THE polarizing and regressive characteristics of the digitalized political domains have received much attention. As the practices of digital meddling, induced polarization, and catalyzed regression are spreading, an overall confluence of circumstances is causing convulsions in democracies and rapidly narrowing their previously more inclusive societies. The regression can lead them deeper into intensifying nexus of internal and external drivers where externalizations, diversions, interferences, and meddling are increasingly commonplace. As such, the key premise of this work is to improve existing understanding of the nexus between internal domestic division and external foreign action, which has hitherto received relatively little attention in modern scholarly works. This work studies the following key questions: What kind of power-political dynamics are we now facing in the current world order? How are democratic Western states, and especially the United States (US), challenged—internally and externally—in an age of increasingly competitive geopolitics? Most importantly, how does the digital domain facilitate the possibilities of political regression both from within and without the gates of Western democracies? This book gives an account of our contemporary times that contain

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1 E.g. Marks et al. (2019) and Brady et al. (2018).

2 There are notable exceptions: for example, Paul Kennedy’s 1987 work, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, focuses on the economic and military drivers of the rise-and-fall narrative, but does not fully take into account the role of the cognitive and irrational dimensions in the overall process.
diversity of regressive factors and seeds of polarization ranging from the abuse of new technologies to the destabilizing spread of Covid-19 pandemic.

Our own times have often been called, and increasingly perceived as, borderless and connected. This can be seen as a virtue or a vice. Internal and external are hard to define in a world of global value and production chains. The flows that cross not only state borders but also the domains of sea, space, cyber, and air are defining our modern life (Aaltola 2014). The bordering “walls” and “city gates” are thought more and more in terms of flow control, access, security, vulnerability, and resilience. Increasingly, our cognitive experience, engagement, and flow are also defined by newer domains and services, such as social media platforms, the dynamic of which reshape and redefine domestic and foreign politics.

INTERNAL division has been a key driver in history. Examples are many. When the Goths headed by Alaric were besieging Rome in 410 CE, it is rumored that internal elements opened the outer gate of the city to the invaders: “But they were unable to guard against the secret conspiracy of their slaves and domestics, who either from birth or interest were attached to the cause of the enemy. At the hour of midnight, the Salarian gate was silently opened, and the inhabitants were awakened by the tremendous sound of the Gothic trumpet. Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the Imperial city, which had subdued and civilized so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia” (Gibbon 2010: I: 31). Historian Edward Gibbon, who detailed this account in his six-volume work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, was not the first to narrate the regressive decline and fall of a body politic. His account is predated by more ancient historians such as Thucydides and Zosimus, who have presented us with what some might call naturalistic and grimly realistic accounts of regressive vortexes that have engulfed and brought down empires and other political entities throughout history.

The conspiracy inside the city gates cited by Gibbon was supposedly motivated by factors such as ethnic bonds and factional interests. The city of Rome and, together with it, the Western part of the empire was set, metaphorically speaking, in a state of vortex from which the empire could no longer recover. The idea of “enemies within the gates” has received research attention through case studies on the supposed “fifth columns” and “enemy aliens.” These studies of possible and supposed collusion have
indirectly taken on the issue of an internal–external nexus.\textsuperscript{3} The critical junctures and situations described in these studies are tense, full of circles of suspicion and doubt. Conspiracies and paranoia run rampant. Because of this, it is easy to see that a fifth columnist can appear out of the figments of the dis-eased political imagination of a given time. Spies and traitors can appear out of thin air as one’s own failures are externalized and explained away by hidden enemy elements and their underhand subversive tactics. Crisis, failure, and political loss can be projected into forces that go beyond the usual and expected. Enemies are not only at the gate, they are often already seen within them because of collusion. Danger is seen as impending and immediate.

