# The Cold War Never Ended

## Ukraine, the China Challenge, and the Revival of the West

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*Blood and Ruins: The Last Imperial War, 1931–1945*
BY RICHARD OVERY. Viking, 2022, 1,040 pp.

Does anyone have a right to be surprised? A gangster regime in the Kremlin has declared that its security is threatened by a much smaller neighbor—which, the regime claims, is not a truly sovereign country but just a plaything of far more powerful Western states. To make itself more secure, the Kremlin insists, it needs to bite off some of its neighbor's territory. Negotiations between the two sides break down; Moscow invades.

The year was 1939. The regime in the Kremlin was led by Joseph Stalin, and the neighboring country was Finland. Stalin had offered to swap territory with the Finns: he wanted Finnish islands to use as forward military bases in the Baltic Sea, as well as control of most of the Karelian Isthmus, the stretch of land at the southern end of which sat Leningrad. In exchange, he offered an expansive but boggy forest in Soviet Karelia, bordering Finland far to the north of the isthmus. To Stalin's surprise, despite serial modifications of his original demands, the Finns rejected the deal. Finland, a country of around four million people with a small army, spurned the Soviet colossus, an imperial power with 170 million people and the world's largest military force.

The Soviets invaded, but Finnish fighters stalled the poorly planned and executed Soviet attack for months, administering a black eye to the Red Army. Their resistance captured imaginations in the West; British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and other European leaders hailed gallant Finland. But the admiration remained rhetorical: Western powers did not send weapons, let alone intervene militarily. In the end, the Finns kept their honor but lost a grinding war of attrition, ceding more territory than Stalin had initially demanded. Soviet casualties exceeded those of the Finns, and Stalin embarked on a belated top-to-bottom reorganization of the Red Army. Adolf Hitler and the German high command concluded that the Soviet military was not ten feet tall, after all.

Now flash forward. A despot in the Kremlin has once again authorized an invasion of yet another small country, expecting it to be quickly overrun. He has been expounding about how the West is in decline and imagines that although the decadent Americans and their stooges might whine, none of them

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will come to the aid of a small, weak country. But the despot has miscalculated. Encased in an echo chamber, surrounded by sycophants, he has based his strategic calculations on his own propaganda. The West, far from shrinking from the fight, rallies, with the United States decisively in the lead.

The year was 1950. Stalin was still in power, but this time, the small country in question was South Korea, invaded by North Korean forces after he gave the despot in Pyongyang, Kim Il Sung, a green light. To Stalin's surprise, the United States formed an international military coalition, supported by a UN resolution; the Soviets, boycotting the UN Security Council, had failed to exercise their veto. UN forces landed on the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula and drove the North Koreans all the way to the Chinese border. Stalin, aided by Washington's failure to heed its own intelligent reports, effectively managed to shunt his blunder onto the Chinese leader Mao Zedong. China's People's Liberation Army intervened in huge numbers, surprising the U.S. commander, and drove the U.S.-led coalition back to the line that had divided the North and the South before the North's aggression, resulting in a costly stalemate.

And now to the present. Stalin and the Soviet Union are long gone, of course. In their place are Vladimir Putin, a far lesser despot, and Russia, a second-rank, albeit still dangerous, power, which inherited the Soviet Union's doomsday arsenal, UN veto, and animus toward the West. In February, when Putin chose to invade Ukraine, dismissing its sovereignty and disparaging the country as a pawn in the hands of Russia's enemies, he was expecting an international response like the one Stalin witnessed when invading Finland in 1939: noise from the sidelines, disunity, inaction. So far, however, the war in Ukraine has engendered something closer to what happened in South Korea in 1950—although this time, the Europeans were ahead of the Americans. Putin's aggression—and, crucially, the heroism and ingenuity of the Ukrainian people, soldiers and civilians alike, and the resolve and savvy demonstrated by Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky—spurred a dormant West to action. The Ukrainians, like the Finns, have kept their honor. But this time, so has the West.

What these parallels show is not that history repeats itself or rhymes; the point, rather, is that the history made in those earlier eras is still being made today. Eternal Russian imperialism leaps out as the easiest explanation, as if there were some sort of innate cultural proclivity toward aggression. There is not. Conversely, however, it would also be simplistic to see Russia's invasion as a mere reaction to Western imperialism, whether in the form of NATO or its expansion, when the pattern long predates NATO.

