

JANUARY 2018

# CURRENT HISTORY

A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs



## GLOBAL TRENDS

### Heavy Lifts

**The Elusive Goal of Food Security**

Rosamond L. Naylor

**The Right Way to Build Climate Resilience**

Daniel P. Aldrich

### Survival Mode

**The UN in the Trump Era**

Thomas G. Weiss

**Nuclear Fear and Loathing**

Sharon Squassoni

*Plus:*

\$8.95US \$9.95CAN

01>



074470753070

# CURRENT HISTORY

January 2018

Vol. 117, No. 795

## CONTENTS

- 3 **The Elusive Goal of Global Food Security.** . . . . . *Rosamond L. Naylor*  
While great strides have been made against hunger, conflict and climate change are undermining progress in some regions, and insidious forms of malnutrition are on the rise.
- 10 **The United Nations and Sovereignty in the Age of Trump.** . . . . . *Thomas G. Weiss*  
Even in an era of resurgent nationalism, the biggest global problems require collective action. The UN remains indispensable but needs reform to become more effective.
- 16 **The Right Way to Build Resilience to Climate Change.** . . . . . *Daniel P. Aldrich*  
Innovative Dutch-style infrastructure can help cities withstand the effects of global warming; Strong social bonds may be just as important. *Fourth in a series on climate adaptation around the world.*
- 22 **The Strained Marriage of Public Debts and Private Contracts.** . . . . . *Anna Gelpern*  
Contract reform has become an important tool in bond restructurings, but recent crises made clear that it is not enough on its own to handle the complex politics of sovereign debt.
- 29 **How Big Data Feeds Big Crime.** . . . . . *David S. Wall*  
The global economy's increasing reliance on huge flows of data is making societies more vulnerable to disruptive new forms of cybercrime that thrive in the dark corners of the Internet.
- PERSPECTIVE**
- 35 **Fear, Loathing, and Nuclear Disarmament.** . . . . . *Sharon Squassoni*  
A volatile US president has stirred up new angst over the nuclear peril. The UN treaty banning the bomb may not have much immediate effect, but it could be a first step toward a safer future.
- BOOKS**
- 38 **Beginning of the End?** . . . . . *Joshua Lustig*  
A pair of political scientists warn that history offers many examples of democracies collapsing after demagogues come to power—and the United States is not immune.
- THE MONTH IN REVIEW**
- 40 **November 2017**  
An international chronology of events in November, country by country, day by day.

# CURRENT HISTORY

January 2018

*“What will it take to meet the global food needs of up to 10 billion people by midcentury in the midst of expanding civil conflicts, human displacement, extreme climate events, and other natural disasters?”*

## The Elusive Goal of Global Food Security

ROSAMOND L. NAYLOR

Ending world hunger is a universal goal, yet progress and social awareness of the issue waxes and wanes in the course of broader political and economic developments. The massive famine in China under Chairman Mao's 1958–62 Great Leap Forward, a succession of severe droughts and associated famines in India in 1965–66, and the political violence that accompanied regime change in Indonesia in 1964–67 left tens of millions of people starving and drew global attention to the threat of food insecurity. What emerged from these events was an international commitment to agricultural technology transfers, water resource development, and foreign assistance—partly in the spirit of humanitarian goodwill and partly in pursuit of long-term geopolitical and economic interests revolving around the Cold War. Whatever the motivation, the outcome over the ensuing decades was more than a doubling of staple cereal yields in Asia, and a steady decline in real (inflation-adjusted) cereal prices.

Despite these gains, a second, quite different, rallying cry for food security resounded in 2007–8 as international grain prices spiked, food riots erupted in numerous cities throughout the developing world, and the global economy headed into a deep recession. Several factors sparked this crisis, but unlike the earlier periods of dire food shortages, the root causes included unwieldy financial markets and escalating demands for food, animal feeds, and fuel (including biofuels) in a globalized economy. This episode prompted new analyses of the connection between global commodity markets and food security, the political-economy founda-

tions of agricultural development, and the differential impacts of food prices on net producers and net consumers. In the five-year period from 2007 to 2012, international cereal prices were highly unstable, varying by as much as 300 percent.

