

The background of the cover is a blue globe of the Earth. Overlaid on the globe are red, scribbled lines that form a dragon-like creature with its wings spread. The dragon's body is a vertical line, and its wings are large, textured shapes on either side. The overall aesthetic is graphic and somewhat abstract.

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META MORPH OSIS

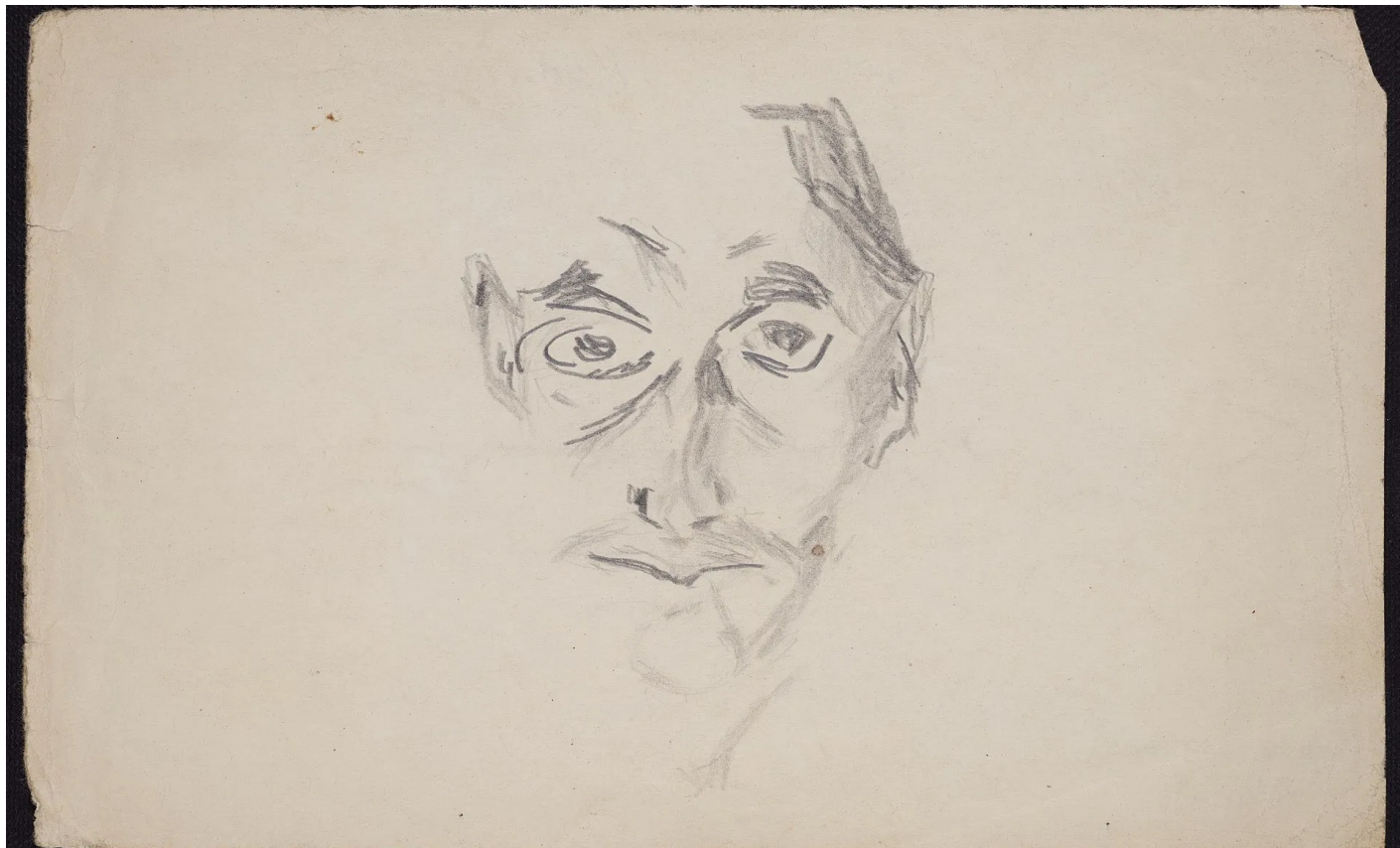
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ABSURD NEW WORLD

BY YEGOR RUBANOV

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INTRODUCTION

In Stanley Kubrick's 1964 classic *Dr. Strangelove*, the United States foreign policy apparatus is satirically immobilized by absurdity as a nuclear threat looms on the horizon. The leadership of the government is left paralyzed by a reality in which bureaucracy and apocalypse converge—until all is disintegrated into oblivion. While the world today is not at the edge of a nuclear catastro-

phe just yet, the foreign policy of the current administration echoes Kubrick's deepest fears. A new system is emerging, one that seamlessly blends a Kafkaesque megalomania over deporting international students, individuals with "suspicious tattoos," and openly innocent citizens, with an economic policy that is far closer to a hollowed-out economic theater than any notion of economic theory.¹ Absurdity in this new political reality has increasingly become the norm—a mode of foreign policy largely un-

familiar to this country in its newly mutated form.

KAFKA IN ICELAND

The absurdity of today finds its parallels in Kafka's *The Trial*, where the main character, Joseph K., finds himself for reasons never revealed, arrested and prosecuted for an unspecified crime. Not dissimilarly, over the last months, students across the country have been arrested, detained, and stripped of their rightful stay within a

country that has for decades proclaimed its unwavering dedication to liberty and freedom of speech.² When Joseph K. questions the reason for his arrest, the authorities promptly respond “[i]t is not our place to tell you that.”³ Analogously, students that have been detained across the country have largely not received any legal reasoning for their detention, with 1300 visas being revoked

“In this new political climate, justice within the immigration system has become nothing more than a system of symbols...”

under the pretense of “national security” as a catch-all justification.⁴ The arrest of Turkish graduate student Rumeysa Ozturk, which resembled more a kidnapping than an interaction with law enforcement, stands out as the most direct attempt by the administration to steal Kafka’s script. Just as Ozturk was taken away by agents in plain clothing, Joseph K. unsuccessfully attempts to grasp his own arrest: “Which of the authorities is conducting the proceedings? Are you a state official? None of you is in uniform.”⁵ This symbolic blurring between the image of legal

detention and unlawful abduction fosters an atmosphere of perpetual fear, a self-policing incentive of the absurdist regime. In this new absurd world, we as international students—just like Kafka’s Joseph K.—find ourselves under an inconspicuously blatant attack.