These recurring episodes of Russian aggression, for all their differences, reflect the same geopolitical trap, one that Russian rulers have set for themselves again and again. Many Russians view their country as a providential power, with a distinct civilization and a special mission in the world, but Russia's capabilities do not match its aspirations, and so its rulers resort, time and again, to a

hyperconcentration of power in the state in a coercive effort to close the yawning gap with the West. But the drive for a strong state does not work, invariably devolving into personalist rule. The combination of weakness and grandeur, in turn, drives the autocrat to exacerbate the very problem that facilitated his appearance. After 1991, when the gap with the West widened radically, Russia's perpetual geopolitics endured, as I argued in these pages in 2016. It will persist until Russian rulers make the strategic choice to abandon the impossible quest to become a great-power equal of the West and choose instead to live alongside it and focus on Russia's internal development.

All of this explains why the original Cold War's end was a mirage. The events of 1989–91 were consequential, just not as consequential as most observers—myself included—took them to be. During those years, Germany reunified within the transatlantic alliance, and Russian power suffered a sharp temporary reduction—outcomes that, with Moscow's subsequent withdrawal of troops, freed up small eastern European countries to adopt democratic constitutional orders and market economies and join the West in the EU and NATO. Those events transformed the lives of the people in the countries between Germany and Russia and in those two historical frenemies themselves, but they changed the world far less. A reunified Germany largely remained a nonfactor geopolitically, at least until the weeks after the invasion of Ukraine, when Berlin adopted a far more assertive posture, at least for the moment. Parts of eastern Europe, such as Hungary and Poland, which happened to be among the biggest losers in the world wars and their peace settlements, started to show illiberal streaks and in this way confirmed limitations in the EU's framework. Although the radical diminution in the size of the Russian state has mostly held (so far), the collapse of Russian power was hardly permanent, just as it was not after the Treaty of Versailles of 1919. The West's relatively brief respite from great-power competition with Russia constituted a historical blink of an eye.

All the while, the Korean Peninsula remained divided, and China remained communist and continues to insist on its claim to the self-governing democratic island of Taiwan, including the right to forcibly unify it with the mainland. Well beyond Asia, ideologically tinged rivalries and resistance to American power and the West's professed ideals persist. Above all, the potential for nuclear Armageddon, among the Cold War's defining aspects, also persists. To argue that the Cold War ended, in other words, is to reduce that conflict to the existence of the Soviet state.

To be sure, far-reaching structural changes have occurred since 1991, and not just in technology. China had been the junior partner in the anti-Western alternative order; now, Russia is in that position. More broadly, the locus of great-power competition has shifted to the Indo-Pacific, a change that began gradually during the 1970s and quickened in the early years of this century. But the foundations for that shift were laid during World War II and built up during the Cold War.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the historical hinge of the late twentieth century was located less in 1989–91 than in 1979. That was the year that the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping normalized relations with the United States and began the Chinese Communist Party's acquiescence in economic liberalization, which exponentially expanded China's economy and global power. In the same year, political Islam came to power in Iran in a revolution whose influence reverberated beyond that country, thanks partly to the U.S. organization of Islamist resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Around the same time, amid the depths of stagflation and social anomie, the Reagan-Thatcher revolution launched a renewal of the Anglo-American sphere with an emphasis on free markets, which ignited decades of growth and would eventually force the political left back to the center, with the advent of Tony Blair's New Labour in the United Kingdom and Bill Clinton's New Democrats in the United States. This remarkable combination—a market-Leninist China, political Islam in power, and a revived West—reshaped the globe more profoundly than anything since the postwar transformations of Germany and Japan and the consolidation of the U.S.-led West.

The mistaken belief that the Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union spurred some fateful foreign policy choices in Washington. Believing that the ideological contest had been settled definitively in their favor, most American policymakers and thinkers shifted away from seeing their country as the bedrock of the West, which is not a geographic location but a concatenation of institutions and values—individual liberty, private property, the rule of law, open markets, political dissent—and which encompasses not only western Europe and North America but also Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and many other places, as well. In place of the concept of the West, many American elites embraced a vision of a U.S.-led "liberal international order," which could theoretically integrate the entire world—including societies that did not share Western institutions and values—into a single, globalized whole.

