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Israel, America, and the Herzl Paradox

IRCUMSTANCES are forcing Israel to rethink its position in world affairs.

Russia reasserted itself militarily in Syria and has now invaded Ukraine. China continues its rise to dominance, in its region and beyond. America, meanwhile, as successive presidents have made clear in word and deed, is disengaging from the Middle East and shrinking the U.S. role in the world.

In many respects, Israel is stronger and more secure than ever. But it still faces challenges — primarily, an Iranian nuclear bomb — that can best be handled through cooperation with America. Can it count on that cooperation? Should it respond to American disengagement and apparent decline by seeking partnerships elsewhere?

In recent decades, Israel has cultivated relations with China and Russia. It sees China as a major economic opportunity and generally turns a blind eye to China's crimes against human rights in Xinjiang and elsewhere. Meanwhile, efforts to improve relations with Russia intensified after Putin joined Iran in the Syrian civil war to defend Assad. Iran wants to be able to attack Israel from Syria. To prevent this, Israel has to strike Iranian forces there without killing Russians. Good relations with the Putin regime have made possible the necessary "deconfliction." Anxious to preserve coordination with Russia in Syria, some Israeli leaders have been less than full-throated in denouncing Putin's enormities in Ukraine.

U.S. officials from the Trump and Biden administrations have counseled caution in both cases, warning that China exploits trade and investment arrangements for strategic purposes and complaining that Israel is too cozy with Putin — a complaint with starker resonance since the rape of Ukraine.

In rebuffing this criticism, Israelis often say simply that China has never been their enemy. That's a flip answer to the serious question of how Israel (and the West in general) should regulate economic relations with an increasingly aggressive China. Xi's threatening policies have belied decades of hopes that integration into the world economy would liberalize and moderate China. In Israel and throughout the West, major policy changes are required, but the world economy does not transform itself overnight. Neither the United States, Israel, nor any other economic partner of China has yet come fully to grips with the challenges that Xi is posing. The first required step is to acknowledge the problem.

The Ukraine war obviously makes it harder for Israel to deflect criticism of its cooperation with Russia. Israelis, nevertheless, make a valid point in highlighting America's responsibility for Israel's predicament. The United States gutted its own Mediterranean fleet, allowed Russia to become dominant in Syria, and did nothing to keep Iran out. That is why Israel needs Russia's help, or at least acquiescence.

These matters are a problem in the U.S.-Israeli relationship,

particularly for the junior partner. Israel knows the relationship has been helpful, sometimes supremely so. But America's substantial support over many years elicits unease as well as gratitude. It creates dependency. It limits Israel's freedom of action. And it may not last forever.

As national-security officials in Jerusalem assess their choices, they should consider what I call the Herzl Paradox.

When Herzl organized Zionism into a political movement, his goal was Jewish self-reliance. At the same time, he sought foreign support. This is the paradox.

In Herzl's day, Jewish life, liberty, and property depended everywhere on the goodwill or toleration of non-Jews. Nowhere were Jews a majority, and hostility to them was pandemic. From Britain to Yemen, Jewish communities were vilified, expropriated, murdered, and expelled century after century.

The Zionist message was that Jews should cease living as history's objects. They could take their future into their own hands by creating a Jewish-majority state in their ancient homeland. For some, a Jewish state would be home. For those in the Diaspora, it could be a refuge. Jews could build a national center there. There would be dignity in independence and related responsibilities, and the resulting self-respect would not be confined to Jews who lived there.

While some Zionists stressed Jewish culture (most notably Ahad Ha'am) and others stressed the practical value of creating farming settlements (Menachem Ussishkin, for example), Herzl focused on national sovereignty and diplomacy. The first World Zionist Congress, with Herzl presiding, declared in 1897 that the Jewish people aimed for a "publicly recognized and legally secured homeland in Palestine." He had in mind some kind of charter to legitimate the Zionist enterprise. A decade after his

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death, Zionists who sided with Britain in World War I advanced his ideas and were instrumental in bringing about the Balfour Declaration, which may be seen as the great-power charter that Herzl had envisioned.

But Herzl was a pragmatist as well as a visionary. As much as he stressed the importance of Jewish national independence, he recognized the need for outside help. How has the Israeli government applied that lesson to relations with the United States?

The complexity of the U.S.-Israeli alliance is sometimes obscured by both sides' insistence that the relationship has always been strong and unshakable. In fact, its strength varies from one U.S. administration to another, and individual administrations are often inconsistent in their support. That does not mean the alliance has been poor, only that it is a creature with two heads, each with its own mind — and each capable of holding inconsistent thoughts.

President Truman was the first world leader to give formal recognition to Israel's independence. The new state was then fighting for its life against the Palestinian Arabs and a coalition of neighboring Arab states. And yet, just as British and American intelligence agencies were predicting Arab victory, Truman imposed an arms embargo that particularly disadvantaged the Jews.

President Eisenhower shared the conventional Washington

view that Israel was a Cold War liability. After Israel defeated Egypt in the 1956 Suez War, Eisenhower threatened Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to compel Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Ben-Gurion submitted — in return for assurances that America would uphold Israel's Red Sea navigation rights.