These detentions not only mirror Kafka in the literary sense, but also emblemize a new legal architecture which has become decoupled from its own fundamental intent. In this new political climate, justice within the immigration system has become nothing more than a system of symbols, part of a broader theater where innocence and guilt are no

longer legal categories, but narrative conveniences in a broader agenda. By invoking national security as an all-encompassing justification, the administration is transforming immigration into an even more dramatic hall of mirrors. Repression is now carried out through a bureaucratic order, that subsumes the values enshrined in its own constitution.⁷ What is most fascinating is the dramatic contrast of these policies with the small-governance and free speech narrative that were so central to this administration’s campaign.⁸ This grotesque absurdity fos-

ters a new legal order where fear dominates freedom and where students like myself are increasingly coerced into silence. We are forced to surrender our right to speak freely in exchange for the illusion of safety.⁹

THE BIOPOLITICS OF BUREAUCRACY

Students represent just one facet of an immigration policy that has been weaponized by the executive branch’s opaque bureaucratic authority to enforce its narrative. In this new reality, non-citizens and citizens alike are reduced to what Giorgio Agamben calls bare life—the biological existence of a person stripped of all political, social, and cultural attributes, leaving only the capacity to be alive.¹⁰ The recent game of cat and mouse between the leadership of the current administration and El Salvador’s President Nayib Bukele on the fate of Abrego Garcia, a man illegally sent to prison abroad due to an “administrative error,” demonstrates this more clearly than anyone else.¹¹ Both administrations have actively withdrawn their own ability to return a definitively innocent individual home. Bukele has dismissed the idea of returning Abrego Garcia as “absurd” (perversely ironic given the horrid absurdity of the overall situation). Meanwhile, the presidential administration has deflected responsibility by

citing bureaucratic limitations and repeating disproven claims of gang affiliation, using legal ambiguity as a shield against accountability.¹²¹³ Tattoos and racial prejudice have become the new law and order, dictating whether one deserves freedom. Notably, it has been made clear that this is only the beginning: “Homegrown are next.”¹⁴

Kafka demonstrated long ago how a bureaucratic machine can reduce one’s life to nothing: in the final seconds of his life Joseph K. proclaims “like a dog!” before he is executed by a system that has stripped him of humanity.¹⁵ The goal today is precisely the same: to create a society that coerces you into bare life if you step out of line. Yes, you are alive, but with no rights, no dignity, no recourse, and with no more ‘liberty’ than a dog. The presidential administration in its case against Garcia has called this an “intuitive sense of liberty.”¹⁶ The most insidious danger lies in normalizing this state of exception, turning what should be an extraordinary suspension of rights into an everyday tool of governance. When the absurd becomes the norm, its power grows and the intentionality behind it becomes ever more powerful.

THE ECONOMY OF SPECTACLE

Absurdity as policy is not restricted to the world of immigration, however, as starkly portrayed in the administration’s approach to economic foreign policy. If justice now functions as a theater for national security, the econ-

“...this new form of economic policy manufactures a veneer of meaningful action out of orchestrated chaos...”

omy has become its equally unstable twin—a simulation of productivity and actionability that has abandoned all semblance of material grounding. French thinker Jean Baudrillard terms this phenomenon quite fittingly: transeconomics. Transeconomics is the stage at which the economy no longer functions according to production, value, or market logic—but instead becomes a game of speculation and spectacle governed by floating, arbitrary rules.¹⁷ It imitates the structure of economic rationality while discarding its substance—an “ecstasy of value” where

meaning collapses into performance.¹⁸ The administration’s tariff policy has become exactly that, a performance where the standard rules of economic theory are dismissed to make way for unfounded narratives that emphasize the trade deficit as an end-all be-all for the pure purpose of narrative.

Notably, this game seems detached from consequence for the administration which is able to “pause” its policy just as easily, and with as little reason as it had to enforce it in the first place. This in the eyes of Baudrillard is the death of “Political Economy” as we have imagined it—a system in which economics has become “the exacerbation of its own logic to the point of self-parody.”¹⁹ The materiality of economic theory in this context has been to an extent destroyed, replaced by a narrative of tariffs as performative vengeance, and grounded in a formula so arbitrary and contextless that some have even speculated it was drafted by an LLM.²⁰ As a result, by becoming ungrounded from widely accepted theory, this new form of economic policy manufactures a veneer of meaningful action out of orchestrated chaos, and quietly harvests profit from the ensuing market absurdity.²¹ Ironically this system, which “effectively co-opts the energy of poker,” is being directed by a man whose own casinos have been through four bankruptcies.²²²³

CONCLUSION

This new era is fundamentally shifting foreign policy, blurring the line between governance and absurdity, cruelty and policy, both domestically and globally. In Kafka's world, Joseph K. is swallowed by the machine. In ours, the hyper-real, bureaucratic fog has not yet fully submerged the liberty which this country claims to be built on. Baudrillard saw in the collapse not salvation but an opportunity for rupture within a system that is internally combusting, "vanquished by its simulacrum of itself."²⁴ There may be a future where the system becomes so unreal, so self-parodied, that it can no longer maintain the illusion of order through narrative—even if that seems to be the precise strong suit of those at the helm of this ship today. In Dr. Strangelove, the end comes not with a decisive act of war, but with a farce no one bothers to stop. Absurdity becomes an end in itself— set to the sound of "We'll Meet Again" and mushroom clouds. If we are not ready to ride the bomb of absurdity into oblivion, we must continue naming it, shining a bright light into the bureaucratic fog and the vague language of securitization to disrupt the complicity the spectacle so actively depends on. Doing this is the only prospect there is for a future where truth is not treated as contraband and free speech as an exclusive club, where obe-

dience is the only currency of entry.

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CLIMATE CHANGE, MENSTRUATION, AND THE COST OF INACTION IN PAKISTAN

BY SARAH JEDDY

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Featured/Headline Image Caption and Citation: Emergency Flood Response in Pakistan, Image sourced from Flickr | CC License, no changes made

Despite increasingly dire climate consequences, the Pakistani government has yet to implement sufficient or sustained policies to mitigate environmental degradation or support its most vulnerable populations. Although Pakistan has articulated ambitious targets under its nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement, its actions often fall short of matching these goals. The country remains among the top 30 global emitters of carbon dioxide, re-

leasing 200 million tons of CO₂ in 2022 alone, with emissions continuing to trend upward.¹ This reflects both a systemic underfunding of climate adaptation initiatives and a continued reliance on fossil fuels, as well as a lack of enforcement of international agreements meant to curb emissions.

The consequences of climate inaction have been catastrophic. While all Pakistanis face exposure to climate-related disasters, women and girls —

particularly those who menstruate — bear a disproportionate share of the burden. The 2021 floods displaced hundreds of thousands, while the 2022 monsoon floods, intensified by global warming, affected more than 33 million people.² Among them were 650,000 pregnant women who lost access to essential healthcare, many forced to give birth without medical assistance or sanitary conditions. A staggering 8 million individuals were left without menstrual hygiene products or

even toilets, stripping them of the means to manage menstruation with dignity.

Climate disasters have also disrupted food systems, especially in rural and agrarian regions. The resulting malnutrition exacerbates the challenges menstruators face, as adequate nutrition is essential to regulate menstrual cycles and maintain reproductive health.³ Research suggests that menstruation demands significant energy and nutrient intake; in its absence, growth can be stunted, and the onset of menstruation delayed. While the global average age of menarche is 12, in Pakistan it tends to occur later, often between ages 12 and 16, reflecting the dual burden of food insecurity and environmental exposure.⁴

These delays and disruptions are not merely biological inconveniences—they carry long-term health consequences. Climate-induced menstrual irregularities have been linked to heightened risks of infertility, depression, cardiovascular disease, and osteoporosis.⁵ This growing health crisis underscores the extent to which environmental stressors can reproduce cycles of gendered vulnerability.

