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THE PENDULUM

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Russian, American, and Chinese

COVID-19
VACCINE DIPLOMACY
IN CENTRAL ASIA

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CLEMSON
IN THE WORLD
Engineers Without Borders



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear readers,

Welcome to this issue of *The Pendulum*! In a world of international affairs swinging between conflict and cooperation, oscillations are shaped by reactivity and proactivity; pragmatism and idealism; inertia and momentum. In presenting perspectives that challenge, inform, and broaden the way you see global affairs, *The Pendulum* aims to empower you to draw conclusions about the constellation of vectors that determine the overall direction of our world. 2026 marks the quarter millennium since American independence; our 250th birthday offers a moment of introspection, to contemplate where we ought to go from here. The ostensible founder of modern political thought, Niccolò Machiavelli, noted that “artists who draw landscapes get down in the valley to study the mountains and go up to the mountains to look down on the valley”: in our collective pursuit to paint the picture of America at 250—understanding the past, present, and future—we, too, must ascend the heights, into the world of international affairs, to better study America’s place in the world landscape.

The Spring 2026 edition marks my first at the helm of *The Pendulum*. I am grateful to the former Editor-in-Chief, my mentor Owen M. Eastman, whose deft stewardship informed a sustainable model for growth that increased the magazine’s regional reach. Under my purview, I will continue to grow *The Pendulum*’s stature, transforming the magazine into a staple of the Southeast’s college humanities discourse. This semester’s edition reflects our commitment to the Southeast, featuring writers hailing from Clemson, the University of Georgia, Sewanee, and the University of South Florida. As we continue expanding our regional presence, we remain faithful to our Clemson roots: this semester, we’re celebrating the launch of the “Clemson in the World” feature series, highlighting Clemson students and organizations dedicated to global service and engagement.

In this edition, you will find articles ranging from vaccine diplomacy in Central and East Asia, to political transition in a fractious and scarred Syria, to specters of the past casting long shadows across the landscapes of contemporary France and Lesotho. As you turn these pages, my hope is that you will let your mind drift up into the mountains—into the plane of foreign affairs—such that our stories will not only inform but inspire you to think critically about the future of our world, and America at 250.

Warm regards,



Briggs Collins Murray
Editor-in-Chief, *The Pendulum*

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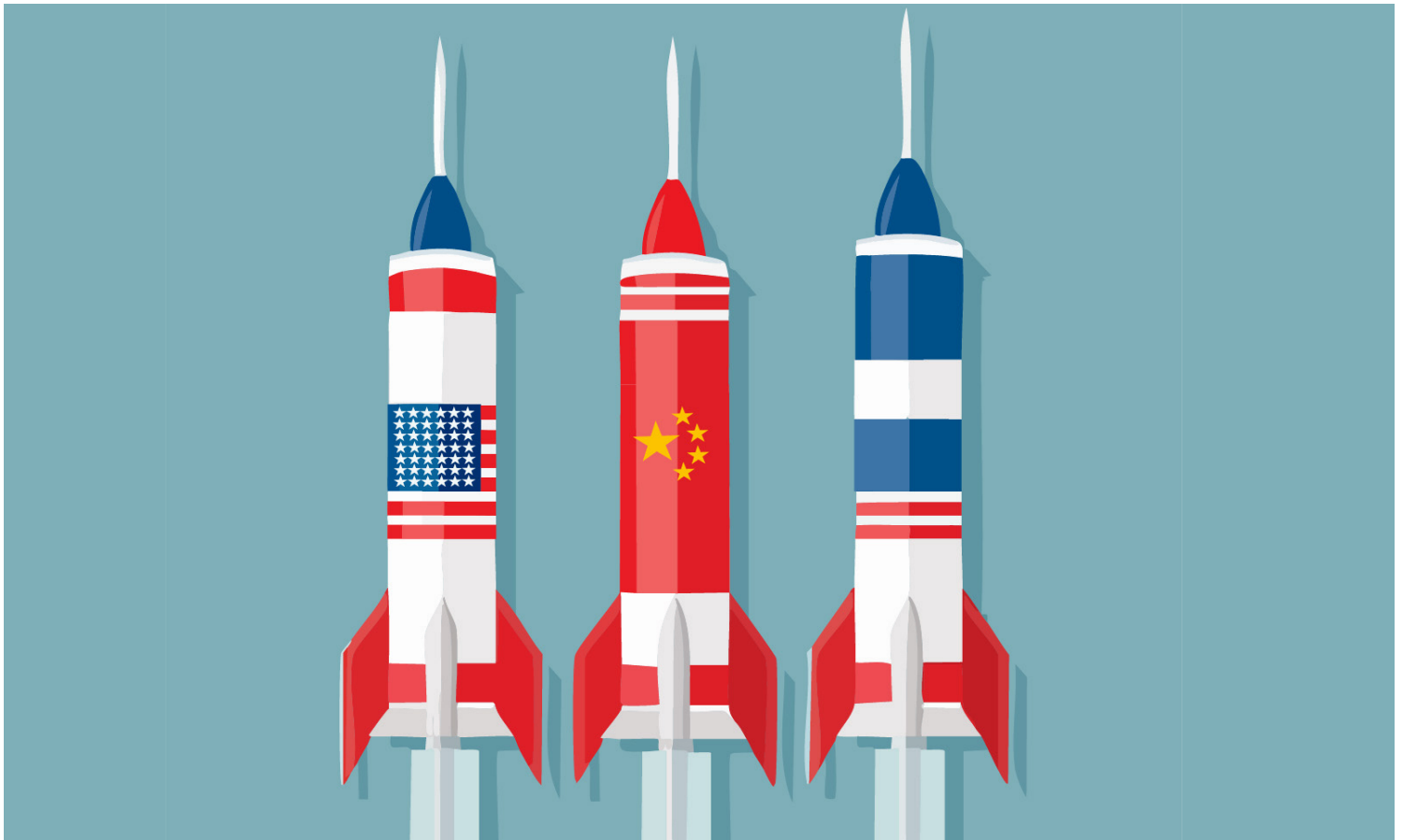
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VACCINE DIPLOMACY

Russian, American and Chinese COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy in Central Asia

By Sara Adkins: Sara is a fifth-year student in the Russian Overseas Flagship Capstone in Almaty, Kazakhstan from the University of Georgia.

At the end of December 2019, the People's Republic of China reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology. Not even three months later, on March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic. With the discovery of the etiological agent, SARS-CoV-2, a so-called 'vaccine race' began between several countries, with the goal of not only reducing the number of cases and lifting isolation protocols, but also of distributing vaccine doses around the world. This practice, when done in a diplomatic capacity, is referred to as vaccine diplomacy.

Vaccine diplomacy is a type of medical diplomacy, characterized by the delivery of vaccines or vaccine-producing technology to foreign countries. In an era when major world powers actively exert soft power through

international public health institutions and initiatives, distributing vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 became an opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties with countries of interest, and in doing so, combat the influence of other international governments in these regions. Vaccine diplomacy became a foreign policy tool for confrontation, rather than collaboration. This shift in function occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, as throughout the 20th century, vaccine development, for example, against polio, was achieved by a more unified international community. Vaccine campaigns during infectious disease outbreaks not only lower infection rates, but also alleviate economic disruptions and stress in communities, allowing citizens to return to a sense of normalcy. For this reason, vaccine diplomacy is an effective and powerful way to exert soft

“ Vaccine diplomacy became a foreign policy tool for confrontation, rather than collaboration. ”

power and achieve goals abroad. The increased political significance of vaccine diplomacy seen during the COVID-19 pandemic has been attributed to the global scale of the outbreak. Although the modern era has been no stranger to endemics of viral infections (Lassa fever, Ebola, bird flu, etc.), the COVID-19 pandemic reached an unprecedented global scale. Nations were not prepared for this, nor the speed of infection rates, and as a result, fighting the pandemic was swiftly placed on the global agenda.

The geopolitical interests of countries, as well as their internal fight against COVID-19, shaped their ability or interest in conducting vaccine diplomacy abroad. Central Asia, located between Russia and China, has always occupied a transitory and strategically important status within Eurasia. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation's foreign policy has been dominated by the desire to keep post-Soviet countries within the Russian sphere of influence. In addition to using vaccine diplomacy to maintain and even improve relations with Central Asian governments, Russia had a vested interest in limiting the spread of COVID in Central Asia. Given the exchange of migrant workers that occurs between Russia and Central Asia, supplying vaccines was a protective measure for limiting the number of potentially infected workers entering Russia from the region. China regards this region as a strategic opportunity for economic growth as a transit hub for distributing its products around the world, as well as a trade partner in the energy sphere. Furthermore, intense diplomacy was pursued as a means of combating Sinophobia that rose in the region as a result of the pandemic. Improving relations through medical diplomacy was seen as a way to simplify the implementation of economic projects in the region. Though the United States' current presence in the region is rather fragmented, collaboration is regarded as an attempt to align the interests of Central Asian states with the broader American agenda pertaining to Russia, China, and Afghanistan.

Of the 59 million inhabitants of Central Asia, over 1 million were infected with COVID over the course of the pandemic and over 20,000 died as a result. However, it is essential to mention that while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reported statistical mortality rates that roughly corresponded with world mortality rates, Uzbekistan reported rates roughly 13 times below the world rate and Tajikistan reported rates 51 times lower. Turkmenistan entirely denied any cases of COVID-19 infections within the country. These statistics lead experts to question the accuracy of reports of cases across Central Asia, notably in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

In addition to quarantine measures, vaccination campaigns were the main hope for Central Asian states for defeating the pandemic. Largely lacking the facilities and means to develop their own vaccines, experiencing economic troubles and watching as infection rates climbed within their countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan attentively followed vaccine development and production in other countries. Given the strategic political, economic and geographic characteristics of Central Asia in the post-Soviet world, major world powers also expressed interest in delivering their vaccines to the region. Though Russia was a natural choice as a partner, given the close political and economic ties and nearly identical public health systems, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan did not stop there. Collaboration also ensued between Central Asia and China, as well as the United States, given their global presence in the public health sphere and level of scientific advancements. This multi-vectoriness was not only a result of economic and health distress, but also echoes a foreign policy strategy that Central Asian countries have been seeking to maintain, not only relying on diplomatic ties with Russia, but also collaborating with China and the West.

It is vital to mention that in addition to varying goals in the region, the United States, China and Russia all had varying contexts within their country, regarding COVID-19

infection rates and the pharmaceutical institutions developing the vaccines. This created varying timelines for delivery and collaboration. Very strict, swift and effective lockdown measures allowed China to turn its attention to diplomatic endeavors. As of May 2021, over 40% of the five national vaccines produced in China were exported to other countries. Russia and the United States, however, experienced a longer period of high infection rates. Despite this shared fact, they prioritized vaccine diplomacy differently. Russia swiftly began negotiations for dose delivery and domestic production facilities in Central Asia upon developing a vaccine. In contrast, the United States conducted so-called 'vaccine nationalism,' prioritizing vaccination of US citizens before selling vaccines abroad. Furthermore, private American pharmaceutical companies developed the American vaccines, meaning that the US government then made deals with these companies for doses. Having bought more doses than needed, the US sold these doses abroad, only after infection rates were brought under control domestically. However, this strategy has received criticism due to limiting the stock of doses for countries that did not have the means to develop or produce their own vaccine, and in turn, potentially prolonging the pandemic. Chinese and Russian COVID-19 vaccine development was carried out by government-controlled institutions. Unlike the United States, China and Russia were immediately in control of their domestically produced vaccine doses, which created a natural path for their swift use as foreign policy tools.

