

précis



75 years of meeting the moment. What comes next?



Meeting the Moment: From the Cold War to the Age of AI

12

Scholarship Meets the Real World

16

Rethinking Humanitarian Aid in a World of Conflict and Crisis

20

Testing Sustainability in Barcelona

24



**MIT Center for
International Studies**
Celebrating 75 Years



Contents

03

Director's Message

04

On the Horizon
Looking ahead to the year to come.



In 1983, **Suzanne Berger** founded MISTI, transforming how MIT students experience and engage with the world.

12

Expertise in Action
A closer look at CIS ideas, research, and expertise at work.

- 12 Meeting the Moment: From the Cold War to the Age of AI
- 16 Scholarship Meets the Real World
- 20 Rethinking Humanitarian Aid in a World of Conflict and Crisis
- 24 Testing Sustainability in Barcelona

Under the leadership of **Richard Nielsen**, the MIT-MENA Program has deepened MIT's engagement with the region.



Max Millikan was CIS's first director, helping shape the Center's mission to connect research with the challenges of a changing world.

28

Regional Flashpoints
A curated look at three regions in focus.

- 28 Ukraine
- 36 China
- 44 MENA

52

Year in Review
Looking back at a year of impact.

Suzanne Berger photo by Stuart Darsch Max Millikan photo courtesy MIT Museum



Director's Message

As the Center for International Studies marks its 75th anniversary, this new edition of *précis* reflects on a legacy of meeting the moment while looking ahead to the challenges that will define the decades to come.

Since its founding in 1951, CIS has brought together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to deepen understanding of an increasingly complex world. This anniversary issue explores that history through a feature on how the Center has evolved alongside – and helped shape – some of the most consequential global developments of the past three-quarters of a century.

Our anniversary celebration this fall will continue that tradition with a symposium examining the changing global order and the challenges of the next quarter century. The symposium will open with a Starr Forum keynote by Anne-Marie Slaughter, followed by a day of conversations

Evan Lieberman photo by Stuart Darsch



Evan Lieberman
Director, CIS
Total Professor of Political Science and Contemporary Africa

featuring leading scholars and practitioners exploring the forces reshaping global politics, security, governance, and international cooperation.

The year ahead will also bring new scholarship to CIS. We are especially pleased to welcome Robert E Wilhelm Fellows Richard Mills and Marcos Troyjo, whose experience in diplomacy and international affairs will enrich our teaching, research, and public dialogue.

As always, these pages capture only a snapshot of the breadth of activity across CIS – from research and student engagement to public events and global partnerships.

I hope this issue offers an opportunity to reflect on the Center's history and an invitation to join us as we continue to work towards addressing our world's most pressing challenges.

Thank you for being part of the CIS community.

Evan
Evan Lieberman



HORIZON

As a new academic year begins, CIS embarks on a new season of ideas, launching collaborations and initiatives, welcoming new colleagues and creating opportunities for the MIT community and the general public to engage with us. Here’s a look at what’s ahead.

Photo by Emily Dahl

75th Anniversary Symposium

The Next Quarter Century: What Kind of New World Order?

For 75 years, CIS has helped illuminate the forces shaping our world – from the Cold War to today’s rapidly evolving global landscape.

As we celebrate this milestone, we invite you to join us for our keynote event on Thursday, October 15, and for a day of conversation, reflection, and forward-looking analysis on Friday, October 16.

Bringing together leading scholars, policymakers, alumni, and friends of the Center, the symposium will examine the geopolitical, technological, and societal dynamics redefining international affairs.

Learn more and RSVP at
cis.mit.edu/75symposium



Anne-Marie Slaughter
Incoming Dean, School of Public Policy,
London School of Economics
Former CEO, New America
Former Director of Policy Planning,
US State Department

Oct 15

2026

4:30–6:00 PM
MIT Wong Auditorium

Keynote Address by Anne-Marie Slaughter

Anne-Marie Slaughter, a leading scholar of international affairs and global governance, will speak on “What Would the US Do in a Middle Power Order?” Her talk will set the stage for the symposium’s panel discussions the following day.

