl trafficking drive high profits while causing devastating public health costs. Since 2020, fentanyl has been linked to over 300,000 American deaths, with annual synthetic-opioid fatalities exceeding 70,000.² These numbers, which surpass U.S. combat deaths in many modern wars, highlight why fentanyl is increasingly seen as a national security threat rather than solely a public health issue.

The American overdose crisis developed in three distinct waves. The first began in the late 1990s, when aggressive marketing by pharmaceutical companies and over-prescription of opioids helped lead to overdose deaths rising from 8,000 in 1999 to over 16,000 by 2010.³ As access to prescriptions tightened, a second wave appeared around 2010, with users turning to heroin, mainly supplied by Mexican cartels. Heroin-related deaths nearly quintupled between

2010 and 2016.⁴ A third wave began in 2015, when illicit fentanyl and fentanyl analogues replaced heroin and prescription opioids as the leading cause of overdose fatalities. Deaths jumped from 22,000 in 2015 to over 56,000 by 2020, as fentanyl was increasingly mixed into counterfeit pills and other drugs, often without users' knowledge.⁵

This trajectory has established a resilient transnational supply chain that is challenging to disrupt. Chinese chemical and pharmaceutical companies – both legal and illicit – continue to be the primary sources of precursor chemicals used in the synthesis of fentanyl that is thereafter smuggled into the United States. Brokers exploit regulatory gaps, purchase chemicals online, and ship them through legitimate freight and parcel services, most commonly to Mexico.⁶ Mexican narcotrafficking cartels, especially the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation groups, then convert these inputs into fentanyl powder and counterfeit tablets, protected by sophisticated logistics and security networks.⁷ Smuggling into the United States primarily occurs through land ports of entry along the U.S. southern border, often concealed in passenger vehicles and commercial trucks; smaller amounts are transported through express couriers and international mail.⁸ (Fentanyl's extraordinary potency facilitates such smuggling, as very little volume is required to transport dangerous quantities.) Wholesale supplies then spread into decentralized retail networks, including online delivery, ensuring nationwide distribution.⁹

Financial infrastructure amplifies the problem. Cartels and their enablers rely on trade-based money laundering, underground Chinese banking, and digital assets to obscure profits. Sanctions and indictments have disrupted some networks, but front companies are easily reconstituted, and high profits ensure a ready supply of facilitators.¹⁰ This adaptability explains why record interdictions have not reduced overall supply; seizures fluctuate, but generally reflect adjustments by traffickers rather than a true contraction.¹¹

The effects go beyond public health into national and regional security. Fentanyl challenges U.S. border enforcement, where high trade volume strains inspections, and small shipments slip through

undetected. Mexican cartels strengthen their power by diversifying into extortion, fuel theft, and human smuggling, which further destabilizes Mexico and makes bilateral relations more difficult.¹² Digital technologies, encrypted communications, social media platforms, and pseudo-anonymous payments also help expand the reach of fentanyl networks and keep them hidden from scrutiny.¹³

Strategic competition increases the challenge. In 2019, pressured by the United States, Beijing placed all fentanyl-related substances under national control, briefly reducing flows. However, cooperation declined as tensions between the United States and China grew over trade, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. By 2022, China had suspended most counternarcotics cooperation, framing the crisis as a domestic American addiction issue, while Washington saw it as a global security concern.¹⁴ This divergence demonstrates how counternarcotics diplomacy has become vulnerable to broader geopolitical shifts.

Recent statistics illustrate the severity of the problem. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection Service (CBP) seized more than seven tons of fentanyl in fiscal year 2022, nearly doubling that amount in 2023.¹⁵ Although overdose deaths slightly declined in 2024 for the first time in years, the total still exceeded 95,000, surpassing the combined U.S. combat deaths in Korea and Vietnam.¹⁶ While U.S. interdiction and enforcement efforts have demonstrated impressive capacity, they also reveal the resilience of a network that continues to evolve and adapt, and on which those efforts have had remarkably little effect.

This context points to two ongoing realities. First, targeting a single part of the supply chain—such as precursors, laboratories, routes, or retail outlets—usually leads to substitution effects, with traffickers quickly shifting their activity elsewhere. Second, working with foreign partners is essential but fragile, hindered by corruption, uneven regulatory abilities, and conflicting political interests. Though it is true that the fentanyl trade feeds a continuing U.S. domestic demand for illicit opiates, that trade's dependence on Chinese precursors and Mexican cartels – groups now labeled by the U.S.

Government as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) – demonstrates that the crisis involves both state and non-state actors and cannot be seen solely as a U.S. domestic health problem.

The following section examines the primary tools available to U.S. authorities seeking to deal with this problem – namely, *deterrence*, *diplomacy*, *disruption*, and *defense* – and explains how they can be integrated with one another rather than employed in isolation. Throughout this paper, we refer to such an integrated approach as the “4D Framework.”

Policy Considerations: The 4D Framework

If fentanyl is to be addressed as a national security threat, policymakers need to first assess the tools at their disposal. Over the past decade, U.S. responses have included law enforcement activity, public health measures, financial sanctions, and military support; however, these efforts have too often been used only in a fragmented way. Implementing a coherent and integrated strategy, however, requires thinking systematically about the four main tools available: *deterrence*, *diplomacy*, *disruption*, and *defense*. Each tool targets a different part of the supply chain, with its own advantages and limitations; only by using them together can they create a sustainable solution.

In the case of the fentanyl trade, *deterrence* aims to change the cost-benefit calculations of those involved in manufacturing, transporting, or facilitating trafficking. Sanctions, criminal indictments, and extraditions, for instance, have targeted Chinese chemical suppliers and Mexican cartel leaders. The U.S. Treasury Department has used its authority to freeze assets and blacklist companies linked to precursor shipments, while the Department of Justice has filed criminal cases against Chinese nationals accused of marketing fentanyl precursors online.¹⁷ Labeling cartels as FTOs has expanded the legal options available, allowing for more use of counterterrorism measures.¹⁸ However, deterrence has inherent limitations. Many companies operate in loosely regulated

environments where reputational costs are low, and criminal networks are structurally resilient, quickly replacing sanctioned entities with new ones. To be effective, *deterrence* must be supported by consistent enforcement and clear consequences; otherwise, it risks becoming mere symbolic gestures.

Diplomacy is a second, vital tool because fentanyl is a transnational problem that no single country can solve alone. Sometimes, bilateral engagement has shown promise. In 2019, under U.S. pressure, China scheduled all fentanyl-related substances, for instance, closing a loophole that traffickers had exploited by changing chemical formulas.¹⁹ However, diplomatic progress remained fragile. As U.S.–China relations worsened over trade and Taiwan, Beijing pulled back cooperation, framing the crisis as a matter of American addiction demand rather than Chinese supply. (There are those, in fact, who have voiced suspicions that Beijing tolerates the trade in fentanyl precursors today as a matter of policy precisely because of its debilitating effects in the United States, in part as a kind of “payback” for Western – that is, British – support for the opium trade into Qing Dynasty China.²⁰)

Mexico also highlights the complexities of counternarcotics diplomacy. U.S. support through initiatives like the Mérida Initiative modernized Mexico’s military and police forces, but corruption, weak institutions, and cartel infiltration limited their ability to respond effectively.²¹ Broader coalitions, such as the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, launched in 2023, offer hope for coordinated regulatory standards and intelligence sharing, but their success depends on U.S. leadership and the participation of hesitant states.²² Therefore, *diplomacy* is crucial, but it is rarely enough on its own.

Where *deterrence* and *diplomacy* seek to influence behavior, *disruption* targets networks directly. To this end, U.S. agencies have seized precursor shipments, dismantled clandestine labs, and imposed financial sanctions on cartel-linked intermediaries. Sometimes, these efforts have led to high-profile successes, such as the arrest of senior

cartel leaders and the coordination of Treasury and Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operations against money laundering networks.²³ However, *disruption* campaigns face two main challenges. First, since fentanyl is synthetic, small, easily hidden labs can replace those that are destroyed, unlike coca or poppy fields that need large-scale farming and hence are both easier to locate and more difficult to quickly reconstitute once disrupted. Second, cartels have shown great flexibility and agility in responding to disruption efforts, splitting into factions when leaders are arrested and shifting trafficking routes to avoid crackdowns. *Disruption* is thus essential, but it is inherently temporary – especially in the face of continued drug demand and high profits – unless integrated with *deterrence* and *diplomatic* efforts.

Defense constitutes the last line of effort, aimed at shielding the U.S. homeland from the influx of fentanyl that gets past upstream measures. CBP has invested heavily in advanced scanning technologies, canine units, and increased staffing at land ports of entry, resulting in record fentanyl seizures in 2022 and 2023.²⁴ The U.S. Coast Guard plays a similar role in intercepting precursor shipments across maritime routes, while partnerships with the Mexican Navy seek to strengthen interdiction efforts in the Gulf of Mexico. *Defense* also includes forensic tracing methods, which can link seized fentanyl to specific cartel operations and Chinese suppliers, enabling targeted sanctions and prosecutions.

However, *defense* efforts are limited by scale. The sheer volume of all forms of trade across U.S. borders makes comprehensive inspections impossible – especially against fentanyl, dangerous quantities of which can be concealed in a very small space – and traffickers continuously adapt with new concealment methods, such as drones, tunnels, and encrypted communications. Without upstream *disruption*, *defense* thus risks becoming a costly war of attrition in which the advantage belongs to the cartels.

Taken together, the four tools reveal both the breadth of U.S. strategic options and their inherent vulnerabilities. *Deterrence* without credible enforcement produces empty threats; *diplomacy* without

leverage yields symbolic agreements; *disruption* without coordination leads to temporary setbacks; and *defense* without upstream action resembles a perpetual game of catch-up. The value of the *4D Directive* lies not in treating these tools as alternatives, but in integrating them into a layered strategy that exerts pressure on networks across multiple levels.

The challenge for U.S. policymakers, then, is not whether to use *deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, or defense*, but how to integrate them effectively to create cumulative pressure rather than disjointed efforts. Knowing the available tools is only the first step. The next question is how well they have been applied in practice. Analyzing the record of three consecutive presidential administrations – President Donald Trump’s first term, Joe Biden’s presidency, and Trump’s current term – shows both limited progress and ongoing shortcomings.

United States Efforts to Date (2017-2025)

The trajectory of the fentanyl crisis has unfolded across three presidential administrations, each of which attempted to address the epidemic with varying degrees of focus upon deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense. Overall, these efforts reveal recurring themes: partial successes, structural limitations, and a failure to maintain an integrated approach.