Fever dreams of a limitless liberal order obscured the stubborn persistence of geopolitics. The three ancient civilizations of Eurasia—China, Iran, and Russia—did not suddenly vanish, and by the 1990s, their elites had clearly demonstrated that they had no intention of participating in one-worldism on Western terms. To the contrary, China took advantage of its integration into the global economy without fulfilling its economic obligations, let alone liberalizing its political system. Iran embarked on an ongoing quest to blow up its neighborhood in the name of its own security—unwittingly assisted by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Russian elites chafed at the absorption into the West of former Soviet satellites and republics, even as many Russian government officials availed themselves of the money-laundering services provided by top Western firms. Eventually, the Kremlin rebuilt the wherewithal to push back. And nearly two decades ago, China and Russia began developing an anti-Western partnership of mutual grievance—in broad daylight.

## THE WORLD THE WAR MADE

These events precipitated a debate about whether there should or should not be (or whether there already is) a new cold war, one that primarily pits Washington against Beijing. Such handwringing is beside the point; this conflict is hardly new.

The next iteration of the great global contest is likely to revolve around Asia partly because, to a degree that is underappreciated by many Western observers, the last two did, as well. Correcting that misperception, at least when it comes to World War II, is part of the historian Richard Overy's mission in his latest book, *Blood and Ruins*, which seeks to shift perspectives on the war and the postwar era by calling more attention to Asia. "The Asian war and its consequences," he observes, "were as important to the creation of the post-war world as the defeat of Germany in Europe, arguably more so."

Some of Overy's arguments read like self-admonishments: the Eurocentric chronology dating the onset of World War II to 1939 "is no longer useful"; "the war should be understood as a global event, rather than one confined to the defeat of the European Axis states with the Pacific War as an appendix"; "the conflict needs to be redefined as a number of different kinds of war," including "civil wars fought alongside the major military conflict . . . and 'civilian wars', fought either as wars of liberation against an occupying power (including the Allies) or as wars of civilian self-defence." Less conventional for a scholar of Asian or global history is his principal argument that "the long Second World War was the last imperial war." This contention turns out to clash, however, with his welcome call for greater emphasis on Asia.

Overy sets out his imperialism framework by noting the various major wars before 1914, such as the Sino-Japanese clash of 1894–95, and approvingly quotes Stalin to the effect that a crisis of capitalism "intensified [the] struggle for markets" and that extreme economic nationalism "put war on the order of the day as a means for a new redivision of the world and of spheres of influence." Overy does not dwell on the fact that Stalin himself sought to forcibly divide the world into hierarchical spheres of influence, albeit ones unrelated to market access. And despite his emphasis on imperialism and his call for a spotlight on Asia, his opening chapters furnish a familiarly Hitler-centric picture of interwar diplomacy and the onset of World War II, his chief subject. He does take a run at a kind of revisionism, recasting British appeasement as "containment" combined with deterrence, even though the arms buildup carried out by London was too slow and the supposed containment lacked credibility. He disregards the 1939 nonaggression pact between Hitler and Stalin, as if the Soviet Union was not involved in the outbreak of the war.

In any case, for the millions of Asians caught up in the conflagration, the war had little to do with Hitler or Stalin or British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, and everything to do with Japan and its clash with the United States, which Overy relegates to a secondary position in his narrative. He also has difficulty demonstrat-

ing the imperial nature of the belligerent armies. The only country that fielded a large-scale imperial army was the United Kingdom; the British dominions mobilized 2.6 million soldiers, and India 2.7 million more. But they were deployed primarily outside the main theaters.

Overy's book takes flight, however, when it turns to logistics, production, and mechanics. Overy demonstrates, for example, that what today is called "modern warfare" bears little resemblance to the mid-twentieth-century version of industrialized conflict. During World War II, the combatants mostly produced weapons of relative simplicity in prodigious volume, because they had to be operated by the more than 100 million uniformed men and women thrown into combat with comparatively little training. In contrast with many histories of the war, Overy eschews the drama of great tank battles and instead conveys the stupefying loss of nearly all the tanks produced by the combatants. This is a history not of generalship but of unfathomable deprivation, atrocities, and genocide.