Oct 16

2026

8:30 AM–6:00 PM
MIT Samberg Conference Center

Panel Discussions with Global Experts

Throughout the day, speakers will explore topics including war and security, democratic governance, nuclear risk, climate change, trade and development, shifting alliances, artificial intelligence, and the future of global order.



The Center’s **Starr Forum series** brings leading thinkers to campus to discuss the world’s most pressing issues. Starr Forums are free and open to the public.

Join the Conversation

CIS convenes leading thinkers, scholars, and policymakers to explore the defining global issues of our time – from security and technology to climate, migration, governance, development, and beyond.

Through the MIT Starr Forum, our flagship public event series, and more than 100 lectures, seminars, workshops, and discussions each year, CIS fosters informed dialogue that connects the MIT community and the public with experts shaping our world.

Starr Forum

The Starr Forum brings distinguished leaders, scholars, and experts to MIT for timely conversations on pressing global issues.

Security Studies Program Wednesday Seminar

The Security Studies Program hosts a weekly seminar series featuring scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who explore critical questions in international security.

Global Research & Policy Seminar

The Global Research & Policy Seminar bridges academic research and real-world policy challenges, convening experts to explore emerging issues in global affairs.

Center for Nuclear Security Policy Speaker Series

Bringing together leading experts, scholars, and practitioners, the series advances informed discussion on nuclear security at the intersection of technology and policy.

Regional Events

The Center’s regional programs host lectures, seminars, and discussions that explore the diverse forces shaping regions around the world from Africa to Europe, Asia-Pacific to Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Explore all of our upcoming events at cis.mit.edu/events



Richard M Mills Jr
Former US ambassador to Niger



Marcos Troyjo
Former deputy minister of the economy, Brazil

Meet Our New Fellows and Scholars

This fall, veteran diplomat Richard M Mills Jr and global economic leader Marcos Troyjo join CIS as our prestigious Robert E Wilhelm Fellows, bringing decades of experience in diplomacy, international development, trade, and global economic governance.

Richard M Mills Jr, JD, served as US ambassador to Nigeria from 2024 to 2026. He previously served as US ambassador to Armenia and as US deputy permanent representative to the United Nations with ambassadorial rank. He joined the US Foreign Service in 1988, and prior to his recent retirement, worked in diplomatic positions ranging from senior democracy advisor at the US Embassy in Baghdad to energy attaché at the US Embassy in Riyadh, as well as a member of Secretary Madeleine Albright’s executive staff.

Marcos Troyjo served as Brazil’s deputy economy minister and special secretary for foreign trade and international affairs. He was a leading negotiator of the European Union-Mercosur Agreement, and president of the New Development Bank – the first westerner to lead a multilateral organization headquartered in Asia. He is a global advisor of the European Investment Bank and co-founded and co-directed the BRICLab at Columbia SIPA, where he taught international affairs and political economy.

“

I plan to contribute to the necessary public debate on reform of global multilateral institutions, US development aid, and migration frameworks, all of which were created in the very different world of 75 years ago.

Richard M Mills Jr

“

At a time when economics, technology, security, and geopolitics are becoming increasingly intertwined, there is no better place than MIT to explore the forces shaping the future of nations, markets, and societies.

Marcos Troyjo



Fiona Bare
Postdoctoral Associate



Ruofan Ma
Postdoctoral Associate

2026–27 Postdoctoral Associates

Fiona Bare studies international political economy and global environmental governance, with a focus on climate finance and the role of firms in climate policymaking. She received her PhD and MA in politics from Princeton University, where she held the Prize Fellowship for Social Sciences and was a graduate affiliate of the Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance. In July of 2027, she will join the Department of Political Science as an assistant professor.

Ruofan Ma’s research interests include labor rights, human rights, and international organizations. He received his PhD degree in government and MA in statistics and East Asian studies from Harvard University. He was a junior visiting fellow at Nuffield College, University of Oxford, and a graduate associate at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University. His time at CIS precedes his July 2027 appointment as an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science.