In contexts of extreme scarcity, societal desperation often gives rise to further injustices. In climate-vulnerable regions of Pakistan and beyond, there is a documented rise in child marriages—young girls exchanged

for food or resources in order to alleviate family hunger.⁶

Though such practices are condemned globally, they resurface in moments of crisis, revealing the intersection of climate instability and entrenched gender inequality. These forms of gender-based violence are compounded by the absence of institutional protections during and after environmental disasters.

The scientific community has drawn a direct line between anthropogenic climate change and these worsening conditions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group II—tasked with assessing climate change’s impacts, vulnerabilities, and adaptation—has reported with high levels of evidence and confidence that the glacial melting and unprecedented flooding observed in Pakistan are attributable to rising global temperatures.⁷ These climatic shifts not only bring extreme weather, but also environmental contamination: floods and droughts disturb landfills, industrial zones, and agricultural soils, triggering the release of toxins such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), pesticides, and

other chemicals. Contact with such substances—including

“This growing health crisis underscores the extent to which environmental stressors can reproduce cycles of gendered vulnerability...”

flame retardants and heavy metals like lead—has been scientifically linked to delayed puberty and menstrual onset.⁸ These impacts are reflected in self-reported menarche among Pakistani girls: over 80% of respondents were between the ages of 12 and 16 upon starting their period.⁹

The inequity of climate change is thus twofold: it is an environmental emergency and a social justice crisis. Yet Pakistan’s policy priorities often fail to reflect this dual urgency. Military spending remains one of the country’s largest budget items, consistently outpacing allocations to climate resilience or public health.¹⁰ Although Pakistan has appealed for international aid—highlighting its disproportionate vulnerability despite contributing less than 1% of historic emissions¹¹—its domestic expenditures reveal

a misalignment with its own rhetoric. Redirecting funds from militarization or fossil fuel subsidies toward green infrastructure, healthcare access, and gender-sensitive adaptation policies is not merely advisable, it is necessary.

As emphasized by the IPCC

“The stakes of climate inaction are no longer abstract. They are embedded in the lives of girls...”

Working Group II, which assesses climate impacts and regional vulnerabilities, no nation can adapt to climate change in isolation.¹² Pakistan’s climate response must be integrated into broader global frameworks. This includes advocating for more equitable disbursement under United Nations climate finance mechanisms, increased participation in the Green Climate Fund, and engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to restructure debt in exchange for environmental investment. At a regional level, Pakistan would also benefit from deeper cooperation with other South Asian states facing similar challenges. Multilateral platforms could help harmonize climate adaptation strategies, especially around shared river systems,

agricultural resilience, and migration preparedness.

The stakes of climate inaction are no longer abstract. They are embedded in the lives of girls who miss school because of a lack of pads, in the hospitals overwhelmed during floods, and in the communities

forced to barter away their daughters for survival. Confronting this reality demands a transformation not only in policy but in priorities—placing health, gender equity, and sustainability at the heart of Pakistan’s climate agenda.

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A NEW ORDER? THE CHANGING BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST [PART III]

SAUDI ARABIA'S ASCENDANCY: BALANCING POWER, PARTNERSHIPS, AND GLOBAL INFLUENCE

BY YASMINE SAMOLADA

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Featured/Headline Image Caption and Citation: "Saudi Arabia said Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman conveyed the kingdom's stance in 'a clear and explicit manner' without room for interpretation," Image source from Free Malaysia Today | CC License, no changes made

Saudi Arabia is emerging as one of the most consequential actors in the Middle East, redefining its role through a carefully calibrated foreign policy that balances regional leadership aspirations with global economic and diplomatic engagements. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the designated successor to the King, is steering the Kingdom toward greater geopolitical

autonomy, leveraging its vast economic resources, strategic partnerships, and mediation efforts to expand its influence. However, Saudi Arabia faces challenges, particularly regarding its stance on Israel, its evolving relationships with the United States and China, and its role in shaping post-conflict regional dynamics. This analysis examines Saudi Arabia's shifting influence in the Mid-

dle East as it fills the power vacuum left by the declining influence of Iran and Russia.

Saudi Arabia's diplomatic strategy is defined by a mix of calculated pragmatism and bold initiatives. A prime example of this is its cautious approach to normalizing relations with Israel. While the Kingdom has signaled openness to normalization, it has repeatedly re-

affirmed that any agreement must be contingent on the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.¹ This stance aligns more with the Arab Peace Initiative than the Abraham Accords — that do not list the creation of a Palestinian state as a precondition. The Arab Peace Initiative, adopted unanimously by 23 Arab states in 2002 and confirmed by the Arab Summit earlier this year, reversed the traditional negative Arab position toward peace with Israel and offered a comprehensive peace plan for ending the Arab Israeli conflict.²³ The continued strikes in Gaza have further complicated the process, making it politically untenable for Riyadh to pursue normalization without substantial Israeli concessions. Saudi media has aggressively criticized Netanyahu, reflecting broader frustrations with his policy and its impact on regional stability. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia is spearheading an alternative Arab plan to counter American-Israeli proposals for Palestinian displacement.⁴ This initiative, which focuses on rebuilding Gaza with Gulf funding⁵ while sidelining Hamas from governance, underscores the Kingdom's determination to shape the postwar order on its own terms, highlighting its ability to balance U.S. expectations with Arab consensus, reinforcing its leadership within the region.

Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States remains central to its foreign policy, yet the Kingdom has adopted a more independent approach, continuing to pursue a policy of "active neutrality" in glob-

“Saudi Arabia is spearheading an alternative Arab plan to counter American-Israeli proposals for Palestinian displacement...”

al affairs, beyond the Middle East.⁶ It has condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UN but has refrained from joining Western-led sanctions against the Kremlin, allowing it to maintain strategic flexibility and preserve economic and security ties with both the U.S. and Russia. In 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted a major international peace summit on Ukraine, demonstrating its ambitions as a global diplomatic power.⁷ Even though Russia dismissed the summit, Saudi Arabia's involvement in prisoner exchanges and backchannel diplomacy underscored its growing influence beyond the Middle East. Similarly, despite being a key U.S. ally, Saudi officials have emphasized the

importance of their relationship with China, describing it as complementary to their alliance with Washington. Hence, Saudi Arabia remains indispensable to both Western and Eastern powers.

Saudi Arabia remains one of the world's largest arms importers, historically reliant on U.S. and European suppliers for advanced weaponry. However, in recent years, it has diversified its defense partnerships, expanding military cooperation with China, including — areported joint production of drones and ballistic missiles. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has conducted naval exercises with the Chinese navy, signaling its intent to hedge against shifting U.S. commitments in the region.⁸ Despite this diversification, the United States remains Saudi Arabia's primary security guarantor. Ongoing negotiations for a formal U.S.-Saudi defense treaty reflect the recognition that neither China nor Russia can fully replace American military support.⁹ However, Saudi leaders are leveraging their growing relationships with Beijing and Moscow to extract greater security guarantees from the U.S., including technology transfers and assistance in developing a domestic defense industry.