From the Spring of 2021, when vaccine distribution started, to November 2021, around 48 million doses of COVID vaccines were delivered to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan from the United States, Russia and China. The United States sold the region doses of 'Pfizer-BioNTech' and 'Moderna,' Russia - 'Sputnik V' (meaning 'companion' in Russian) and China - 'Coronovac,' 'ZF-UZ-VAC2001,' 'Sinopharm,' and 'Vero Cell.' According to researchers from the Pirogov Russian National Research

Medical University, as of November 2021, over 70% of the vaccines received by Central Asian governments were Chinese. Because of their relatively lower price, the absence of strict temperature requirements for storage (especially important for Kazakhstan, considering the size of the country) and long waiting periods for American vaccines, Chinese vaccines were a logical choice. Another important factor was the slow delivery of promised Russian vaccines, which necessitated Central Asian governments to turn to China to compensate.

As the most populous country in Central Asia, Uzbekistan received tens of millions more vaccines than Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia agreed in September 2020 to deliver 35 million doses of Sputnik V to Uzbekistan.

However, according to data from November 2021, only 720,500 doses were sent. Uzbekistan expressed interest in producing Sputnik V domestically, which was realized in September 2021. Active delivery of the American vaccines Moderna and Pfizer occurred in the summer and fall of 2021, with 3 million (free) and 2 million doses, respectively, sent to Uzbekistan. Chinese vaccines in Uzbekistan made up an overwhelming majority of those received, totaling almost 28 million by November 2021, 26 million of which were the ZF-UZ-

VAC2001 vaccine. In fact, ZF-UZ-VAC2001 trials were carried out in Uzbekistan with the participation of 7,000 Uzbek volunteers. As a result, the country purchased doses for a discounted, though unknown, price. However, open-source research conducted by public health experts in Central Asia, funded by the Fogarty International Center of the National Institutes of Health, showed that this campaign caused controversy in the country. Social media posts about this collaborative endeavor featured language that accused China of using Uzbekistan citizens as guinea pigs, monkeys and rabbits in place of their own citizens.

Kyrgyzstan began actively receiving vaccine deliveries starting in the summer of 2021, facing similar problems as Uzbekistan with the delayed delivery of the

// **Because of their relatively lower price, the absence of strict temperature requirements for storage and long waiting periods for American vaccines, Chinese vaccines were a logical choice.**

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Russian Sputnik V. Despite requesting 500,000 doses in January 2021, that summer, only 100,000 had been received. The country also expressed interest in producing Sputnik V locally, but Russia turned down the idea due to an insufficient level of technological advancement in the Kyrgyz pharmaceutical industry and an absence of interest. Russia only sent 100,000 doses of Sputnik, according to data from November 2021. The United States sent over double that, almost 260,000 doses. By far, Chinese vaccine diplomacy was the most voluminous; China sent over 2,700,000 doses, and in some shipments even covered transportation and delivery fees. Overall, due to the economic difficulties induced by the pandemic, Kyrgyzstan received hundreds of thousands of vaccine doses free of charge from all three countries.

Whereas in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, where China clearly contributed the most to vaccine stocks, in Kazakhstan, Russia played a much more competitive role, combating the presence of Chinese soft power. It is also no coincidence that days before the official registration of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V, information was already published on Kazakh government websites regarding the local production of the Sputnik V vaccine, which was realized by the end of 2020. Furthermore, Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian country to receive Sputnik V deliveries. This is likely due to Kazakhstan's ability to pay for the vaccines and close political and economic relations. Overall, by November 2021, Russia sent over 5,000,000 doses, China - 5,500,000, and the United States - 646,000 doses.

Ultimately, it cannot be said that vaccine diplomacy plays a definitive role in defining relations between nations, but it can certainly influence the course of events. Based on data across these countries during the first year of active vaccine diplomacy and subsequent foreign relations events, the following conclusions can be made: despite America's modest contribution to the fight against the pandemic in Central Asia, the country's humanitarian and political reputation in the region remains relatively unchanged and Central Asian nations still express interest in furthering US-Central Asian relations in many spheres. Describing changes to Russian-Central-Asian relations as a result of

active vaccine diplomacy, however, is much more difficult due to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, among other policies put in place since the pandemic. On one hand, Central Asian governments have ushered in a period of diversification in foreign relations, slowly moving away from Russian dependence in favor of a more balanced, multi-vectored foreign policy. However, according to research from the Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia was able to improve its image in the eyes of the Kazakh political elite thanks to active collaboration during this period. To this day, collaboration in the public health sphere between Russia and Central Asia remains active. By far, the most successful vaccine diplomacy was conducted by China, which is logical considering the scale of its campaign. After this active phase of collaboration, China has managed to promote a number of projects in the region and established a visa-free regime with Kazakhstan.

This approach to fighting the pandemic, which on one hand was rooted in collaboration and on the other hand was doused in geopolitical confrontation, hints at new conventions for battling international health crises in the future. The pandemic also set the stage for information wars and accusatory remarks regarding the virus and its release, emphasizing the confrontational aspect of this crisis. Furthermore, regional action underscores the sovereignty of Central Asian governments, who sought collaboration not only with Russia, but also with other world powers. Though the entire international community should work to prevent a public health crisis of this scale in the future, in the case of another such challenge, we can expect collaboration to reflect geopolitical interests of major world powers, and more importantly, we can hope to be better equipped to limit health and economic disruptions in our communities.



This approach to fighting the pandemic...hints at new conventions for battling international health crises in the future.



SYRIA

Between Ruin and Renewal



By Sara Alkelani: Sara is a senior Political Science major at Clemson University.

For more than a decade, Syria existed in the global imagination as a country suspended in destruction. Images of airstrikes, collapsed neighborhoods, and mass displacement flattened Syria into a singular narrative of war. In the process, its long history, political complexity, and human continuity were often overshadowed by catastrophe. Yet Syria has entered a new and fragile chapter. The fall of the Assad regime marked a historic rupture, but it did not deliver immediate peace. Instead, it exposed how difficult rebuilding becomes after authoritarianism, war, and international isolation, revealing a transition shaped by fractured institutions, unresolved social divisions, and competing regional influences.

For over fifty years, Syria was governed by the Assad family. Hafez al-Assad, who came to power in a 1970 coup known as the Corrective Movement, consolidated authority through military control and an extensive intelligence apparatus, shaping a state built on loyalty, surveillance, and repression. This system was later inherited by his son Bashar al-Assad. When Syrians took to the streets in 2011 amid the Arab Spring, they called for dignity, political reform, and accountability. The regime responded with violence. Peaceful demonstrations were met with mass arrests and

lethal force. What began as an uprising escalated into a civil war that would devastate the country.

Over the following years, Syria became the site of one of the most destructive conflicts of the twenty-first century. Government forces, armed opposition groups, extremist organizations, and foreign powers all became entangled in the fighting. Cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Raqqa were reduced to rubble. Hospitals, schools, and markets were repeatedly targeted. Chemical weapons attacks drew global condemnation but little sustained intervention. By the height of the war, hundreds of thousands had been killed and more than half of Syria's population were displaced, creating a massive refugee crisis that reshaped the region and beyond.

The conflict never operated along a single political fault line. While the uprising began with demands for reform, it quickly intersected with longstanding sectarian and ethnic tensions that were both exploited and deepened by the war. The Assad regime, rooted in an Alawite minority leadership, positioned itself as a protector of religious minorities, while much of the opposition drew support from Sunni-majority communities. Kurdish groups in the north simultaneously pursued their own forms of

autonomy, complicating the idea of a unified national project. These divisions were not created by the war, but the violence hardened them in ways that remain unresolved, shaping patterns of governance, security, and belonging in the present.

The eventual collapse of the Assad regime did not arrive as a moment of resolution. Years of territorial fragmentation, economic exhaustion, international sanctions, and internal pressure eroded the state's ability to govern. When the regime fell, it left behind a hollowed country. Institutions had been weaponized or destroyed. Trust between citizens and the state had been deeply eroded. For many Syrians, the end of Assad rule brought relief, but not closure. Many finally felt hope that they could return to some sense of normalcy and peace, but uncertainty still dominated the atmosphere.

The process of political transition that followed has been uneven and, at times, externally shaped. The fall of the regime did not produce a fully organic or unified political order, but rather a fragile restructuring influenced by internal actors and regional powers. In the transition that followed, Ahmad al-Sharaa emerged as president amid deep political uncertainty. His leadership reflects the difficult reality of postwar Syria. The country is rebuilding from decades of authoritarian governance and years of extreme violence, rather than from a neutral starting point. Al-Sharaa's presidency has been shaped less by stability than by the scale of reconstruction required, from restoring basic services to reestablishing political legitimacy.

His rise has also been accompanied by controversy. International observers and foreign governments have raised concerns about alleged past links between Al-Sharaa and militant or extremist groups during earlier phases of the conflict. These allegations remain the subject of debate, shaped by the fragmented and militarized environment in which many Syrian actors operated during the war. Critics argue that unresolved questions about his political past complicate Syria's transition and undermine trust, particularly as the country seeks international engagement and reconstruction assistance. Supporters emphasize that leadership should be evaluated through present governance, civilian protection, and commitments to stability rather than solely through wartime affiliations.

Regional dynamics continue to shape Syria's trajectory. Gulf states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have taken steps toward reengagement, including efforts to relieve outstanding debts and reintroduce Syria into regional diplomatic frameworks. This shift reflects a broader

“ For many Syrians the end of Assad rule brought relief, but not closure. ”

movement among Arab states toward reintegration rather than isolation, though it remains cautious and conditional. Syria's recovery is therefore not only a domestic process, but one deeply tied to regional politics, financial flows, and shifting geopolitical alignments.

This complexity is reflected in the country's economic reality. International sanctions imposed during the Assad era remain partially in place, complicating recovery. While these sanctions were designed to pressure an authoritarian regime, their effects continue to shape civilian life. Inflation has surged, the Syrian pound remains weak, and access to electricity, fuel, medicine, and food is inconsistent. But again, there are many who have hope. For example, many celebrated when earlier this year the al-Sharaa administration introduced the new currency, effectively removing two zeros to stabilize the economy and removing Assad family imagery. Rebuilding Syria requires navigating the tension between accountability and recovery, between justice and survival.

The capacity of state institutions remains deeply limited. Decades of centralized control hollowed out independent governance structures, and war further eroded what remained. Ministries responsible for rebuilding infrastructure and delivering services operate with limited funding, fragmented authority, and weakened public trust. In many areas, governance is supplemented by local councils, humanitarian organizations, and informal networks that step in where the state cannot. This uneven system produces stark differences in recovery across regions and raises questions about long-term national cohesion.

Physical reconstruction is slow and uneven.

Entire neighborhoods remain uninhabitable. Roads, water systems, and power grids are damaged or nonexistent in many areas. Families rebuild homes by hand using salvaged materials and shared labor. Schools operate in temporary or damaged spaces. Clinics rely on limited supplies and overstretched staff. The scale of destruction far exceeds available resources, and international attention has largely shifted elsewhere.

Beyond infrastructure, Syria faces the challenge of repairing its social fabric. Years of violence fractured trust between communities and regions. Forced displacement reshaped demographics and severed generational ties to land and place. Property disputes, unresolved disappearances, and the absence of comprehensive accountability complicate return for millions of Syrians still living in exile. Rebuilding is not simply about reconstruction, but about whether return is possible at all.

The refugee crisis continues to shape Syria's future in profound ways. Millions of Syrians remain displaced outside the country, including many of the professionals, students, and skilled workers who once sustained Syria's economy. This ongoing loss of human capital complicates reconstruction, as the people needed to rebuild institutions are often those least able or willing to return. For those in the diaspora, return is shaped by concerns over safety, legal protections, and the absence of accountability for past violence. As a result, Syria's recovery unfolds both inside and beyond its borders, sustained through remittances, advocacy, and cultural preservation.

For the Syrian diaspora, the fall of the regime

reopened painful and complex questions. Some see the possibility of returning for the first time in years. Others remain wary, shaped by detention, exile, or the loss of family members. Home exists as both memory and possibility, carried through language, food, and inherited stories. Rebuilding often happens across borders rather than through physical return.