20+

Visiting Fellows & Scholars

Researchers, practitioners, postdoctorates, students, journalists, military leaders, and educators in residence during 2026–27.

80

Seminar XXI

Senior military officers and national security leaders participating in the 2026–27 Seminar XXI program in Washington, DC.

Connecting Expertise Across Disciplines

From scholars and students to policymakers, military leaders, journalists, and educators, CIS convenes diverse communities through fellowships and research programs. Together, we explore the ideas shaping international affairs—from AI and democracy to climate, migration, and global security.



| Explore more at cis.mit.edu

Supporting New Research

MIT Global Seed Funds

The Global Seed Funds program at CIS enables MIT faculty and principal investigators the opportunity to launch research projects with peers at universities and institutions around the world.

Since its inception in 2008, Global Seed Funds has invested more than \$30 million to support high-impact international research spanning global health, climate and sustainability, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, energy, education, urban development, and the social sciences.

The MIT Global Seed Funds call for proposals is now open through December 3, 2026.

“

This has to be one of the standout ways to develop international collaborations that any school has anywhere. It’s an extraordinary way to build serious relationships with people who have science that you can work on together, get to synergistic and exciting outcomes, and start projects that you could never get going otherwise. It can turn those partnerships—and the ideas behind them—into reality.

Matt Shoulders, Class of 1942 Professor of Chemistry and head of the Department of Chemistry

The Global Seed Funds program helped Matt Shoulders build international partnerships that continue to shape his research more than a decade later. Here, Shoulders examines his plants with genetically modified Rubisco in a laboratory in Australia.



Photo courtesy Gretchen Ertl

Catherine D’Ignazio, associate professor in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning and director of the Data + Feminism Lab, is among the recipients of the Center’s new faculty grants.

Faculty Grants

CIS recently launched a new grants program that supports MIT faculty and principal investigators in developing new research projects and research communities around pressing international issues.

The inaugural awards reflect the breadth of MIT’s global scholarship, supporting projects on topics ranging from water diplomacy in the Middle East and US-China technology competition to migration, local governance, democracy and digital authoritarianism, media and transnational political movements, and the future of US global development.

Selected projects receive funding and program support over two to three years, helping researchers build new collaborations, generate pilot research, and position projects for larger external funding opportunities.

The next call for proposals will open in the spring.

Explore all funding opportunities for faculty and PIs here cis.mit.edu/opportunities/faculty

Inaugural Faculty Grant Projects

Christine Ortiz

Water, energy, and infrastructure diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa.

Jacob Moscona

Innovation policy and global technology competition.

Bish Sanyal

The evolution of US policy toward global development.

Catherine D'Ignazio

Technology, democracy, and transnational authoritarianism.

Rebekah Larsen

Christian nationalism and global media networks.

Emma Teng

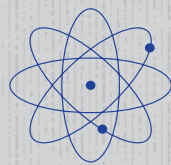
Migration and mobility across Asia.

Daniel Hidalgo

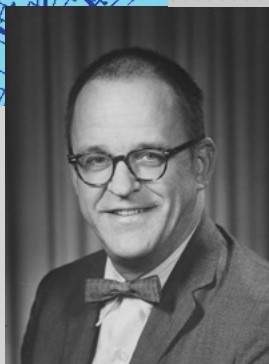
Local governance and urban democracy in the Global South.

Elizabeth Wood

Co-creation roadmap for designing resilient knowledge ecosystems.



75 years of meeting the moment. What comes next?



Meeting the Moment: From the Cold War to the Age of AI

For 75 years, CIS has brought together social scientists, engineers, and practitioners to understand global change, shape public debate, and address the defining challenges of each generation.

AT A MOMENT WHEN GLOBAL ALLIANCES ARE SHIFTING, technological change is accelerating, and the boundaries between science and geopolitics are dissolving, understanding the world demands new ways of thinking.