President Trump’s first term (2017–2021) treated the opioid epidemic mainly as a public health emergency supported by law enforcement efforts. In October 2017, the administration declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency and later passed the SUPPORT Act of 2018, which expanded treatment, prevention, and enforcement initiatives.²⁵ These actions coincided with tougher sanctions and prosecutions targeting Chinese suppliers of fentanyl precursors and Mexican cartel leaders. The administration also pushed Beijing in 2019 to classify all fentanyl-related substances, closing a loophole that traffickers had exploited by changing chemical formulas.²⁶ However, as we have seen, China’s enforcement weakened as trade tensions grew, and that initial progress proved temporary.

Similarly, efforts to improve intelligence sharing and joint operations with Mexico resulted in some lab seizures but were undermined by corruption and limited institutional capacity.²⁷ On the defensive side, the administration invested approximately \$6 billion in CBP upgrades, including new detection technologies and additional personnel, and fentanyl seizures increased.²⁸ This did not, however, seem to have much effect upon supply. In fact, from 2017 to 2020, annual fentanyl-related overdose deaths nearly tripled, from 19,500 to 56,894.²⁹ The first Trump Administration showed resolve but failed to significantly reduce the number of fatalities.

President Biden (2021–2025) adopted a more openly public health-focused approach, emphasizing harm reduction and international cooperation. The 2022 National Drug Control Strategy, for example, highlighted overdose prevention and the expansion of treatment and recovery programs. At the same time, the administration launched a Counter-Fentanyl Strike Force through the Treasury Department and DEA, targeting cartel finances and supply chains.³⁰ In October 2023, new sanctions and indictments were issued against Chinese firms and individuals linked to precursor shipments.³¹

Diplomatically, Biden aimed to revive cooperation with China; his November 2023 summit with Xi Jinping included commitments on counternarcotics cooperation, though Beijing's follow-through remained uncertain after suspending earlier coordination in 2022. With Mexico, the administration relied heavily on the U.S.-Mexico High-Level Security Dialogue to promote intelligence sharing and law enforcement coordination; however, systemic corruption and cartel adaptability limited progress.³² On defense, CBP recorded record seizures in 2022 and 2023, indicating improved interdiction efforts, yet overdose deaths still surpassed 70,000 annually, showing that seizures did not lead to reduced drug availability.³³ Critics argued that border vulnerabilities, combined with weak deterrence against cartels, allowed trafficking to thrive despite record interdictions.

President Trump's second term (2025–present) has adopted a significantly more assertive stance, driven by increasing border pressures and cartel violence. On inauguration day, he declared a national emergency at the southern border, and by April, roughly 9,000 military personnel had been deployed to support CBP operations.³⁴ As noted, cartels were designated as FTOs, expanding the government's authority to use counterterrorism tools against traffickers and their financial networks.³⁵

Diplomatically, Trump urged Mexico to take more decisive action, using tariff threats to secure the deployment of 10,000 National Guard troops to key trafficking routes.³⁶ China has been more resistant, however; Beijing still frames fentanyl as being only a U.S. domestic issue, weakening prospects for sustained cooperation.³⁷ In response to the disruption, the administration increased joint operations with Mexican forces, including embedding U.S. military advisors in support roles.³⁸ Discussions about potential U.S. special operations raids across the border have unsettled cartel leadership but also sparked debates over sovereignty and escalation.³⁹ On the defense front, CBP seizures remain high, and the presence of thousands of troops along the border highlights the administration's focus on physical deterrence. While it is too early to determine full outcomes, the second Trump administration has signaled an intent to treat fentanyl not only as a law enforcement issue but as a strategic threat comparable to terrorism.

Across all three administrations, the pattern is clear. Targeted actions have led to visible enforcement successes – sanctions imposed, labs destroyed, seizures recorded – yet the structural resilience of fentanyl networks has lessened the long-term effect of such measures. The adaptability of cartels, the inconsistent cooperation of China and Mexico, and the limits of border enforcement have all restricted U.S. efforts. This evidence shows the limits of a fragmented American response to the crisis.

Accordingly, the question is: What would a truly integrated strategy look like? The next section explains *how deterrence, diplomacy,*

disruption, and *defense* can be joined into a comprehensive approach capable of changing the course of the crisis.

Toward an Integrated 4D Framework

Deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense have been employed, sometimes forcefully, but seldom in a coordinated manner. This lack of coordination is evident in how fentanyl policy has typically been organized around parallel public health, law enforcement, border security, and diplomatic initiatives. As reflected in successive National Drug Control Strategies and reinforced by persistent interagency fragmentation, these efforts have not been linked by a clearly articulated, integrated approach or placed under a single authority responsible for synchronizing their application across the supply chain.⁴⁰ The result has been a patchwork of policies that achieved tactical wins but did not reduce the overall availability of fentanyl. If the United States wants to change the course of the crisis, it must adopt an integrated approach that combines these tools into a long-term strategy.

Such integration must start with *deterrence*. Sanctions and indictments cannot be merely symbolic; they must be linked to visible enforcement and coordinated intelligence efforts. Labeling cartels as FTOs presents an opportunity to expand the legal arsenal; however, this label will only be effective if it is accompanied by real consequences, such as asset freezes, extraditions, and operational disruptions, executed in partnership with allies.⁴¹ To deter Chinese chemical suppliers, sanctions should be combined with persistent diplomacy that emphasizes the reputational costs of supporting a network responsible for tens of thousands of American deaths each year.⁴² (Since stepped-up sanctions on Chinese entities producing fentanyl precursor chemicals is likely further to roil Washington's relationship with Beijing, successful deterrence against the fentanyl trade may exist in some tension with other objectives in Sino-American relations. Working out the appropriate prioritization may be challenging.) *Deterrence* is effective only when the threat of costs is credible, consistent, and effectively integrated with other measures.

Diplomacy should be seen not as a concession but as a form of leverage. The fentanyl crisis is a shared threat to global stability, and framing it this way helps build coalitions beyond bilateral disagreements. The United States should expand the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats into an effective regulatory alliance, coordinating export controls and intelligence sharing among willing partners.⁴³ With Mexico, the goal is to move from occasional cooperation to a binding framework that ties U.S. aid to tangible progress against cartels. Sovereignty concerns (and Mexican sensitivities) will persist, but Mexico's involvement and cooperation is essential, and a new bilateral agreement – modeled on, but more robust than, the Mérida Initiative – provides the best way forward.⁴⁴ With China, engagement must include both pressure and incentives: pressuring Beijing through transparency and potential trade consequences while offering cooperation that aligns with its global self-image as a responsible great power.

Disruption requires a shift from episodic raids to ongoing financial and technological targeting. Cartel networks rely not only on secret laboratories but also on logistics, money laundering, and digital tools. Enhancing interagency cooperation among the Treasury, DEA, and intelligence agencies is crucial for tracking streams of digital assets, front companies, and shell transactions.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, joint operations with Mexico must evolve beyond merely targeting high-profile individuals to systematically dismantling the infrastructure that enables cartels to recover and adapt. Intelligence-driven disruption – bolstered by cyber capabilities and forensic tracking – can raise the cost of trafficking and weaken its resilience.

Defense should become the final, layered safeguard instead of the only line of resistance. Record seizures show capability but also highlight that interdiction alone cannot stop the flow. To be effective, defense must integrate maritime operations, postal inspections, land border screening, and digital monitoring of online trafficking. CBP needs ongoing funding for advanced detection systems, while the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy should work more closely to monitor maritime

precursor routes.⁴⁶ Defense should also reach into the cyber domain, where encrypted communications and social media recruitment are reshaping trafficking methods.

An integrated approach also needs clear coordination within the U.S. government. Currently, counternarcotics duties are spread across many agencies – DEA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense (DoD), CBP, State, and Treasury – without a single lead for strategy. Creating a national *fentanyl coordinator*, with authority similar to a counterterrorism “tsar,” would streamline interagency efforts and promote accountability. This role could help ensure that deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense work together rather than separately.

Finally, integration must be maintained at the political level. Fentanyl is not a crisis that can be solved within one administration’s term. It is a generational challenge that requires ongoing policy, bipartisan support, and an understanding that failing to act strategically will extend a crisis that is in many ways as deadly as traditional warfare. By institutionalizing the *4D Directive*, the United States can move beyond short-term victories and aim for strategic results: reducing fentanyl availability, weakening cartels, and holding enablers accountable across borders.

The fentanyl crisis has already caused more deaths than many wars. It weakens border security, destabilizes allies, and erodes public trust in the government’s ability to protect its citizens. Tackling it requires a doctrine that integrates *deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense* into a unified strategy. Without this integration, the United States will remain stuck in cycles of reacting and adapting, constantly responding to traffickers’ innovations. Overall, implementing our recommendations in this article would create a more coherent U.S. doctrine and hence a more effective approach. Indeed, *not* adopting such an approach would make the fentanyl epidemic one of the biggest national security failures of the 21st Century.

Conclusion: From Episodic Response to Doctrine

The fentanyl epidemic is no longer just a public health issue; it has become a *strategic threat* with consequences for national security, international stability, and the strength of American society. Overdose deaths in the tens of thousands annually represent not only a humanitarian crisis but also a slow-moving mass casualty event that erodes trust in governance and damages the integrity of U.S. borders.

Three administrations have attempted to tackle the issue with varying focus, but none has maintained a unified approach, and none has succeeded. The pattern is clear: limited diplomatic agreements, sporadic enforcement efforts, record seizures, and repeated adaptations by cartels and suppliers. Without a cohesive strategy, these efforts have remained fragmented and inadequate.

The United States now faces a stark choice. It can either treat fentanyl as a series of disconnected policy challenges – law enforcement, diplomacy, border control – or it can adopt an integrated counter-fentanyl strategy that synchronizes *deterrence, diplomacy, disruption, and defense* into a single approach. The first option perpetuates cycles of failure; the latter presents a genuine opportunity to alter the trajectory of the epidemic.

Recent developments in Venezuela – still underway at the time of writing – illustrate some ways in which regimes that depend on illicit economies such as drug trafficking respond to certain types of external pressure. Although Venezuela is not part of the fentanyl production chain, it offers a useful parallel for understanding how criminal revenue streams shape regime behavior in ways relevant to the U.S. counter-fentanyl strategy that we propose.

Renewed enforcement of U.S. sanctions authorities and ongoing international legal actions against senior figures in the government of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela reflect a long-standing assessment by U.S. agencies that criminal activity is closely tied to regime survival rather than operating at its margins.⁴⁷ Venezuela's role as a permissive

environment for narcotics transit, money laundering, and sanctions evasion has been documented for years, particularly through networks linking political elites, security services, and transnational criminal actors.⁴⁸ Available reporting, however, suggests that tightening financial and diplomatic pressure has not produced moderation in regime behavior. (It seems, in fact, to have been frustration with the Maduro regime's *refusal* to change its behavior – even in the face of repeated American military strikes on boats apparently carrying cocaine from Venezuela – that helped lead to the U.S. decision to escalate with its move in January 2026 to seize Maduro himself by force. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Hegseth put it, Maduro “had his chance,” but “f****d around and found out.”⁴⁹) Instead, constraints on legal revenue streams have increased the government's reliance on illicit partnerships as alternative sources of income and leverage.⁵⁰ From a *deterrence* perspective, this pattern thus shows that when criminal activity is part of a governing strategy, pressure narrowly focused on individuals or transactions is unlikely to alter regime behavior at the state level.⁵¹ This suggests the importance of the kind of broader, integrated approach we advocate.