Despite these obstacles, Syrians continue to imagine a future beyond survival. Grassroots organizations document war crimes, preserve oral histories, and support trauma recovery. Local initiatives provide education and community care where state institutions remain weak. Artists, writers, and photographers are reclaiming narratives that once belonged only to war reporting. These efforts are fragile, but they form the foundation of long-term recovery.

Syria's future is uncertain, with political transition still unfolding, economic recovery uneven, and deeper questions of legitimacy, justice, and accountability still hanging in the balance. Yet the fall of the Assad regime closed a chapter of authoritarian rule that defined Syrian life for generations. What follows is not a clean beginning, but a difficult opportunity. The question is no longer only how Syria rebuilds its cities, but how it rebuilds trust, governance, and a shared sense of future after years of fragmentation. The country is left in ruins, but it is no longer frozen in the past. Its people are negotiating what it means to rebuild a nation where loss is everywhere, yet hope persists in deliberate and human acts. Syria is not finished. It is learning, slowly and painfully, how to exist after survival.





CUBA'S GEOPOLITICAL ABANDON AND FORCED INDEPENDENCE

By Kate McDonough: Kate is a sophomore Romance Languages major at the University of Georgia.

The capture of Nicolás Maduro by United States forces in early 2026 was a seismic geopolitical event that did far more than disrupt Maduro's reign: it severed the primary lifeline of the Cuban government. For over two decades, the partnership between Caracas and Havana functioned as the essential heartbeat of the Cuban economy. The partnership provided a unified ideological front and heavily subsidized crude oil that was primarily processed at the revived Cienfuegos refinery. Venezuela was the bedrock of the island's material and psychological stability, offering a sense of regional belonging and a guaranteed energy floor. With the conclusion of Operation Absolute Resolve, that foundation has disintegrated, forcing Cuba to navigate a period of profound isolation that is fueled by the United States of America.

To understand the magnitude of this shift, one must look at the trajectory of Cuban history over the last century. Since the 1959 Revolution, the island's survival in terms of governmental stability has almost always been based on a

symbiotic relationship with a larger, ideologically aligned power. Initially, the Soviet Union provided the massive subsidies and favorable trade terms (sugar for oil) that allowed the revolutionary government to build its social safety nets. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Cuba plummeted into the Special Period, an era of drawback and near-famine. It was a time of regular blackouts and drastically decreased automobile usage, but it was also a time when the state of Cuba, along with the Cuban people, remained the central, if struggling, providers.

The emergence of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela at the turn of the millennium provided the second helpline for the Cuban system. In 2000, Castro and Chávez signed a landmark agreement that traded Cuban human capital (doctors, teachers, and security advisors) in exchange for a steady flow of Venezuelan oil. This was the birth of the *Patria Grande* vision—a dream of a socialist Latin America that would challenge northern hegemony. Venezuela became Cuba's primary trading partner, at one point supplying

over 100,000 barrels of oil per day. This partnership not only fueled the lights of Havana but also reinforced the revolutionary narrative that Cuba was part of a larger, unstoppable continental movement.

However, the foundation of this partnership began to erode long before the events of 2026. Following the death of Chávez, the Venezuelan economy entered a tailspin under the management of Nicolás Maduro. Mismanagement of the state oil company, PDVSA, coupled with plummeting global oil prices and tightening international sanctions, caused production to drop from nearly 3.5 million barrels per day to less than 800,000. By 2025, the once heavy flow of oil to Cuba had slowed, barely meeting a third of the island's demand.

The final blow came in the early hours of January 3, 2026. In a mission referred to as Operation Absolute Resolve, United States military units conducted a high-precision strike in Caracas, where 32 Cuban intelligence officers were killed. The operation involved over 150 aircraft and utilized advanced electronic warfare to neutralize Venezuelan air defenses, allowing Delta Force operators to capture Maduro and his inner circle from their fortified residences. This was seen as the beginning of the total dismantling of the regional socialist axis. Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in on January 5, 2026, and is currently leading Venezuela under the oversight of the United States of America. The new transitional authorities in Venezuela, under heavy international influence,

immediately terminated the oil-for-doctors program, leaving Havana completely stranded.

Cuba now exists in a state of isolation that some observers call geopolitical orphanhood. Deprived of Venezuelan fuel and the protection of its most powerful regional ally, the island is navigating a transition far more severe than the one that occurred in the 1990s. This era is different because there is no longer a looming benefactor on the horizon. Russia remains preoccupied with its own conflicts in Eastern Europe, and China has shown increasing hesitation to invest in an island with mounting debt and crumbling infrastructure.

This isolation is most visible in the darkness that has gripped the island. By March 2026, the country was engulfed in near-total blackouts following the repeated failure of the Antonio Guiteras power plant. This facility, the largest in the country, has been crippled by a lack of spare parts and the absence of high-quality Venezuelan fuel. In the wake of an executive order from the United States authorizing tariffs on any nation supplying oil to the island, even secondary suppliers like Mexico have begun to pull back. As of late February, the U.S. Treasury Department is allowing U.S. companies to apply for licenses to sell or resell oil to Cuba's private sector and non-governmental entities, but that has proven to not be enough.

This chronic lack of power is reshaping the national



psyche. When electricity is unavailable for 18 to 20 hours a day, the ability to plan for the future diminishes. Daily existence is reduced to a series of tactical maneuvers: finding water, locating a charging source for a phone, or salvaging food before it spoils. In a virtual interview with Alissa Scheer, who is the founder of CubieBag and Experiences By Alissa, a digital creator, and an expatriate who has lived in Havana for the past 7 years, it was noted that: “The biggest invisible effort is simply organizing everyday life. Many small tasks that take seconds elsewhere require patience here. Even something like internet access can be exhausting. And if you happen to be in an area experiencing a blackout, it can stop your work completely. Shopping is another example. In many places you assume stores will consistently carry the same products. In Cuba that’s rarely the case. A shop might suddenly have shelves full of toilet paper one week and then none for two months. You never know exactly what you’ll find, so everyday errands often feel a bit like a lottery. And of course there are things people in many countries take for granted that simply don’t exist here — online shopping, delivery services, or ordering something from Amazon. Many modern conveniences just aren’t part of daily life.”

The Cuban government’s official position attributes the current humanitarian crisis primarily to external pressures, specifically citing a three-month lapse in fuel shipments which President Miguel Díaz-Canel linked to U.S. sanctions. In a significant public acknowledgment of the domestic impact, Díaz-Canel recently reported that electricity outages exceeding 30 hours have paralyzed water pumping and forced the postponement of tens of thousands of surgeries, including those for children. While the state has previously intended to promote a narrative of collective endurance, this message often conflicts with the logistical demands of daily survival. Furthermore, the government has recently admitted to talks with the United States, representing a departure from its traditional rhetoric of self-sufficiency. This shift suggests that the leadership is increasingly forced to balance its historical political stance against the practical urgency of addressing a systemic collapse that has left the country’s economic activities in a state of heightened stagnation.

This infrastructure trauma has effectively eroded the state’s primary mechanism for social control. When a government cannot provide basic necessities such as light or running water, it loses its ability to justify its existence. Ms. Scheer adds, “The blackouts themselves have also evolved over time. In the beginning they were scheduled, with timetables that told people exactly when electricity would

// In the darkness, the traditional social safety nets, healthcare and education, are in a state of advanced decay. //

be cut in each neighborhood. That allowed people to plan. Now it’s often the opposite — the electricity goes out first and information comes later, if at all. People rely on Telegram groups or word of mouth to understand what’s happening. And it can vary dramatically: some parts of Havana rarely lose power, while others experience outages for hours every day, sometimes even within the same street depending on the electrical grid.”

In the darkness, the traditional social safety nets—healthcare and education—are in a state of advanced decay. Hospitals struggle to run life-saving equipment on failing generators, and schools are frequently closed. This has led to a more extreme localism, where Cubans are retreating from national politics into the sanctity of the family and the micro-community. The sense of collective identity once championed by the state is being replaced by a survivalist mindset defined by the individual. As Anthony DePalma suggests, the Cuban *sociolismo* (the art of getting by via connections) has mutated from a cultural strength into a survivalist trap; by finding ingenious ways to fix what is broken, the individual inadvertently buffers the state from the consequences of its own failure.

This shift is visible in the smallest neighborhood inequities. For the average citizen, the unseen labor of navigating a lottery-like economy—where toilet paper or stable data are fleeting luxuries—leaves little room for the collective identity once championed by the state. As Ms. Scheer notes, “the day-to-day logistics of life can be exhausting,” and in that exhaustion, the grand political project is replaced by a solitary focus on making it through the next twenty-four hours.

Theodore Henken, a Baruch College professor with an expertise in Cuban Studies, notes that it is key to “have *fe*, or faith. But what they really mean is *familia en el extranjero*,

or family abroad.” The colloquialism of having “fe”, or faith, now refers directly to this external support. With the state-run libreta (ration book) providing less than a week’s worth of food, and the U.S. Navy intercepting fuel shipments, the digital bridge of remittances has become the primary social safety net. This represents an outsourcing of national welfare, creating a stark class divide between those with external links and those who are left in the dark. Ultimately, the most resilient bond on the island is no longer between the citizen and the state, but between the migrant and the home they are keeping alive.

The fall of the Maduro administration effectively ended the narrative of socialist collectivism as a viable regional future. This shift is visible in the changing social discourse. The revolutionary slogans of the past, like Socialismo o Muerte (Socialism or Death), are increasingly viewed as relics, and in their place, a decentralized, survivalist mindset has taken root. Cubans are no longer looking to the state for solutions; they are engineering their own through informal markets and neighborhood barter systems. This extra-state agency is particularly prevalent among the youth, who use VPNs and illicit satellite connections to link with a globalized world. Their resilience is not revolutionary in the state-sanctioned sense; it is entrepreneurial and individualistic. They are not necessarily protesting the government so much as they are rendering it irrelevant to their daily survival.

The international community has recognized this shift. As previously mentioned, a strategic license was issued allowing international companies to sell oil specifically to Cuba’s private sector. This move was designed to bypass the state and empower the private sector, further accelerating the decentralization of power. As the center fails to hold, the provinces and black markets take over.