When morale is low, fifth columnists and enemies within can also be thought of as natural symptoms of the overall political regression. The talk about Russian actors meddling in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States can be seen, at least partly, in this context. Although many forms of meddling did in fact occur\textsuperscript{4} and are likely to take place again in 2020, the deepening regression is by now a part of the broader domestic discussion concerning the dangerous and escalating state of affairs in US politics. However, the discussion is not limited to the US alone, but considers also the overall intense deliberations concerning the possible regression of Western democracies and the liberal world order, coupled with the autocratic challenges posed by autocratic actors like Russia and China and with the pandemic era of Covid-19.

It can be further claimed that the political regression taking place in a state has certain general symptoms and proceeds in stages from a stable, vibrant, and steady body politic to extreme infighting, civil war, and state collapse. Suspicions and paranoia can be part of the political equation, and enemy aliens, spooks, and colluders can be symptoms of the perceived domestic trouble. Fifth columnists can be mere paranoia, but they can also reflect some real underlying worries that are acute in our times, during what might be called regressive multidimensional polarization, characterized by intensifying clash between the factions of democratic politics and the rise of centralized autocratic actors, such as China and Russia.

\textsuperscript{3}See, e.g., McMahon (2008) and Prysor (2005).

\textsuperscript{4}See, e.g., Mueller (2019) and US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2018).
On the one hand, fears about agents of regression reflect the internal processes whereby the community aims to (re)create political health and a more advantageous situation. In the US, the political thought after the 2016 elections has been focused on foreign elements and possible internal collusion. The troubles the nation has experienced are generalized and projected into often loose and stereotypical yet popular talk about immigrants, barbarian terrorists, and subversive Russian or unfair Chinese activities. To a degree, internal regression in the US can be used to understand the talk about collusion and external meddling. On the other hand, foreign powers really are drawn to signs of democratic weakness by strategic design, but also by opportunism as they try to co-opt and abuse these new emergent vulnerabilities. Moreover, there are also more irrational motives. The meddlers are often regressing themselves and, in many cases, they are more politically regressed than their democratic targets. They have their own regressive reasons for meddling. Moreover, the resulting confluence can further intensify mutual regressions and form negative downward-sloping spirals of coupled political failure that are, ultimately, not under any strategic control and proceeds in stages according to its own emergent logic.

There is a sense of an approaching precipice in many Western democracies. The growing internal polarization, identity wars, and tribalism have fed a sense of emergency further catalyzed by the tensions created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Two important books have pointed out the dangers of the regressive situation in 2018. Lilliana Mason’s book, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, details the deepening route of polarization from disagreements over policy issues to intense fights between two mega identities that have overrun practical common ground and, increasingly, the potential for practical political arbitration (Mason 2018). Francis Fukuyama’s (2018) work, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, explores the politics of fear that has led to the emergence of narrower identity groups and domestic infighting between them, replacing the more inclusive and civic-minded domestic polities. That this dis-ease is reaching toxic levels of contestation and lack of together-mindedness is pointed out by politicians as well. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron in March 2019 published an op-ed in major European newspapers. His message pointed

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5 See, e.g., Kushner (2010).
out a sense of urgency and emergency: “Never since the second world war has Europe been so essential. Yet never has Europe been in such a danger” (Macron 2019). He was not talking about just geographical Europe, but also about the very idea of liberal democracies based on the rule of law. They seemed to have lost much of the luster added to them by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. Autocracies are sensing, opportunistically and strategically, this weakened staying power and are seeing their own legitimacy in the rise in the failings of the democratic West. Polarizing monochromatic upheavals in the West are replacing their worst fears: color revolutions in the East. In the West, the emergence of Covid-19 is further triggering the sense of urgency, danger, and potential fragmentation. The pandemic has not been followed by lull in influence operations and meddling.