Saudi Arabia's military posture is undergoing a transformation, shifting from direct interventionism — exemplified

by its involvement in Yemen — to a more calculated security strategy focused on regional stability and diplomatic engagement. Having significantly reduced its military operations in Yemen, the Kingdom is pursuing a negotiated settlement with the Houthis, who reject the Saudi-backed government, while simultaneously reinforcing its defense capabilities against potential threats.¹⁰ Moreover, Saudi Arabia's reassessment of its relationship with Iran once again reflects its broader shift toward diplomacy over confrontation. The China-brokered détente in 2023 signaled a preference for regional stability over prolonged hostilities.¹¹ While tensions persist — especially regarding Iran's support for proxy groups — Saudi Arabia's engagement

“...military posture is undergoing a transformation, shifting...to a more calculated security strategy focused on regional stability...”

with Iran highlights its commitment to preventing further destabilization in the Middle East, rekindling hopes for ending the Yemen conflict, where

both countries have historically supported opposing factions. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has aggressively pursued economic diversification, reducing its dependence on oil while expanding investments in infrastructure, technology, and renewable energy. Non-oil sectors account for 52% of GDP, with a projected 6.2% increase by 2026, with Saudi Arabia aiming to position itself as a hub for green energy and advanced technology, aligning its economic ambitions with global trends.¹² In pursuit of Vision 2030, the Kingdom has deepened cooperation with China, now its largest trading partner, in infrastructure, 5G technology, and renewable energy.¹³ The Sino-Arabian alignment plan integrates China's Belt and Road Initiative with Vision 2030, facilitating joint investments in hydrogen energy, electric vehicles, and industrial projects. This shift signals Riyadh's effort to diversify its partnerships and reduce exclusive reliance on Western economies. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia wields strategic influence over global energy markets through OPEC+, which it co-founded, working closely with Russia to manage oil production and pricing.¹⁴ Despite U.S. pressure to increase production following Russia's inva-

sion of Ukraine, the Kingdom instead coordinated production cuts that favored Moscow, underscoring its prioritization

“Leveraging its economic strength and strategy partnerships, Saudi Arabia is reshaping the regional order.”

of economic self-interest over Western expectations. This stance is further reflected in its overtures toward joining BRICS — an increasingly potent counterbalance to U.S. influence — as well as its hosting of a meeting between Russia and Ukraine, a significant development after Zelensky's meeting with Trump.^{15,16} This move underscores Saudi Arabia's growing confidence in charting an independent economic and foreign policy.

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia has all the qualifications to be a powerhouse — 34 million inhabitants, a stable political system, a booming economy, and one of the world's largest oil reserves. Its past isolationism and extremist Wahhabi social order are largely relics of the past, replaced by a rapid modernization drive that began a few years ago, with tangible change unfolding

daily.¹⁷ Leveraging its economic strength and strategic partnerships, Saudi Arabia is reshaping the regional order. By balancing ties with the U.S., China, and Russia, while spearheading regional economic transformations and redefining security strategy, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself at the center of an emerging multipolar order. This new order is defined by fluid alliances and pragmatic diplomacy, moving beyond the past dynamics of U.S. hegemony and Iran-Saudi rivalry, with Saudi Arabia standing at the forefront.

As things stand, the war in Gaza remains a determining factor in shaping the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia's role in normalizing relations between Israel and the Arab world will be pivotal. As regional power structures shift following the decline of both Russia and Iran, a power vacuum has emerged — one that Saudi Arabia is poised to fill. The Kingdom's support for the two-state solution, tying diplomatic normalization with Israel to the creation of an independent Palestinian state, places it in a unique position of leadership. Saudi Arabia's potential to broker a peace agreement that reflects broader Arab consensus and upholds Palestinian self-determination could set a new precedent for regional cooperation in the Middle East, countering the status quo.

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This article has been modified for the purpose of print. To read the full article, including an omitted section that explores potential strategies for the United States to cultivate basketball diplomacy in Mongolia, find it online at: <https://yris.yira.org/column/the-mongolian-hoop-dream-creation-of-american-soft-power-through-basketball/>.

THE MONGOLIAN “HOOP DREAM” – CREATION OF AMERICAN SOFT POWER THROUGH BASKETBALL

BY BENJAMIN M. NULAND

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Featured/Headline Image Caption and Citation: Two children play basketball close to Yolyn Am, taken on July 5, 2015 | Image sourced from Flickr | CC License, no changes made

BASKETBALL’S CONTEXT IN MONGOLIA

For decades, Mongolia has been ‘balled-up’ by an undeniable cultural trend: Basketball. But in a nation known for traditional wrestling, throat singing,

and horse riding, how did this unusual “Hoop Dream” take hold in the Mongolian plains?

Although originally introduced to Mongolia in the 1960’s by the Russians and Chinese in an attempt to ‘modernize’ the nation, basketball’s modern popularity came primarily from American influence. The

rise of a Chicago Bulls dynasty during the years following Mongolia’s Democratic Revolution exposed Mongolians to the NBA and created excitement around western culture. High level government officials, inspired by watching NBA games during trips to the US, brought back dreams to make basketball an official

sport to match the modernity of Mongolia's new era. Over time, basketball enthusiasm grew substantially when one of Mongolia's own, Tserenjanhor Sharavjamts, joined the Harlem Globetrotters for international exhibition games. Basketball culture continued to grow on the domestic level as well, leading to the creation of a national basketball league in the late 2010s; Mongolia's choice was to follow the NBA's rules. Today, the basketball fascination still lives under the halo of the NBA and its associations to American pop culture - NBA jerseys and streetwear define the "cool," and passion around NBA games resembles levels in the US. The cultural impact of basketball in Mongolia also pays huge dividends to America's soft power among Mongolia's young population.¹

While Mongolia was known to be weak in team sports and strong in individual sports like Judo, basketball has provided a new outlet for athletic success.² Since 2017, Mongolia's men's teams have twice won gold at the FIBA 3x3 Asian Cup, silver twice, and bronze once. Furthermore, the Mongolian women's 3x3 basketball team qualified for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, a first time achievement for any Mongolian basketball team.³ With 3 Mongolian players playing in the American NCAA - including Tserenjanhor Sharavjamts' son Mike, who might become Mongolia's first NBA professional when he graduates from the

University of Utah in 2026 - it seems that basketball in Mongolia will only gain further momentum over the coming years.⁴⁵

Mongolia seems to be on track to become a basketball haven for a new generation of talent, but US and international organizations have yet to participate in its development. In 2024 Mongolia hosted the 3x3 basketball world tour, but it has never been able to attract an NBA team or secure a visit from an NBA star. Recent plans to bring the Utah Jazz to Mongolia created great anticipation, but never materialized. MCS, Mongolia's largest business conglomerate built 118 new 3x3 basketball courts in Ulaanbaatar alone, yet it has been unable to secure US or international organizations to launch basketball development programs on these courts.⁶ Nevertheless, there is a growing demand for basketball in Mongolia and general openness toward American influence - leaving an interesting gap that the United States could fill with an unconventional foreign policy initiative.

With this undeniable cultural trend, how might all three stakeholders - Mongolia, the US and the NBA - collaborate towards creating better basketball in Mongolia?