Today, international agricultural markets have settled at relatively low prices, but civil conflicts, extreme climate events, and other natural disasters are blocking the path toward ending hunger. In February 2017, the United Nations declared a famine in South Sudan, as war and economic collapse ravaged the newly independent nation. Although the famine officially ended in mid-2017, food emergencies and severe undernourishment still threaten tens of millions of people in South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia, and Syria, due to a combination of civil conflict, prolonged droughts, and occasional floods. On the surface, it seems incomprehensible that there could be such difficulty in addressing these looming famines at a time when global cereal production and stocks are at historical highs. But the problem is not a matter of food supply; the problem is war.

According to a 2017 report by UN agencies, “The State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World,” the number of people suffering from chronic undernourishment (as measured by calorie deficits) has ticked up in recent years and now stands at 815 million globally—roughly one in nine people worldwide. The majority, an estimated 490 million people, live in countries affected by conflict, where governance structures are weak, supply chains fail, and displaced populations lose economic and physical access to food. Food insecurity is especially pronounced in conflict-ridden communities throughout the world that are exposed to droughts, floods, and other natural disasters.

---

ROSAMOND L. NAYLOR is a professor of earth system science and director of the Center on Food Security and the Environment at Stanford University.

“Sovereignty can be and has been interpreted more inclusively—including during World War II—to justify cooperation in the face of common, existential threats.”

## The United Nations and Sovereignty in the Age of Trump

THOMAS G. WEISS

After serving as a British intelligence officer during World War II, Brian Urquhart was the second official recruited for the United Nations Secretariat in 1946. Looking back decades later on a distinguished career as an international civil servant, he quipped, “The UN is the last bastion of national sovereignty.” It was not a compliment. He was lamenting the world organization’s inability to come to the rescue of desperate people subjected to violent attacks on their human rights. Presidents, princes, and prime ministers claimed that what they did at home was exclusively their business. Other UN member states agreed.

More recently, the international community of states occasionally has applied the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” to revoke the license for mass murder claimed by sovereign thugs who abuse their citizens. Of course, states have also agreed to limit their sovereign prerogatives through international treaties of various sorts, and globalization means that they are largely powerless to halt some other intrusions—for instance through financial and technology transfers, and the free flow of information. In short, sovereignty ain’t quite what it used to be.

Nonetheless, the UN and other intergovernmental organizations—even the supposedly supranational European Union—remain firmly grounded in sovereignty, which US President Donald Trump made even clearer when he uttered the s-word 21 times in his September 2017 address to the UN General Assembly. His mantra was well received by such major powers as Russia, China, and India as well as minor ones including Zimbabwe and Cuba. These countries customarily emphasized

sovereignty to ward off criticism from Washington. No longer.

The contrast with Barack Obama was stark. In his first address to the General Assembly in 2009, Obama referred to sovereignty just once while reaffirming the US commitment to international cooperation and multilateralism.

Although Trump and Vice President Mike Pence have tried unpersuasively to square the circle, “America First” actually means “America Alone.” The sting of Trump’s strident use of the phrase on the world’s biggest stage may have eased momentarily when he told other leaders that they were right to put their own countries first. However, his address was primarily a declaration of war on international obligations and cooperation, and an unconvincing effort to reassert the power of a single state to address global problems.

We should recall that Trump’s slogan has its isolationist origins in the America First Committee, which was the largest and best-organized antiwar group ever. It was founded in 1940 by the likes of proto-fascists Charles Lindbergh and Father Coughlin to keep the United States out of World War II. The America First Committee collapsed after Pearl Harbor. Trump’s contemporary adaptation has reached the height of power.

Among the “alternative facts” being peddled by the Trump administration is the claim that unilateralism is the way to address pressing problems—from terrorism to North Korea’s nuclear weapons to the planet’s changing climate. Yet no country is powerful enough to impose its will and solve global problems on its own. Tending one’s own garden is not a realistic strategy in 2018. Human welfare depends increasingly on effective collaboration across national boundaries. This obvious reality, like many others, is denied by the evidence-averse White House.