It is also a compelling story of organization. Overy illuminates how the sensational initial breakthroughs that the Axis powers achieved had inherent limits—but also how their defeat was not foreordained. "The Axis states all had space rather than time, and it was space that slowed down their advance and brought them to a halt in 1942," he writes, adding that "the Allies were no nearer invading the Japanese, German, or Italian homelands in 1942, but they now had the time and the global reach to work out how to reorganize and improve their military capability so that they were in a position to do so over the last two years of war." The slog to victory meant learning the hard way how to fight better and develop the full means to do so. Overy shows how the Soviets painfully absorbed the lessons of German tank warfare and eventually emulated the Nazis' prowess, revolutionizing standardized tank production despite a massive loss of territory, physical infrastructure, and laborers. The British, meanwhile, underwent their own grind to mimic German air warfare and overhaul their air fleet. Admittedly, Overy is less incisive on how the Americans confronted the most confounding task of all, learning how to fight on oceans, while building out the world's largest and most advanced navy and air force. Still, he rightly concludes that Allied "military establishments became what the organizational theorist Trent Hone has described as 'complex adaptive systems', in which the learning curve"—a term coined in 1936—"could be worked through."

Ultimately, the war was won not predominantly on the eastern front, where the Red Army suffered unfathomable casualties to annihilate the Wehrmacht, but on the seas and in the air. The United Kingdom and the United States deliberately destroyed the ability of Germany and Japan to produce the weapons of war and to transport them to the front. By 1944, only a minority of the war-making potential of Germany and Japan could even be put into battle. The value to Japan of its vast overseas conquests, with their prodigious natural resources, disappeared once U.S. forces wiped

out Japanese merchant shipping. In Germany, even when factories managed to relocate their production (usually belowground), the hasty dispersals introduced higher rates of defects and took workers away from critical manufacturing tasks.

Rather than highlight these Allied achievements, however, Overy emphasizes the costs of the Anglo-American denial strategy. He does note that the Soviet Union did not have the means to engage in systematic economic warfare and that Germany's attempted ocean blockade of the United Kingdom sputtered, a reflection of Germany's failure to invest sufficiently in submarines until it was too late. But "in the end," he concludes, "volume-production and the sharing of military goods proved to be the surer economic contribution to victory." Needless to say, production and destruction were two sides of the same coin. Overy himself highlights the massive investments in air and naval power to control sea-lanes and mount assaults at a distance and demonstrates the degree to which the Axis powers launched the war to preempt the Allies' attempt to deny them access to indispensable raw materials, such as oil and rare metals, which the Axis powers did not control. The leaders of Germany and Japan were mesmerized by the unparalleled resources and interdiction capabilities of the British Empire and the continental United States, as well as the sprawling Soviet Union. They felt compelled to fight a war in order to be able to fight a war.

## CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Overy's understanding of empire evinces a pronounced political hue. He suggests, for example, that the postwar Soviet occupation of and coercive imposition of clone regimes in eastern Europe did not constitute imperialism and that British imperialism could be equated with Axis conquests and plundering. "As one Japanese official complained," he writes, "why was it regarded as morally acceptable for Britain to dominate India, but not for Japan to dominate China?" But not all domination is alike. The British, for all their perfidy, including misgovernance contributing to the 1943 Bengal famine, did not obliterate India's infrastructure, strafe and shell Indian civilians, coerce millions of Indians into sex slavery, or carry out gruesome scientific experiments on humans—all of which the Japanese did to Asians in China. Overy further implies that the United Kingdom's single-minded aim in 1945 to recover Malaya and Hong Kong differed little from Japan's objective to seize and occupy them; in fact, many Asians who rejected British rule could tell the difference between it and Japan's carnage.

For all his focus on British imperialism, moreover, Overy fails to recount the enormously consequential British recapture of Hong Kong, which the United Kingdom had controlled for a century prior to Japan's seizure of the territory in 1941. In a book purporting to shift the focus to Asia, he might have credibly made the case that in geopolitical terms, Hong Kong's fate was more important than that of, say, Poland. Arguably, with the exception of the Soviet capture of Berlin in May 1945 and the stern telegram that U.S. President Harry Truman sent to Stalin in August of that year warning him not

to invade Hokkaido (one of Japan's four main islands), the physical reoccupation of Hong Kong by the British in 1945 exceeded any other wartime episode in its strategic implications.