The implications of a U.S. counter-fentanyl strategy become clearer when examining how criminal networks operate under state protection. Criminal networks that operate with state tolerance or protection have repeatedly shown resilience in the face of arrests, seizures, and indictments, particularly when those activities serve broader political or strategic purposes.⁵² In such cases, *disruption* becomes consequential only when paired with *deterrence* that raises state-level costs by limiting access to financial systems, transportation corridors, and international legitimacy.⁵³ More broadly, illicit supply chains persist where sovereignty, corruption, and geopolitical friction protect from sustained external pressure.⁵⁴ When criminal economies serve regime survival rather than independent profit, counter-narcotics policy necessarily intersects with national security strategy, reinforcing the logic of integrating *deterrence* and *disruption* rather than treating them as separate efforts.

If Washington can institutionalize this doctrine, align allies, and sustain pressure along the supply chain, fentanyl can be contained, its production and distribution networks degraded, and its enablers held accountable. If the United States cannot, the crisis will continue to be a lasting national security failure.

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Reinforce the Gates: Expanded Roles for U.S. Homeland Missile Defense in the 21st Century

by

Santiago Spadiliero

Introduction

On January 27, 2025, the recently inaugurated President Donald J. Trump signed an Executive Order commanding the deployment and maintenance of a next-generation missile defense shield intended to deter America's adversaries while protecting American citizens and U.S. critical infrastructure from any "foreign aerial attack."¹ This decision laid the first foundations for a radical modification of the U.S. understanding of the role and purpose of homeland missile defenses, in ways without precedent since President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) announcement of March 1983. Trump's decision took more specific form when, on May 20, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated that "the Department has developed a draft architecture and implementation plan for a Golden Dome system of systems that will protect our homeland from a wide range of global missile threats."² After decades of reticence about developing a robust homeland ballistic missile defense architecture, the U.S. government has finally decided that a great expansion of its homeland missile defense posture is needed to deter and protect against the wide range of new threats that have emerged.

The international security environment has worsened in the last decades, and the way armies conduct warfare has also shifted: the period of Blitzkrieg and of conventional, mechanized armies seems to be slowly being replaced by long-range strikes by ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, or drones. In this enterprise, newer and more dangerous technologies are also emerging, such as hypersonic cruise missiles and glide vehicles, which may threaten America's assets below the nuclear threshold.³ The last tit-for-tat conflict between Israel and Iran in June 2025 is a clear example of this new era of warfare, in which infantry or armored vehicles are rarely seen, but long-range drone, aerial, and missile strikes are the primary means of combat, and much thus hinges on whether (and how well) one can defend against them. For these reasons, it is important to understand how these development have affected the current development of warfare, and how the U.S. should adapt its national security and defense policy accordingly.

This article seeks to help draw out such implications. It will first analyze key aspects of the new security environment that the U.S. and its allies face. These include the growing threats from North Korea and also, now more actively, Iran, as well as the continuing threats posed by Russia and China. It will then explore two current conflicts that have refloated the debate on the methods of modern warfare and the efficacy of missile defenses. Third, it will offer some insights on what the new U.S. "Golden Dome" architecture may look like based on the capabilities and intentions of the adversaries' attacks from whom it will be designed to deter. Fourth, it will briefly examine the complex situation of the production and procurement of missile interceptors vis-à-vis the Iran strikes over Israel, which has important implications for U.S. missile defense supply chains in the emerging "Golden Dome" era. Finally, a conclusion will summarize these findings.

A New (and More Dangerous) Security Environment

In the last two decades, the international security environment has become more competitive and hostile. North Korea and Iran are developing and fielding massive missile capabilities, including long-

range missiles possibly armed with nuclear warheads – already, in North Korea’s case, and perhaps before long also in Iran’s – while Russia and China have long deployed a wide range of missile systems capable of coercing America below and above the nuclear threshold in their pursuit of capabilities that undermine the “extended deterrence” policy that America prolongs to its military allies and in their campaign to weaken the role of the United States in the international system. This section examines developments and changes in the missile threat environment that affect America’s policy and approach to missile defense, including an emerging debate over whether the United States should consider new roles for homeland missile defenses.

North Korean and Iranian Threats

In Asia, North Korea has been a threat to its neighbors and U.S. interests since the foundation of that country in 1948. Since its failed invasion of its southern neighbor in 1950, North Korea has sought to acquire better means to combat its enemies, both to deter attack upon itself and perhaps ultimately to “decouple” the United States from its South Korean ally and hence create opportunities for the peninsular unification. Pyongyang has longed for since U.S. and United Nations armies stymied its 1950 invasion. These new tools have included systems capable of fighting asymmetrical wars and, more recently, weapons of mass destruction. From short and medium-range ballistic missiles to long-range ones and a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons, North Korea uses these capabilities to hold military forces and population centers at risk to deter external threats to the regime.⁴

A great leap for the North Korean missile program came in August of 1998 when North Korea tested its first three-stage missile, the Taepodong-1. This test has an important significance to this study since it proved how unprepared the United States was to deal with such emerging threats. In 1995, a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) had declared that

North Korea has the most advanced ballistic missile program but is unlikely to obtain the technological capability to develop a longer-range, operational ICBM. North Korea would have to overcome significant hurdles to complete such a program, particularly given the political and economic uncertainties and technological challenges it faces. North Korea would have to develop new propulsion and improved guidance and control systems.⁵

Finally, this analysis concluded that “[n]o country, other than the major declared nuclear powers, will develop or otherwise acquire a ballistic missile in the next 15 years that could threaten the contiguous 48 states or Canada.”⁶

Two years later, a congressional commission was formed to assess the ballistic missile threat to the continental United States. The commission, later known as the Rumsfeld Commission since it was chaired by former Gerald Ford Administration (and future George W. Bush Administration) Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, who concluded that

... [t]he threat to the U.S. posed by these emerging capabilities (ballistic missiles) is broader, more mature and evolving more rapidly than has been reported in estimates and reports by the Intelligence Community.⁷

Notably, this report was signed and released on July 15, 1998, just a month and a half before the Taepodong-1 flight test.

In that Taepodong-1 test, North Korea flew its first multi-stage missile, reaching a third stage of flight but failing to deploy a satellite into Earth’s low orbit. The test, nonetheless, provided evidence that despite official U.S. predictions to the contrary – but in many ways very much vindicating the warnings of the Rumsfeld Commission – the North Koreans in fact possessed (or would soon possess) the technological expertise to produce a missile that could reach the

continental United States with a survivable warhead, as such three-stage missiles can indeed achieve long distances, depending on their payload. The NIE embarrassingly made clear that the U.S. Intelligence Community had heavily underestimated the technological expertise of North Korea.⁸ Moreover, “[t]he launch clearly changed the terms of the debate over a number of missile proliferation issues, including the long-running and contentious argument over the deployment of national missile defenses in the United States.”⁹ This, indeed, led to the development of the first nationwide missile defense systems in the early 2000s.

The overconfidence observed in the NIE’s 1995 assessment showcased limitations in the U.S. threat assessment capabilities, also demonstrating how rapidly U.S. adversaries can develop systems capable of threatening either U.S. interests abroad or at home. The 1998 test, and the following reports on North Korea’s military developments, would lead to a growing concern that perhaps U.S. nuclear weapons may not be fully reliable in deterring adversaries, especially what became known as “rogue regime” proliferators such as the Kim regime. This placed growing stress upon U.S. missile defense posture – especially vis-à-vis new “third-party” powers like North Korea – which remained sharply limited by the terms of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty agreed between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1972.

North Korean advancements in the military field did not stop there, and North Korea has conducted six nuclear explosive tests since 2006, making clear that it possessed nuclear weapons that could potentially be put atop such long-range missiles. According to a report prepared by Hans Kristensen for the Federation of American Scientists, North Korea had likely assembled around 50 nuclear warheads by 2024, but it possesses enough fissile material to produce at least 90 in total.¹⁰ Moreover, as it has been assessed, North Korea now possesses a wide range of capabilities that can reach not only U.S. allies and partners and American bases in the region but also much of the continental U.S. and most of its most important population centers. In the last decade, North Korea has tested several ICBM-capable

missiles, including a solid-fuel system. At this point, three are considered to still be operational: the Hwasong-15, Hwasong-17, and Hwasong-18.¹¹ These systems have ranges of up to 15,000 or more kilometers (or about 9,300 miles). Additionally, North Korea has also revealed the construction of a “nuclear-powered strategic guided missile submarine,” which could complicate U.S. anti-submarine warfare missions, especially were conflict to occur simultaneously on the Korean peninsula and over Taiwan.¹²

The strategic implications of a nuclear-armed North Korea are several. Significantly, North Korea has successfully embraced nuclear deterrence as a powerful tool, as the Kim regime has emphasized since 2003. On June 6 of that year, for instance, a North Korean foreign ministry spokesperson stated that “as far as the issue of nuclear deterrent force is concerned, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has the same legal status as the United States and other states possessing nuclear deterrent forces.”¹³ According to Sung Chull Kim, this policy statement came at a time when the United States was deliberating a preemptive strike strategy against the regime. Deterrence, favoring Pyongyang, thus may have forced the U.S. to stand down.¹⁴

But such deterrence may not be entirely defensive. Under these circumstances, if North Korea felt that its nuclear force could deter U.S. counter-intervention against North Korean aggression, the Kim regime might be prompted to act more aggressively against South Korea and perhaps other U.S. allies. North Korea’s nuclear program and capabilities thus raise important questions regarding how to deter the Kim regime from attacking its neighbors or even the United States itself. This has been much debated.