ELECTION is the key gauge of democracy’s health. Without elections, it is hard to imagine modern version of democracy, representative democracy. Meddling, heightening instability, and hybrid interference directed against democratic elections are new power-political signifiers that have come to characterize recent scenarios on global order. These arguably regressive elements are discussed and investigated intensely in different democracies, ranging from the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) and the US elections in 2016 to the French, and German elections. In fact, autocracies have been meddling in democracies based on the investigations of 2016 US presidential elections, 2017 French presidential elections, and 2017 German parliamentary elections (Aaltola 2017). The events are by now relatively well-researched thanks to a corpus of reports and investigations. Moreover, reports by the US Intelligence Community and Congressional Committees, together with the publication of the much-awaited Mueller Report in March 2019 on Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential elections, do appear to shed legal and forensic light on Russia’s meddling in the 2016 US elections. The influential Mueller Report, in particular, also provided a (relatively narrow) legal definition of the key political concept of “collusion,” with an emphasis on terms recognized by the US Code (e.g., “coordination” and “conspiracy”). Irrespective of specific legal definitions, recent Western elections indicate an emerging core practice whereby autocracies states meddle in democratic elections by hacking data, disseminating it as scandals through leaks, and

6See also Conley et al. (2016).
7See, e.g., Vilmer et al. (2018) and Conley and Vilmer (2018).
amplifying the effect by creating intense cognitive flows of disinformation and distrust across social media. The basic model is continually evolving to include newer practices and sets of actors. Thus, it is not repeated fully and in the basic form in new elections. The regressive meddling practices are innovative as digitalized political platforms and countermeasures evolve and develop. The approach here is to examine election interference and meddling, as a practice intimately related to the increasing geopolitical tensions between Western democracies and the rising autocratic challengers. The focus is on what can be called a regressive geo-digital nexus between democracies and autocracies.

However, not all electoral interferences are hack-and-leak operations. While the model derived from the 2016 US elections is not generalizable, it illustrates the core elements that are used in highly tailored ways by different autocratic actors. Further innovations and variations are to be expected that catalyze collusive tendencies and agitate democratic polities in new ways, such as mobilization through crowdsourcing and targetting through the use of artificial intelligence. The basic model developed in here focuses on the critical elections of the main Western democracies. Further research should also include elections, for example, in Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, Brazil, and India to develop a more comprehensive model and to see how the main autocracies differ in their meddling approaches.

The book expands the current research on the topic in two ways: (1) There has been a disconnect between election interference/meddling and wider political/international theory with the result that research so far has been relatively shallow in conceptual elaboration. This work connects the phenomenon to classical political theory, and in particular to the Thucydidean framework of political regression; and (2) The existing body of research also tends to lack a proper understanding of election meddling as a geopolitical practice, as most of the research focuses on single case studies and does not connect the phenomenon to the wider ongoing power-political transformations or to other societal changes, such as digitalization (Jamieson 2018). Overall, the growing ideological unrest in Western democracies needs to be better integrated into the geostrategic understanding of democratic vulnerabilities.

Today’s competitive world order is arguably characterized by growing animosities and regressive political developments. Because of the overall
downward slide, the relations between autocratic actors and democratic societies are marked by new power-political practices such as hybrid influencing and election meddling. Inside democracies, there is alarm and tangible awareness of one’s democratic vulnerability stemming from the emerging possibilities of outside actors abusing the networked and open nature of the Western democratic societies. At the same time, internal populist political movements increasingly contest liberal model of democracy. Political cleavages are opening up. Polarization is leading to fragmentation. This democratic political regression, loss of together-mindedness, and growing discord should not be viewed in isolation from the overall geopolitically regressive dynamics in geopolitics. In fact, the book argues that the external autocratic states, experiencing legitimacy and in-group power transition challenges, are drawn into intervene and participate in the regression of democracies. The main focus of analysis will be on Russia, but China’s practices are also investigated and contrasted with Russia’s efforts. This link between internal and external actors provides the background for a fuller understanding of the cases of hybrid influence, collusion, and election meddling.