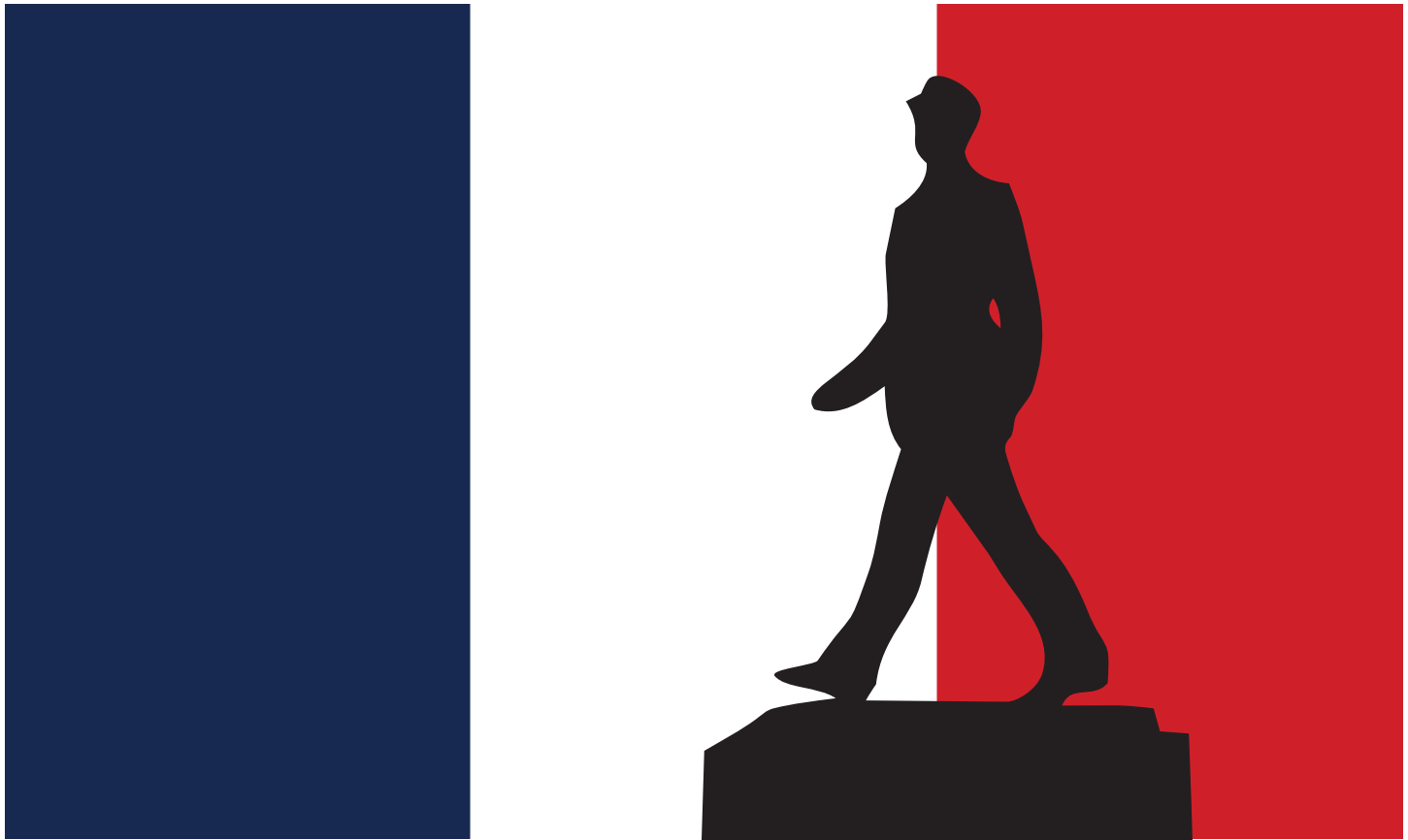
However, this transition brings peril. While the survivalist mindset allows for incredible ingenuity, such as the ability to maintain 1950s engines with improvised parts, it also stretches the moral fabric of society thin. The need to resolver—a euphemism for bartering or stealing to meet basic needs—can undermine social cohesion. “What helps a lot — and this is true for many Cubans as well — is community,” emphasizes Ms. Scheer. “Meeting friends in the evening, going out, or simply leaving the house for a while helps you reset and forget about problems for a bit. Cuban culture already has a strong ‘fix what you have’ mentality. People grow up learning to repair things, reuse things, and make them last far longer than they normally would. That mindset is deeply ingrained. At the same time, many people are simply tired of the daily struggles. That feeling exists

across generations. Between roughly 2022 and 2024, many people left the country — especially those between their mid-20s and 50s. Among my own friends and acquaintances, a significant number left during that period. Right now, the mood I observe is less about a sudden rush to leave and more about people trying to manage the reality they are in and finding ways to cope with it day by day.”

The capture of Nicolás Maduro signaled the end of the 20th century for Cuba. The island is no longer a strategic outpost of a global movement. This radical self-reliance is not a choice, but a biological and social necessity. The Patria Grande is gone, and in its place, millions of individuals are defining a new national identity based not on the system they live under, but on the ways they have learned to outlive it.

The psychological pivot currently underway is one of both mourning and awakening. Among some, there is still a mourning for the relative stability of the past, however repressive it may have been. Above all, this is an awakening to the reality that the future belongs solely to the Cuban people, independent of their leaders’ rhetoric. Whether this leads to a democratic rebirth or a fragmented, failed state remains to be seen, but the era of the ideological umbilical cord is over.

While the current geopolitical isolation is objectively grim—a direct consequence of the U.S. energy blockade and the aggressive blocking of aid and detention of humanitarian aid workers returning to the United States—to view this moment solely as a funeral for a nation is to fundamentally underestimate the Cuban people. For decades, the island has been a crucible of adaptation, but this current era has catalyzed something deeper than endurance. We are seeing a fierce reclamation of agency, evidenced by the Morón protest on March 14, where the burning of a Communist Party headquarters signaled that the population is no longer willing to suffer in silence for a failing government body. This is more than waiting for the lights to come back on. In the shadow of a neighbor that intercepts fuel ships and blocks aid from entering, Cubans are redefining their national identity through sheer, unyielding ingenuity. They are not just outliving a failing system; they are outgrowing it. Whether the transition ahead is a democratic rebirth or a period of prolonged hardship, the era of ideological solidarity and partnership is over. Although it appears that the future of the island belongs to the state or the sanctions of Washington, it truly belongs to the people who have learned to survive total isolation. In the face of terminal trauma, the Cuban people are expected to exhibit a fierce, renewed agency that suggests the island will not only endure this darkness, but eventually emerge from it redefined.



THE GHOST OF GAULLISM

An Independent Europe

By Jackson Huffman: Jackson is a senior Philosophy major at Clemson University.

On March 2, 2026, President Emmanuel Macron stood atop a terrace at Île Longue, with a nuclear-powered submarine looming imposingly behind him, and proudly proclaimed, “to be free, one must be feared, to be feared, one must be powerful.” At the same naval facility, several other Triomphant-class nuclear submarines sit bobbing in the turquoise water, hidden away from the sprawling Breton countryside. The base was established in 1961, as a clandestine location for the production of weapons related to the newly-initiated Force de frappe (Strike Force), or Force de dissuasion (Deterrence Force), program, which sought to instate France as an independent nuclear power. As Macron’s speech ended, the observers present listened to Les Marseillaise echo across the facility; the notes lingered, as they rippled through the cavernous structure, and past the fluttering tricolore. What remained was a strong image of French nationalism. Plastered across the

social media accounts of every newspaper and political institution was the picture of the French president standing before the world, announcing a departure from American political security, whispering of a new future, one of an independent Europe, whose sovereignty is secured by its own military capabilities. President Macron was not the first to elucidate this vision, its form was spoken of long ago, and the imprint of this moment, and this future, were predicted decades ago by Europe’s most divisive rebuilder: Charles de Gaulle.

In the aftermath of World War Two, France was a fledgling, embarrassed nation, entwined with the fate of a dozen colonies gripping with revolutionary violence, and situated in a continent reduced to rubble and uncertainty. Paralyzed by the Nazi war machine, France spent the duration of the war as a complicit and complacent hostage, emotionally distancing itself from the swastika, and rising

its standard before the statehouse everyday. Heroes of the first World War retired their laurels, and marched under the swastika; the very symbol of French resilience, the lion of Verdun, General Philippe Pétain, surrendered to the invading forces, and became their asset, leading the Vichy puppet state. When the war ended, the leader of France libre (Free France), Charles de Gaulle, otherwise known as le général, rode into Paris, much to the chagrin of allied military leadership, and announced, “Paris outraged! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people with the help of the armies of France.” For the following next two decades, de Gaulle dedicated himself to this vision, this myth—the idea of a strong and liberated France, inflamed by the spirit of sovereignty and power, through which, a standard of foreign policy was established, one which remains today.

The tradition of Gaullist foreign policy was established with a skepticism of a united, American-led Western hegemony. De Gaulle understood the nature of the future that awaited Europe; one dominated by American capital, protected by American weapons, and allied with American interests. The United States was able to secure the second interest by establishing the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), and through which, create a collective security organization, with consolidated and entwined military approval. And in

relation to the Soviet Union, and burgeoning Socialist East, secure protection during the Cold War by the promise of nuclear deterrence. Post-war Europe, a pauperized collection of sovereign states, was futile when compared to the blossoming economic and military superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. Never before had the world witnessed the creation of such entities, ones who singlehandedly possess the ability to determine the development and destiny of the human species. History has known empires, maps draped in European flags adorned with foreign names, but never before has the world been divided by powers of such immense influence; countries with the armaments of armageddon, feuding over control and domination. The gamble of de Gaulle and Anthony Eden, his British counterpart, was whether or not the new liberal order would be a co-operative, unified enterprise, or an appendage of the American empire. The crisis of the Suez Canal resulted in a definite and conclusive answer: Europe is beholden to American interests. The colonial protections of the previous century had neither the legitimacy, nor support, of the reigning regime. Nations whose vast territories rested upon the political capital of the newly knighted American police state were troubled by the prospect of a changing order.

Charles de Gaulle saw himself in the tradition of great French statesmen, standing amongst figures like



Cardinals Richelieu, de Fleury, Napoléon, and Talleyrand, and saw the clouds part and reveal his divine duty: retain French grandeur. From the 'le Roi Soleil' (sun king) Louis XIV, to the harbinger of nationalist upheaval, Napoléon, the rushing currents of French politics have carved the stone of European history, and rendered a statue-esque image of a strong state. It is a symbolic and cultural task, to maintain the appearance of power and sovereignty, amidst a rapidly changing world, wherein century-old Empires dissolve and assume the position of impotent satellite states. Beyond the pronouncements of French capacity and ability, were the technical solutions, the establishment of a self-sufficient energy industry, in tandem with the creation of a nuclear arms program. Vessels to launch and carry the missiles were created soon thereafter, with France having the pleasure of boasting the fact that they are the only other country, besides the United States, to have a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle. With a structure and environment conducive to the execution of an independent, sovereign and popular will, the government of France withdrew from the NATO central command in 1966, inhibiting the ability of the Americans to operate active military bases and personnel on French soil. This, the idea of a collective and secure free Europe, was derived from the fear regarding an 'American Europe,' under the patronage of an 'ally' whose primary military and economic concerns might threaten the peace and prosperity of the continent.

The aspects of nuclear deterrence and a robust, and capable, military was only part of the aspiration of grandeur. The other, perhaps more significant, was the realization of a "confederacy of nations," where Europe operates as a third superpower, balancing the bifurcated global structure of the Cold War. This was done after de Gaulle's time, but supported by many French politicians and intellectuals (figures such as the 'Father of the Euro' Jacques Delors, and Jean Monnet), and eventually realized as the European Union (EU). Specifically, de Gaulle envisioned a confederation of states, wherein the autonomy

of each respective participant was retained by a political organization that acted as a mediator of common interests, with nations reserving their foreign and domestic interests through confined regional action. De Gaulle, with various other European powers, developed and devised the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, which operated as a foundation for the eventual creation of the EU proper. With all of this, a series of dreams, de Gaulle saw two futures of Europe; one where a loose collective of geographically bound American vassal states bumble around helplessly beneath the shield of Uncle Sam, and another, where a united and strong Europe writes and directs its own destiny, with the military, economic, and cultural foundation to build upon. The gravity of these

predictions were derived from an intense fear, the consternation of change, of a future unfolding before the eyes of a distraught, embarrassed population, who felt as though they might not be the ones creating the new world for them to inhabit. The first president of Algeria (a French colony liberated by a violent conflict), Ahmed Ben Bella, said of de Gaulle that he "saw further" than most politicians, and that he had a "universal dimension that is too often lacking in current leaders."

The shape that de Gaulle saw dimly in the smoke of war was, to him, a matter of practical

// The shape that de Gaulle saw dimly in the smoke of war was, to him, a matter of practical and political necessity. //

and political necessity. And President Emmanuel Macron, of the centre-right party Renaissance, has maintained the Gaullist vision. Much of French politics succeeding de Gaulle has preserved the nucleus of the Gaullist plan; by bolstering the European Union through the creation of a single currency, by announcing neutrality during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and now, with the recognition of Palestine as a state, and the intention of expanding the French nuclear arsenal. Conversely, the United States led, and orchestrated, the invasion of Iraq, and has maintained fervent support of the Israeli state, with recent political action being inspired by this geostrategic partnership. Macron is a divisive leader domestically, and has encountered turbulence from a variety of parties, both left and right, which have subjected the nation to upheavals (Mouvement des gilets

jaunes or Yellow Vest Movement), strikes, and riots. But he has remained firm on the principles of a Europe protected continentally by collective security guarantees, a prospered, connected market, and independent nuclear deterrence. As the United States separates itself from the elusive mirage of world order, by means of the United Nations, the fate of Europe is becoming uncertain and vague. The fears presented by de Gaulle now loom like clouds before a dark storm, but France, through Macron, have maintained their convictions.