For instance, in 1995, Jan Lodal, then-Principal Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy declared that:

Nuclear deterrence worked throughout the Cold War, it continues to work now, it will work into the future . . . The

exact same kinds of nuclear deterrence calculations that have always worked will continue to work.¹⁵

This conclusion, nonetheless, was later harshly questioned by officials from the George W. Bush administration, partly based on the possibility that regimes such as the one in North Korea may not be as “detrable” as the Soviets were during the Cold War. Despite U.S. confidence in deterrence, the leaders of such regimes

have nevertheless demonstrated a great variance in the priority they attach to such values (such as survival). Other values such as liberty, religious or ideological devotion, revenge, national honor, and personal glory have, on frequent occasions, been accorded higher priority by leaders than the survival of their regimes or themselves, and they have consciously, willingly risked, and sometimes sacrificed, themselves and their own countries in service of these higher values.¹⁶

There is thus great concern that the regular tools the U.S. uses for nuclear deterrence may not work for a “rogue state” such as North Korea, given the personal traits of its leaders.¹⁷

As noted earlier, moreover, acquiring better offensive capabilities could also assist Pyongyang’s objective of “decoupling” South Korea from its most important ally, the United States and hence creating opportunities for North Korean aggression free of the threat of American counter-intervention. A 2024 RAND report written by Bruce W. Bennett, for example, states that

... [t]o dominate South Korea, North Korea would need to clearly appear militarily superior to the South. To do that, North Korea needs to induce a decoupling of the South Korea–U.S. alliance, then build upon already existing perceptions in the South of North Korean military superiority when considering the North’s nuclear weapons.¹⁸

In short, keeping the United States away from a possible Korean conflict via the use of nuclear threats could pave the way towards a North Korean annexation of the peninsula.

North Korean military developments in both fields – in its nuclear and its missile enterprises – have certainly expanded in recent years, and now the United States faces multiple DPRK systems capable of reaching the U.S. homeland as well as its allies' territories and U.S. bases there. As the United States' *2022 Missile Defense Review* stated,

North Korea continues to improve, expand, and diversify its conventional and nuclear missile capabilities, posing an increasing risk to the U.S. homeland and U.S. forces in theater, as well as regional allies and partners.¹⁹

There are also growing concerns that North Korean advancements, coupled with delays in the development of the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) for existing U.S. anti-ballistic missile systems, could create a dangerous window of vulnerability by 2030, as Pyongyang's missile and nuclear threat is expanding faster than anticipated.²⁰ Nonetheless, North Korea is not the only growing long-range missile threat that the United States and its allies face today.

In the Middle East, Iran has followed North Korea in the development of its own domestically produced longer-range missiles. Tehran has heavily invested in improving and enhancing its military capabilities, including its short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Moreover, Tehran has also heavily invested in drone technology, with its designs being tested and deployed extensively not only in Ukraine but also in Iran's recent conflict with Israel.

Although Iran is believed not yet to possess any nuclear warheads, its nuclear program is (or was) still alive, centered on uranium centrifuge plants dispersed across the country. These capabilities can be manufactured quickly and placed almost anywhere,²¹ and allow Iran to enrich uranium by spinning uranium

hexafluoride gas at high speeds to increase the concentration of the uranium-235 isotope. These can produce both low-enriched uranium, used in nuclear reactors that provide energy, as well as high-enriched uranium, one of the two types of fissile material typically used in nuclear warheads (the other being plutonium-239).²² These plants were a focal point of attack for Israeli and U.S. strikes during the short-lived war between these and Tehran in June of 2025, during which these strikes inflicted significant damage on Iran's nuclear program by destroying key infrastructure and human capital.²³

Even though Iran is assessed to have halted most aspects of its nuclear weaponization program in 2003 – except, of course, for the uranium enrichment program it originally began in order to provide fissile material for nuclear weapons – the aforementioned capabilities can be rapidly used to create Iran's first nuclear weapon. According to U.S. intelligence assessments as of February and March of 2024, Iran has not yet decided to develop nuclear weapons.²⁴ Nonetheless, the bipartisan December 2023 Strategic Posture Commission (SPC) Report states that

the United States must consider the possibility that Iran will become a nuclear state during the 2027-2035 timeframe. Iran is likely not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons design and development activities that would be necessary to produce a testable nuclear device; however, the time estimated for Iran to achieve sufficient fissile material continues to shorten, as Iran is accelerating the expansion of its nuclear program.²⁵

Such concerns – along with Iran's refusal to cooperate fully with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors – helped lead to the preemptive strike launched by Israel against Tehran in June of this year. The operation, codenamed Rising Lion, was meant to disrupt Iran's nuclear enterprise by targeting its nuclear facilities across the country.²⁶ The intervention by the U.S. Air Force with huge conventionally-armed "bunker buster" munitions, days later, served to inflict further damage on Iran's capabilities. Nevertheless, the

specific extent of the resulting damage to Iran's enrichment capabilities is not publicly known, nor the location of its stockpile of enriched uranium, nor the extent (if any) of Iran's subsequent success in rebuilding and perhaps further dispersing fissile material capabilities.

In terms of missile capabilities, Iran has heavily invested in a large and modern missile arsenal, hoping to deter any attempt at intervention by the West against the theocracy. As national security analyst Anthony H. Cordesman, once noted,

... [s]een from an Iranian perspective, Iran is responding to proven threats from its neighbors and the U.S. and its inability to properly modernize its military forces since 1980.²⁷

From a broader perspective, moreover, Iran could perhaps also utilize these systems to coerce or blackmail its neighbors, including not only Israel but also Saudi Arabia. In ways loosely analogous to North Korea's arguable hopes to "decouple" South Korea from its U.S. alliance, Iran may also hope to use its missile capabilities to deter American intervention in support of those threatened by Iran's policies of regional destabilization.

These Iranian modernization efforts involve several different types of missile and other types of aerial threats. In the realm of ballistic missiles, these have replaced Iran's decrepit air force as the regime's primary means of long-range attack and have grown in both sophistication and numbers. These missiles can target U.S. forces and population centers of U.S. allies in the region, as well as parts of Southern Europe. Although the Iranian regime still lacks a reliable ICBM, its shorter-range missiles have improved their accuracy, lethality, and reliability.²⁸ These have been seen in action more recently in the 12-Day War against Israel in June of 2025. The following section will address these implications.

Furthermore, the partnerships that Iran has formed with North Korea and Russia could greatly advance Iran's long-range missile capabilities, giving it the ability to hold American cities at risk.²⁹ In this field, Iran is already building its own space program and is seeking to develop solid-propellant rockets similar to North Korea's. Reports have indicated, for instance, that solid-propellant systems "have greater military utility and likely are being used to develop an alternative ICBM pathway by the Iranian security establishment."³⁰ The Strategic Posture Commission report, in fact, notes that Iran "could field advanced longer-range missile systems in the 2027-2035 timeframe."³¹

In early December of 2024, Iran conducted its latest space launch by launching a Simorgh rocket with the heaviest payload in its history: about 300 kilograms. Allegedly, that rocket also carried an orbital propulsion system, as well as two research systems and the Fakhr-1 military satellite, to a 400-kilometer (250-mile) orbit above the Earth.³² Such payload capacity clearly suggests ICBM-class capabilities. Iran's recent regional setbacks at Israeli and U.S. hands and the collapse of its ally in Syria may prompt it to deepen its investments in its nuclear program, while the future development of its long-range weapons might soon pose a grave security risk to the U.S. homeland.

Russian and Chinese Strategies

In Europe, Russia continues to field new tactical and strategic weapons, while also relying heavily on aggressive nuclear rhetoric in support of its imperialistic foreign policy and war of territorial aggression against Ukraine, violating its neighbors' sovereignty and every arms control agreement it has ratified.³³ The Kremlin's objective, according to the Strategic Posture Commission, is to establish a sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space that would provide it with a perceived defense against the West's attempts to undermine Russia's sovereignty. In connection with its war in Ukraine, Russia has relied on the threat of using tactical nuclear weapons to deter NATO counter-intervention in support of Moscow's Ukrainian victims.

Russia, in fact, has made clear since at least the early 2000s that it “reserves the right to use nuclear weapons to respond to large-scale aggression utilizing conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation.”³⁴ According to security analysts such as Robert Joseph and Peppino DeBiaso, Russia envisions the prospective escalation to nuclear strikes deter or to force Washington to halt involvement in an ongoing conflict with Russia.³⁵ Use of a nuclear escalatory strategy directly against Ukraine could also perhaps force the Kyiv government to capitulate.³⁶

Manipulating the risk of nuclear escalation has thus been a key part of Russia’s regional strategy for years. In 2015, for instance, Ilya Kramnik, a military correspondent for the state-controlled Russian news agency *RIA Novosti*, wrote that the 2010 revision of Russia’s military doctrine had “further lowered” the threshold for combat use of nuclear weapons.³⁷ In September of 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced:

It is proposed that aggression against Russia by any non-nuclear state, but with the participation or support of a nuclear state, be considered as their joint attack on the Russian Federation The conditions for Russia’s transition to the use of nuclear weapons are also clearly fixed.³⁸

In a context in which Russia has declared portions of its neighbors’ territory to be parts of “Russia” – as is the case with Ukraine – the implications of such threats are obvious: the Kremlin’s nuclear weapons policy is devoted not merely to defense but also to creating *offensive* opportunities for regional aggression by deterring involvement by those who would support Moscow’s victims.³⁹

Moreover, such a strategy of nuclear coercion could perhaps also be used against the American homeland to achieve further strategic goals. An unprotected U.S. homeland, for example, could be threatened with a limited conventional or small-yield nuclear strike by Russia’s newer weapons to force the U.S. to refrain from assisting

Europe in the event of Russian aggression. This would be quite consistent with Russia's now well-established military doctrine of "strategic operations to destroy critical infrastructure targets" (SODCIT), and in light of improving Russian conventional and nuclear strike capabilities represents a significant new threat to the U.S. homeland.⁴⁰

In terms of Russia's newer weapons, the Kremlin has heavily invested in a new generation of sea and air-launched cruise missiles, among other types of aerial weapons. These weapons, called "Super Weapons" by President Putin,⁴¹ can travel at hypersonic speeds and include the *Kinzhal* and the *Tsirkon*, which (in conventionally-armed forms) have both been used in the war against Ukraine. These systems have had mixed results against Kyiv. (In May of 2023, for instance, seven Kinzhal missiles were reported to have been shot down by U.S.-provided Patriot systems.⁴²) Nevertheless, they demonstrate the growing breadth and sophistication of Russia's strike arsenal.

Furthermore, Russia still possesses the largest and most diverse nuclear stockpile in existence today,⁴³ which Putin continues to modernize and expand.⁴⁴ The Kremlin is also seeking to expand its fleet of non-strategic nuclear systems, including the aforementioned hypersonic systems. In sum, Russia's nuclear doctrine views its nuclear capabilities as necessary to maintain deterrence, enable coercion, and achieve its goals in a potential conflict against NATO, and the Kremlin's doctrine emphasizes leveraging nuclear threats in support of a range of objectives. This threat can imply the possible use of tactical nukes in the Ukrainian theater, which raises new questions on whether deterrence by punishment is enough to deter Russia's actions in Ukraine and Europe as a whole.