WHY BASKETBALL

For the moment then, current American diplomacy in Mongolia focus on 3 questions: 1)

“...there is a growing demand for basketball in Mongolia and general openness toward American influence...”

how to maximize the impact of interpersonal exchange as a 'soft power' counterbalance to Russian and Chinese influence, 2) how to convince US organizations to launch activities in Mongolia, and 3) how to ensure that US influence in Mongolia is perceived as positive for Mongolia and non-threatening to its larger neighbors.

Basketball can be a new dimension to America's Mongolia policy that addresses all of these concerns.

On a macro-level, basketball appeals to what expert Alan Wachman considers as the core of the US-Mongolian relationship: “US policy towards Mongolia is not so much about what the United States 'gets'

by assisting as about what the United States is.”⁷ Basketball initiatives would not be perceived as a lever for US economic power, but, rather, a celebration of ideals that Mongolia also celebrates - perseverance, hard work, teamwork, and opportunity. China and Russia would perceive this type of influence as benign, borne from the same cultural forces that popularize basketball in their own countries rather than a seeping US influence. Even if China does see Mongolian basketball in competitive terms, it would focus on “upping its game” on the court, to the benefit of both countries. Nevertheless, with the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) losing domestic viewership and global competitiveness, China lacks the influence to make basketball a focal point in its relations with Mongolia, and would likely avoid interfering

initiatives by China and Russia, the successes of Basketball Diplomacy can be portrayed as a local Mongolian success story. From the US perspective, an initiative which can hook an entire generation to embrace American culture would be a major victory.

The US can become a key player in supporting the local basketball industry by building facilities and training professionals. A rise in the quality of local basketball leagues would increase domestic viewership, domestic revenue, and marketing opportunities. Though small, it would represent a new form of economic diversification for Mongolia into sports. By cultivating local talent, Mongolia would also have the opportunity to send students overseas for education in prestigious American universities, creating a win-win

situation for young Mongolians. Students on basketball scholarships could either come back to play in domestic leagues (assuming they don't make it to the NBA) or use their American education to obtain Mongolian high skilled jobs. Either way, Basketball Diplomacy would be a local success for a generation of young

Mongolians.

By cultivating its talent to showcase internationally, Mon-

golian basketball would bolster national pride through sport patriotism. Success in international competitions could also amplify Mongolia's status on the world stage. In this sense, the US would not only be bolstering Mongolia's basketball success, but also its confidence as a sovereign nation in a neighborhood dominated by China and Russia.

For US corporations like the NBA and Nike, the benefit from participating in basketball diplomacy might be small in the short term, but they would be seeding an opportunity for a larger, long-term win at relatively low cost. The NBA already participates in TV programming in Mongolia, selling live broadcast rights and supporting fan-focused Mongolian language programming. Merchandise sales, though small, penetrate the leading edge of Mongolian youth. Opportunities to monetize that fanbase will only grow with the popularity of the sport.

By boosting up local leagues, the US can draw NCAA or NBA scouts to the exceptional talent already developing in Mongolia. One could only imagine the frenzy, and business opportunity created if a Mongolian ever achieved stardom in the NCAA or NBA. Shortly after Mike Sharavjamts joined the Dayton University Fliers, the NCAA team created a Mongolian language Facebook account that quickly attracted nearly 30,000 follow-

“Basketball initiatives would not be perceived as a lever for US economic power, but, rather, a celebration of ideals...”

with U.S-led basketball diplomacy.⁸

In contrast to soft power ini-

ers.⁹

OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS: WHAT MUST BE DONE?

The many options leave one optimistic about the potential for Diplomacy through Basketball, but the challenges to launch those initiatives should not be underestimated. Among the key success factors are 1. Aligning a diverse set of Mongolian and US stakeholders around the initiatives; 2. Identifying champions to create support among Mongolian decision makers; and 3. Raising funding and other forms of support from domestic and international partners.

Creating a productive dialogue between US and Mongolian delegations will be an important and arduous process. Pushing for Basketball Diplomacy would not just involve the State Department and the Mongolian Sports Ministry, but would also include the Mongolian Basketball Association, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the Peace Corps, and maybe even the NBA. While each stakeholder might join the project with its own unique agenda in mind, they would all have to align around common operating principles and program goals. In practical terms, the obstacles posed by geography, distance and communication (Mongolians are hard to reach by email) would

add levels of complexity. If all parties are motivated, those obstacles can be overcome, but the Mongolian side will have to see clear enough benefits to be fully engaged. Considering the long list of US geopolitical priorities, US policy makers will need assurances that Mongolia will be a proactive partner.

In order for Basketball Diplomacy to gain attention from any of the organizations above, there must be an influential figure endorsing this project. While a charismatic communicator like the current US Ambassador, Richard Buangan, could push for Mongolian Basketball Diplomacy on a policy level, the project must have big-name athletic ambassadors that promote the deal on a public level. For example, Loul Deng's role as an NBA star was crucial to securing US funding for basketball leagues and development programs in South Sudan, which put them on a path to nearly defeating the US men's team at last year's Olympics.¹⁰

In the case of Mongolian basketball, Mike Sharavjamts seems destined to take on this role, especially if he's drafted into the NBA. Though still young, he already represents a bridge between American and Mongolian culture, bringing awareness about Mongolia to Americans while also representing the reality of the "American Dream" to many aspiring Mongolian youth. Therefore, he would be the

ideal champion for this type of Mongolian-American Basketball Diplomacy. Sharavjamts seems to have this ambition as well, noting to the San Francisco Chronicle that he hopes to create his own basketball academy in Mongolia when he retires.¹¹

Beyond a Mongolian icon like Sharavjamts, American players who have played in Mongolia could also add starpower to the initiative. Stephen Sir, one of the all-time 3-point scoring leaders in NCAA history, could be an instrumental figure in pushing for 3x3 basketball initiatives in Mongolia, as he was once a player-coach of the Mongolia 3x3 basketball team.¹² The fifteen Americans currently playing in Mongolia could also make Americans aware of "The League," highlighting both the talent of young Mongolian players and the league's development potential.¹³ These figures would not only bring the attention of Mongolians but could also bring previously unenthusiastic Americans to the table.

Securing funding has been a persistent challenge for past programs, but it can be addressed through upweighting basketball diplomacy on both the US and Mongolian sides. The Mongolian government - whether through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Great Hural, or the Executive branch - could incorporate Basketball Diplomacy into its Vision 2050 policy plan for national devel-

opment.¹⁴ This would not only put basketball in the national spotlight, but also fund programs to solicit the participation of foreign governments, including the U.S.

Building on previous collaborative efforts, the government could partner with local conglomerates like MCS to construct large-scale basketball infrastructure. The role of US partners, then, could focus exclusively on staffing, management and other elements that make the program authentically American.

Beyond this, the Mongolian government can leverage its proven social media expertise to create a halo of domestic and international support around basketball programs. The country's global tourism campaign, "MonGolia" reached 155 million consumers, attracted 650,000 tourists, and generated \$1.2 billion in revenue.¹⁵ A similar effort around basketball could rally international stakeholders to invest, but also convince US lawmakers to fund government programs aimed at pursuing soft power through sport diplomacy. In this era of tension between the US and Mongolia's two large neighbors - China and Russia - congress might see Basketball Diplomacy as a quick, effective and invulnerable way to build America's influence in a region that's otherwise leaning away.