For 75 years, CIS has helped meet that challenge – bringing together engineers, social scientists, and policy practitioners to confront the most pressing global challenges of their time. From developing the foundations of modern international security to redefining how the United States engages with the world, CIS has not only studied global affairs, it has helped shape them.

What distinguishes CIS is not just the scope of its work, but the way it approaches it.

At MIT, international studies does not sit apart from science and technology, it is embedded within it. This proximity has enabled generations of scholars to tackle geopolitical problems with tools and perspectives rarely found in traditional academic and policy environments.

“Being situated within the world’s leading technical institution enables a lot of exciting possibilities,” says Evan Lieberman, the director of CIS and Total Professor of Political Science and Contemporary Africa. “We focus on critical problems in international development and security – always with an eye towards the challenges and opportunities presented by technological change. Beyond that, a big part of our mission is to provide global perspectives and engagement avenues relevant to scientists and engineers.”

Established during the dawn of the Cold War, CIS pioneered a new understanding of global power: that science, technology, and geopolitics were becoming deeply intertwined. From the beginning, it convened faculty across disciplines – economics, political science, engineering, and beyond – setting a template that has since become a model for institutions around the world.

Over the decades, this approach has produced an outsized impact.

In 1961, a memorandum to President John F Kennedy from MIT economist Max Millikan – the inaugural director of CIS – helped inspire the creation of the Peace Corps, fundamentally reshaping how the United States engages in global development.

CIS scholars such as Lincoln Bloomfield and William “Bill” Kaufman played a central role in establishing security studies as a rigorous academic field in the late 1950s. Less than two decades later, Jack Ruina and George Rathjens founded the Center’s Arms Control and Defense Policy Program (now known as the MIT Security Studies Program), which has influenced generations of policymakers and trained generations of scholars.

The study of modernization and political development has also long been central to the work of the Center with notable luminaries such as Lucian Pye and Myron Weiner helping to lead the way.



Evan Lieberman
Director, CIS



Jack Ruina
A professor of electrical engineering and nuclear arms control expert, Ruina’s leadership led to the establishment of the Center’s Security Studies Program.

Photo courtesy MIT Museum

A legacy of global exchange

At the same time, CIS has reshaped how knowledge flows across borders. The MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives (MISTI), launched in 1983 by Institute Professor Suzanne Berger, has sent thousands of MIT students abroad to work, study, and conduct research alongside international partners – experiences that extend far beyond traditional study abroad. In doing so, it helped change long-standing assumptions about the United States’ role in the world, demonstrating that learning is most powerful when it is reciprocal.

That ethos of mutual exchange continues to define CIS today. Through initiatives such as the Global Seed Funds, MIT faculty, researchers, and their students collaborate with academic partners around the world to advance shared research agendas.

The connection between these initiatives can be traced to Richard Samuels, Ford International Professor of Political Science and director of CIS from 2000 until 2023. His creation of the MIT-Japan Program in 1981 served as the model for MISTI. He was also the visionary behind the launch of the Global Seed Funds in 2008.

Together, these programs reflect a consistent vision: that the strongest ideas emerge through sustained engagement with partners around the world.



Suzanne Berger
Founder and inaugural director, MISTI



Richard Samuels
Former director, CIS
Founding director, MIT-Japan Program

Expertise in action

Drawing on deep regional expertise, CIS also serves as a platform for global engagement across MIT, mobilizing cross-disciplinary knowledge to respond to unfolding international crises and inform both scholarly and policy debates.

Its MIT-MENA Program led by Richard Nielsen, associate professor of political science, recently convened experts to assess the energy and security implications of disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz; the MIT-Ukraine Program under the direction of Elizabeth Wood, Ford International Professor of History, brings together scientific, technical, and academic expertise to design sustainable solutions for a nation at war; and the MIT-China Program, directed by Yasheng Huang, professor of global economics and management at the MIT Sloan School, is creating a hub for scholars and policy experts focused on balancing the Institute’s engagement with China.