Russia's actions and attitudes towards its neighbors and the U.S. should raise the alarm level and reinforce the possibility that deterring Moscow is now more complex than it used to be. An attack composed of long-range strikes, possibly nuclear-armed, could be difficult not only to prevent but also to deter, particularly because the United States lacks comparable nuclear capabilities. In other words, the war

dynamic vis-à-vis Russia has changed, and therefore, the deterrence requirements have also shifted – and the need to *defend* against missile attack has grown.

Nonetheless, Putin is not the only growing challenge the United States faces. In Asia, China has rapidly become a hegemon in the region with not only a growing economy and a powerful position astride global supply chains, but also considerable geopolitical ambitions. Both the SPC Report and the U.S. Department of Defense's Report on the Military and Security Developments Involving the PRC (MSDPRC) emphasize this ambition in their first lines: "[t]he Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to make China the world's preeminent power by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC,"⁴⁵ and "[t]he PRC's national strategy is to achieve 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2049."⁴⁶ In other words, Beijing's leaders seek to "zero-sum positional advantage: to 'restore' – for that is how Chinese nationalists see it – China's relative position vis-à-vis all others at the top of the global status hierarchy."⁴⁷ For Chinese strategists, therefore, United States power and military alliances are necessarily obstacles to be broken and overcome.

China's regional ambitions are of particular concern, and are at present mostly focused on two sectors. One is Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, most of which it claims as its own and where it has occupied and built on several islands and archipelagos claimed by other countries in that area – among them the Spratly Islands, which are claimed not only by China but also by Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

Additionally, China has long had the desire to capture and "reunify" with Taiwan. Since taking control of the country in 1949 and the retreat from the Kuomintang government to the island, the CCP has claimed Taiwan as its own, prompting several crises through the decades.⁴⁸ According to the MSDPRC report, China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), has established the objective of modernizing its conventional forces by 2027 to accelerate the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and

“intelligentization” of those forces. Doing this will give its military the capacity to be a more credible tool for the CCP’s ambitions in Taiwan, enabling it to take that democratically-ruled island by force if necessary.⁴⁹

China’s military strategy has evolved and become increasingly more advanced and capable. Its most recent evolution comes in the shape of what it calls “intelligentized warfare.” First mentioned in 2019, this concept focuses on

integrated warfare waged in land, sea, air, space, electromagnetic, cyber, and cognitive arenas using intelligent weaponry and equipment and their associated operation methods, underpinned by the IoT (Internet of Things) information system.⁵⁰

This could include the expanded use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other advanced technologies at every level of warfare, including missile targeting and maneuverability. In short, “[m]ulti-domain precision warfare aims to integrate AI and big data analysis with precision strikes to identify and target enemy weaknesses.” China is also “exploring how to use AI for missile guidance and target detection and identification, as well as for electronic warfare and decision making.”⁵¹ The evolution of Chinese military thinking has been quick and in-depth and has now become a focus of major concern for U.S. national security experts.

Alongside these concerns, China’s nuclear arsenal has also evolved and expanded, increasing the stress on the U.S. nuclear deterrent. According to the SPC,

current estimates are that the PRC’s operational nuclear warhead stockpile surpassed 400 warheads in 2021 and that the PLA will field over 700 nuclear warheads by 2027, over 1,000 warheads by 2030, and, if it continues its current pace, at least 1,500 deployed warheads by 2035.⁵²

Moreover, the PLA's Rocket Force (PLARF) continues to deploy new and more sophisticated missiles capable of not only reaching the continental United States but also playing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) roles within the second island chain in hopes of precluding U.S. Navy and other allied operations in that area.

On top of this, China might also be seeking to achieve the capability to directly strike the U.S. homeland with non-nuclear strategic warheads. In 2021, it was reported that China had tested a missile with the capability of deploying a Fractional Orbital Bombardment System (FOBS) warhead capable of flying through a low orbit of the planet before de-orbiting onto its target.⁵³ This test apparently caught the U.S. intelligence and national security communities by surprise, showing once more that America's adversaries have not stopped developing and testing new systems, and that Washington cannot always see them coming. This FOBS system provides its possessor with the capability of striking a target from any direction, rendering most radar and missile defense systems useless because they tend to focus upon defending upon attacks along a particular threat axis.⁵⁴ The U.S. Department of Defense also reports that China has begun development of a conventionally-armed ICBM,⁵⁵ which could also facilitate Russian-style nuclear coercion.

China's ongoing technological progress in nuclear and conventional arms raises the possibility that one day it might reach nuclear parity (or worse) vis-à-vis the United States. Since the testing of its first nuclear weapon in 1964, Beijing has continuously declared a "no-first-use" (NFU) nuclear policy, stating that it will not be the first party to use of nuclear weapons in case of conflict unless attacked via the same means first.⁵⁶ Still, China's nuclear modernization and expansion have further fueled longstanding questions about the actual existence and credibility of this NFU policy.⁵⁷

As I have written elsewhere,

China's approach to achieving its strategic goals in the region may transition toward the inclusion of nuclear

weapons into its framework of political threats, intimidation, and even the use of force to achieve its international goals.⁵⁸

This could mean that China's growing nuclear arsenal will prompt and permit the Politburo to modify its current nuclear policy, heading towards an approach more like those of other nuclear powers, and holding out the possibility of a first strike or policies of nuclear coercion. This could lead to Beijing issuing nuclear threats against its foes to pursue its short and long-term goals.⁵⁹ China's neighbors might be the first victims, but Beijing could perhaps use the same type of threats against the U.S. homeland: coercive threats to convince Washington to avoid intervention against Chinese aggression in Asia, for instance.

In fact, China has already provided some evidence of this course of action. Recent Chinese military writings already discuss the utility of a "controlled use" of small-yield nuclear weapons for the purposes of "warning and deterrence."⁶⁰ Even as early as 2004, moreover, a People's Liberation Army publication indicating that China's NFU policy may be far less absolute than officials in Beijing would have one believe, suggesting multiple *conventional* military scenarios (*i.e.*, ones *not* involving China being attacked by nuclear weapons) in which "lowering the nuclear threshold" might be appropriate.⁶¹

Since Taiwan is the oldest and most important regional territorial objective for the People's Liberation Army, it would not be surprising to see Beijing employ such nuclear coercion in the case of an amphibious invasion of the island. The use or threatened use of nuclear weapons could be directed not only against the Taiwanese island *per se* but against any American fleet coming to its aid as well. Chinese efforts to deter American intervention in such a conflict would thus

... [i]nvolve ... convincing Washington that the conflict might escalate to levels of violence that exceed the importance of the U.S. stake in Taiwan, therefore deterring

Washington from intervening in the first place. And it requires intra-war deterrence of U.S. nuclear escalation to defeat the invasion.⁶²

These dynamics have clear implications for American homeland missile defense, for Beijing's nuclear strategy might not be limited only to targeting the American forces deployed overseas with its nuclear element. China's rocket forces could also target the American homeland with its broad range of hypersonic, and small-yield nuclear capabilities, or with a new conventionally-armed ICBM. The SPC report has already noted, for instance, that

unlike previous conflicts in the 20th century, a future potential conflict with China or Russia would likely involve new kinetic and non-kinetic attacks on the U.S. homeland and assets in space and cyber domains – further underscoring the importance of deterring and defeating such attacks.⁶³

This possibility has concerned U.S. planners for years. In 1996, for example, an Assistant Secretary of Defense quoted a Chinese military officer as asserting that China could act against Taiwan without fear of intervention, since the United States might not dare to defend it if credibly forced to choose between defending Taipei and preserving America's own cities.⁶⁴ If China considered the stakes to be high enough, this possibility could become real, and the United States currently has no capability to stop such a strike.

The threat posed by Beijing continues to grow. China already possesses the world's largest arsenal of ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic missiles of various ranges.⁶⁵ Some of these systems can be armed with either conventional or nuclear warheads, complicating the decision-making for those commanders on the field lacking clear information on what they are facing. This problem, known as "entanglement," complicates how U.S. forces in theater would react against an attack by such missiles, and which systems the U.S. should target in case of conflict.

The risks and complications associated with such dual-use capabilities were deliberately created by China years ago, when it was felt that that U.S. conventional superiority could still overwhelm China's forces, and that such "entanglement" might help make U.S. forces more cautious about targeting seemingly conventional Chinese assets. As noted by Jacob Stokes, a researcher at the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, it is also possible that China worried that U.S. conventional missiles "might be powerful enough to destroy a large portion of Beijing's previously bare-bones nuclear arsenal, leaving U.S. missile defenses to intercept the remainder and thereby prevent China from retaliating."⁶⁶

Yet China has continued to acquire dual-capable systems, even as its relative power has grown, and such a broad suite of both conventional and nuclear delivery options may soon give China opportunities for more offensively-focused coercive opportunities. Without improved American defenses, the nature, number, and sophistication of China's growing missile arsenal will undoubtedly not only compromise U.S. operations in the Indo-Pacific region overall but also complicate any U.S. decision to intervene against China on behalf of allies and partners in the region, like Taiwan.

All in all, America's adversaries are not only becoming increasingly willing to assert themselves against U.S. interests and present growing threats to the American homeland, but they are also expanding the means at their disposal to undermine those interests. In addition to the threats posed by even more novel emerging technologies such as AI and cyber weapons, which will not be discussed here but that it is nonetheless important to mention, America's foes are heavily investing in their air and long-range capabilities to undermine U.S. conventional superiority – and increase their coercive leverage – at several different levels of conflict.

Two Case Studies: Ukraine & Israel

Analysis of the effectiveness of missile defenses in the Ukrainian-Russian war requires exploring two main axes: the adversaries' reliance on long-range weapons, and the effectiveness of missile defenses in this conflict. In Ukraine, Russia has heavily used some of its old stockpile of missiles and other long-range weapons while also innovating by using some of its new "super weapons." Moreover, Moscow has also sought to replenish and diversify its offensive arsenal by acquiring Iranian-made armed drones, which have seen wide use throughout the war and have caused a certain level of destruction.

Russia's reliance on missiles was first observed during the first year of the conflict. Ian Williams, Deputy Director of the Missile Defense Project at CSIS, has noted that

... [s]ince February 2022, Russia has fired thousands of missiles and loitering munitions at Ukraine's cities, infrastructure, and military forces. These attacks have killed and maimed thousands of Ukrainian civilians and military personnel and have heavily damaged Ukraine's infrastructure and economy Long-range missile strikes against Ukrainian cities and infrastructure have been a prominent and persistent aspect of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, these systems have not always proven as successful as the Kremlin wished. Williams, for instance, has also observed that "Russia has struggled to use this advantage to produce the kind of decisive strategic effects that Moscow likely expected to deliver a quick Ukrainian capitulation."⁶⁸ Moreover, according to analyst William Alberque "Russia's use of missiles in its war on Ukraine has been less effective and decisive in helping achieve its war aims than leaders in Moscow likely expected."⁶⁹ This may be in part thanks to the use of advanced missile defense systems by the Ukrainian forces.