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THE COST OF AID: MINERALS, ECOCIDE, AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS OF REBUILDING UKRAINE

BY SOFIIA TIAPKINA

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In February 2025, as Ukraine faced its third year of war against Russia, U.S. President Donald Trump made headlines by demanding that Ukraine hand over a share of its natural resources in return for continued American support. The proposed arrangement was eye-catching not just for its tone but for its underlying assumptions. Looking to recoup

the costs of U.S. assistance, Trump asked for the equivalent of \$500 billion from Ukraine's war-battered resource base, focusing on high-demand minerals that are key to modern defense and tech industries.¹ Zelensky said he would not recognize such a large sum since it vastly outweighed the \$100 billion the U.S. had sent to Ukraine under former

President Joe Biden. Signing the deal, in his words, would mean "10 generations of Ukrainians" paying back the debt.² Yet, the deal remains on the table, and the terms are bold: Ukraine would commit 50% of all future revenues from newly developed natural resources to a joint U.S.-Ukrainian investment fund for reconstruction, echoing Ukraine's environmen-

tal exploitation under the USSR.³

Following World War II, the Marshall Plan used \$13.3 billion in U.S. funds—roughly \$171 billion today—to rebuild war-torn Western Europe from 1948 to late 1951. The American initiative focused on economic development, reaping the benefits of European democratic stability and financial success. The current mineral deal has been instead likened to the Treaty of Versailles, the post-World War I reparations paid by Germany, but in today’s case, the financial burden falls not on the aggressor but the invaded.⁴ The deal’s transactional nature highlights a deeper tension: the current American administration views Ukraine less as an ally to aid and more as a resource to exploit. Ukraine will be rebuilt not just as a sovereign democracy but as a strategic site of extraction and environmental exploitation. What role should the environment—and its protection—play in this process?

INDUSTRIAL LEGACY AND ENVIRONMENTAL BURDEN

To understand Ukraine’s mineral allure, we must revisit its industrial roots. During the So-

“Pollution from smelting plants, the Chernobyl disaster, tailings from uranium mines, and unchecked chemical production left many regions economically degraded...”

viet era, Ukraine was a central cog in the USSR’s heavy industrial machine. It supplied coal from the Donbas, iron from Kryvyi Rih, and uranium from central Ukraine. Under Stalin’s rule, Ukraine became the site for many of the Soviet Union’s biggest dams, highways, government complexes, factories, mines, oil refineries, chemical plants, ships, and space rocket facilities. This came at a massive environmental cost. Pollution from smelting plants, the Chernobyl disaster, tailings from uranium mines, and unchecked chemical production left many regions ecologically degraded, especially in the country’s east.⁵

After independence in 1991, Ukraine’s industrial economy struggled to transition. Outdated infrastructure, lack of in-

vestment, and oligarchic control slowed the shift to a service economy and continued the trend of large-scale de-development.⁶ But the resource wealth remained, and in recent years—especially with rising geopolitical tensions—Western governments and companies began considering Ukraine’s untapped potential in critical raw materials, including lithium, titanium, graphite, and rare earths.⁴ Some estimates suggest the country holds at least \$10 trillion worth of natural resources, though many geologists cast doubt on

the figures, and the commercial viability of these reserves is still uncertain.⁷

ECOCIDE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

While attention has focused on the minerals beneath Ukraine’s soil, another environmental crisis has been unfolding on the surface. Since 2022, Russian military tactics have inflicted deep ecological damage. The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023 displaced tens of thousands, flooded critical farmland territories in Ukraine’s south, and irreversibly changed aquatic life across the Dnipro River basin.⁸ Russian shelling has also hit chemical plants, fuel depots,

and water treatment facilities, spreading pollutants and creating no-go zones of toxic debris.

These acts have sparked calls to recognize ecocide—the deliberate or negligent destruction of ecosystems—as an international crime.⁹ In early 2024, Pacific Island nations, including Vanuatu and Tuvalu, formally proposed that ecocide be added to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).¹⁰ Legal scholars argue that the environmental devastation in Ukraine is not collateral damage but a deliberate tactic of war—a way to destabilize communities and make regions unlivable. Historical comparisons can also help put the current situation in a larger context. The term “ecocide” was coined in 1970 by Professor Arthur W. Galston, a

“...warfare often weaponizes the environment, erasing landscapes and livelihoods alike.”

Yale biologist, specifically in response to the Vietnam War. The U.S. military used Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant and herbicide, to destroy forests and crop fields—a strategy with devastating long-term effects on health and biodiversity. In Cambodia, warfare during

the 1970s led to widespread deforestation, as combatants cleared jungles and mined rivers. These cases, like Ukraine’s today, show how warfare often weaponizes the environment, erasing landscapes and livelihoods alike.

Compared to other sectors, the U.S. invested virtually no funds directly in environmental protection in Ukraine, with the majority of funds coming from USAID and subsequently put in question after Trump’s executive order around the USAID cuts.¹¹

MINERALS AND THE POLITICS OF EXTRACTION

Against this backdrop, the focus on rare earths takes on a more fraught character. Ukraine’s reserves—while promising—come with caveats. Minerals like graphite and lithium require heavy upfront investment and technical expertise to process. Rare earths, in particular, are notoriously difficult to extract without causing radioactive or chemical pollution. At present, much of the global processing capacity lies in China, raising both economic and geopolitical challenges for any country seeking alternatives.

The Trump-backed proposal envisions using Ukraine’s re-

source base as both a revenue generator and a geopolitical anchor. Under the recently reworked draft agreement, Washington would receive all profits from the joint investment fund until Ukraine had repaid the full value of U.S. wartime assistance, plus an additional 4 percent in annual interest.¹² The United States would also gain preferential control over future projects, including the right of first offer on new initiatives and the authority to block the sale of Ukrainian resources to third parties. For the first year of the agreement, Ukraine would be barred from offering more favorable investment terms to any country other than the U.S. Should Ukraine, already facing a reconstruction bill of over \$500 billion, be expected to finance its recovery by opening its land, water, and air to further environmental stress?

Critics argue that this setup prioritizes short-term extraction over long-term sovereignty. Unlike the Marshall Plan, which offered grants, the proposed resource-sharing agreement is effectively a loan against Ukraine’s future. Without robust environmental regulations, Ukraine risks repeating the pattern seen in other resource-rich post-conflict nations: wealth exits the country, leaving pollution and instability in its wake.

RETHINKING

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS ESPORTS AND CHINESE NATIONALISM

BY WILLIAM ZHANG



Featured/Headline Image Caption and Citation: Edward Gaming winners of 2015 League of Legends Mid-Year Invitational | Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons | CC License, no changes made

On November 6th 2021, students of Chinese universities rampaged through the streets in their pajamas on a snowy night as deafening screams of celebration echoed across dorm buildings.¹ You would be forgiven to guess that there was a nation wide cancellation of final exams; or perhaps, in an even more unlikely scenario, the Chinese soccer team made it to the World Cup. However, the truth is that EDward Gaming (EDG), a Chinese esports

team, had just won the most important tournament of the year: the League of Legends World Championship. For the Chinese community, League of Legends esports is more than just a competitive scene for a children's computer game, it is a reflection of the nationalist tendencies of Chinese citizens.