When Japan's surrender suddenly appeared imminent in the summer of 1945, surprising Washington, the Truman administration hastily accelerated work on a plan for the handover of Japanese-occupied territories and assigned the acceptance of Japan's surrender of Hong Kong not to the British but to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist government. The British, however, undertook furious military and political preparations to reclaim Hong Kong for themselves. U.S. officials wanted to satisfy their British allies but also allow Chiang to save face, and so they cleverly suggested that the British could accept the surrender on behalf of the Chinese government. But the British refused that offer, and eventually, Washington acquiesced. Chiang acquiesced as well, dependent as he was on U.S. military and logistical support to reclaim other areas of China. The upshot was that Hong Kong passed from the Japanese back to the British and remained that way even after 1949, when the Communists triumphed over Chiang's Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War but shrank from attempting to expel the British from the strategic southern port.

Had the British acquiesced rather than the Americans and Chiang, history would have played out very differently. As it was, the communist regime in Beijing was able to take extraordinary advantage of something it would not otherwise have possessed: a world-class international financial center governed by the rule of law. During the period of Deng's reforms, British Hong Kong ended up funneling indispensable foreign direct investment into mainland communist China—from Japan and Taiwan, especially.

People often ask why Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, when attempting to reenergize the Soviet economy in the second half of the 1980s, did not follow the successful Chinese approach to reforms. Beyond the immense gulf between a highly urbanized, heavily industrialized country and a predominantly rural, agricultural one, the Soviet Union had no Hong Kong to attract and direct incoming investment according to market, rather than political, considerations. No British Hong Kong, no Chinese miracle.

Hong Kong reverted to Beijing's control only in 1997, under an agreement announced by China and the United Kingdom in 1984. Under the "one country, two systems" arrangement, the Chinese Communist Party agreed to allow Hong Kong to maintain a level of autonomy, democratic rule, and civil liberties, at least until 2047. But Chinese President Xi Jinping has made a mockery of his country's treaty promises. The logic of communist rule has spurred a vicious and self-defeating crackdown on Hong Kong's independent sources of wealth, power, and liberty, all of which has threatened the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

Such instances of Chinese imperialism do not fit easily into Overy's end-of-imperialism story line. And Hong Kong is hardly the only place to have been on the receiving end. After all, communist China inherited the

Qing dynasty's multiethnic empire. In 1950 and 1951, the Communists occupied Tibet, which had been self-governing since 1912. Stalin had supported Muslim separatists in the predominantly Uyghur region of Xinjiang during and after the war, but in 1949, he advised the Chinese Communists to encourage Han settlement there. The goal was to bring Xinjiang's ethnic Chinese population up to 30 percent from five percent so as to foster development and strengthen China's grip. In 2020, according to that year's census, Han Chinese made up 42 percent of Xinjiang's population. A 2018 UN report, whose findings have been corroborated by copious open-source satellite imagery, indicated that Beijing has incarcerated at least one million Uyghurs in "reeducation" and forced-labor camps.

Ethnic tensions were not the only difficulty that faced communist China after its successful military occupation of and legalization of its rule over a swath of what is known as "Inner Asia," a region that spans from Tibet to Turkmenistan. The terrain itself was forbidding: deserts, mountains, and high plateaus. Nor did it offer China anything equivalent to the American West Coast. China has no California. Today, Beijing is trying to acquire something of an ersatz California to gain access to the Indian Ocean via the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea by extending Chinese infrastructure into volatile Pakistan and Myanmar. But this is no substitute for the real thing, a second coast that provides both an immense security moat and an invaluable commercial highway; California represents the fifth-largest economy in the world by GDP. Lacking anything like it is by far China's biggest strategic deficit.

## HOW THE WEST WAS ONE

Asia has cast a harsh light on a number of Americans celebrated for their grand statesmanship in Europe and the Soviet Union: the envoy George Marshall and his failed mission to China to reconcile Chiang's Nationalists and Mao's Communists; the diplomat George Kennan and his ignored recommendations to abandon the Nationalists and to launch a U.S. military invasion of Taiwan that would deny it to both the Nationalists and the Communists; Secretary of State Dean Acheson and his exclusion of the Korean Peninsula from the U.S. defense perimeter. Stalin, more than U.S. policymakers, feared the competitive weight of China, which after his death, in 1953, vied for supremacy within the communist bloc (and across what was then called the Third World). Many analysts blame Clinton for naively encouraging communist China's accession to the World Trade Organization without proper conditionality or reciprocity. Fair enough. But one could just as well point the finger at President Jimmy Carter for restoring "most favored nation" status to China, a nonmarket economy with a totalitarian regime.