---

THOMAS G. WEISS is a professor of political science at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. His latest book, *Would the World Be Better Without the UN?* will be published in March by Polity Press, 2018.

“Focusing solely on physical infrastructure runs the risk of overlooking another critical component of resilience: social infrastructure.”

## The Right Way to Build Resilience to Climate Change

DANIEL P. ALDRICH

For 400 years, residents in the Inupiaq Eskimo town of Shishmaref, Alaska—population around 600—built and lived in homes on a narrow island of sand just three miles long, protected from the frigid waters of the Chukchi Sea by layers of ice. Their subsistence lifestyle

### Changing with the Climate

Fourth in a series

of hunting, fishing, and gathering remained largely unchanged. But in recent years, warming seas and rising air temperatures have melted permafrost and ice, allowing the water to come right up to homes on the shore. Some previously inhabited structures have collapsed. The sea has swallowed up 100 feet of coastline over 20 years. Physical infrastructure built to keep the town safe—such as rock seawalls—has only slowed the sea’s inexorable conquest or deflected currents to eat away at the sand and rocks up or down the beach.

Fourteen homes have already been towed from the town’s more vulnerable side. Locals speak of how their great-grandparents built homes on sand that has since turned treacherously unstable. Warmer seas have also resulted in thinner ice. Some villagers have fallen through and drowned in areas where the ice used to be solid year round.

Recognizing the danger of warmer, encroaching waters, the village has voted several times to relocate. Only a few people have actually moved. The Army Corps of Engineers projects that relocation costs will run close to \$180 million. Beyond the costs, many questions remain about where the people of Shishmaref might go. The town is one of about thirty in the region that experts believe are in imminent danger of destruction.

For years, it was possible to assume that climate change would create problems only for future generations. No longer. Societies around the world now face the effects of climate change on a daily basis. Millions of people from developing countries flee every year from slowly unfolding climate-related crises like drought and famine. These crises in turn may be fueling political violence and civil wars over access to water, fertile land, and other critical resources. Studies from the Center for Climate and Security, among others, have identified climate-driven violent incidents around the world, such as bloody riots in the summer of 2017 by farmers facing ruin because of drought in India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu.

It is not only parts of the developing world that have seen impacts from global warming. Citizens of advanced, industrialized countries have begun moving from long-occupied areas that are now threatened by rising sea levels, soil subsidence, and the erosion of barrier islands. These coastal areas, such as Shishmaref, have been inhabited for hundreds if not thousands of years. But in the Anthropocene Era (the formal name for the present geological time period in which human beings have begun to alter the earth’s atmosphere and environment), time is running out for such low-lying communities.

Of course, nations with limited resources have fewer options. With only two or three meters of land above sea level, Palau, the Cook Islands, Kiribati, and other small island developing states face grim futures and the need for mass relocation. One man’s attempt to be recognized by New Zealand as a climate-change refugee due to the slow submersion of his native island of Kiribati failed; the petitioner, Ioane Teitiota, was deported in 2015 after losing a legal appeal. But many

---

DANIEL P. ALDRICH is a professor of political science and public policy at Northeastern University.

“[S]overeign debt is a complex political institution, which cannot be reduced to creditor coordination or any other contract problem.”

## The Strained Marriage of Public Debts and Private Contracts

ANNA GELPERN

**A**s a new year begins, governments around the world are poised for another cycle of debt disputes and missed payments. Venezuela is stumbling into default after starving its people for years to pay foreign creditors. Its hard currency reserves are drying up under pressure from US sanctions as the government battles hyperinflation, runs out of things to sell to China and Russia, and tries to buy time with a wacky virtual currency scheme.