League of Legends (LoL) is a video game made by developing company Riot Games that attracts over 130 million active

users every month, 70 million of which are from China.² LoL also has the largest esports scene in the world, with tournaments that peak at over six million concurrent viewers, not including Chinese viewership.³ In China, these numbers are even crazier. LoL esports has over 15 million subscribers on Bilibili and over 17 million subscribers on Huya, China's two largest video streaming platforms.^{4,5}

Clearly, League of Legends and the attached esports scene are incredibly popular in China. However, to explain what they have to do with Chinese nationalism, we must dive deeper into the history of LoL esports. League of Legends esports began in 2011, when the European team Fnatic won the first world championship.⁶ A Taiwanese team, Taipei Assassins, won the second world championship in 2012.⁷ Afterwards, every single world championship up to 2018 was won by a Korean team.⁸ Despite having a much smaller player base than China, Korea is by far the most dominant region in LoL, with Korean teams having won nine world championships and Chinese teams having won only three. Even among the three world championship Chinese teams, Invictus Gaming (iG), FunPlus Phoenix (FPX), and EDG, there have always been at least two imports, a technical term referring to players who compete in a region different from their country of origin.^{9 10 11} Without exception, these imports have been Korean.

Ever since Korean teams started dominating the world championships while Chinese teams came at a distant second, a sharp anti-Korean sentiment arose in the Chinese esports community. This is quite cu-

rious because the League of Legends World Championship is not a competition between different regions but individual teams. However, the Chinese community's sentiment is not against a specific team, but Korea in general. A common term within the Chinese esports community is “抗韩” (kang han) literally meaning anti-Korean.¹² It is common for Chinese fans to specifically

“...it is apparent that Chinese fans have derived a national rivalry out of something that has no direct national implications.”

track how different Chinese teams do against Korean teams, with several teams that do especially well against Korean teams being dubbed “抗韩先锋,” (kang han xian feng) literally meaning anti-Korean frontline.¹³ Even Riot Games has noticed this rivalry and organized Rift Rivals, an event that specifically pits regions against each other.¹⁴ Therefore, it is apparent that Chinese fans have derived a national rivalry out of something that has no direct national implications.

This anti-Korean sentiment is even present when distinguish-

ing between Chinese teams. Within the Chinese fandom, there is a general consensus that a “全华班,” or an all-Chinese team, is preferred over a team with Korean imports.¹⁵ Some particularly toxic netizens (a term describing habitual users of the internet) have even used crude and racist terms to describe teams with Korean imports in earlier years when importing players was not as common.¹⁶ However, even disregarding these particularly toxic fans, it is still clear that the broader Chinese community prefers fully Chinese teams. When EDG won the 2015 Mid Season Invitational (MSI), the second most prestigious international tournament of the year, and beat a Korean team in the finals to do so, the Chinese LoL community cheered with ap-

proval.^{17 18} However, it paled in comparison to the roar of pride team Royal Never Give Up (RNG) received when they won the 2018 MSI.^{19 20 21} Even state owned media outlets such as the China Daily posted about RNG's win.²² What's the difference between the two teams? Two of the five players from EDG's MSI winning roster were Korean, and RNG's 2018 roster was exclusively Chinese. To be more precise, RNG's 2018 roster was perceived by the Chinese community as exclusively Chinese; Hung “Karsa” Hao-Hsuan, a member of 2018 RNG, is actually Taiwanese.²³ However,

since almost all-Chinese citizens consider Taiwan to be part of China, RNG's 2018 roster was still considered an all-Chinese team.

This sentiment still persists today despite a vast majority of Chinese League of Legends teams having Korean imports. A few months ago, on November 2nd 2024, Bilibili Gaming (BLG) advanced to the finals of the 2024 League of Legends World Championship.^{24 25} Chinese media were quick to point out that they were the first all-Chinese team to make it to the finals of a world championship since Royal Club (RYL) in 2013.^{26 27} This way of framing BLG's advancement implies that an all-Chinese team is still important to Chinese audiences. Indeed, over 43 million Chinese fans, approximately 86% of the world wide viewership, watched the 2024 world finals.²⁸ In the 2020 LoL World Championship, another Chinese team, Suning Gaming (SN), advanced to the finals and lost.²⁹ However, they were not an all-Chinese team, and only 38 million Chinese fans (assuming that Chinese fans consist of 86% of the viewer base) watched the 2020 world finals.³⁰

It is clear that for the Chinese community, despite competitive League of Legends revolving around specific teams rather than regions, League of Legends esports still carries deep nationalist implications for China. However, it is worth noting that the intrigue of

an all-Chinese team has been slowly disappearing. Chinese LoL influencers have been discussing the future of a fully-Chinese team, suggesting fans no longer blindly support all-Chinese teams without tangible achievements.³¹ As a direct reaction to this sentiment, many prominent teams that have advertised the all-Chinese brand signed Korean players to bolster their roster. Team Oh My God (OMG), a Chinese team that has never had any imports since its inception in 2012, decided to sign Jeong "Moham" Jae-hun, a Korean import.^{32 33} More notably, Top Esports (TES), a perennial contender for the World Championship that has not had an import since 2022, signed Seo "Kanavi" Jin-hyeok, a Korean import.^{34 35}

The continued fascination of the all-Chinese team highlights the role of nationalism within LoL. Despite League of Legends esports being centered around individual teams, the Chinese community still focuses on the national rivalry against Korea, demonstrating just how deep nationalistic sentiments run within Chinese society. However, this sentiment is evolving, namely in the form of the Chinese LoL community shifting away from blindly supporting all-Chinese teams leading to perennial fully-Chinese teams signing Korean players, forgoing romantic ideals for practical results. Ultimately, this signals a return to a fundamental truth of competi-

tive sports: winning is all that matters. Or to use a common Chinese phrase: 竞技体育, 成绩说话 (in competitive sports, the results do the talking).

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Around Yale, you can often find him going on long walks, grabbing a cup of boba, or reading about philosophy.

DANCING THROUGH DIPLOMACY: BALLET'S ROLE IN UNITED STATES-SOVIET UNION RELATIONS

BY CAMILLE ROUSSEL

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Featured/Headline Image Caption and Citation: A group of ballet dancers performing on a stage. Ballet performance don quixote, beauty fashion | Image sourced from Pixabay | CC License, no changes made

On walls throughout Russian cities, Swan Lake graffiti has been appearing.¹ These depict the famous line of four ballerinas in the “Dance of the Cygnets” in “Swan Lake” and have become forms of anti-war protest. While this symbol may seem strange, it has existed for many decades already. In 1982, Soviet state TV aired the ballet repeatedly after the death of Premier Brezhnev as Soviet leaders decided on a successor. This happened again after the

deaths of Yuri Andropov in 1984 and Konstantin Chernenko in 1985. It also occurred in 1991 after a failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev, where it officially became a sign of political upheaval. Even before ballet became this political symbol, it was used in political relations as a form of cultural diplomacy, specifically between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Though ballet originated in

Italy and France, it was at the Imperial Russian Ballet in St. Petersburg in the late 19th century that it truly developed. Since then, Russia has continued to have a significant influence on ballet around the world. Two of the world’s most prestigious companies, the Mariinsky Ballet and the Bolshoi Ballet, are located in Russia.