Ten years later, however, when Egypt blockaded the Red Sea, President Johnson reneged on Eisenhower's promise. Though he considered himself a friend of Israel, Johnson warned that, if it broke the blockade by itself, Israel would find itself alone. Israel defied the warning and won the Six-Day War. Had it complied, it might have lost.

A high point in U.S.-Israeli relations occurred in 1970, when Syria, a Soviet client, threatened to overthrow Jordan's King Hussein. President Nixon asked Israel to protect the king, which it did by aborting a Syrian invasion. King Hussein survived, and President Nixon was grateful. But a low point also occurred that year. Egypt violated its cease-fire agreement in the "War of Attrition" at the Suez Canal by moving anti-aircraft missiles forward. The United States, which had promoted the cease-fire, did nothing. Then, when Egypt used those missiles in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Nixon, in perhaps the brightest moment in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations, ordered the resupply of Israeli forces, saving the country from possible destruction. But he promptly pressured Israel into a cease-fire, blocking it from a clear victory.

President Carter spoke sympathetically of the Palestinians and reproachfully toward Israel. He wanted Israel to feel as much pressure as possible to withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank, so he warned Egypt's President Sadat against a bilateral peace. But once Egypt and Israel signed their treaty in 1979, Carter initiated huge aid programs for both countries. Steady funding from Congress has helped preserve the treaty for more than 40 years, despite Middle Eastern tumult. Israel has been especially successful in using that aid to create a superb military.

Reagan-era U.S. officials increasingly valued Israel as a Cold War asset — pro-American, stable, and committed to free-world political and economic principles. Its military and intelligence capabilities were unmatched in the region and showed the superiority of American over Soviet arms. In the Arab–Israeli conflict, President Reagan viewed Israel as wearing the white hat. Yet his administration condemned Israel at the United Nations in 1981 for destroying Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor and, in 1982, sent Marines into Lebanon to rescue the Palestine Liberation Organization. In 1988, Reagan gave the PLO formal U.S. diplomatic recognition — a first.

Inconsistency remains a feature of the relationship. In post-9/11 America, Israel won widespread popular appreciation as a valuable ally in the War on Terrorism. President Bush, however, was the first U.S. president to announce support for a Palestinian state. Bush was furious when Palestinian officials lied to him about contraband weapons they had tried to smuggle from Iran — but he allowed his State Department to pressure Israel to meet Palestinian demands on settlements and other peace-process issues.

President Obama often voiced resentment of Israel and pursued policies on Iran and the Palestinians that Israeli leaders said were harmful to Israel's security. At the same time, perhaps to mollify pro-Israel congressional Democrats, he permitted his Defense Department to expand U.S.-Israeli cooperation.

President Trump's bull-in-a-china-shop disregard for conventional wisdom worked in Israel's favor. Trump defied standard warnings that the United States would antagonize important Arab partners and detonate the "Arab street" if he aligned with Israel on Jerusalem, West Bank settlements, the Golan, and other reputedly explosive issues. Trump went further. He pulled the United States out of Obama's nuclear deal with Iran. His peace plan endorsed Israeli security concerns regarding the Jordan Valley and other parts of the West Bank — and made no gestures toward evenhandedness between Israel and its enemies. The plan promoted

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the Abraham Accords — the peace and normalization deals Israel soon signed with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Trump did not detonate the Arab street, but he exploded the reputation of many "experts."

Trump meanwhile shared his predecessor's isolationist impulses. He embraced Obama policies that had helped create in Syria the strategic vacuum that Russia and Iran filled. Trump squeezed Iran economically, cutting its oil sales and weakening its currency, but showed no interest in countering its seizure of commercial ships and destruction of Saudi oil facilities. Denouncing "endless wars," as if one's enemies have no say in when a war ends, Trump set in train the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan that President Biden endorsed and then managed so badly.

Israeli officials have a duty to keep the Jewish state safe no matter how world affairs evolve. Because Israel depends heavily on U.S. arms, aid, trade, investment, and diplomatic support, it has worked to demonstrate its loyalty and usefulness to America. Now, however, with world affairs in high flux, Israeli officials wonder whether they should hedge. They voice impatience with U.S.

warnings about excessive coziness with China and Russia. Meanwhile, Israelis fret about American steadiness, reminding me of a remark I heard from a NATO diplomat almost 50 years ago: The problem with being a U.S. ally is that you never know when America is going to stab itself in the back.

As hedging can be hazardous, some cautions are in order.

First, the strategic tie between Israel and America is as strong as exists between any sovereign states. Each has its own interests and priorities, and they will sometimes differ and even clash. But that's the whole point of sovereignty — and of Zionism. One must have wildly unrealistic expectations to be disappointed in what the U.S.-Israeli alliance, in general, provides to both parties.