A broader geopolitical game underlies the election meddling in the West. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, democracies have enjoyed considerable appeal. However, the other side of the coin is that autocracies have come to view democratic appeal and Western soft power as destabilizing threats to themselves, as drivers behind internal democratic movements, color revolutions, and power transition interferences. A more active strategy for some autocratic governments may be to strategically induce equal weaknesses in democracies, changing the prevailing geopolitical balance, and, thereby, strengthening the domestic stranglehold of the autocratic regimes. Influencing, manipulating, and disrupting cognitive flows through cyber methods and social media tactics provide an increasingly important part of the toolbox for autocratic operations. Democratic trust was among the key targets of the recent election hackings and hybrid operations in the various Western democracies. The aim was to engender distrust and polarization, and to reduce the cohesion in (and between) the Western democracies. The tensions between democracies are more visible, democratic solidarity is less tangible, and the transatlantic bonds are weakening (see e.g. Haukkala 2020). Fissuring by corruptive and geo-economic means can be used in tandem with election-hacking or other related operations.
Emerging Geo-Digital Power Practices

Galileo Galilei (1957) famously stated that reality “cannot be read until we have learnt the language and become familiar with the characters in which it is written. It is written in mathematical language, and the letters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to comprehend a single word.” His statement was made in connection with the celestial bodies and their natural movements, which could be comprehended by new scholarly knowledge. However, geometrical language is also in the foreground of understanding the political dimension of today’s increasingly digitalized modern global life, for many looking-glasses into the sociopolitical reality are based on algorithms and, increasingly, on machine learning, such as artificial intelligence (AI). The contemporary political life and debates are embedded in algorithmic and social practices of the digital realm.

The trends, dynamics, virulence, and contagions influence—intentionally and unintentionally—election cycles and democratic processes in general. The cognitive flows mediated by digital platforms are a field of contestation but with certain patterned dynamics. Their supposedly spontaneous bottom-up processes are at the heart of Western democracy as a lived practice, and their algorithmic characteristics provide an interface or vector that can be used, abused, and co-opted.

How various new “geo-digital” practices are changing and challenging the stability, position, and influence of Western democratic systems and democratic ideals in the global hierarchy of power? It is suggested that the patterns of digital sphere will transform the ways in which physical space and territoriality are used, often also in ways that undermine the existing definitions of power and governance (see Barnett and Duvall 2005). It has become almost a contemporary truism that—due to various coexisting factors—we are living in an age of uncertainty, unpredictability, and disorder. To a degree, this might be due to the obvious fact that as social, economic, and political practices change, traditional political signifiers start losing their descriptive and prescriptive force, and, as a result,

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8 E.g. Metaxas and Mustafaraj (2012).

9 See, e.g., European Commission (2018) and European Political Strategy Centre (2018).
existing cognitive frames fail in their predictions increasingly often. On the one hand, the uncertainty paradigm can be completely misleading if one scratches beneath the surface. Much of the world is acquiring newer cognitive templates of regularity fit for the emerging daily global life. This is perhaps most evident in terms of different social media platforms, which have global appeal. Facebook, for example, now has billions of monthly users around the world, all tied to certain regular ways of media consumption and sense-making. Regularity, synchrony, and predictability prevail, in some cases even at global levels. At the same time, older political geometries and expectations still exist, resulting in a crosswind between paradigms with much confusion and contestation. Identity wars, polarization, state weakness, international wars, and non-state violence all coexist and are made (in)comprehensible through the less of social media interaction (e.g. Lilla 2017).

The interstate system and its presumed logic of anarchical power politics increasingly coexists with and is characterized by cognitive operations, algorithmic experimentation, and, gradually, by artificial intelligence, as, for example, when a person searches with the keywords “President Trump” or “the wall.” Clearly, the algorithmic geometries have their attachment points with the contemporary domestic and international contestations. The internal and external can clash and may overlap, producing multifaceted confluences and resonances. They can produce confluences between multiple simultaneous political processes, which do not have any causal linkages, based on seeming patterns and family resemblances. These confluences of circumstances can materialize in an instant in a way that is paradoxically both superficial yet profoundly politically significant. These instances of seeming clarity mark our everyday political cognitions and speculations about the meaning and direction of world events.

