



Lesson 118

Perils Facing the World part 1

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In this lesson we are going to look at the external issues that the world is facing today. First, we're going to look at Russia and the Ukrainian war. Then we're going to look at China and the rise and rule of Xi Jinping. Next, we're going to look at Iran and its support for Russia. Lastly, we're going to look at inflation and issues that face the United States.

Conflict: Russia and Ukraine

An isolated Russia

Putin's Russia has been, for a while, cut off from the rest of the world to an extent. This isolation is only broadening. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, western countries have imposed sanctions (including on specific people), tariffs, and limited exports to Russia. On February 24th of this year, the anniversary of the beginning of Russia's invasion, more measures like these were introduced to further weaken and isolate Russia. Many western countries (especially the United States) even wanted to kick Russia out of the G20; Ukraine agreed with this idea, and although Russia wasn't kicked out, Putin didn't attend the 2022 G20 summit. Russia was even excluded from the 2022 World Cup. Because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Germany suspended a gas pipeline from Russia (the Nord Stream 2 pipeline); this would have brought a lot of Russian gas to Europe - and a lot of money to Russia. But this did not happen, in fact last year Europe's use of Russian gas fell by 55%. On January 21st, Putin announced that Russia would partially leave the New START program. New START is a nuclear nonproliferation agreement between the United States and Russia that was started in 2011 and recently extended until 2026. Among other things, this program limited the amount of different types of nuclear weapons that the United States and Russia could possess, it also allowed them to inspect each other's nuclear arsenal up to eighteen times per year. On the 21st Putin declared that he would no longer allow NATO countries to inspect Russia's nuclear weapons, something that he had refused to let them do earlier that month. NEW START is the last treaty on arms control between the United States and Russia and its partial suspension further isolates Russia. Through internal and external actions, Russia is being further and further isolated from the rest of the world, and as long as the war in Ukraine continues, this isolation will only grow.

Time line of the war

The war in Ukraine is one of if not the most significant ongoing conflict in the world right now. It started on February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. They attacked Ukraine's second largest city and capital- Kyiv, attempting to overthrow President Zelensky. The very next day the European Union, United States, and other countries imposed several sanctions on Russia. March 2022 was the deadliest month for civilians, with more being killed than currently any other month. On March 2nd, seven Russian banks were banned from accessing an international financing system, and on March 15th Russia took control of the Kherson region. In April of 2022, Russia bombed a train station killing fifty civilians, and Ukraine sank one of Russia's best ships. In May, the siege of Mariupol ended. The Ukrainian military in the area had been forced into a steel plant where they held out against the Russians for weeks, but finally surrendered. Regardless, the siege became a symbol for Ukraine's resistance against Russia. In June, Ukraine reduced Russia's naval power by gaining a bit of land, forcing Russia off Snake Island. The United States also supplied Ukraine with rocket

systems that month. In July, Russia took control of Luhansk after weeks of fighting. Ukraine followed up this loss in August by launching a counteroffensive. They targeted military infrastructure used by Russia and regained territory in eastern Ukraine. In September, Ukraine retook more territory in the Kharkiv region. On September 21st, Russia announced partial mobilization of its citizens. An explosion that damaged a bridge that connected Crimea to Russia (which was used by Russia), in October led Russia to launch a series of air strikes against Ukraine. They bombed Ukraine's energy infrastructure and cities - including Kyiv. In November, Ukraine recaptured Kherson from Russia - a significant victory. In December, Ukraine carried out drone strikes on military bases in Russia. The United States announced Ukraine would receive Patriot missile systems, and also that month Putin made subtle threats to use nuclear weapons. In January of 2023, Ukraine bombed a building that housed Russian troops. Russia claims 89 were killed but Ukraine says the number is actually in the hundreds. Lastly in February, Russia began trying a new strategy to retake eastern Ukraine, while being met with heavy losses in other parts of the country.

China: What is Xi doing?