Russia's goals in the use of its missiles seem to have shifted throughout the war, from targeting military bases and achieving other similar objectives to targeting civilian populations and transportation networks. These shifts did not represent pre-planned moves, but rather "*ad hoc* adaptations driven by Russia's frustration over its broader war effort, its struggle to target mobile Ukrainian military assets, and the irregular availability of cruise missiles and other stand-off weapons."⁷⁰ Furthermore, Russian missiles have not only supported the operational goals of Moscow's military campaign but have also been used to shape public opinion and act as psychological warfare instruments to subdue Ukrainian leaders.⁷¹

In terms of numbers, from September 28, 2022, to September 1, 2024, Russia launched a total of 11,466 missiles. On average, 23.2 missiles were launched daily, with the median being recorded at 17 missiles.⁷² These numbers illustrate the huge reliance that Russians have put on their missile capabilities. For comparison purposes, during the Iraq-Iran War of 1982-1988, Iraq fired 516 Scud B missiles, while Iran fired 117.⁷³ Years later, during the First Gulf War, Iraq fired 93 Al-Hussein and Al-Hijarah missiles, while 23 were fired during the Second Gulf War. In 2006, the terrorist organization Hezbollah fired 4,000 short-range rockets at Israel. Finally, and more importantly, the Soviet Union launched between 1,700 and 2,000 Scud missiles against Afghan guerrillas between 1988 and 1991 during their invasion of the country.⁷⁴ These numbers provide some insight into the vast size of Moscow's missile effort against Ukrainian targets today and the centrality of such missiles in the Kremlin's approach to war and coercion.

Such high fire volume has naturally raised questions about whether or when Russia would run out of missiles and other such weapon systems.⁷⁵ One analysis in the spring of 2023, for instance, suggested that Russia would not run out of missiles, but that export controls and sanctions can limit the quantity and quality of these weapons. More importantly, it analyzed the Russian attempt to destroy one of Ukraine's most expensive weapon systems: the U.S.-made, Germany-provided Patriot battery defending the Ukrainian

capital city. To achieve the destruction of this system, Moscow used some of its best weapons in the attack, including 34 *Iskander* ballistic missiles and *Kinzhal* hypersonic missiles.

According to reports, however, the Patriot battery, alongside other systems, was able to intercept all 34 missiles.⁷⁶ On November 13, 2024, Russia attacked Ukraine's capital city once more with a barrage of missiles and other aerial weapons. Kyiv's missile defenses were able to intercept two cruise missiles, two ballistic missiles, and 37 drones.⁷⁷ Moscow's barrage of missiles does not seem to have been able to undermine Ukraine's will to fight, however, either at the tactical or strategic levels. Nonetheless, Russia has not been dissuaded and continues to strike Ukraine with these weapons; large attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure have become routine.

As these accounts illustrate, missile defenses have been a critical factor in the Ukrainian war effort. As mentioned previously, the 34 *Iskander* and *Kinzhal* missiles intercepted by the Patriot battery and other systems serve as an example of the effectiveness of these systems being used by the Ukrainian army. (Similar reports were filed and verified by American officials on *Kinzhal* missiles being intercepted by the Patriot battery deployed in Kyiv.⁷⁸) "Overall," it has been observed, "the performance of Ukraine's air defenses has steadily improved since the start of the war, particularly against Russian cruise missiles."⁷⁹ Ukraine's air force has also reported that during the 2022-2023 Winter campaign against Ukraine's electrical grid, Russia lost around 70-80 percent of the missiles it launched against Ukraine.

Moreover, in May of 2023, Ukraine also reported intercepting 90 percent of launched Russian missiles:

Ukraine has reported downing nearly 80 percent of air and ground-launched ballistic missile attacks nationwide and 100 percent of ballistic missiles attacking areas where ballistic missile defenses (Patriot) are present. Ukraine only has two Patriot batteries.⁸⁰

In this regard, Ukraine's President Zelenskyy recently stated that "[a]ir defense is the answer. We need at least seven additional Patriot systems to cover the major settlements soon."⁸¹ Finally, data compiled by Petro Ivaniuk reveals that the daily intercept rate averaged 83.5 percent, with the median intercept rate reaching 88.5 percent:

This high level of intercept efficiency suggests the deployment of advanced missile defense technologies capable of neutralizing a substantial portion of incoming threats on most days.⁸²

The Ukrainian case, then, has demonstrated the effectiveness of deploying missile defenses in the homeland to protect against strikes undertaken either for military or for coercive political advantage.

This assessment is critical in understanding how contemporary warfare has evolved. As Shawn Rostker, an analyst at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, has stated,

... [i]n the limited context of the Ukraine war, missile defense can be said to be a useful tool. In a possible future conflict, U.S. forces should expect to be targeted in much the same way as Ukraine, and the lessons learned from its defense should prove valuable.⁸³

Russia's reliance on missiles to achieve a quick victory over its enemy – and the difficulties the Kremlin has been facing in the face of Ukrainian missile defenses – should serve as an important example as we consider the applicability of missile defenses to defend not only American bases overseas but also the homeland itself. Aerial threats, mainly composed of missiles and drones, are now the weapons of choice by American adversaries in Europe and in the Middle East, but there remains a real possibility of defending against them.

In the Middle East, another recent conflict has sparked further interest in missile defenses and their effects on deterrence and their role in foiling adversarial strategy. Since the surprise attack carried

out by Hamas terrorist forces on Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, Israel has responded with ground and aerial attacks against Iran and its affiliated terrorist organizations. At the same time, Iran has counter-attacked with rocket, drone, and missile strikes on Israel, most of them intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome, Arrow, and David's Sling systems (with some help from forward-deployed U.S. missile defense capabilities). Such defensive systems have thus been vital in protecting and securing the Israeli homeland from attacks in almost all directions.

Specifically, Tehran has responded twice to Israel's operations, including in a 12-day-long missile exchange between both countries, and it did so by launching missile and drone strikes in numbers that Israel had not faced before. Indeed, the level of sophistication in these quite long-ranged attacks was far higher than the strikes Israel has faced from Hamas and Hezbollah, terrorist organizations that possessed only rudimentary and antique rocket systems, such as the old Soviet-era Katyusha used, for instance, during the Battle of Berlin in 1945.⁸⁴ (These terrorists also possessed smaller numbers of short-range ballistic missiles, such as the Iranian-made Fateh-110, and some drones.⁸⁵) In defense of its homeland since October 7, 2023, Israeli missile defenses have been extremely successful at intercepting Hamas and Hezbollah's rockets, with a success rate reported at 86 percent.⁸⁶

In the case of Iran's strikes against Israel, Tehran launched its first direct strikes against Tel Aviv and other targets in April of 2024, while the second was carried out in October of the same year, using a mix of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles in the first attack, and faster and more reliable ballistic missiles on the second strike.⁸⁷ These attacks tested Israel's and its partners' defensive systems and mechanisms, with some attacker successes reported.

The Iranian attack in April was performed by a salvo of 120 ballistic missiles, around 230 cruise missiles, and about 300 drones.⁸⁸ These strikes faced a strong defense led by the Israeli defense systems, which included Iron Dome and David's Sling interceptors for short-range attacks from Iran's proxies, and Arrow 2 and 3 interceptors for

Iran's ballistic and cruise missiles. Moreover, a coalition of countries led by the U.S. also participated in the defense by intercepting most of the drones in the air while also assisting with the interception of several ballistic missiles with SM-3s interceptors launched from American vessels in the Mediterranean Sea.⁸⁹ This combined effort, Shaan Shaikh, an analyst at the CSIS *Missile Defense Project*, wrote,

represents an outstanding success story for air and missile defense. Despite the over 300 ballistic missiles, drones, and cruise missiles launched, there appears to have been minimal damage to Israeli infrastructure and military assets, and the attack resulted in only one Israeli casualty.⁹⁰

The combined allied effort also consisted of interceptors and aircraft from the United Kingdom, France, and Jordan, and the coordination took place at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar.⁹¹

The SM-3 missiles launched from the USS *Arleigh Burke* (DDG-51) and USS *Carney* (DDG-64) destroyers – which successfully intercepted at least six of the Iranian missiles – are particularly notable from the perspective of U.S. homeland defenses, for that operation was the baptism of fire for this system capable of exo-atmospheric interceptions.⁹² The SM-3 system is a key component of the current U.S. missile defense architecture, and its now-proven combat efficiency can encourage its integration into a new homeland missile defense posture.

The second attack from Iran against Israel was carried out on October 1st, 2024, by approximately 200 Iranian ballistic missiles. This attack was larger in its scope than the previous attack in April, as the number of ballistic missiles used almost doubled. As in the previous attack, U.S. ships in the Mediterranean Sea provided missile defense support to the Israeli defensive architecture. The attack caused minimal damage on the ground, and “Israel was able to defend itself against the Iranian attack successfully.”⁹³ This attack also provided valuable information to U.S. and Israeli analysts on the benefits of

deployment of an integrated air and missile defense architecture against adversaries that heavily rely on missile strikes for coercion.

In an interview with Tom Karako, Director of the *Missile Defense Project* at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Moshe Patel, Director of Israel's Missile Defense Organization, stated that

... [o]n the first day (since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war), David's Sling and Iron Dome were the main systems that have been working and the first time with so extensive capability and operational successes. The next important date was October 31st, where (*sic*) for the first time ever, the Arrow 2 weapon system intercepted a ballistic missile that came from Iran operationally. ... The next important date is November 9th, which was the first Arrow 3 operational interception of a Houthi missile again. It was the first outer space, exo-atmospheric kind of operational interception of a ballistic missile."⁹⁴

Evidence from the Israel case demonstrated how a properly integrated and fielded missile defense architecture can be operationally successful against multiple missile threats. Tehran's attack also demonstrated a complex relationship between Israel and other regional states, since some additional nations also participated in the interception of several of the threats launched by Iran.