The political environment of today mirrors the uncertainty which de Gaulle faced as President. The limitations of power are being arranged through violent conflicts unfolding throughout the world, the continent is struggling to support disinterested and discontent constituents, and sundry nuclear-powered states are contending on the international stage. Macron is operating on the same assumptions as his spiritual predecessor de Gaulle, and is intent on sustaining the dream of grandeur first actualized during that speech in Paris so long ago. By expanding the nuclear arsenal, Macron announced the continual guarantee of French sovereignty, and by insisting on the collective ability of the European Union to trade, negotiate, and sanction, he has further bolstered the international reputation of the continent. And much like de Gaulle, Macron has sought the support of other world powers when the United States is offering contentious trade perimeters, such as when he visited China in late 2025 to discuss potential investment. Similar to the acts

of 'le général' during World War Two, when he visited Joseph Stalin to pressure the Western half of the allies into acquiescing to his demands. Both executives were willing to betray the established dichotomy of East-West politics by conversing with the opposition of the United States, to remind the world of their independence, that they are bounded by neither sphere of influence. The principle present is that France, and Europe as a whole, is not an arm of American control, but rather, an unfettered body, capable of discerning judgement itself.

The ghost of de Gaulle may save Europe. It whispers in the ear of Macron a haunting story of uncertainty and ambition, of rivaling superpowers conducting conflicts with Europe as pawns. As the bald eagle encroaches upon the middle east with talons extended, Europe must decide if it will join the American crusade. Much of the continent is impotent, with neither the ability nor capacity to resist the will of President Donald Trump. But France, being blessed with the forethought of a visionary, has developed the necessary infrastructure to support itself, militarily and economically. However, the dreams of de Gaulle have not yet been realized, the European Union is a weak institution, divided across the states as populist movements surge. The actions of Macron present a promising continuation of Gaullist tradition, and with time, the shadow of his legacy may soon creep across the continent, securing the sovereignty of a people left insignificant in the periphery of American foreign policy.

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The ghost of de Gaulle may save Europe. It whispers in the ear of Macron a haunting story of uncertainty and ambition.

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CLEMSON IN THE WORLD

featuring



ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS USA
Clemson University Chapter

By Various Members of the Clemson University Chapter of Engineers without Borders

Who We Are

“Engineers Without Borders (EWB) is an international engineering organization that strives to make the world a better place through engineering projects in developing countries, but to me, it’s so much more. At Clemson, it’s a place for students to get involved and grow as people and professionals. It’s a community of people who are passionate about helping people and believe in something bigger than themselves.”

-Josh Taylor, President
(Biomedical Engineering Senior)

“Empathy is at the core of the work that we strive to accomplish at EWB. Our goal is to make a positive impact on the communities we serve, and we tackle these problems in a sustainable, ethical manner.”

- Sia Dighade, Vice President
(Environmental Engineering Sophomore)

“To me, what makes EWB-CU so great are the wonderful hardworking kind-hearted people who are committed to bringing about a positive impact. Not only is it an opportunity to grow as a person and better us, it is a community where we all lift each other up.”

- Ranitha Kumarasinghe, President-Elect
(Biomedical Engineering Sophomore)



“ Our systems need to work with the environment and community rather than against it. ”

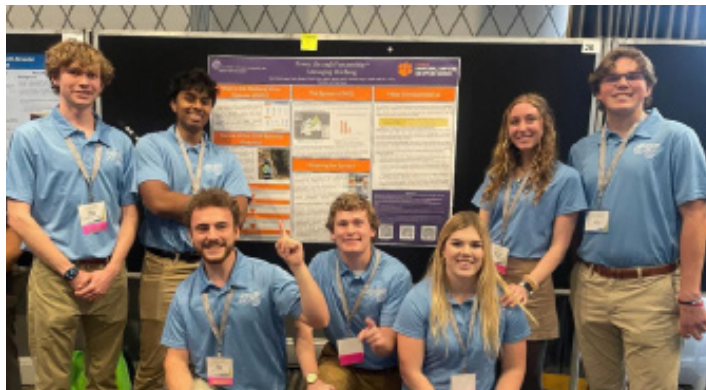
What We Do

“We do a lot! Currently, we have three teams: our International Projects team, our Local Projects team, and our Fundraising, Administration, and Club Events (FACE) team. Our international projects team has spent most of the last two years designing a water protection and collection system for a community of around 1,500 beneficiaries in Kagarama, Rwanda (a small village outside the capital). They recently got to see all their hard work pay off, as the team traveled to Rwanda and completed construction in December. While in country, they also completed assessment for a future project with the aim to expand water access to a nearby school.”

-Josh Taylor, President
(Biomedical Engineering Senior)

“Our goal is to design longevity. Our systems need to work with the environment and community rather than against it. Our designs use locally sources materials available in Rwanda and local craftsmen, ensuring that the community can do repairs as needed. Additionally, we go through an iterative design process with our NGOs. This ensures that any design or calculation we make translates to a sustainable, community owned system.”

-Ahnnalise Wolf, International Relations
(Environmental Engineering Senior)



“We’re hard at work because clean water and sanitation are human rights. According to the UN, 2.2 billion people still lack access to safe drinking water.”

- Sia Dighade, Vice President-Elect
(Environmental Engineering Sophomore)

“Clemson EWB’s work in Rwanda over the past four years has created a very measurable impact. Over 1500 community members and 250+ households now have reliable access to clean, uncontaminated water. Water-borne illness rates, which were reported by the community to be especially high in children, have decreased dramatically since the completion of the project in 2025. The spring collection system now outputs over 100 gallons per minute of clean water, enough to comfortably sustain all the water needs of a Rwandan community 18 times the size of Kagarama currently. Now, Clemson EWB is investigating the possibility of building a pipeline to transport some of this excess water supply to a nearby school and into the community centers to make it more accessible to the community.”

-Owen Branch, Kagarama Project Lead
(Mechanical Engineering Senior)

“In a club full of engineers, who takes care of all non-engineering things? FACE team! FACE teamers are the unsung heroes of our club. They handle everything from purchasing concrete to planning 5Ks to ordering pizza to applying for grants. A dedicated fundraising team is also a unique feature of our club, as most other EWB chapters make their project teams fundraise for themselves. Our setup allows the project teams to focus on their engineering and design work and allows the FACE team members to cultivate the crucial soft skills that are essential to success.”

-Josh Taylor, President
(Biomedical Engineering Senior)

“A big part of our work is fundraising to support our projects. Although I have spent most of my time on the engineering side of the club, I have had an awesome experience helping host our annual Run for Rwanda 5K. I had never planned an event such as this before and learned a ton about how to communicate with multiple parties, lead a team, and stay organized right up until race day. It is incredibly rewarding to see 50+ people to show up to support the event and cause you have put so much time into, and these organizational skills are something I will remember and use going forward throughout my career.”

-Simon Draper, Vice President
(Mechanical Engineering Senior)



Our Impact

“The local projects team is our newest, only starting back in August, but since then they’ve already made huge strides. They’ve recently completed their first project – the design of ADA accessible ramps at 12 Mile Recreation Area right here in Clemson! They’re also working on designing and building a new boardwalk at Lake Greenwood State Park and restoring sites in the Experimental Forrest in conjunction with the Clemson Rotary Club. The Local Projects team is looking to expand the scope of its projects as it grows and becomes more established.”

-Josh Taylor, President
(Biomedical Engineering Senior)

“EWB Clemson is making a tangible difference for over 1,000 community members in Kagarama, Rwanda. By replacing a highly contaminated surface spring with a protected groundwater system and high-flow tap stands, we’ve transformed a daily health struggle into a reliable, life-changing resource. However, our greatest impact isn’t just the infrastructure; it’s the trust we’ve built with the

community. Serving as the International Relations Chapter Officer, I have had the unique privilege of maintaining the bridge between Clemson and our partners in Rwanda. This role has shown me the importance of relation building in sustainable engineering, not just technical design. By ensuring our partners are heard and valued, we aren’t just building tap stands; we are securing the health of the next generation. Because of our success and mutual respect established during the Kagarama Water Supply project, we are expanding our initiatives in the same community through the G.S. Musave School Project.”

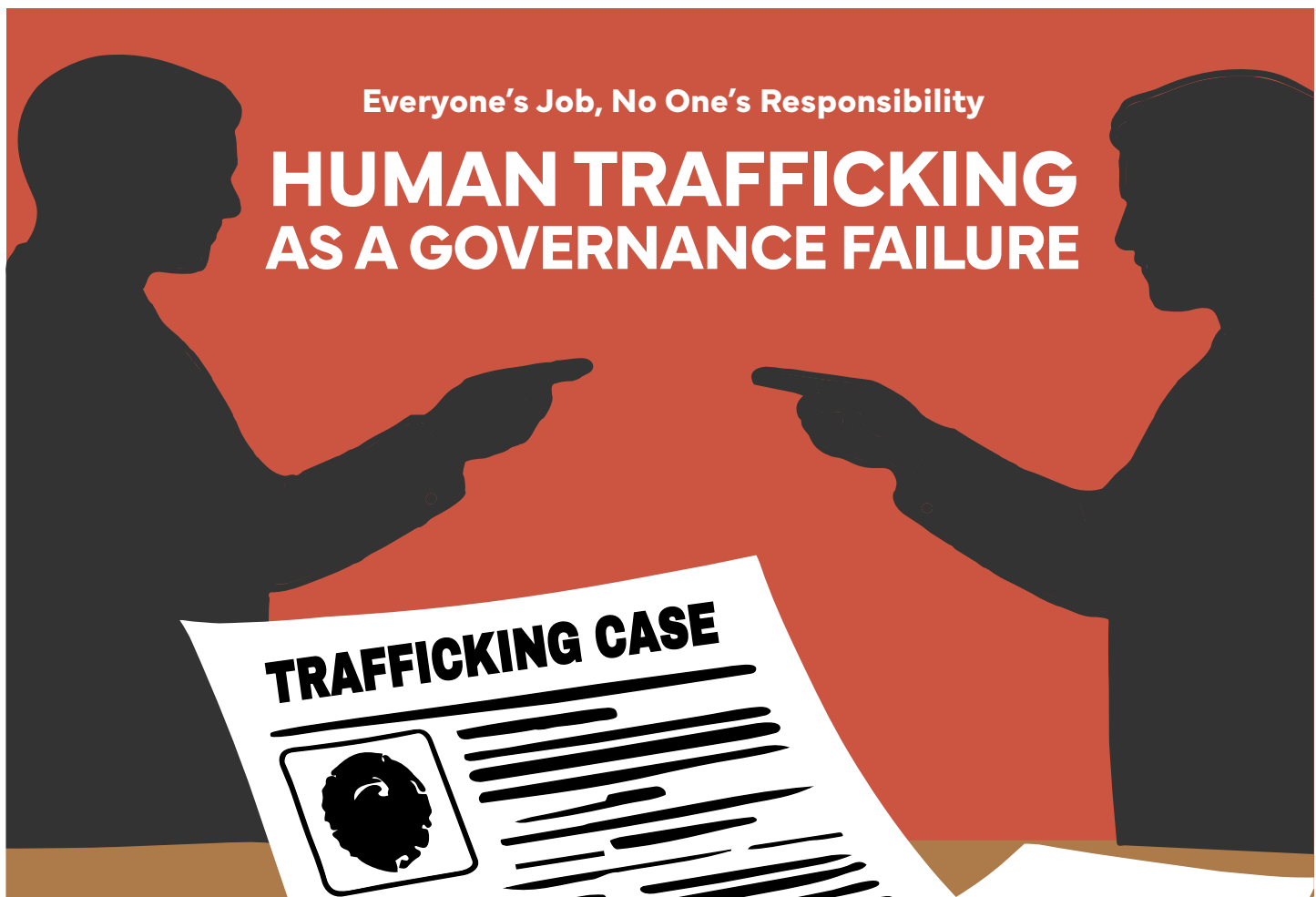
-Ahnnalise Wolf, International Relations
(Environmental Engineering Senior)

“I joined Clemson EWB in Fall 2022—my very first semester in college—and had the opportunity to help discover and begin this project. Since then, I have been fortunate enough to travel to the community in Rwanda twice. During those visits, I was able to meet many of the people this project serves, spend time with families, and even play with the children who live there. Those experiences made the work feel incredibly real. The project was no longer just drawings, calculations, and meetings—it was about people I had come to know. Seeing firsthand how access to clean, reliable water changes daily life for the community makes the impact deeply personal. Looking back on my time at Clemson, being part of a project that grew from an idea into something that truly improves people’s lives is one of the most meaningful experiences I will carry with me.”