Xi Jinping's rise to power

Xi Jinping is the current president of China. In 1982, When he was 29 years old, he was made the deputy, and soon after leader, of the Communist Party in the Zhengding county in China. Three years later, he became vice mayor of the city of Xiamen and remained in that position for 17 years. In 2002, he moved to Zhejiang and became the party chief. Five years later, he was appointed as the party chief in Shanghai but only remained in that position for a few months. Later that year, he became a leader within the Politburo Standing Committee, which is the top leadership ranks of the Communist Party. Less than a year later, in March 2008, he became the vice president of China. In 2012, he became the general secretary of the Communist Party-the highest position. And less than a year after that he was elected as the President. In China, the people do not vote for their president. Instead, a body called the National People's Congress vote for the President. Xi Jinping almost received a unanimous vote, save for one nay and two abstentions.

Xi Jinping's leadership

Xi Jinping has not been the wisest with all of the power he has amassed. In the past Xi has done things rashly, for example the people of China, as well as the economy, were hurt badly by his "zero COVID" policies, but when he ended them last December there was a surge (one big contributor being the fact that China has a low vaccination rate because Xi has refused to allow foreign vaccines to be administered). Xi also seems to think that local leaders are the ones to blame for many of China's problems - taking the blame off himself. Xi has continued to support Russia, despite its actions in Ukraine, which is hurting China. But Xi is still consolidating his power. This week the Chinese Congress is approving his plan to restructure the Chinese government's control in several sectors like technology, business, finances, and national security. Xi Jinping is also having new leaders appointed - who will answer to him, showing us that he will continue to rule China how he sees fit for the foreseeable future.

Iran: Domestic and International Issues

Protests in Iran

The recent protests in Iran have been the most significant threat to the regime since the 1970s. On September 14, 2022, 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was arrested by Iran's Guidance Patrol for wearing an "improper" hijab. According to witnesses, she was severely beaten by the officers, and was pronounced dead two days later. A CT scan confirmed she had sustained head injuries. Beginning in Tehran, her death sparked unrest and protests against Iran's government (on September 16th). The protests started small and demanded the end of the mandatory hijab. But they soon grew into a national demonstration. Large street protests have taken place in all of Iran's major cities and many smaller ones. Schools and universities have reported strikes and outcries. Some say this is the greatest challenge to Iran's government since the revolution in 1979. Protests are often small and fast, but frequent. People block the streets with their cars to stop security from getting close, as well as wearing masks to avoid being identified. Clothing seen as symbols of oppression such as the hijab and turban (viewed as the regime's symbol) have been burnt or discarded. Iran's government is responding to the protests violently. In some regions, military vehicles and weapons have been used against the protestors. The government crackdowns are especially targeted in areas such as Kurdistan-the homes of ethnic minorities. People are said to have been shot for showing support by honking their car horns. The reported death toll of civilians is over 500, but likely higher since many deaths go unreported. Over 20,000 people have been jailed, with officials going as far as storing people in warehouses as jails are nearly filled. In December of 2022, the first protester was executed for "corruption on earth." A unique aspect of these protests are the demographics. Iranians of all ethnicities, genders, and ages have joined the fight against their government. However, the protesters are mainly women and younger people (Gen Z). The revolt is led by women, who have come out to oppose government oppression against them, and against Iranians as a whole. They aren't calling for small incremental reforms, rather change that's extensive and meaningful. Iranians are angry over the government's policies, especially the ones dealing with dress code, the imposition of Islamic law, the lack of free expression, violation of women's rights, and many other grievances. While phrases such as "death to the dictator" are chanted during protests, the main chant is "woman, life, freedom." On top of the increase in inequality, Iran's economy was crippled by sanctions when Trump pulled out of the nuclear deal-prompting further outcry. While the protests have been relatively small, they are very persistent. The Iranian government has so far been unable to stop them. The end of Iran's government doesn't seem likely, but If Iranians do have a chance of bringing about change, they need western governments to give their full support. Some say that if the West applied enough pressure, large parts of Iran's military and some politicians would abandon the regime.