Finally, in June of 2025, a preventative attack by Israel against Iran's nuclear program unleashed a new series of missile strikes between these two nations. This short-lived conflict saw the deaths of many Iranian nuclear scientist and the damage of most of Iran's nuclear infrastructure.⁹⁵ In the 12 days the battle lasted, between 530 to 550 ballistic missiles were launched from Iran against Israel, of which at least 31 landed near military targets or populated areas, and a few dozen more reportedly blasting unpopulated areas.⁹⁶

This final phase (so far) of the Israeli-Iranian conflict seems still to have been a success for Israel. The Israeli government, for instance,

reported that its missile defense systems had an overall success rate of near 86 percent against Iranian ballistic missiles during the recent conflict. The same report also included that these systems prevented more than \$15 billion in potential property damage and saved countless lives.⁹⁷

But this last attack may offer additional lessons. According to some U.S. officials, the rate of failed missile launches by Iran saw a decline compared to the two previous attacks from 2024, showing that Tehran has learned from the flaws in those earlier attacks, and that its capabilities are improving.⁹⁸ It is also worth noting that according to a report by CNN, the United States used roughly a quarter of its entire arsenal of high-end missile interceptors during the 12-day-long engagement between Tel Aviv and Tehran, showing important limitations regarding the supply chain of these items vis-à-vis the demand generated by America's adversaries.⁹⁹

The U.S. Missile Defense Posture

The U.S. missile defense posture has been a constant in every U.S. presidential administration since President George W. Bush withdrew from the ABM treaty in 2002 and created the foundations for today's posture. During his administration, he announced the creation of a "New Triad": the U.S. nuclear deterrent would be accompanied by a strong industrial infrastructure responsive to evolving threats and by the addition of a new fundamental component of active and passive defenses, including missile defenses.¹⁰⁰ The controversial decision represented a U.S. response to North Korea's rapid advancements in its long-range missile and nuclear programs, and the threat they presented to the U.S. homeland, which suggested that missile defenses would become a vital component of the U.S. national security strategy for as long as North Korea remained a threat.

Today, the U.S. missile defense posture consists only of the Ground-based Mid-course Defense (GMD) system, with its 44 Ground-based Interceptors (GBIs) deployed in Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Space Force Base in California. First deployed in

2004, it was designed to defend the U.S. homeland against long-range ballistic missile threats from countries such as North Korea and Iran, and its geographic architecture is built around the DPRK threat.¹⁰¹

This system works as follows: To intercept a missile from either of these nations, the GMD system should first detect the missile launch and feed the data (*e.g.*, geographic location, altitude, and trajectory) into the GMD fire control system, which controls how many GBIs are to be launched. These interceptors have three stages, are solid-fueled, and fly into the path of the incoming missile before releasing an Exo-atmospheric Kill Vehicle (EKV), which uses onboard sensors to track and physically collide with the warhead.¹⁰² A future system, the Next Generation Interceptor, is expected to replace the aging GBIs from the GMD system and might include multiple kill vehicles per interceptor. This would potentially enable one interceptor to defend against a greater volume of increasingly complex adversary missile threats.¹⁰³

Still, the scope and scale of these deployments made clear the focus was only on “limited” ICBM attacks to address the “new rogue state threats.”¹⁰⁴ This system, then, was never intended to counter the Russian or Chinese nuclear deterrent, though it was meant to continue evolving at the same pace as rogue threats. The Obama Administration accepted this logic and reaffirmed a commitment to the GMD system within the overall U.S. national security apparatus. It continued to emphasize rogue states and their small or rudimentary offensive capabilities, rather than threats from major powers. Moreover, the focus remained exclusively on ballistic missile threats, as these were the dominant threats at the time. Finally, the Obama Administration also highlighted the importance of strategic stability in the missile defense context, meaning this as a message to Russia and China on the limited purpose and role of the GMD system – and hence that U.S. defenses were *not* intended to defend against Russian or Chinese attacks. Before leaving office, however, the Obama administration decided to increase the number of GBIs deployed to the current 44, while redesigning the GBI’s kill vehicle in order to stay ahead of the growing threat presented by North Korea’s most advanced ICBM at the time, the Hwasong-13.¹⁰⁵

The First Trump Administration decided to take a step further, however, and ordered the future modernization of the GBI to be replaced with a Next Generation Interceptor (NGI). The 2019 Missile Defense Review (MDR) from that administration, moreover, pointed to a broader shift taking place in the threat environment, concluding that not only were nations continuing to improve and expand their ballistic missile capabilities, but that they were also adding “new and unprecedented types of missiles” to their arsenals.¹⁰⁶ The vision of the role of this system vis-à-vis Russia and China remained the same: that is, the U.S. would continue to “rel[y] on nuclear deterrence to address the large and more sophisticated Russian and Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities.”¹⁰⁷

The Biden administration’s MDR presented more continuity than change, articulating an approach whereby active defenses became part of a comprehensive “missile defeat” approach, which complemented the credible threat of direct cost imposition through nuclear and non-nuclear means.¹⁰⁸ This strategy

encompass[ed] the range of activities to counter the development, acquisition, proliferation, potential and actual use of adversary offensive missiles of all types, and to limit damage from such use.¹⁰⁹

The Biden Administration, furthermore, recognized the importance of the continued modernization of the GMD architecture by, for instance, requesting \$1.7 billion for Fiscal Year (FY)-25 toward the planned fielding of the 2020 NGIs, expected to be fielded starting in 2028. Still, this effort did not translate into real modernization or enhancement of the GMD system, and as several national security experts have noted, the system might not be able to cope with North Korea’s advancements in the short term.¹¹⁰

Problems in the U.S. Missile Defense Posture

Two distinct sets of issues seem likely to affect the efficacy of the GMD system. First, as a result of problems of scale, it might not be able to cope with the evolving threats posed by North Korea and Iran. Secondly, the longstanding policy of not seeking to defend against *Russian or Chinese* missiles could jeopardize U.S. national security interests by leaving the United States helpless in the face of low-level nuclear coercion by those powers. This section will address both of these issues, arguing that the current GMD system is inadequate to defend the nation even against a North Korean strike and that, furthermore, it is also inadequate to protect against Iranian, Russian, or Chinese coercive strikes.

One of the most commonly repeated phrases in U.S. missile defense reviews and other related documents has been the mantra of “staying ahead of the threat,” used in reference to keeping the GMD system up to date to face the evolving threats of North Korea and others. Actual responsiveness to these threats, however, has not happened. Several experts have noted, for example, that every administration has so far failed to implement the “spiral development” approach that would be needed to cope with the expanding threat by incorporating new technologies on a systematic and continual basis.¹¹¹

Since the Obama Administration, the GBIs have been subject to Service Life Extension Programs (SLEPs) that have prolonged the life expectancy of the systems but have not improved their vital components or operational capabilities. Consequently, the system designed in the early 2000s to protect against America against then-current threats might not be able to do so successfully against today’s. General Gregory M. Guillot, Commander of the U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), stated in a February 13, 2025, congressional hearing that

... [r]egime rhetoric surrounding the new ICBM suggests Kim [Jong-Un] is eager to transition his strategic weapons

program from research and development to serial production and fielding, a process that could rapidly expand North Korea's inventory and narrow my confidence in USNORTHCOM's existing ballistic missile defense capacity in the coming years.¹¹²

Extending the life expectancy of this system is vital, then, but without enhancing some of its core components, such as propulsion systems or targeting software – and without expanding the *number* of targets it can intercept – it is less and less likely that the GMD system will be able to protect America even against North Korean threats, let alone those from other countries.

The current GBI fleet is supposed to be able to deal with a strike by a limited number of North Korean nuclear warheads, but it is not clear how these would be effective against Iranian missile threats. Tehran does not yet possess weapons long-ranged enough directly to threaten the United States, but such capabilities are (or soon will be) within its technical reach, and relatively nuclear weaponization has been an option for Iran for years if it resumes its long-paused (but never eradicated) nuclear weapons program. Iran's recent strategic setbacks in the Middle East – such as the damage done to Hezbollah by the Israelis and the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the Israeli and U.S. attacks upon Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025 – could encourage Tehran toward nuclear weaponization as a last resort, and the country's new defense relationship with Russia (and Russia's with North Korea) might permit Iran to acquire any additional technology needed to threaten long-range missile attack on America. There is no sign that the GMD system, in its current configuration, would be able to cope with such an Iranian missile threat, or indeed one from any state other than North Korea, for the system has not been designed to face such challenges.¹¹³

As noted earlier, apparently in hopes of not provoking Russia and China, prior U.S. administrations adopted policies of intentionally designing the GMD system to avoid any capability to defend against even limited attacks by those nations on the U.S. homeland.¹¹⁴ Yet

missile threats from Russia and China continue to grow, even as their military doctrines seem increasingly to be preparing for campaigns of limited coercive strikes. Until recently, the United States has disregarded such threats, and Russian and Chinese technological advances such as new ballistic and also hypersonic and cruise missile capabilities that present threats of conventional as well as low-yield nuclear attack.

These deficiencies have been the subject of growing concern. Robert Soofer, who is now acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of War for Nuclear Deterrence, Chemical and Biological Defense Policy and Programs, has criticized the ambiguity and incoherence of prior U.S. homeland missile defense policy. As mentioned, it has been U.S. policy to rely only on strategic deterrence – that is, the threat of nuclear counterattack – to defend against nuclear-armed ballistic missile threats from either Russia or China. At the same time, however, prior policies admit to the existence of growing threats of coercive attack using conventional missiles. The 2022 MDR, for instance, states that to deter “attempts by adversaries to stay under the nuclear threshold and achieve strategic results with conventional capabilities,” the United States will need to “examine active and possible defense measures to decrease the risk from any cruise missile strike against critical assets, regardless of origin.”¹¹⁵

According to Soofer, however, it is irrational to defend against *some* Russian or Chinese missiles but not others. He expressed his concerns as follows: “While one might question the value of defending against cruise and ballistic missile threats, ... defending against one and not the other makes no strategic sense.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, this contradiction might even seem to *encourage* coercive missile attack, in that Russia and China could employ conventionally armed ballistic missiles against U.S. nodes of control and critical infrastructure, perhaps deeming such attacks both to be *easy* (because the United States lacks defenses capable of defeating them) and to be *low-risk* (because U.S. officials have signaled that America’s nuclear deterrent is reserved for nuclear attacks).

Another problem for U.S. planners lies in the difficulty of identifying whether an incoming missile is nuclear-armed or not when both Russia and China have so many dual-capable systems. (As noted earlier, in the near future, even an incoming ICBM might conceivably carry only a conventional warhead.) For example, one of China's more recent and advanced missiles, the DF-27, is an intermediate-to-intercontinental range ballistic missile capable of carrying nuclear or conventional warheads, while its most recent system, the DF-61, is also road mobile.¹¹⁷ If such missiles were to be used against the United States, would it make more sense simply to intercept as many as possible, or to let them hit their targets and only *then* decide whether to retaliate with nuclear weapons (in the event of nuclear detonations) or simply to absorb the damage (if it turned out to be a conventional attack)? America deserves a more sensible policy, born from a new conceptual framework.

What the U.S. Homeland Missile Defense Policy Should Be

It is clear that the threats facing the United States have grown exponentially. As the threats posed not only by rogue states but also by America's strategic competitors have expanded, many experts now agree that U.S. defenses are not fit for purpose. For these reasons, an adjustment of U.S. missile defense strategy is overdue. The modifications to the U.S. missile defense posture that will be described in this section can serve as a conceptual framework for a new approach. For starters, an attempt to update U.S. policy would be to declare that:

The U.S. missile defense policy will update and enhance GMD system and employ and integrate other systems in order to protect the American homeland against multiple threats: Pyongyang's increasingly modern and dangerous arsenal; possible future Iranian missile threats; and limited attacks by China and/or Russia involving not only ballistic missiles but also cruise and hypersonic systems and drones with either conventional or nuclear warheads as

these countries implement strategies of coercive intimidation and extortion.