-Owen Branch, Kagarama Project Lead
(Mechanical Engineering Senior)

“EWB has always been important to me. I have an older sister who is a part of NC State University’s chapter of EWB, and she encouraged me to get involved here at Clemson. Deciding to do so has already been one of the best choices I’ve made in college as a freshman. EWB Clemson manages to have such a major impact on Clemson’s campus and globally. It’s given me close friends on top of the global impacts our engineering projects create. That’s also one of the reasons I love being a part of FACE team, the team that helps with the organizational aspects of the club. There’s something special about doing the work behind the scenes which allows my peers to create amazing solutions to real world problems.”

-Alle Marsh, FACE Team Member
(General Engineering Freshman)



By Rachel French: Rachel is a graduate student completing her Master's of Public Administration at the University of South Florida.

How does exploitation persist inside some of the world's strongest democracies? Not for lack of laws, task forces, or political commitment, but because responsibility is divided. In many developed countries, anti-trafficking governance is dispersed across immigration agencies, labor regulators, prosecutors, and social service providers. Rather than operating through a single centralized hub, these systems rely on coordination across institutions designed to function independently. When authority is fragmented, accountability becomes blurred and exploitation can persist within otherwise robust legal frameworks.

Human Trafficking and Institutional Blind Spots

Per the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), "Human Trafficking is a crime involving the exploitation of a person for labor, services, or commercial sex" (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). Human trafficking is facilitated by a range of structural and individual vulnerabilities that

increase susceptibility to exploitation. Structural conditions such as poverty, housing instability, migration status, and displacement create environments in which individuals may lack access to protective institutions or stable support systems. In particular, migration status can complicate interactions with immigration authorities and labor regulators, leaving some individuals outside the reach of systems designed to identify exploitation or provide protection. At the individual level, prior involvement in foster care, experiences of abuse or neglect, and substance dependence can further heighten risk by weakening social and economic safeguards. Certain populations, including children, particularly adolescent girls, as well as LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, and Indigenous communities, face disproportionate vulnerability due to systemic discrimination and social marginalization. For children and youth, responsibility for protection is often concentrated within child welfare systems, which may limit the ability of other institutions, such as labor inspectors or immigration authorities, to identify exploitation when it

occurs outside traditional child protection contexts.

Traffickers strategically exploit these layered vulnerabilities to establish and maintain control. Exploitation frequently begins not through overt physical force, but through coercion, manipulation, and psychological abuse. Perpetrators may offer financial assistance, debt relief, housing, or romantic partnership to cultivate dependence and trust before transitioning to exploitative arrangements. These forms of control can be difficult for institutions to detect when exploitation is embedded within family relationships, informal employment, or migration arrangements that fall between the jurisdiction of multiple regulatory systems. This gradual process underscores that trafficking is often sustained through relational and economic control rather than immediate violence, complicating identification and intervention efforts.

Understanding trafficking as a process of coercion and vulnerability is necessary but insufficient. The persistence of exploitation in developed democracies depends not only on individual perpetrators and victim vulnerabilities, but also on how institutions are structured to recognize, categorize, and respond to harm.

Human Trafficking Hot Spots

Human trafficking often manifests within legally regulated industries, including construction, agriculture, hospitality, food services, domestic labor, and spa services. Increasingly, recruitment and coercion are facilitated through digital platforms and social media. These sectors share a common feature: they operate at the intersection of labor regulation, immigration oversight, and criminal enforcement. Because oversight authority is divided among separate institutions, exploitation can be categorized as a labor infraction, an immigration irregularity, or a criminal offense depending on which agency first encounters it. This categorization process reflects governance structure as much as individual wrongdoing.

Comparative Governance

The United Kingdom has adopted a centralized legislative and referral framework through the Modern Slavery Act of 2015, which consolidates trafficking and slavery offenses into a single statutory regime and establishes national oversight mechanisms (UK Government, 2015). Complementing this legislative framework is the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a centralized system designed

// Because oversight authority is divided among separate institutions, exploitation can be categorized...depending on which agency first encounters it. //

to identify potential victims and coordinate support services across England and Wales (UK Government, 2023). Together, these mechanisms create a formal national entry point for victim identification and data collection, placing accountability within a centralized administrative structure. The United Kingdom's national anti-trafficking strategies and cross-agency initiatives aim to improve victim identification and strengthen enforcement efforts.

Germany, by contrast, embeds trafficking offenses within its federal Criminal Code rather than consolidating them into a standalone statute, and enforcement responsibilities are distributed across the Länder (states). While national coordination efforts and action plans exist, victim identification and service provision vary regionally, and there is no single unified national referral mechanism comparable to the UK's NRM. Germany maintains federal and state-level initiatives focused on combating human trafficking and supporting victims, reflecting a governmental commitment to addressing the issue.

The UK reflects a more centralized accountability model, whereas Germany demonstrates how federal fragmentation can diffuse responsibility across multiple levels of government. These contrasting structures do not suggest that one country eliminates trafficking while the other enables it. Rather, they illustrate how governance design shapes the trajectory of suspected exploitation. In centralized systems, suspicion is more likely to enter a dedicated trafficking-specific pathway. In decentralized systems, cases may remain within the regulatory domain of the first institution that encounters them. The distinction lies not in political will, but in institutional architecture.

Germany Scenario - Driven By Governance

Background

A 15-year-old girl from Eastern Europe relocates with extended family to Germany for seasonal agricultural work. She is undocumented in practice (though EU movement rules complicate formal categorization), speaks limited German, and is withdrawn from school. Seasonal migration arrangements and informal recruitment channels can allow minors to move across borders with limited documentation oversight, particularly when employment occurs within family or subcontracted labor networks. She works long hours in food processing, receives no pay directly, and is controlled by a relative who claims to manage her earnings. The work occurs within an informal labor environment where oversight by labor authorities is limited and employment relationships are difficult to verify. She is not visibly restrained or reporting any violence, residing with family and not interacting regularly with teachers or social workers. Because responsibility for monitoring minors may rest primarily with youth welfare authorities, while labor oversight and immigration monitoring occur in separate institutional spheres, the situation may remain unnoticed until another regulatory body encounters irregularities.

Scenario

When a labor inspector visits the food processing site, nothing immediately signals a criminal offense. What stands out instead are administrative irregularities: incomplete pay records, unusually long hours, and unclear documentation regarding who is responsible for the minor’s employment. These are the kinds of issues labor inspectors are trained to identify and address within the scope of labor law.

As a result, the situation is initially processed as a labor compliance issue. The inspector’s authority is grounded in enforcing wage regulations, working conditions, and employment documentation; not in making determinations about trafficking. While elements of exploitation may be present, they are not yet framed within a criminal context. To formally classify the situation as human trafficking, a higher evidentiary threshold must be met. This typically requires demonstrating coercion, abuse of vulnerability, or clear exploitative intent under criminal law standards. At the point of inspection, these elements may not be immediately provable through administrative findings alone.

Escalating the case beyond a labor violation requires coordination across multiple institutions, including law enforcement, prosecutors, and youth welfare authorities.



Because these responsibilities are distributed across Länder (state) and local jurisdictions, there is no single authority responsible for advancing the case. Each step depends on interagency communication and discretionary judgment.

In the absence of a centralized referral mechanism triggered by suspicion alone, the case may remain within the regulatory domain in which it was first identified. Without a formalized pathway to transition from administrative concern to coordinated trafficking response, the situation risks stalling. As a result, what may constitute exploitation is addressed as a labor irregularity. Without clear institutional handoff or unified accountability, the case may never fully transition into a trafficking investigation or victim protection process.

UK Scenario - Driven By Governance Background

A 15-year-old girl from Eastern Europe relocates with extended family to the United Kingdom for seasonal agricultural work. Although her immigration status is unclear in practice, complicated by shifting post-Brexit movement rules, she lacks formal documentation and speaks limited English. Shortly after arrival, she is withdrawn from school. She works long hours in food processing, does not receive wages directly, and is told by a relative that her earnings are being managed on her behalf. She is not visibly restrained or reporting any violence, resides with family members, and has minimal interaction with teachers or social workers.

Scenario

When a labor inspector encounters similar irregularities at a food processing site in the United Kingdom, the initial observations may appear comparable: excessive working hours, lack of direct payment, and unclear guardianship arrangements. However, the institutional response unfolds differently once indicators of potential exploitation are recognized.

Rather than remaining confined within labor enforcement, suspicion alone is sufficient to trigger a trafficking-specific pathway through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The inspector, or another authorized first responder, can refer the case into this centralized system even without definitive proof of criminal wrongdoing.

Upon referral, the case is evaluated under an administrative 'reasonable grounds' standard. This threshold allows authorities to formally recognize an individual as a potential victim of trafficking based on indicators of

exploitation, even if the evidentiary standard required for criminal prosecution has not yet been met.

Once entered into the NRM, the case becomes part of a centralized process for identification, documentation, and follow-up. This creates a structured pathway for assessment and ensures that the case does not remain isolated within a single regulatory domain.

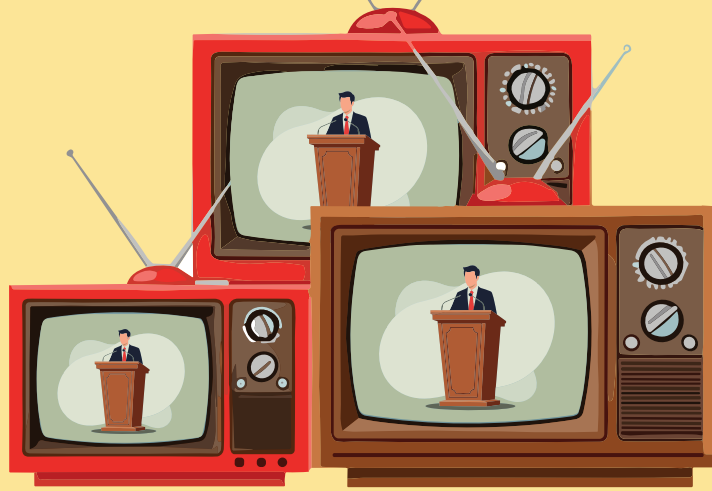
For a minor, referral into the system also strengthens safeguarding measures and access to support services while the case is under review. Protection does not depend on the immediate success of a criminal investigation, but rather on the recognition of vulnerability and potential exploitation. Even if the case does not ultimately result in prosecution, it is less likely to remain categorized solely as a labor violation. The governance structure provides a clear mechanism for transitioning suspicion into formal identification and coordinated response, reducing the likelihood that exploitation remains unaddressed.