When the then (perceived) presidential front-runner, Hillary Rodham Clinton stumbled during the September 11 memorial event in New York City in 2016, it was taken as “evidence” of some serious but deeply hidden medical condition by her opponents and the alt-right news sites. The highly visual nature of the “proof” was referred to by many

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10 For a seminal discussion, see, e.g., Wendt (1992).
mainstream media sites. The Washington Post, for example, reported that Clinton’s health had become a “real issue.” There was seemingly something suspicious about the incident, rather than it being just a nonthreatening medical condition or even merely a case of exposure to the prevailing hot and humid weather. The confluence of circumstances started to carry the virulent message of her being medically unfit to be president. The episode reinforced a sense that she was hiding something. The social media was full of rumors of Parkinson’s disease kept under cover, or even of HIV/AIDS. The widely circulated overall claim was that the Clinton campaign had again failed to be transparent, this time about her health. However, the contagious trajectories of the incident cannot be reduced to the campaign’s decision to not disclose her pneumonia. Rather, the incident revealed that the digitalized world is being constituted by scenarios that interact reactively with a variety of characteristics based on their apparent connectedness and narrative value, instead of corresponding to reality.

The digitalization of the way in which citizens and polities communicate has emphasized what can be called the “confluence of circumstances” effect which accelerates the tempo and the dramaturgy. Citizens react to the drama of politics in ways that reflect their other inherited or learnt circumstances, histories, social contexts, and cultural embeddedness. All this comes to play in a particular moment, especially in the heated context of approaching elections. The situations are complex and entangled. The digital environments, and in particular social media and the associated popular culture, have transfigured this complexity and its politically expressible behavior. The background term, “confluence of circumstances,” has multiple meanings. The main idea seems to be that something critical—a “scandal,” an “October surprise,” or a “gaffe”—took place at a precise moment in time because everything was right for it to occur. The context for the creation of the “right circumstance” is nowadays increasingly algorithmic and based on cognitive shaping and managing. Things do not simply happen. They do not take place only by coincidence, by virtue of something simply happening.

For example, Clinton’s illness, or the conspiracies that focused intensively on the killing of the Clinton campaign official that was tied to the infamous Pizzagate, were just a few conditions among many; they were

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11 See, e.g., BBC News (2016).
not the precipitating events that took place in the final weeks of the 2016 election campaign nor in the 2016 election meddling. They were not the only driving forces of the overall confluence of circumstances that led to Clinton’s electoral defeat. The single episodes mattered only as parts of the overall confluence. Moreover, it is important to realize that the confluence, or the digitalized part of it, matters because it can be engineered and manipulated. It could be shaped, managed, and manufactured due to its algorithmic nature.

The foundations of democratic politics are often thought to be spontaneous. The mobilizations of people within Western societies rely on the imagery of an open political space, where different actors negotiate over how to lead a pluralistic society. The increasing use of algorithmic politics alters this in ways that need to be acknowledged and more fully examined, especially from a power-political angle. Outside of the state boundaries, interactions are often thought to be competitive and anarchic in the absence of an overarching authority. This anarchic and uncertain reality is transformed with algorithmic manipulation enabled by the digitalization of global life. The keywords of hybrid conflict, election meddling, digitalized espionage, and mass surveillance provide examples of how power-political patterns and practices are changing. They are fuzzy concepts, yet they correspond to and mirror our fuzzy and changing world.

Digital flows and the confluences of the cognitive flows therein are competitive, contradictory, and conflictual. For domestic and foreign actors, this field of game poses a complex strategic challenge. However, digitalized cognitive flows can be strategic, directed. The resulting dynamic confluences are in acute need of being mapped as they emerge. This entails the study of the power politics and geostrategies of the digital age as they relate to democratic vulnerabilities in the face of growing autocratic challenges. Research on the geo-digital interactions and geo-cognitive flows in and of world politics remains underdeveloped and in need of significant analysis and overviewing.

