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The Strategic Illusion of Regime Change

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Throughout modern history, regime change has functioned as both a strategic tool and a moral proposition. Advocates frequently argue that removing authoritarian or adversarial governments can promote regional stability, protect human rights, or safeguard global security. Yet the empirical record over the past two centuries suggests that externally driven regime change more often generates prolonged instability, undermines the legitimacy of domestic institutions, and fosters long-term strategic blowback.

The proposition that states can re-engineer political systems through force or covert intervention is nothing new. Imperial Britain routinely manipulated leadership structures across the Middle East and South Asia, from the deposition of Egyptian ruler Khedive Ismail in 1879 to the installation of compliant leaders in the princely states of India. In each case, the underlying rationale was imperial stability, but the outcomes included nationalist backlash and enduring resentment.

Post-World War II Germany and Japan are frequently cited as successful examples. These cases demonstrate that regime change can produce functioning democratic orders under very specific conditions: total military defeat, the absence of a domestic insurgency, cohesive national institutions, and a sustained, well-resourced foreign presence. Germany's postwar recovery benefited from the Marshall Plan, while Japan's transformation preserved the symbolic institution of the emperor, ensuring continuity amidst reform. These were not mere removals of regimes, but full reconstructions of state systems under extraordinary international consensus and financial support.

In contrast, most regime change efforts since the Cold War have lacked these foundational elements. The 1953 coup in Iran, orchestrated by British and American intelligence services, removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and reinstalled the Shah. Though executed as a Cold War necessity, the operation ultimately delegitimized liberal nationalism and contributed to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Likewise, the CIA-supported overthrow of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala (1954) led to decades of military dictatorship, civil war, and human rights abuses.

The pattern repeated itself across Latin America: in Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), and Argentina (1976), where Western-backed military regimes replaced elected governments. While some regimes eventually transitioned to democracy, the intervening periods were marked by repression, disappearances, and societal trauma. The cost of these transitions cannot be understood in short-term geopolitical metrics alone.

The Middle East: The Epicenter of Strategic Overreach

No region more vividly illustrates the perils of regime change than the Middle East—a cauldron of historical grievances, ethno-sectarian divides, and foreign interventions. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq exemplifies the strategic illusion that regime removal leads to order. While the toppling of Saddam Hussein was swift, the dismantling of the Ba'ath Party, the Iraqi army, and the civil service apparatus created a governance vacuum. The decision to pursue de-Ba'athification and disband state institutions effectively dissolved Iraq's administrative backbone, plunging the country into chaos.



What followed was not the emergence of liberal democracy, but sectarian civil war. U.S. policymakers had assumed that Iraqi nationalism would cohere around newly formed democratic institutions. Instead, power gravitated toward ethno-sectarian militias and religious factions. The marginalization of Sunni Arabs, many of whom were former Ba'athists, fed the insurgency and later the rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whose reign of terror extended beyond Iraq's borders and drew the region into a wider war.

Afghanistan offers another cautionary tale. The 2001 intervention to remove the Taliban was initially framed as a counterterrorism mission. Over time, it morphed into an ambitious state-building project. While the Bonn Agreement set the framework for democratic transition, it was largely shaped by Western donors and excluded the Taliban and other significant factions. A new constitution, regular elections, and vast international aid failed to produce legitimacy in the eyes of many Afghans. Corruption soared, warlordism returned, and security remained fragile outside urban areas.

The abrupt collapse of the Afghan government in 2021, despite two decades of foreign support and over \$2 trillion in spending, underscored the limits of imposed governance. The Taliban's return was not merely a military victory; it was an indictment of a two-decade-long project that failed to build durable institutions with local credibility.

Libya's 2011 revolution, supported by NATO airstrikes, removed Muammar Gaddafi under the auspices of the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine. Yet with no post-conflict stabilization plan, Libya descended into civil war, fractured into rival governments, and became a transit hub for arms trafficking and migration crises affecting Europe. Syria's ongoing conflict—where regime change was pursued by proxy—resulted in over 500,000 deaths and displaced more than 13 million people. The West's mixed messages and selective support further fragmented the opposition, allowing extremist factions to flourish.

In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition's 2015 intervention aimed at restoring the internationally recognized government of President Hadi escalated into a regional proxy war. Regime change by military force, even with broad international backing, became a quagmire of unintended consequences: humanitarian catastrophe, fragmented sovereignty, and Iranian entrenchment.

Strategic Blowback and Regional Realities

What unites these examples is a fundamental misunderstanding of political legitimacy in the Middle East. Strongmen like Saddam, Assad, or Gaddafi were brutal but maintained internal order through coercive institutions deeply embedded in local power networks. Removing them without simultaneously restructuring those networks created vacuums that neither democratic forces nor foreign armies could fill.

Moreover, regime change efforts often misread the resilience of authoritarian institutions. Assad, despite international isolation and civil war, had retained power thanks to a mix of military consolidation, Russian and Iranian support, and the fragmentation of opposition forces. This



highlights a core dilemma: regimes that survive external attempts to topple them often emerge more authoritarian, more paranoid, and more repressive.

Beyond the Middle East: Global Lessons

In Southeast Asia, U.S. efforts to bolster or change regimes during the Vietnam War produced similar instability. The removal of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, though welcomed by Washington, created a power vacuum that undermined the South Vietnamese government's coherence. The subsequent descent into protracted war and eventual collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 demonstrated the perils of conflating regime change with national stability.

In Africa, the Western-backed ouster of Laurent Gbagbo in the Ivory Coast (2011), while ending an electoral crisis, did little to heal the deep political divisions that persist. Earlier, the French-led removal of Jean-Bédél Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1979) replaced one authoritarian regime with another fragile one. And Mobutu Sese Seko's rise in Congo, enabled by U.S. support during the Cold War, exemplified how regime change for geopolitical convenience can yield decades of kleptocracy and state decay.

Even in non-military contexts, efforts to influence regime outcomes have proven destabilizing. Western backing of Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004) and the Euromaidan movement (2014) contributed to democratic aspirations but also provoked geopolitical confrontation with Russia. In Belarus, the 2020 protest movement received strong rhetorical support from the West, but little material follow-through, illustrating the limits of external encouragement without structural leverage.

Strategic Costs for the Interveners

The legacy of failed regime change is not limited to target states. Intervening powers often suffer reputational damage, strategic overreach, and domestic political backlash. The Vietnam War discredited U.S. foreign policy for a generation. The Iraq War divided allies and drained resources. In each case, the costs far outweighed the intended benefits.

What's more, the assumption that regime change can surgically remove undesirable leadership while preserving stability is fundamentally flawed. Regimes are not merely individuals at the top—they are networks of coercion, patronage, ideology, and institutions. To remove one is to destabilize the entire system.

This is not to suggest that external actors must remain passive in the face of atrocities or threats. But alternatives to regime change exist: sustained diplomatic pressure, economic incentives, support for civil society, and multilateral engagement. These tools are slower, less dramatic, and often politically unglamorous—but historically, they have yielded more durable results.

Conclusion: The Mirage of Control

Regime change endures as a concept because it appeals to a desire for clarity and agency in a complex world. Yet the historical record underscores its dangers. Unless taken under conditions of



overwhelming consensus, strategic patience, and local legitimacy, regime change remains a high-risk strategy with low probability of success.

The belief that governments can be changed like pawns in a game of chess ignores the intricate social contracts that bind societies, however flawed they may be. Changing a government is easy; building a state is not. History, rather than ideology, should be the guide—but usually, it is not.

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