Governance Design is Prevention

The comparison between Germany and the United Kingdom demonstrates that trafficking identification is not solely a function of criminal law strength, but of governance structure. When enforcement, victim services, labor oversight, and immigration regulation operate independently, escalation depends on interagency discretion rather than institutional mandate. Fragmented systems can inadvertently diffuse responsibility, allowing cases to stall within administrative categories. Centralized referral mechanisms, by contrast, create clearer pathways for suspicion to become formal identification, even before criminal thresholds are met.

Human trafficking persists in developed democracies not because vulnerabilities exist, but because institutional responses are often divided across bureaucratic boundaries. When accountability is dispersed, protection depends on coordination rather than structure. In that space between institutions, exploitation can endure, leaving victims more difficult to identify, delay access to protection, and create opportunities for perpetrators to exploit gaps in oversight and sustain cycles of trafficking. Ultimately, when it is everyone's job but no one's responsibility, exploitation can endure within the very systems meant to prevent it.

Martial Law, Distorted Histories, and the **PHILIPPINES'** **"GOLDEN AGE"**



By Jill Parreno: Jill is a sophomore Nursing major at Clemson University.

In 1975, Ferdinand Marcos told Amnesty International in an interview that his administration had arrested over 50,000 Filipinos over the martial law period. Many decades later, stories of those victims remain buried—overshadowed by narratives that continue to glorify the Marcos era. Many would wonder why such a time period marked by imprisonment, censorship, and human rights abuses comes to be remembered by some as a “golden age”. The answer lies within how the Marcos regime shaped how history was remembered through propaganda, censorship, and education, with these distortions continuing to influence Philippine politics and society in the present day.

Martial law officially began on September 22, 1972, at midnight, following an assassination attempt on Marcos’ Defense Secretary, where there were no casualties and no identified perpetrators. Officiated through Proclamation No. 1081, martial law was the turning point for a media-wide blackout. News and radios completely ceased broadcasting, flights were grounded, and political opponents were arrested en masse. While there is no one clear reason, the Marcos administration cited the growing need for civil reforms in the fight against rising communist threats and

rebellion from the Filipino people as the cause of martial law. At the time, many Filipinos were protesting against the Marcos administration. In particular, the First Quarter Storm occurred in the first quarter of 1970—a period marked by political demonstrations and civilian protests. Marcos capitalized on the rising unrest, leveraging political instability to consolidate power by suspending Congress, canceling elections, and establishing himself as a prime minister under a new parliamentary system. Violence during protests was used by the administration to further justify the consolidation of power.

Marcos’ regime centered heavily on media censorship, driven in part by a fear of negative publicity. To control public perception, journalists were arrested and charged with “conspiring with the Left,” while major media outlets like ABS CBN—one of the country’s largest media networks—were shut down unless they complied with government-approved narratives. Through his established Media Advisory Council, the administration was able to tightly regulate critical content about Marcos and limit publicized dissenting voices. Instead, only television channels owned by Marcos’ allies and business partners were allowed

to operate and broadcast to the Filipino public, ensuring that the information received reinforced and uplifted the regime's image rather than challenge it.

Despite strict censorship laws, Filipino journalists and activists came together to establish underground publications known as the “mosquito press”—a term coined by Ferdinand Marcos to liken critical press to mosquitoes: irritating but not a total threat. Although small in scale, the mosquito press provided an alternative to government-controlled information, allowing many Filipinos to access accounts of real events deliberately hidden from the public. By reporting incidents such as extrajudicial killings and government corruption, these publications allowed Filipinos to question narratives pushed by the government and organize boycotts, particularly against state-controlled media. However, this work came at a significant risk. Journalists who challenged the regime were harassed, imprisoned, and in some cases, assassinated due to their reports, posing an extreme danger for citizens involved in the rebellion against censorship. Activists were detained without due process and separated from their families or subjected to torture. Forced confessions were a common scenario, with the administration resorting to extreme methods such as physical assault on the suspicion of conspiracy, which separated families and created an unusual, repressed environment growing up for children—sometimes referred to as “prison babies”—who were raised apart from their parents and placed in prison camps.

Even after the fall of the dictatorship, the control over public narrative by the Marcos family did not disappear, continuing instead through strategic storytelling. Much of the misinformation that emerged during Ferdinand Marcos' time in office has often overshadowed verified accounts with narratives that deny human rights abuses and recast opposing political figures as villains through myths and conspiracy theories to deflect criticism. These curated narratives have persisted through generations and continued to distort how historical events are understood over time, especially in the era of social media. The utilization of platforms like Facebook and YouTube influencers to rebrand the reputation of the martial law era has been wildly successful, instead framing the era in a more nostalgic light and minimizing or ignoring its abuses. The time period, which is referred to as the “golden age,” is often portrayed as a period of growth through the mass construction of public transportation, hospitals, roads, and other overly ambitious developments, while simultaneously disregarding the failure of several mega-infrastructure projects and rising poverty levels at the

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time. These developments came along with Marcos' Bagong Lipunan or New Society campaign, which many Filipinos now believe to have been a prosperous and orderly time, despite the massive corruption schemes that came along with this new order.

For many Filipinos, escape became the only means for survival. With the wealth inequality gap growing and economic instability deepening under the Marcos administration, the government introduced the 1974 Labor Export Policy to combat unemployment and rising poverty. While framed as an economic solution, the policy led to the migration of thousands of Filipinos, particularly in sectors such as healthcare. Many left not only to find work, but also to escape the repressed and unstable environment that martial law created. The economy started to rely on remittances being sent home from abroad, contributing to the growth of the Filipino diaspora, while losing many skilled essential workers to international companies.

This large-scale migration had unintended consequences for how martial law is remembered by the general populace. Many of the individuals who directly experienced repression left the country and migrated to countries like Canada and the U.S., taking their firsthand accounts with them. Their physical absence meant gaps in memory where younger Filipinos were less likely to hear personal testimonies from those who lived through the regime, and more susceptible to propaganda schemes targeted to promote the Marcos family due to the lack of knowledge and sanitized narratives.

The manipulation of memory is continually reinforced through formal education as well. Many of the

written textbooks presented in civics curricula in Filipino schools present the martial law era through whitewashed lenses or complete erasure, subtly downplaying the severity of the crimes against Filipinos and balancing these negative events with infrastructure achievements. Nostalgic revisionism and selective education components in formal and informal media work together to influence historical memory over time and eventually allow for distorted interpretations of the events of martial law to develop generations after the fact.

The consequences of distorted historical memory were especially evident during the 2022 Philippine Presidential Election, when Ferdinand Marcos' son, Bongbong Marcos, won in a landslide. A significant portion of younger voters were exposed to and believed disinformation about Ferdinand Marcos' legacy, showing strong correlations between exposure to misinformation and his son's candidacy. Many stories that circulated during the election period claimed that the Philippines was one of

the richest countries in Southeast Asia during Ferdinand Marcos' administration and that no arrests of Marcos' critics were made during martial law, both of which were later debunked. While many other components, such as promotion by former President Rodrigo Duterte, played a part in Bongbong Marcos' presidential win, election-related disinformation was widely cited as a contributing factor in his electoral success.

Martial law, despite coming at a profound human cost that lasted for generations, is an example of how long-term normalization of distorted narratives can continue to impact modern politics. With the modern-day impacts of the Marcos legacy, contemporary Philippine politics is a reminder of the importance of remembering and amplifying hidden voices; serving as a cautionary tale of how historical revisionism through propaganda and censorship can preserve disinformation decades later, influencing modern-day politics.





ONE OF MANY

Exploring the Implications of South African Labor Migration on Lesotho

By Brett Rau: Brett is a sophomore International Affairs and Geography double major at the University of Georgia.

“Get up, get up, son of mine, and see if people are at the door; for I am hungry and would eat meat.” The voice was that of a man, seated in front of some red-hot cinders in the middle of the hut. The little boy ran to the door, and, upon seeing two girls standing there, implored them to run away at once. This oral story, the Village Maiden and the Cannibal, is a traditional folktale told by the Basotho people where a group of young maidens attempt to enlist the help of a few men to save the village from starvation. One of the men turns out to be a cannibal, and the story cautions listeners to be wary of strangers. Oral traditions like the Village Maiden and the Cannibal can be found in all corners of the world, per linguist and folklore scholar John Foley. One characteristic of oral tradition is that it is

often not one consistent narrative; it is a living body which accommodates the events of people’s lives. Such narrative differences can be seen in Walter Jekyll’s essay, where he recounts different tellings of the same story further north: unlike the southern Basotho tale, the North-east Nyasa and Kilimanjaro versions of the Village Maiden and the Cannibal include the girls being aided by an animal. Oral tradition is a longstanding practice of the Basotho people who inhabit the Maloti mountains. They reside in a nation-state known as Lesotho, which translates to “land of the Basotho” in Sesotho, the national language. In modernity, Lesotho is a self-governing sovereign entity and identified as such by the United Nations, but economically, independence is far from the case. Much like orators’ different approaches in

“ For more than a quarter century Kimberly has been the stage for the worst forms of undisguised inhumanity. ”

arriving at the moral of the story in *Village Maiden* and the *Cannibal*, scholars have offered divergent narratives to explain the economic struggles of Lesotho. Perhaps the most compelling telling relates to migratory labor. Lesotho has become overly reliant on South African labor migration rooted in colonial era policy, which has become ultimately detrimental to contemporary economic and social development.

The relationship between South Africa and Lesotho, along with the corresponding existence of regional labor migration, can be traced back to the colonial period. Descendants of the Sotho people, the Basotho were first formally unified under King Moshoeshe during the first half of the nineteenth century, largely in response to the Mfecane (Zulu term), or “The Crushing” (English term), a warring period that uprooted many southern African communities. Shortly after the formation of the first Basotho nation, the Afrikaners—colonizers of Dutch descent—slowly encroached on the territory. Faced with a difficult dilemma, King Moshoeshe decided to apply for the aid of the British, and their response was received favorably. At this point, the first Basotho nation was officially demarcated and operated by the British. The discovery of diamonds in the Cape Colony, or more specifically in Kimberly (northwest of Maseru, Lesotho’s capital), in 1867 attracted a wide array of Africans for labor. During this period, a semi-symbiotic relationship developed where these rapidly expanding miner communities provided a location for Basotho crop exports, and many Basotho men participated in labor emigration to South Africa for diamonds. Importantly, the first Basotho men who participated in the labor migration did so “for discretionary reasons, not out of economic necessity,” according to scholars Rosenberg and Weisfelder. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, agricultural exports began to decline as protective tariffs by a neighboring Afrikaner republic, and the formation of small canyon-like features known as dongas, erased the

agricultural surplus supporting the more sustainable system of labor migration. As a result, many Basotho were forced into more unsustainable patterns of migrant labor.

Mining in apartheid South Africa is often not a desirable form of employment. Thousands of unskilled black migrant workers traveled from across the southern region of Africa to work in encampments often referred to as compounds. The conditions were often inhumane for the Basotho, given that they were sent to work underground in a racially segregated system. Due to the isolated nature of the compounds, sex work was extraordinarily common. Men typically worked in several month periods and were only permitted to see their families every few months. As South African activist Alice Kinloch wrote in 1897, “for more than a quarter century Kimberly has been the stage for the worst forms of undisguised inhumanity”.

Gold mining was a very common career for Basotho men up until the industry crashed in the 1990s. Decreasing gold prices and a necessity to dig deeper to access dangerous gold deposits led to less mining opportunities among Basotho men. A steep reliance upon labor migration for Lesotho’s economic output has created a system whereby in 2023, remittances, or money sent from migrant laborers back to family and friends in their country of origin, reached US\$485 million—nearly 23 percent of Lesotho’s gross domestic product (GDP). As such, Lesotho is “one of Africa’s most remittance-dependent economies” as reported on by the Lesotho News Agency. Therefore, these statistics on male miners and remittances demonstrate how Lesotho is straying farther from economic self-sufficiency.