This simple statement could be further expanded as the threats and their strategies evolve, and as more importance is placed on protecting the homeland. This approach would be consistent with the growing chorus of calls for improved defenses, such as the SPC report that recommended that the United States “develop and field homeland IAMD [integrated air and missile defense] capabilities that can deter and defeat coercive attacks by Russia and China.”¹¹⁸ As Soofer has also emphasized,

... [t]he United States requires not simply a new architecture for accomplishing the same old mission better but rather a new architecture and strategy that layers in new capabilities designed to meet the challenges posed by Russian and Chinese limited strikes as well as the expansion of North Korea’s missile capabilities.¹¹⁹

The new missile defense policy put forward by President Trump may be an important step in this direction. The parameters of the announced “Golden Dome” approach have yet to be made clear, and so far the plan has raised far more questions than it answers. Will it survive, be fully funded, and prove effective – thus perhaps completely changing the strategic and technological equation, rendering strategic missiles and other such weapons all but useless – as President Trump seems to suggest – or will it fail to develop and wither away, as did Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)? And what, precisely, *is* Golden Dome trying to accomplish? Does it merely intend to expand U.S. homeland missile defenses to cover growing North Korean threats, possible emerging Iranian ones, and the prospect of limited Russian or Chinese attack? Or is the hope to defend even against *larger-scale* missile assaults?

Some experts are not optimistic about whether any of this is really possible. Henry Sokolski, for instance, executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, recently wrote that “[t]he

[Golden Dome] project could easily run over budget and behind schedule. Therefore, I recommend hedging with a[n] [alternative] narrative that could garner bipartisan support – something which has not yet been attempted.”¹²⁰ And even if President Trump’s optimistic-sounding budget projections for Golden Dome *are* realistic, without bipartisan support, securing these funds could be in jeopardy.

On these efforts, the NDAA for the FY-26 was passed in mid-December, fully funding the Golden Dome of America and missile defense in general, with about \$25 billion requested for Golden Dome alone plus \$43.3 billion for Missile Defeat and Defense, which encompasses investments for the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), for regional and strategic missile defense capabilities outside of MDA, and for advanced technology missile defeat efforts and other left-of-launch activities.¹²¹ At first, this project seems to be intended to proceed with the development and integration of already-fielded systems, such as Aegis battleships, or other programs-of-record, such as the Next Generation Interceptor, but it could also “deploy next-generation technologies across the land, sea, and space, including space-based sensors and interceptors,” in the words of President Trump.¹²²

The Trump Administration is attempting to adapt U.S. homeland missile defense posture to the current international security environment. And some updating is clearly necessary. Previous U.S. policies of only defending against very limited North Korean attacks could perhaps actually *encourage* Pyongyang to continue to expand its missile capabilities in order to overwhelm America’s very limited defenses, even while leaving America defenseless against other quite real and growing aerial threats, both nuclear and conventional. Whatever the ultimate extent of Golden Dome, it seems likely to lead to important augmentations of U.S. missile defense capability, and this is much needed.

The Administration now has three years left in which to make good on President Trump’s promise, for as Sokolski has written, “[i]n fewer than 40 months, President Trump’s presidency will end. The

question is, will his signature project — the Golden Dome — die with it?”¹²³

A More Practical Issue: Supply Chains and Missile Defense

Beyond the insufficiencies of from America’s outdated missile defense *policy*, there is an additional important obstacle to overcome if the United States truly desires a new missile defense posture: its lack of a defense industrial base currently capable of *building* and *maintaining* a sound defensive architecture.

According to CNN, U.S. forces in Israel countered Iran’s barrage of missiles during the June 2025 conflict with at least 100 THAAD interceptors.¹²⁴ This barrage of interceptors were fired by only two batteries, and yet they represented a significant portion of the entire U.S. stockpile of these anti-missile missiles worldwide. Reports indicate that between 20 percent and 25 percent of the global supply of THAAD interceptors was used up during the 12-day-long campaign, meaning that thwarting attacks in any more sustained campaign could vastly outpace U.S. production capabilities.

On a similar note, CSIS Fellow Wes Rumbaugh wrote in late 2024 that U.S. defense of Israel against the two prior Iranian attacks of April and October of that year had revealed deficiencies in the American supply of SM-3 missiles as a dozen of these were used in each engagement. In this article, Rumbaugh noted that “[s]ome commentators have observed that the U.S. Navy fired a year’s worth of SM-3 interceptors in a single day,” and that “[b]ased on the procurement numbers projected in the FY 2025 budget proposal, this is technically true.”¹²⁵ That said, Rumbaugh notes the missiles expended in those campaigns are a smaller proportion of the total U.S. inventory. He argues, for instance, that counting all types and versions of the SM-3s, the 12 interceptors used during the October 1, 2024, attack on Israel would only amount to 2.5 percent of the total amount of SM-3 in stock. According to him, such expenditure of missiles “would be a small price to pay to limit the damage of the Iranian

attack, provide space for diplomacy, and avoid an immediate Israeli retaliation.”¹²⁶

Still, this argument misses an important point. If 12 interceptors represent 2.5 percent of the total number of SM-3s, then 480 interceptors would represent 100 percent of it. If the United States were to enter into a war against a heavily missile-reliant adversary such as Iran and use up its interceptors at the same rate seen in the October and then June of 2025 strikes, America would have missile defense capabilities for only 40 days until it would run short of munitions. Against a larger missile-armed adversary such as Russia or China, the interceptor “burn rate” could be even higher – and America’s resulting combat endurance even less.

Moreover, the production of different types of SM-3s was put on pause by the Department of Defense in order to concentrate all efforts on the more sophisticated SM-3 Block IIA. Counting only this type of SM-3, only 64 were procured in the last four fiscal years.¹²⁷ This would give the U.S. ships and forces only five days of autonomy to defend themselves against missile strikes. Although the SM-3 Block IIA is advanced and has impressive interception rates, these numbers are not sufficient for serious missile defense against serious foes.

This situation was recently recognized by both members of the armed forces and Congress. In a June 2025 hearing before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral James Kilby stated that U.S. interceptors are being used up at an “alarming rate.”¹²⁸ For his part, Appropriations Committee Chair Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) declared:

We need more munitions. Air defense, interceptors, long-range fires, artillery, recent conflicts tell us we need a lot more of them. Recent experience tells us our industry ain’t [sic] producing them fast enough.¹²⁹

It is thus becoming increasingly clear that the U.S. supply chain for missile defense interceptors is out of step with the new methods of warfare and is inadequate to current and future missile defense needs.

Congress has recently decided to reverse the five-year plan embedded in the FY 25 budget request that reduces the production of SM-3 Block IB to zero over the next five years. In May 2025, the Department of Defense granted SM-3's manufacturer, RTX (formerly known as Raytheon), a significant contract for the delivery of more of these missiles. In addition, efforts are also underway to enhance the production of the Block IIA version.¹³⁰ It is far from clear, however, that this will be enough – especially if Golden Dome is serious about providing more comprehensive defenses.

Final Words and Implications

The year 2025 might turn out to be one that redefined the future defense and national security policies of the United States, the policies of its partners and allies, and the threats posed by its adversaries. The Second Trump Administration has already taken what may be important first steps in enhancing America's defense posture by revising America's traditional approach to missile defense by reinforcing the importance and need for improved homeland protection.

This article has sought to outline the threats posed by America's adversaries and demonstrate the inadequacy of prior U.S. approaches to missile defense, which have been frozen in time since their last modification during the early 2000s after the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty. The many strategic and tactical threats that the United States now faces, not only from rogue states but also from near-peer competitors, have expanded and evolved. North Korea continues to expand and modernize its nuclear arsenal, even testing the advantages of hypersonic technology. Iran might not pose a threat yet, especially after the latest round of strikes with Israel, but the strategic losses it has faced could encourage the Ayatollahs not merely to

rebuild and expand their missile arsenal, but also to develop nuclear weapons to deliver atop such missiles.¹³¹

In the case of America's near-peer competitors, Russia continues to use the Ukraine conflict as a testing ground for some of its "superweapons" and other modern long-range munitions, and continues to develop and refine its doctrines of coercive intimidation using both conventional and nuclear delivery systems. In case of conflict, a diverse range of Russian weapons could be used with conventional or low-yield nuclear warheads, allowing Russia the capability to attack the U.S. homeland without – Russian planners might assume – necessarily eliciting an American strategic nuclear response, and current U.S. missile defenses would be unable to meet this threat.

China is following a similar path, for it has not only modernized but also heavily expanded its nuclear arsenal. It is possible that China will reach effective nuclear parity vis-à-vis the United States by the 2030-2035 timeframe, by which point its arsenal will actually also contain a range of dual-capable systems (and potentially soon even an intercontinental-range ballistic missile) for which no U.S. counterparts exist. America's adversaries, then, have diversified and enhanced their offensive capabilities, giving them capabilities the use of which it may prove increasingly difficult to deter by the traditional U.S. approach of relying only upon strategic nuclear threats. It is for this reason that it has become increasingly urgent to improve U.S. homeland missile defenses.

As this article has shown, U.S. missile defense policy has become outdated. Against this new strategic environment, a new missile defense policy for the United States is needed against the increasingly dangerous North Korean threat, the short and mid-term evolution of the Iranian threat, the already considerable Russian threat, and equally challenging, and rapidly expanding, Chinese military capabilities.

But merely developing a new homeland missile defense *policy* may not be enough if America cannot *build* and *maintain* the expanded

system it needs – and the United States currently faces glaring flaws in its industrial base vis-à-vis the production of missile interceptors. The recent Iranian campaign has helped highlight both the strategic necessity of homeland missile defense and its challenges, providing us with fertile soil from which to harvest interest and information on how to better update the U.S. approaches.

Overall, this paper has provided evidence of the multiple threats the country faces from different regimes around the world, the likely effectiveness and benefits of developing a new homeland missile defense policy to counter these regimes, and some of what will be needed if we are to deploy a nationwide, integrated homeland missile defense architecture. President Trump’s Executive Order on building an America “Golden Dome” architecture suggests that U.S. officials understand the need to do more, and the FY26 defense budget request provides more evidence of this trend. Much research and development, and a great deal of money, will surely be needed in order to acquire the capabilities needed. But this effort must start with solidifying bipartisan agreement upon the need for improved defenses. After all, deterrence is never ironclad, and therefore, America needs to reinforce its walls.

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