Second, shared political principles have strategic importance. A common commitment to liberal democracy creates a bond that is more than sentimental. China and Russia are strategically aligned with Iran, Israel's mortal enemy, not simply for reasons of wealth and security. Their axis is a joint rejection of Western principles of individual liberty and self-government. Elites in Israel, as in America, tend to downplay the importance in world affairs of ideology, honor, tradition, fellow feeling, and a shared understanding of right and wrong. But these "soft" considerations can make and break armies and alliances. It harms Israel for its officials to appear so hardheaded as to be hard-hearted and so realpolitik-minded as to be amoral or worse. That also undermines solidarity with Israel's American friends, a good part of whose support for Israel is rooted not in considerations of strategy and economics, but in religious faith, memory of the Holocaust, and sympathy for a fellow democracy defending its existence.

In expanding economic, academic, and other ties to China, Israeli officials are whistling past the graveyard — making light of moral and strategic hazards that may be more damaging and imminent than they assume. China is committing brutal human-rights abuses on a large scale in Xinjiang. It is pressing claims of

sovereignty over the South China Sea, threatening war against Taiwan, and acting violently toward its other neighbors. Its officials speak with vehement hostility against the United States. And the hallmarks of China's trade and investment policy are corruption of foreign officials, anti-democratic political influence operations, and the massive theft of foreign intellectual property. These problems, assigned due weight, should be in the balance when Israelis consider cooperation with Chinese entities. Until recently, Jerusalem had no mechanism for evaluating the national-security implications of Chinese or other foreign investments in Israel. It now has one, but the mechanism is not strong enough for its task. Meanwhile Russia is savaging Ukraine and causing much of the world to divide into either a pro-Russia or an anti-Russia camp. It is easy for Israelis to see that the Iranian Islamic Republic's ideology—the foundation of its strategic commitment to Israel's destruction—precludes friendly relations with the Jewish state. But it should be obvious, too, that the ideological principles Russia and China share with Iran severely limit the quality of Israel's relations with the Putin and Xi regimes.

Third, it is a bad bet to assume that America is weak or in irreversible decline. If that is why Israel is thickening links to China and Russia, it should reconsider. Those who have lost that bet include the German leadership in World War I, Hitler after Pearl Harbor, and later Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milošević, and Osama bin Laden. The 1970s offer a telling case. First came Watergate, then the fall of Saigon. The Soviet Union was approaching nuclear-weapons superiority. Its proxies were gaining ground in Vietnam, Ethiopia, and southern Africa. Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan. Projecting naïveté and weakness, President Carter suggested that America was suffering from malaise. Iranian Islamists toppled the shah of Iran, an important U.S. ally, sacked the U.S. Embassy, and held its personnel hostage for over a year. America seemed hopelessly impotent. But Reagan rebuilt its power and confidence and systematically aggravated the Soviet regime's internal contradictions. The United States won the Cold War, destroying the Soviet Union without a hot war.

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Lastly, Zionists have always understood that Israel may one day have to stand alone. But prudent Israeli officials will do what they can to put off that day—and not hasten it by courting anti-Western powers in ways that antagonize America. Israel's interest is in encouraging America to strengthen its military and revive its leadership of the democratic world.

Israel's relations with the Putin regime, a minor irritant among some U.S. officials over the past decade, are now a high-profile element of the Jewish state's image in the world. From inside and outside the country, Israeli leaders have been criticized for not siding squarely with Ukraine.

Some of those leaders immediately joined the anti-Russian consensus. Others equivocated, fearing to antagonize Putin and thereby endanger Israel's ability to counter Iran in Syria. Some, then, are focused on morality, and others on realpolitik. The latter approach, as this essay has argued, is short-sighted and often dishonorable. National-security policy, however, requires more than moralism.

Let us assume that Prime Minister Naftali Bennett believes Ukraine is in the right and the Russian invasion is an unmitigated evil. Even so, he cannot act based only on what is good for Ukraine. His duty is to ask, what is necessary for Israel? It makes sense for Ukraine's President Zelensky to tell other leaders what they "must" do to help — but those leaders all also have unique calculations to make.

Weighing interests against morality is hard to defend when the interests are economic. But when survival rather than trade is at issue, morality may sit on both sides of the scale.

The highest duty of leaders is to preserve their countries' freedom. That is why President Biden must balance the danger of nuclear war against his inclination to aid Ukraine. Polish leaders acted similarly when considering whether and how to donate MiG aircraft. It is likewise proper for Israel to safeguard its freedom of maneuver in Syria when setting its policy toward Russia. Anyone who grants that Britain and America were right to ally with the monstrous Stalin to defeat the Nazis can see why Israel now works with Putin to be able to fight Israel's genocidal Iranian enemy.

This is not an argument against helping Ukraine. A case can be made that considerations of both strategy and morality favor action by the West far bolder than what has been done to date. But no one should expect any foreign leader, obviously including Israel's prime minister, to decide how to act solely based on what is good for Ukraine.

In fact, Ukraine's hideous plight warns Israel to keep to an absolute minimum any serious threat to Israel's existence. As tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews flee for their lives, Zionism is vindicated once again. These refugees are being welcomed into a country happy to receive them, grant them citizenship, and generously assist their absorption into their ancient national homeland. The war confirms both elements of the Herzl paradox. It shows how important it is for any country — including Ukraine and Israel — to have friends willing to extend help. But it also demonstrates the importance of being able to defend oneself. Either can be a matter of life and death. *