Iran and nuclear weapons

On May 8, 2018, the United States withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal during the presidency of Donald J. Trump. (As we saw in Lesson 110, this action would benefit the conservative right agenda.) Now that Joseph R. Biden is president, Iran does not want to re-enter the Nuclear Deal. “Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, in his first U.S. media interview [Sep. 2022], said that the Biden administration’s promise to adhere to a new nuclear agreement was ‘meaningless’ without guarantees that the United States would not again unilaterally withdraw from the deal in the future,” *“Iran says no nuclear deal without U.S. guarantees it won’t walk out again” The Washington Post*. This can cause problems because without being in the nuclear deal, Iran has the freedom to build nuclear weapons without oversight-which it has already begun to do. What makes it even more concerning is that Iran and Russia are close allies. Iran has been supporting Russia through the Ukraine war. In an article titled *“Iran Doubles Down on Arms for Russia”* published by *Foreign Policy* two days ago (March 3, 2023), it said “Iran is doubling down on military support for Russia in a series of new military deals that could prolong the war in Ukraine.” To this Movement, it should not be surprising that Iran is supporting Russia against Ukraine because Iran is under Russia’s sphere of influence.

Division: The United States and Canada

A divided United States

In the United States there is an obvious challenge that we will face this year: political polarization. Late last year the midterms took place and President Biden lost total control of Congress. As we know the Democrats managed to keep control in the Senate (and actually gained a seat there), but the Republicans won the House of Representatives. This means that for the next few years the Democrats will have control of the Executive branch and the Upper House, while Republicans will have control of the Lower House - therefore basically nothing will get done. Republicans and Democrats simply don't really get along, they rarely work together, and when they do it is usually the Democrats who agree on major compromises. This polarization isn't only at the Federal level; you can see it at the state level as well. One example is abortions rights, whereas five states recognize the right to abortion under their Constitution, twelve states have near total bans on the procedure. Regular Americans are also extremely polarized, and this way of thinking has been growing over the years. Last year 62% of Republicans and 54% of Democrats thought very unfavorably about the other party. This political polarization will be a challenge for the United States this year - and there is no evidence that it will ever calm down.

A divided Canada

Political polarization has cemented itself in several countries, and Canada is headed to become one of them. It's common knowledge that the United States has become extremely divided along party lines, and Canada is showing signs of similar polarization. Canada may have multiple prominent political parties, but this isn't a safeguard against the erosion of democracy. Polarization in Canada isn't as straightforward as conservatives against liberals, as mentioned above, Canada has more than two major political parties. The belief that around 25% of Canadians hate their political rivals brings to light a different kind of polarization: the kind where politicians stop working with members of other parties or finding common ground. It's an "us" vs. "them" kind of polarization that is gaining traction, this is called "affective polarization." Decency is thrown out as inflammatory attacks and insults are exchanged between parties; some policies and actions being labeled "un-Canadian." Some politicians are more divisive than others, such as Pierre Poilievre (a prominent conservative leader) who leans into polarization similar to Trump. It's unlikely, but there are talks about two liberal (NDP and Liberal party) parties merging, which would further fuel division. The bad news is that this polarization is likely going to get worse. As attacks between groups increase, citizens will be led to believe other parties are a threat to democracy. Serious subjects that affect the country will be pulled into the chaos, such as abortion and immigration being labeled a "liberal issue." Or subjects such as climate change and energy being weaponized for political gain. Scholars have several reasons why affective polarization is on the rise in Canada. Politicians could be simply exploiting social divisions, however, the rise of social media is definitely a factor. Canadians constantly consume United States politics, news, radio and social media-and such exposure leads their country's media to reflect what it absorbs. Just like the United States, Canadian media is full of disinformation and dysfunction, which are the perfect resources for polarization. An example of the political divide in Canada was the trucker protests in 2022. People gathered in the capital of Canada to protest COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Some Canadians say that the biggest cost of the pandemic was the

extent to which the country divided over issues dealing with COVID-19. Once this polarization is in place, it doesn't remain on a single issue: it spreads. For example, citizens who aren't vaccinated mostly side with Russia in the Ukraine war. The misinformation that Canadians believe is the same force that fuels far-right support for Trump in the United States. Speaking of the far-right, another effect of social media is that it brings groups of people together, even if they are physically separated. As extremist groups in Canada and the United States become closer coordinated, disruption and protests, will increase: some say Canada is even headed for political violence.