The US, and the West more broadly, have been in a unique position since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The expectation that democratization, liberalization, normalization, and interdependence would take place describes an imaginary of expected linear geography that the history was supposed to take. Democratization referred to the spread of democratic states, which would also, according to democratic peace theory, decrease
the likelihood of international war. Liberalization referred to the opening up of markets and markets being governed by international trade institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO). Normalization referred to the hope that states would surrender their claims of having special interests over their neighbors. Interdependence was supposed to be the model for the networked world order. These ideas and hopes were based on the expectation that the arc of history would bend toward justice and democracy. However, currently all these expectations appear to be failing. Most notably, in terms of the argument in this book, great power competition seems to be making a comeback. However, it is taking place in a new context, where the digital domain is one key focal point of power-political competition.

**THE THUCYDIDEAN BRINK AND REgressive COUPLING**

The sense of political upheavals in the more globally connected nodal points contrasts with the political insecurities felt in the less central polities. The resulting anxieties can set the stage for mutual political regressions. The political regression in one place is linked to its likelihood in other places. But conceptual insights for the study of such regression cannot be found in modern political theory that tends to focus on linear and progressive paradigm. This in mind, the current work draws from an interpretation of a key, classic work in political thought and history by Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE), the famous historian of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). In a way, in the pages of the book, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, he saw a similar power-political pattern, characterized by a rising power (Athens) meeting an existing and established power (Sparta). His account of it was written as a story of overall political regression, a nexus that draws to its downward-spiraling vortex increasing number of political entities, and the account also included an outbreak of a severe contagious disease. We can learn lessons from Thucydides in our age of geo-digital competition between different political systems.

This book, of course, is not the first one to recognize the importance of the historian and his work. In fact, Thucydides is back in fashion in world politics. Numerous commentaries have used the neoclassical concept, “Thucydidean Trap,” to analyze the dynamics of the contemporary global order. Key officials who have served in the Trump administration,

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12 See, e.g., Doyle (2011).

13 See, e.g., Allison (2018) and Chan (2020).
such as the former National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster and the former Defense Secretary James Mattis, have expressed their interest in and respect for the ancient historian. Graham Allison, the Thucydides scholar who initially coined the term “Thucydidean Trap,” has even been reported to have visited the White House to discuss with National Security Council staffers “America’s rivalry with China, cast through the lens of ancient Greece” (Crowley 2017).

All this is not a coincidence. Recent great power tensions and the weakening of the so-called rule-based world order has led to the rediscovery of Thucydides, who wrote, in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, about the emergence of hegemonic competition and how that has a tendency to lead into a widening and deepening political regression. Contemporary political research, however, has often focused on progressive processes more in line with the modernization paradigm. The regressive linkages and processes have been left unattended for the most part. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Huntington’s (1965: 415) suggestion that when it comes to the degeneration of political communities, “perhaps the most relevant ideas are the most ancient ones,” is largely accurate even today. In other words, the discursive materials of the “shadow” area of regressive processes in the classics are relevant not only because the scholars of that time focused on them in their writings, but also because the modernists have ignored them as anachronistic anomalies in the grand progressive flow of history. Thucydides made a valuable contribution to our understanding of regressive political dynamics in the overall context of escalating enmities. His analysis of the ways in which domestic political communities are drawn together at different stages of internal upheaval is both tragic and intriguing.

His analysis is also uncannily timely. Various cases of meddling and interference in the past few years tend to highlight an outside autocratic actor and domestic actors in Western democracies forming links and possible patterns of collusion, and holding the potential to derail political communities—and ultimately global order itself. This possibility became perhaps most evident in the heated debate in the US prior to the publication of the now famous Mueller Report in March 2019 on Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential elections. This book draws from Thucydides’s insights on regressive geo- and socio-political dynamics and elaborates on the idea of a “Thucydidean brink,” *when the attraction felt towards an outside geopolitical competitor becomes stronger than the political affinity felt towards one’s domestic political opponent, with the resultant political and strategic consequences*. As the polarization and decomposition
of a democratic polity proceeds, Western political parties, political factions, or political candidates can be drawn to outside actors with the intent and capability to exert significant influence.