Meanwhile, Ukraine and Puerto Rico will each go to court in January to fend off debt collectors. Ukraine has appealed an English court decision that would enforce its debt to Russia as if it were an ordinary commercial contract, despite Russia's annexation of Crimea, crippling trade sanctions, and sponsorship of separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine. A fund known for making a fortune from suing Argentina has challenged a US federal law enacted in 2016 that promised bankruptcy-style debt relief for Puerto Rico. If the fund wins, hopes for a fresh start for the hurricane-battered commonwealth and an equitable resolution for its creditors would dim.

On the bright side, Greece plans to exit the multilateral lending programs that many of its citizens had come to associate with economic collapse, austerity, and loss of policy autonomy. It aims to return to the private financial markets in the fall of 2018. Looming in the background is its debt to euro area governments, which will take generations to repay.

Each of these crises is intensely political, even constitutional, but politics is barely visible in today's sovereign debt restructuring regime. This informal regime coalesced in the 1980s and 1990s

around a relatively stable transatlantic core of governments, international organizations, and private creditor groups, and depended on coordination among them. Throughout this period, private capital flows grew in size and importance to sovereign finance. In response, debt contract reform moved to the forefront of the policy agenda, and quietly took over.

Private contracts are the foundation of private capital movements. The catch phrases “freedom of contract” and “sanctity of contract” capture the ideal: debtors and creditors freely agree on the terms of their relationship up front, and must abide by this private constitution in good times and bad. Domestic courts step in only to resolve disputes.

When governments borrow in the private financial markets, they enter into private debt contracts. These contracts are highly standardized, which makes them easy to trade. In a world where governments borrow primarily from the private markets, changing contracts is an appealing way to deal with sovereign debt crises. The trouble is, governments are very different from private debtors. Trying to solve public debt problems by changing private contracts is at best inadequate. At worst, it can backfire and complicate crisis response.

### CONTRACT LOGIC

The logic of public debt policy investing so heavily in private contract design is intriguing. It holds that crises would be less frequent, less protracted, and less damaging if only debtors and creditors could tweak a few words in their IOUs. Well-designed contracts might even make governments prudent and creditors collaborative.

The idea has a long and respectable pedigree. In the 1930s, when the US Congress was debat-

---

ANNA GELPERN is a professor of law at Georgetown University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Peter G. Peterson Institute for International Economics.

“Big data and big crimes are powered by cloud technologies and the Internet of Things . . .”

## How Big Data Feeds Big Crime

DAVID S. WALL

“Big data is the new oil,” said Clive Humby, the British mathematician and marketing expert, back in 2006. But data, like oil, cannot be used unless it is refined into valuable products that create profit. Big data—the transactional and content-viewing data generated by our interactions with the Internet—must be analyzed, or refined, and made into information products. Only then does it acquire a value that others are prepared to pay for.

Big data helps businesses predict consumer behavior. You have probably noticed how curiously appropriate many of the suggestions from your favorite online vendors are. They analyze data from your past purchases, your movements, and your entertainment likes and dislikes in order to calculate what you would like to buy, eat, listen to, or watch. Big data analytics are also used for many other functions, such as weather forecasting, traffic bulletins, and some more contentious tasks like allocating policing resources or informing judges and parole boards about an individual’s likelihood of recidivism.

Big data is a very disruptive phenomenon. It has brought a range of exciting new tools that offer great potential for identifying new truths about social and physical phenomena that were previously impossible to research on such a large scale. But it has become a generic buzzword for a disparate range of analytic technologies based on algorithms that are supposed to somehow accurately predict the future. There is greater scope for disruption when the analytics shift from anticipating possible events—assigning probabilities on the basis of what has happened previously—to making predictions about when a specific event will occur or what specific individuals or groups will do in the future.

The commercial realization of value in these products has stimulated heavy demand for data—any data—and the creation and sale of tools to analyze it. Demand far outstrips supply, partly because the genuine value of big data products has been exaggerated by the claims of some analytic marketing campaigns.

This demand has also transformed some aspects of criminal behavior. Most of the illegal products and tools for big data analysis that help criminals can be obtained from illicit online markets such as AlphaBay, Silk Road, and Dream Market, to name a few. These markets are regularly taken down by law enforcement, but just as regularly reappear in a different format. The dark web is where the illegal markets and communications forums are found. It is part of the deep web, which underlies the visible Internet and is beyond the reach of search engines such as Google. The deep web is where the mechanics of social media and other communications operate. It can be accessed by tools such as the Tor network, which uses encryption to preserve users’ anonymity.