The Economy: Inflation

Inflation

The effects of inflation are being felt around the world. The first of the main causes of inflation was the COVID-19 pandemic when people weren't purchasing as much stuff, so the government had to essentially jump start the economy. The second was when the United States was coming out of the pandemic, and China shut down their economy (almost everything is made in China). And the third is the war on Ukraine, which caused sanctions to be placed on countries, further slowing the global economy. "This unprecedented confluence of overlapping shocks pushed inflation to levels most countries haven't seen in nearly 50 years." *"Ten Risk for 2023 and Beyond" Eurasia Group*. Inflation is felt through the higher prices of products around the world, for example-gas prices. According to the Energy Information Administration, the average gas price in January 2019 was \$2.34. That was pre-pandemic. Now, in January 2023, the average gas price is \$3.45. Gas prices isn't the only thing that have gone up due to inflation - so has the price of many foods. Another effect of inflation is job loss. During the pandemic, many people were laid off because their jobs couldn't afford to continue paying them. And now, the same issue is presenting itself, but because things are so expensive people can't afford to buy them. According to Forbes, inflation causes increased layoffs and slower hiring. These are just three effects of inflation.

In summary:

Russia

Putin has been isolating Russia from the rest of the world, and that will only get worse. We saw how on January 21st Russia partially backed out of the last nuclear weapons control program (New START) that it had with the United States.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 was a big move by Putin. March 2022 was the deadliest month for Ukrainian civilians, but Ukraine has been standing their ground, and even winning against Russia, like the bombing of the building of Russia troops last January.



China

Xi Jinping has been consolidating his power and control over China since he was appointed to the office of president in 2013 (after being made the leader of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012).



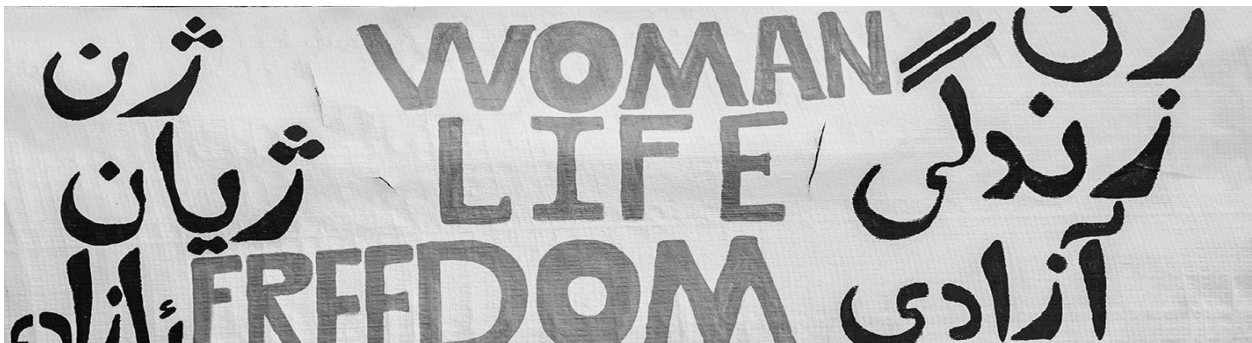
We saw how Xi, in using his power unilaterally, has done some things that are hurting China - like his sudden relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions that led to a big outbreak in China. And he is currently restructuring the government to be more fully under his control.

Iran

Iran has had several issues, both internally and externally.

Internally: Iran has been rocked by unrest and protests since Mahsa Amini's death on September 16, 2022 and they are still happening. Protests are rare in the country, but the Iranians, especially young people, and more specifically women, are tired of the regime's oppression.

Externally: Iran has also been increasing its nuclear weapons program since Trump pulled the US out of the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018.



The US and Canada



The political division in the US is another issue that we will face this year. Since the midterm elections late last year neither the Republicans nor the Democrats are in charge of both the Executive and Legislative branches. That means that this year there will be a lot of dysfunction in the federal government.

This political dysfunction is starting to be visible in other countries too, in this lesson we focused on Canada. Canada has more than two major parties but they still are plagued with polarization.

The Economy

The economy was not in particularly good shape at the beginning of this year. This is mostly because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the things that have happened during it: job loss and reduced spending for example. Inflation is a global problem that is still around.



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