In truth, the original source of the endemic U.S. fumbling over modern China was President Franklin Roosevelt. The wartime leader had a vague intuition about China's significance in the postwar world he envisioned, but he effectively gave up on China, even as he elevated its status by making it one of the four countries (eventually

five) that wielded veto power at the Security Council in the newly formed United Nations. Churchill was apoplectic over Roosevelt's notion that China should be afforded the role of a great power (a mere "affectation" on Beijing's part, in the British prime minister's view). As Overy recalls, the United States distributed some $800 million in aid to China between 1945 and 1948 (the equivalent of more than $10 billion in today's dollars), trained 16 divisions of the Nationalist government's army and assisted another 20, and provided some 80 percent of Chiang's military equipment, before disengaging from China's civil war. By pursuing his communist and anti-Western convictions, Mao imposed bellicose clarity on the confused bilateral relationship, and although Americans debated the question, "Who lost China?" for decades after, under Mao, China lost the United States. Today, more than 40 years after the two countries normalized relations, Xi risks doing much the same.

Where the world is now, however, is not a place it has ever been. For the first time in history, China and the United States are great powers simultaneously. China had long been the world's preeminent country when the 13 American colonies broke free from the United Kingdom. Over the next nearly two centuries, as the United States ascended to become the world's largest economy and greatest power known to history, China not coincidentally entered a long, dark tunnel of external and especially internal depredations. That ended as the two countries became intertwined in profound ways. That process had less to do with U.S. President Richard Nixon's kowtowing to Mao, aiming at widening the wedge that Beijing had opened with Moscow, than with Deng's historic decision to ditch the Soviets, don a cowboy hat during a 1979 visit to Texas, and hitch China's wagon to the insatiable American consumer market, following the trail that had been so spectacularly blazed by Japan, then South Korea and Taiwan. In the 1990s, Chinese President Jiang Zemin recuperated a vital relationship with a jilted Russia and its military-industrial complex, while retaining China's strategic orientation toward the United States, allowing Beijing to have its cake and eat it, too.

But regimes in Eurasia have a way of reminding the United States and its allies, no matter how deep they have sunk into delusions, about what matters and why. U.S. President Donald Trump exhibited strongman envy and only wanted to cut trade deals, but his presidency spurred a remarkable shift to a hawkish national consensus on China, which has endured the advent of the Biden administration even though many members of President Joe Biden's team served in the all-too-submissive Obama administration. Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Xi's evident complicity, in turn, shook Europe out of its dependence on Russian energy and its trade-above-all complacency about China and its leader. The view is now widespread that Putin cannot be allowed to triumph in Ukraine not only for the sake of Ukraine and Europe but also for the sake of the Asian strategy that the United States is pursuing with its allies. Moscow is now a pariah, and business as usual with Beijing is no

longer tenable. Going forward, nothing is more important than Western unity on both China and Russia. This is where the Biden administration has taken an important step forward, despite its fumbles in the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rollout of the AUKUS security pact.

In China, the lean toward Russia is not solely Xi's. Chinese nationalists—in the broader public, among experts, and in ruling circles—ardently blame NATO and the United States for the war in Ukraine. They urge China to draw even closer to Russia. These hard-line Chinese want Russia to win, because they want their country to take over Taiwan and believe that the United States will violate any international norm in the pursuit of dominance. Still, some Chinese elites have noted the degree to which Western intelligence agencies have managed to penetrate Putin's regime, the ease with which Russia was severed from the global financial system, and the ways that a despot in a sycophantic echo chamber can miscalculate in shattering fashion. Maybe allowing one man to turn an authoritarian system that was benefiting myriad interest groups into a personalist fiefdom that risks everything isn't such a good idea, after all.

Still, whereas Stalin maneuvered to fob off his Korean War blunder onto Mao and the Chinese rank-and-file cannon fodder, in the war in Ukraine, Xi has so far allowed Putin and Russian soldiers to pay the costs of attempting to accelerate the West's supposed decline and what the Chinese leader repeatedly refers to as "great changes unseen in a century."