Yet, the concept of a Thucydidean brink involves both push and pull factors. As the international security situation in general becomes disrupted and the prevailing order regresses, actors experiencing internal problems are likely to externalize their internal tensions and regressions. They do this through different diversionary practices, such as a diversionary military campaigns that aim not only at foreign achievements, but also at a domestic rally round the flag effect domestically. It is proposed in this book that meddling in democratic elections as well as other hybrid operations can also be interpreted as instances of diversionary externalizations of domestic political regression. The attempts at meddling stem mainly from increasingly autocratic and authoritarian societies such as Russia and China. Besides this push factor, deeply polarized democratic states are more likely to have political factions that are predisposed toward attracting external actors to participate in the democratic infighting. The Thucydidean brink refers to a point where push and pull factors meet in a way that further feeds the democratic regression of a meddled state and fulfills the diversionary objectives of the external autocratic meddler.

The book will further develop the Thucydidean framework to analyze contemporary patterns of election meddling where outside autocratic actors find willing collaborators inside regressing democratic communities. The book uses the concept of “cognitive flows” to understand the dynamics of political deliberations inside democracies. Cognitive flows refer to fluctuations of public cognitions that are dependent on distributed and programmable networked media (Hayles 2006). Cognitive flows are manifestations of contagious stimulations and agitations that occur as political debates become increasingly digitalized, playing out increasingly on social media platforms. The algorithmic nature of political debates on these platforms allows for the manipulation of the people’s mindsets, especially in the highly tense and focused preelection periods when the stakes are high and domestic communities narrow their awareness to the internal/domestic election process and can lose sight of the manipulative practices of external/international actors.

The use of cognitive flows as a concept draws from the pragmatist tradition and the frame theory developed by Erving Goffman (1974). Cognitive flows are only partly cognitive, based on articulated thought patterns and expressive of clear belief systems. They are also partly power
related in that they contain a sense of reverence for some identity or authority—for a schema, dogma, or creed. Moreover, they are affective because of their ability to arouse quasi-conscious flare-ups, heightened charges, and synchronous behavior. To reiterate, cognitive flows have their own type of emotionality with the corresponding political sentiments. Political sentiments spread. They move and intensify easily. My starting hypothesis here is that what are generally understood as political movements are intimately intertwined with the ebbs and flows of political sentiments. Sentiments arouse, stimulate, captivate, and overwhelm. Sentiments beget sentiments. They are contagious. At critical times, as in the case of the period leading up to democratic elections, they lead to whirlwinds, to highly tense vortexes of emotionality. The vorticity of sentiments is self-feeding. They may spread horizontally, involving new groups of people, and deepen vertically, becoming more and more intensive. In digital platforms (e.g., social media), flows can be controlled and manipulated since they are: (1) taking place in a highly accessible “place”; and (2) they are based on unique platform-dependent patterns and on algorithmic code. These two characteristics provide us with an arguable change in the historical pattern of externally induced meddling and interference by foreign power(s). However, historical legacy also matters as contemporary toolboxes are based on prior experiences, and the underlying cultures of innovation are limited by their own situational horizons.

The confluences of spontaneous or managed/manipulated episodes are key drivers of the overall Thucydidean regressive scenario. They resist key reductive and causal patterns since they are spontaneous, opportunistic, co-optive, and, in essence, messy, disruptive, and abusive. An overview method is developed to capture and make sense of the key dynamics of the regressive dynamic. Overviews are commonly crafted for two general purposes. First, a certain kind of an overview can assuage general interest or scholarly perplexity through initial mapping of implicit and explicit knowledge so as to better allow for a subsequent, more nuanced explanation and model building. However, this two-step approach is best suited to studies where the phenomenon is a single self-contained end product in itself—that is, it does not consist of an open-ended bundle of multifarious and irreducible processes.