In what has historically been a male dominated field, migration to South Africa for employment opportunities has become increasingly common among women compared to what used to be a historically male-dominated sector. An account from a woman living in Maseru interviewed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) who wished to remain anonymous provides insight into the poor

She explains that each job follows a similar pattern: “initial understanding, coupled with expanding duties, denial of rest days, and growing hostility once I became settled.” Women involved in domestic labor migration are often treated very poorly, and far too often are victims of verbal abuse. Jobs are usually obtained through social networks and connections rather than through official job application portals. Many migrant workers are in low-income fields and are seasonally employed. As a result, even though rates of labor migration cut across gender, factors like education and job formality often influence migration decisions.

A commonality between Basotho labor emigrants and Lesotho’s domestic opportunities is a lack of formality. Formal employment remains a struggle in which many are paid based on verbal agreement rather than formal contracts. In 1999, the Central Bank of Lesotho noted that half of all Basotho employed in formal positions were employed in South Africa rather than Lesotho. Domestically, the government remains the primary formal employer, offering positions as teachers, civil servants, and in the armed forces, to name a few. Private sector jobs that function on a word-of-mouth basis account for 49.4 percent of jobs, a figure estimated by the 2024 Lesotho Labor Force Survey.

Because of a lack of opportunity, South Africa attracts many laborers by offering formal positions that many Basotho cannot find in their own country. One major issue of having a large amount of emigrating workers is the lack of tax dollars available for Lesotho’s government. In the words of Mathabo Makoko, the Commission General of the Revenue Services of Lesotho, “domestic resource mobilization is no longer optional. It is a necessity,” and to that end “the true future of Lesotho’s development rests in our ability to generate and mobilize our own resources.” Here, a feedback loop develops: many Basotho are not paying taxes due to either the informal nature of employment or because they work abroad, and therefore because of poor funding the government is unable to effectively operate an agency to enforce efficient tax

collection. In other words, tax dollars are needed to enforce the collection of taxes. One consequence of Basotho workers in South Africa in informal positions is the reduction of function for the government.

A heavy reliance on remittance payments from Basotho emigrant workers in South Africa has done significant damage to Lesotho’s economic sustainability and consequently the state of its society. Referring to Mathaba Makoko’s quote, it is not that Lesotho should rely less on foreign resources and labor markets, but it is required that they simultaneously mobilize domestic markets. The economic direction of Lesotho is unsustainable. Given the circumstances, the government should begin to remedy these issues, but they lack many of the resources

to do so. Lesotho must in a sense modernize and adapt to an ever-changing global economy. Interest has developed among member states of the African Union in the past few years regarding the capabilities of artificial intelligence. Dr. Ahmani Abdou-Zeid states on the matter that AI presents an opportunity for Africans and could be a driving force for economic and social progress. Lesotho needs to find a niche in the global market and could, for example, develop a national strategy to be a regional hub for data centers. But in any

case, Lesotho needs to draw the interest of private investors without compromising the Basotho identity. To explain the current political economy in Lesotho, many people will provide different explanations. Like the nature of oral traditions, mine is just one interpretation of many.

“ Each job follows a similar pattern: initial understanding, expanding duties, denial of rest days, and growing hostility. ”

LOS DESAPARECIDOS

Enough to Fill a City



By Dylana Najera Rios: Dylana is a junior International and Global Studies, Politics, and German triple major at Sewanee: The University of the South.

With over 130,000 people registered as disappeared in 2026, Mexico is facing an industrial-scale human rights crisis where enforced disappearances have become a terrifying norm. The 1996 Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons describes the phenomenon of enforced disappearance as a human rights violation where a person is arrested, detained or abducted by the state or agents acting for the state; who then deny that the person is being held or conceal their whereabouts, placing them outside the protection of the law. Case in point, the enforced disappearance of 43 Mexican students from the Ayotzinapa college in Iguala, Guerrero on September 26, 2014. This case became the face of the national crisis of enforced disappearances in Mexico and an emblematic tragedy. The Ayotzinapa disappearances serve as the definitive illustration of Mexico's deep seated corruption, shocking the public by blurring the lines between state officials and organized crime. It stands as a 'crime of the state' following the debunking of a proven, large-scale government cover up. Even with evidence of state-cartel

collusion, impunity persisted: no one has been convicted. The systematic attempt to bury the truth surrounding the fate of the students created massive domestic and international outrage. The mass disappearance crisis in Mexico reveals a deeply entrenched system of state complicity, prevalence of dangerous cartels, and possible close ties to the Mexican government that has normalized human rights abuses and compelled families of the disappeared to become the primary seekers of truth and justice.

Having been an issue since 1968 during the Mexican Dirty War, enforced disappearances have been a systematic crime. Under President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, more than 1,200 people that the government perceived as a threat disappeared. The act of enforced disappearances isn't the only gruesome part: violations of physical integrity rights also occurred, including cruel and unusual treatment, torture, excessive use of force, extrajudicial executions, and political imprisonment or detention. Among those who were forcibly disappeared included, but were not limited to: indigenous people, priests and members of the

religious community, political and union leaders, students and academics, members of armed opposition groups, and military or those suspected with enemy collaboration. As was the case of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Institutional Revolutionary Party, (PRI) used military force to suppress and massacre about 300 students and activists in response to student protests against the government. The PRI was not only responsible for the repression and human rights violations during the Tlatelolco Massacre, but it also has a history of practices such as electoral fraud, clientelism, and control over the media. The PRI dominated the political landscape in Mexico for 71 years until its historic loss in 2000 due to the implementation of sweeping electoral reforms that dismantled the party's ability to manipulate elections. During its hegemony, it often used strategic violence and both legal and extrajudicial methods to discourage dissent as many of their policies and tactics were aimed at stifling the growing social unrest and political activism. The Mexican government carried out multiple violations of human rights, including the installation of fear, avoiding accountability, and information control, and implemented the use of strategic abductions as a method of repression against its own people through the form of state terror.

Throughout the years, the number of enforced disappearances and government corruption have only increased. In its assessment of 170 counties, the Atlas of Impunity identifies the lowest levels of power abuse with scores nearing zero and overall rank nearing 170. This overall ranking incorporates several key metrics, including unaccountable governance, conflict and violence, and the abuse of human rights. As reported in February 2024, Mexico's score was 2.35, and its overall rank was 52 out of 170. Just a year later, Mexico's score rose in impunity to 2.59, and its overall rank dropped to 31, showing more impunity than before. Furthering, the government of Mexico repeatedly fails to investigate and prosecute the disappearances and murders of journalists. Mexico is considered to be the country with the highest number of disappeared and murdered journalists in the world outside of active war zones. The Congressional Research Service states the surging attacks on journalists as a violation of the freedom of press as well as control of information and is described as "politically driven attempts to intimidate independent media" (2022). The refusal of acknowledgment from the authorities creates a dangerous place for journalists to be in since their rights aren't protected by the government. The government doesn't focus on protecting its

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Throughout the years, the number of enforced disappearances and government corruption have only increased.
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journalists due to the fact that sometimes journalists are working to expose corruption and leaders, especially when it links the government to drug related violence. Although criminal organizations aid in corruption, government forces play a role due to their incompetence and misconduct.

With the increasing violence and instability caused by cartels, criminal organizations employ forced disappearances as a multi-purpose tool for intimidation, coerced recruitment, and abduction. These operations frequently benefit from the collusion of local officials, which systematically undermines the legal process and ensures that official investigations remain ineffective. An extermination camp at Izaguirre Ranch in Jalisco found by the Buscadores Guerreros de Jalisco, a search collective, in March 2025 renewed attention to Mexico's ongoing crisis of enforced disappearances. They uncovered three crematoriums, or "secret ovens," alongside human remains and clothing items, suggesting that the site used hidden, makeshift underground incinerators to systematically dispose of victims. When the site was previously raided by the National Guard and the Jalisco State Prosecutor's Office in September 2024, authorities only reported rescuing hostages and seizing weapons, yet there were no reports of the crematoriums. The discovery was linked to organized crime activity, but also included allegations of state inaction, weak investigations, and possible complicity by local authorities. Correspondingly, members of civil search organizations are at risk when they seek justice for the disappearance of family members. In April 2025, two members of the Guerreros Buscadores were shot and killed after they helped expose the killing site. Cases like

this underscore the scale of violence faced by civilians and the persistent failure of accountability. The disappearances in Mexico have grown so extreme and widespread that in April 2025, the United Nations activated Article 34 of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) against Mexico for the first time in history; however, the Mexican government rejected the statements made by the Committee members alleging State-sponsored enforced disappearances. On March 27, 2026, Mexico's government publicly undermined the depth of Mexico's human rights violations by stating that it has identified signs of life for a third of the country's 130,000 registered missing people. This triggered intense backlash, with public outrage growing over the ongoing lack of accountability. The terror being inflicted on the people of Mexico has risen as not only is the fear for the disappeared, but also the family and friends that are investigating are now vulnerable. The systemic failure to investigate human rights violations combined with the extreme impunity has forced families

of the disappeared to create a revolt of their own through risky search collectives, known as *buscadores*. Because the records and remains of the victim's bodies and evidence of enforced disappearances are usually destroyed, it makes it difficult for the families of victims to prove their cases and hold perpetrators accountable. The gap between families and the government has only grown more due to distrust. The victims' families suffer greatly since abductions provide no respite of knowing where their loved ones are. For families, this is a form of cruel, psychological violence. Now, families have decided to take this crisis into their own hands. Thousands of 'Missing Person' flyers paint the streets of Mexico, silently haunting, not only the families, but the country. The injustice of enforced disappearances brings forth the demand that the international community joins forces to end such a common, now daily, heinous crime in hopes for a future where families don't have to mourn a memory.



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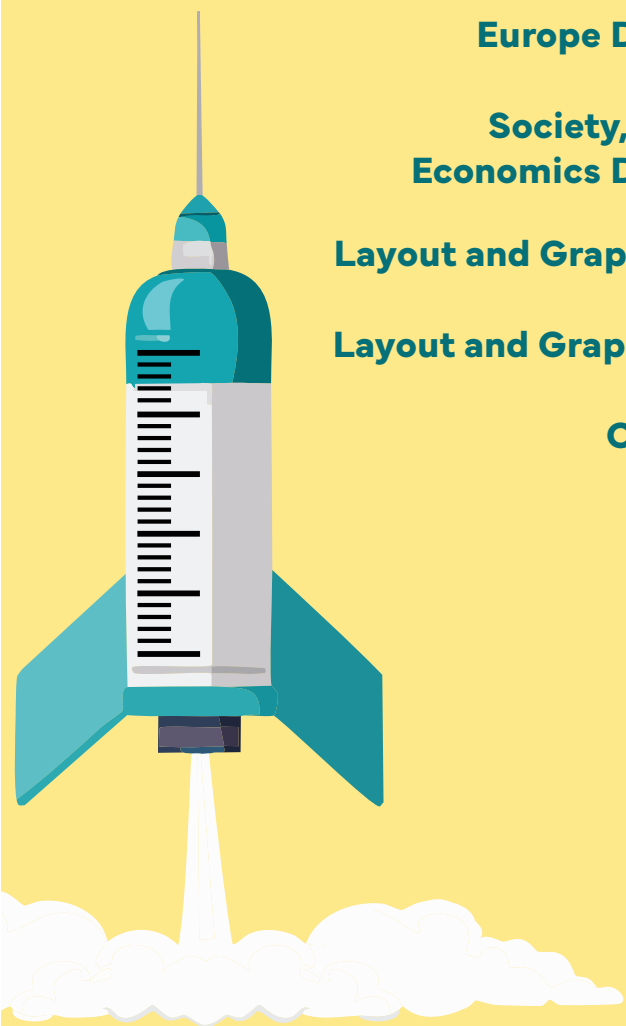
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