In fact, the West has rediscovered its manifold power. Transatlanticism has been pronounced dead again and again, only to be revived again and again, and perhaps never more forcefully than this time. Even the most committed liberal internationalists, including some in the Biden administration, are coming to see that enduring rivalries constitute an ongoing cold war—that the world as it is came into being not in 1989–91 but in the 1940s, when the greatest sphere of influence in history was deliberately formed to counter the Soviet Union and Stalin. It is fundamentally a voluntary sphere of influence that offers mutual prosperity and peace, in contrast to the closed, coercive sphere pursued by Russia in Ukraine and by China in its region and beyond.

Just as decisive are the less tangible qualities that allow the United States to lead not an imaginary liberal international order but rather a non-geographic West. American leaders frequently err, but they can learn from their mistakes. The country has corrective mechanisms in the form of free and fair elections and a dynamic market economy. The United States and its allies have strong institutions, robust civil societies, and independent and free media. These are the advantages afforded by being unashamedly and unabashedly Western—advantages that Americans should never take for granted.

## BLOC PARTY

All three of the eruptions that began in 1979 have sputtered. Political Islam long ago revealed its bankruptcy, nowhere more starkly than in Iran. Unable to provide for the development

of its economy or the well-being of its people, the Islamic Republic survives through domestic repression, lies, and the emigration of its opponents. China faces demographic problems and a severe challenge to escape the so-called middle-income trap, on top of the manifest failures and impossible contradictions of its governance system. The Leninist regime in Beijing has ceased to be able to tolerate the now vast private sector, whose dynamism is so vital for economic growth and job creation yet so threatening to the regime's existence. And in the United States and the United Kingdom, the Reagan-Thatcher synthesis ran its course, in part because some of its downsides grew over time, but mostly because its successes altered and partly eliminated the conditions in which it arose and operated. But whereas Islamism and "market-Leninism" cannot foster systems that can reinvent themselves and still remain stable, history indicates that with leadership and vision, a far-reaching renewal of Western rule-of-law systems is possible. What Western countries—regardless of where they are—need now is a new synthesis of substantially expanded opportunity and a national political consensus.

Globally, the West is both envied and resented. In recent decades, Europe and especially the United States have managed to diminish the envy and magnify the resentment, from Latin America to Southeast Asia and lands in between. That dynamic needs to be reversed, but so far, it has only been reinforced by the Western response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which in the short run has put wind in the sails of detractors who seize on the West's interventionist hypocrisy, self-serving approach to international law, and excessive power.

It is seductive to single out Putin and Xi and imagine that individuals rise almost accidentally to the top of major countries and that their removal would solve the geopolitical challenges their regimes pose. Personalities matter, of course, but systems have a way of selecting for certain types of leaders. Eurasian landmass empires are weaker when compared to the modern Anglo-American archetype of surpassing sea power, free trade with other rich nations, and comparatively limited government. The Allies' victory in World War II enabled that model to encompass not just western Europe but part of central Europe, as well—and, over time, the first island chain in East Asia. China, too, became a trading power, free-riding on the security supplied by the U.S. Navy, building its own navy to protect its position only belatedly. Yet it still suffers from some of the debilitations of a Eurasian power: only one coast, for one, which is largely hemmed in, notwithstanding its seizure and conversion into military installations of coral reefs in the South China Sea. Overbearing states and their attempts at coercive modernization are a backhanded compliment that Eurasia pays to the West. Access to the U.S. and European consumer markets, high-end technology transfers, control of the seas, reserve currencies, and secure supplies of energy and rare metals remain decisive. As Overy's book shows, a quest for just that and the formation of self-sufficient blocs underlay the run-up to the

world wars, their character, and their aftermaths. He conflates this with empire and avers that World War II brought the hammer down on the entire epoch of imperialism.

But empires come and go; blocs endure. Today's China is arguably pursuing a strategy similar to the one that Nazi Germany and imperial Japan adopted, albeit by all means short of war: to become blockade-proof and sanctions-proof. And now, with Putin having provoked a siege of Russia, Xi will redouble his efforts.

Others will continue to debate whether great-power conflict and security dilemmas are unending. Yet the important point here is not theoretical but historical: the contours of the modern world established by World War II persisted right through the great turn of 1979 and the lesser turn of 1989–91. Whether the world has now reached another greater or lesser turning point depends in large measure on how the war in Ukraine plays out, and on whether the West squanders its rediscovery of itself or consolidates it through renewal.