I start with the assumption that meddling in democracies and democratic vulnerability are not clean self-contained processes. They are, instead, arguably messy bundles of different spontaneous incidents and tactical
It is possible to overview different overlapping scenarios so as to discover synoptic, interlinking variety, and see how the combinatorial possibilities can be potentially actualized. This second type of synoptic overview seeks answers to different types of puzzling questions than the first alternative. Furthermore, it brings (the types of) scholarly curiosity itself under a critical gaze, since overviews of synoptic interrelationships tend to result in questions such as why do we see only some bundles of interrelationships as puzzling in the first place, and what is the relationship between “the reasons for finding something scholarly interesting” and “the knowledge being produced” (Wittgenstein 1968: 122). All temporal contexts have synoptic potentials and valencies, which need to be approached from diverse angles to build a fuller understanding of how the actual, potential, and circumstantial are interrelated (Wittgenstein 1980: 37). The overview approach utilized in this book suggests a discovery process that is based on an examination of hidden, or at least not typically highlighted, combinatorial possibilities. This creative (re-)discovery is done by permuting the scenarios, their historical trajectories, and past cross-cutting confluences.

Thus, the aim is to highlight the various synoptic possibilities inherent in the different contemporary bundles of old and new processes. This openness is the context wherein election meddling is situated and becomes a feasible and meaningful scenario. I have tried to avoid the tendency to reduce the events into neat single models, such as the Thucydidean brink or the five stages of election meddling (Aaltola 2012). Such overdone analytic sharpness would reduce the leeway that is likely to be needed in the future, as technologies and politics allow for better crowdsourcing, dramaturgy, and machine learning practices that enable new methods for shaping the cognitive flows in key democracies. Strategic geo-digital competition and the resulting mutual regression among the great powers is just getting started. As the Corona crisis suggests, the overall confluence result in new practices and make this book outdated most likely even before its publication if a neat self-contained model was the main intended end product. Hence, this work seeks to evaluate interactions and confluences in the light of two main background frameworks: (1) What are the synoptic possibilities within temporally situated “bundles” of global processes, such as digitalization of political

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14 See, e.g., Cioffi (2010).
debates, and how do they interact with the more traditional conceptualizations of power politics?; and (2) How do the scenarios of global dynamics interact with the digitalized cognitive flows to produce their own combined hybridity and emergent challenges?

This book investigates political regression in contemporary world politics, particularly by drawing on the insights of Thucydides on great power competition, domestic turmoil, and societal breakdown. It recognizes a tension between (the demand for) analytic sharpness and the open-endedness of actual regressive power politics as its starting point. Keeping that in mind, the arguments expressed in the book are organized as follows. Chapter 2, by relying mainly on Thucydides, elaborates on the neoclassical approach on coupling of political regression. In particular, it outlines the various stages of a regressive, downward-spiraling slide that involves competing states, attempts at strategic influencing, and, more generally, both push and pull factors in a deteriorating confluence of circumstances. The notion of a Thucydidean brink is developed to make sense of the regressive dynamic.

Chapter 3 turns its attention to contemporary world politics and describes the dramatic elements in present-day US politics, as well as both its regressive influence on other democracies and its attractiveness to more regressed states. I call this influence a grim version of power—drama power. The evolution of the different modalities of power—from soft in the 1990s and smart in the 2000s to sharp in the 2010s and drama power in the 2020s—is also discussed. To further make sense of (the potential for) political regression today, the next three chapters map out of the novel uses of cyber and digital media tools in contemporary world politics. Chapter 4 elaborates on the growing importance of the ‘domains’, especially the cyber domain, and Russia’s ability to exert influence and advance its interest through it. Chapter 5 continues with a special focus on election meddling and its consequences in the 2016 US presidential elections. In Chapter, a comparison is made between the US, French, and German elections in order to understand better contemporary forms of regressive meddling. Chapter 7 elaborates on the ideas of leeway and evolution with regard to tools for interference and meddling. In particular, it examines crowdsourcing as a possible further phenomenon conducive of (power-) political regression. Chapter 8 contrasts the Russian meddling practices with those of China in the social media realm. The concluding chapter provides the reader with a Thucydidean conclusion as it overviews
the key themes through the case of Covid-19 pandemic that demonstrates how regression increases the likelihood of noncontrolled disasters and catastrophes (e.g. Barnes 2000). In doing so, the concluding chapter also (re)introduces and reviews Thucydides’s idea that grand regression is similar to a serious contagious disease in its spread.

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