Ballet’s role during the Cold War era first came to light in 1954, when President Eisenhower-

er established the President's Emergency Fund for International Affairs.² Part of this fund included \$2,250,000 allocated to the State Department to put on art and sports presentations abroad. In 1958, the Lacy-Zarubin agreement was reached. This outlined a two-year plan of reciprocal exchange of art, science, media, and education between the US and the Soviet Union. Initiatives to use ballet for cultural diplomacy were being directly funded by both nations.

In 1960, the United States launched one of its first big initiatives in using ballet for cultural diplomacy: American Ballet Theater's (ABT's) Tour of the Soviet Union.³ Starting in Moscow on September 13, the company performed at the Stanislavsky Theater, rather than the more renowned Bolshoi Theater. This did not, however, prevent their performances from selling out. Influential figures, such as Nikita S. Khrushchev and prima ballerinas Galina Ulanova and Maya Plisetskaya, attended the company's opening night. After this start in Moscow, ABT then went on to perform in Tbilisi, Georgia and in Leningrad, returning to Moscow on October 21st to conclude their tour. After the final performance, Premier Khrushchev invited ABT to return to the USSR. Two years later, New York City Ballet (NYCB) followed in ABT's footsteps, but in an even more complicated context.⁴ A week after NYCB's arrival

in Moscow to begin its eight-week tour, funded by the US Department of State, US reconnaissance planes discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba, triggering the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite the rising tensions between the US and the USSR, NYCB's performances were met with enthusiasm from Soviet audiences. At one performance, the audience cheered for an encore, leading principal dancer Edward Villella to perform his solo a second time to a standing ovation, even though company policy forbade encores.

NYCB's tour was especially notable because of the company's artistic director, George Balanchine. George Balanchine was a Georgian-American ballet choreographer born in Russia, who co-founded NYCB with Lincoln Kirstein in 1948.⁵ When the company went to Georgia as part of its USSR tour, few people knew Balanchine by his Georgian last name (Balanchivadze), but his fame had spread from the US to Georgia.⁶ He was perfectly positioned to serve as "an artistic U.S. public diplomat." While the US and USSR each tried to insert their cultural values into their ballets, people in Georgia viewed Balanchine not as an outsider from the other side of the Iron Curtain, but rather as someone who had worked hard

to achieve his dreams in a free country. For Balanchine, personally, this was his first time visiting his home country, an

“Though ballet originated in Italy and France, it was at the Imperial Russian Ballet in St. Petersburg in the late 19th century that it truly developed.”

experience that both allowed him to connect with his heritage and become inspired by Georgian folk dances for his future choreography.

Stylistically, Balanchine's choreography was classified as "neoclassical abstract ballet," something the US feared would not be well received in the Soviet Union, where ballets were typically more traditional.⁷ However, Soviet audiences did enjoy these performances. The US had failed to realize that after the death of Stalin, a new generation of artists arose in the USSR, leading to the development of choreographic symphonism. This new type of

dance focused on the connection between dance and music, rather than the earlier focus on that between dance, theater, and literature. Choreographic symphonism and Balanchine's neoclassicism both developed from changes in early 20th-century Russian ballet, revealing similarities between American and Soviet ballet. The successful reception of NYCB in

na Beryl Grey became the first Western dancer to guest with the Soviet company.⁹ These exchanges, though they certainly helped humanize both countries, did not come without misunderstandings. The Bolshoi Ballet's performance of "Spartacus" was not successful amongst American audiences. They did not view it as ballet since dancers wore Roman

far less controlled than in Moscow. In Moscow, teachers were paid to report on dancers, and families were practically held as collateral. One dancer from Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet who did manage to defect was Alexander Godunov. In 1985, the USSR released a film called "Flight 222" that was connected to his defection.

“With today’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia, many Russian dancers have defected, similar to the Soviet dancers who did so during the Cold War.”

sandals, instead of pointe shoes. They much preferred to go see the new Hollywood movie called "Spartacus" that had just been released. On the other hand, American choreographers worried that Soviet audiences would be offended by abstract ballets like Balanchine's "Agon," not understanding that this neoclassical style was already similar to the Russian creation of choreo-

graphic symphonism. With today's ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia, many Russian dancers have defected, similar to the Soviet dancers who did so during the Cold War. Most notably, former Bolshoi Ballet soloist Olga Smirnova left Russia ten days after the start of the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ When the invasion began, Smirnova wrote, "I've always been proud of the talent of the Russian people, of our cultural and sporting achievements. But today, a line has been crossed." Smirnova is now a prima ballerina with the Dutch National Ballet in Amsterdam.

the USSR would later lead to NYCB completing a second tour in the Soviet Union in 1972.

Like the US, the USSR also sent its own ballet companies on tours abroad. In 1959 and 1962, the Bolshoi Ballet toured the US and was received warmly, with performance tickets being resold for the equivalent of \$830 in 2018 dollars.⁸ In 1957, a year after the Bolshoi Ballet visited the UK, British balleri-

graphic symphonism.

Despite some misunderstandings, these cultural exchanges also ended up providing an unintended opportunity for USSR dancers to defect. In 1961, ballet dancer and choreographer Rudolf Nureyev was one of the first to defect. He was followed by Natalia Makarova in 1970 and Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1974. All three of these dancers were from St. Petersburg—a region in which dancers were

As with during the Cold War, the ballet community has also had a role in, or at least a reaction to, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In March of 2022, international ballet stars took part in a charity gala in London to raise funds for people in Ukraine.¹¹ This project was led by Ukrainian ballet dancer Ivan Putrov and Romanian ballerina Alina Cojocaru. The organization Youth America Grand Prix, which organizes one of the biggest ballet competitions, has helped almost

100 Ukrainian dance students find placements throughout Europe to continue studying ballet in safer settings.¹² The war also led to the end of any pre-existing partnerships between the US and Russia. For example, the US National Security Language Initiative for Youth program previously had a partnership with the Bolshoi Ballet Academy. In this program, American ballet students had the opportunity to train in Russia, while gaining proficiency in Russian, a language that the US considers critical to its national security. In addition to the loss of US partnerships, the UK tours of the Bolshoi Ballet and the Russian State Ballet of Siberia were canceled when Russia invaded Ukraine.

While it is difficult to see how much of a tangible effect ballet had on political policies, especially that of the USSR, it's difficult to deny that the art form did help humanize both sides. By seeing Soviet dancers on stage performing just like American dancers, the Soviet Union became less distant to American audiences and likewise to Soviet audiences. These Cold War artistic exchanges helped increase intercultural exchange overall between the US and USSR, something that was able to persist until the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although cultural exchange between Russia and the United States has decreased recently, ballet still plays a role in other international relations. Ballet has become a universal lan-

guage that helps build bridges across different cultures, contributing to the formation of positive relations.

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