Lucrative illicit markets for data have facilitated a range of what I call big crimes, even though the law relating to some of them is not yet clearly defined. These are largely “upstream” crimes such as data breaches, distributed denial of service attacks (DDoS), and mass spam attacks. Upstream crimes, usually committed against businesses, are damaging in their own right but also provide the information resources or capability for further crimes.

“Downstream” crimes take place when the stolen data is sold to unscrupulous types who may try to use it to exploit or extort either the individuals whose personal information has been compromised or the owner of the database, whether it is a business or another type of organization. This can lead to the disruption of services and businesses,

---

DAVID S. WALL is a professor of criminology at the Centre for Criminal Justice Studies in the University of Leeds’ School of Law.

# Fear, Loathing, and Nuclear Disarmament

SHARON SQUASSONI

The past year was one of extremes for nuclear disarmament.

At the United Nations, more than 120 countries negotiated a nuclear weapons ban in record time. The chief negotiator, Costa Rican Ambassador Elayne Whyte Gómez, hailed the new legal norm that will in principle prohibit the use and threat of use, testing, development, production, possession, transfer, and stationing of nuclear weapons. On the heels of this milestone, in October, the Nobel committee awarded the Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons for its efforts to draw attention to the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use” of nuclear arms, which helped build momentum for the ban treaty.

In the same year, however, North Korea tested a hydrogen bomb and steadily advanced its program to develop missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads. US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un indulged in alarming rhetoric about their ability and willingness to destroy each other’s country, presumably with nuclear weapons.

Even “safe” agendas like nuclear arms control and nonproliferation seem off-limits for the moment for the United States and Russia, which previously cooperated in those areas. Stockpile reductions beyond the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), if they are contemplated, must await completion of the Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review and resolution of noncompliance allegations under the landmark 1987 US-Soviet treaty that eliminated an entire class of intermediate-range nuclear-tipped missiles (the INF Treaty). Even if the Trump administration wanted to pursue nuclear arms control, the current anti-Russian sentiment within Congress on so many issues could make ratification of any new treaties difficult if not impossible.

From all public accounts, however, it is clear that Trump views nuclear weapons as an essential—and usable—component of US military power. He told reporters in October that he wanted “modernization and total rehabilitation” of the arsenal. Reports that the Trump administration also favors more usable nuclear weapons with lower yields align with several public statements suggesting his willingness to resort to the nuclear option under a variety of circumstances. Whatever ultimately happens with stockpile modernization, Trump’s threats to rain down “fire and fury like the world has never seen” and “totally destroy” North Korea have many people worried.

These concerns over a potential lack of presidential restraint prompted the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to begin a series of hearings in November on the authority to order the use of nuclear weapons. Senator Chris Murphy, Democrat of Connecticut, said, “We are concerned that the president is so unstable, is so volatile, has a decision-making process that is so quixotic, that he might order a nuclear weapons strike that is wildly out of step with US national security interests.” According to the committee chairman, Tennessee Republican Bob Corker, Congress had not held a hearing on this topic since 1976.

Others are worried about attacks on the United States. One recent poll (for *Investor’s Business Daily*) found that 73 percent of Americans were “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned” about the possibility of a nuclear strike by North Korea against the United States or its allies. At least three North Korean missile tests in 2017 demonstrated enough range to hit the US mainland, though there is still some uncertainty about their payloads and reliability. Within Washington policy circles, concerns about nuclear attacks are not limited to North Korea. They also extend to Russia’s nuclear modernization program, its violations of the INF treaty, and the perception that Moscow may now be more inclined to use tactical nuclear weapons to offset its inferiority in conventional forces, stealing a page from NATO’s Cold War playbook.

---

SHARON SQUASSONI is a senior fellow and director of the Proliferation Prevention Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.