“A key source of our value added is to convene complementary sources of expertise. It’s about bringing people together who might not otherwise be in the same room, and asking how we can have the greatest possible impact.”

Evan Lieberman



Photo courtesy MIT Museum

Lucian Pye
A longtime CIS faculty member, Pye’s pioneering research on political development helped shape the Center’s work and intellectual agenda.



Scholarship that shapes security

For decades, the MIT Security Studies Program, directed by Taylor Fravel, Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science, since 2019, has been a leading incubator of ideas that have shaped debates on grand strategy, nuclear policy, civil conflict and Asian security. Its affiliated scholars, fellows, and graduate students have produced policy relevant research that continues to inform policymakers grappling with an increasingly complex international security challenges.

Building on that legacy, SSP recently established the Center for Nuclear Security Policy (CNSP) – made possible by a \$45 million gift from the Stanton Foundation. Directed by Vipin Narang, Frank Stanton Professor of Nuclear Security and Political Science, the CNSP aims to expand MIT’s leadership in addressing one of the most urgent challenges of our time: managing the risks posed by nuclear weapons in a rapidly evolving and uncertain geopolitical environment.

Another cornerstone of CIS’s security work is Seminar XXI, currently led by Kelly Greenhill, who holds faculty appointments at Tufts University and MIT. The annual, nine-month program brings together rising leaders from across the US government, military, and national security community. In three decades, more than 2,500 participants have engaged deeply with issues such as nationalism, technological disruption, and global conflict – developing new frameworks for decision-making in high-stakes environments.

Advancing research, expanding dialogue

Beyond its anchor programs, CIS continues to invest in the next generation of scholars and practitioners. Undergraduate research initiatives, postdoctoral fellowships, and visiting scholar programs – including the Robert E Wilhelm Fellowship – create space for emerging and established leaders to explore critical questions, from governance and corruption to political reform and social change.

It also prioritizes policy-relevant research by supporting conferences, workshops, labs, and research initiatives on key problems in international affairs.

Finally, CIS plays a vital role in connecting MIT to the broader world. Through public events like the Starr Forum, the Center brings leading global voices to campus, fostering dialogue on issues that shape international politics and policy.



Taylor Fravel
Director, Security Studies Program

The next 75 years

As CIS looks to the future, its mission is evolving to meet a dramatically changing global landscape.

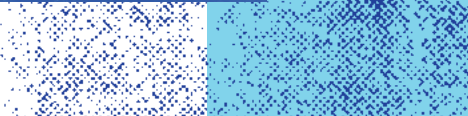
“The moment we’re in now is so different from the Cold War era,” says Lieberman. “We’re seeing a much more complex global system, with new actors and new kinds of challenges.”

In what Lieberman describes as CIS 2.0, the Center is sharpening its focus on the forces that will define the coming decades. This includes the geopolitical implications of artificial intelligence, the future of global cooperation in an era of climate crisis, and the evolving role of the United States within an increasingly contested international order.

Addressing these challenges will require exactly the kind of interdisciplinary, globally engaged approach that has defined CIS for the past 75 years. It will also require a renewed commitment to collaboration – across fields, across institutions, and across countries.

“A key source of our value added is to convene complementary sources of expertise,” Lieberman says. “It’s about bringing people together who might not otherwise be in the same room, and asking how we can have the greatest possible impact.”

Seventy-five years after its founding, CIS remains guided by a simple but powerful idea: that understanding the world – and improving it – demands more than any single discipline, perspective, or nation can offer alone.



Scholarship Meets the Real World

As a year of geopolitical flux tested US foreign policy, Caitlin Talmadge and Dafna Rand found new purpose in their research, their networks, and their students.



Dafna Rand
2025-2026 Robert E Wilhelm Fellow
Former assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor, US State Department



Caitlin Talmadge
Faculty member, Security Studies Program
Faculty affiliate, Center for Nuclear Security Policy

By Leda Zimmerman

ON MARCH 30, 2026, in a crowded lecture hall at MIT, foreign policy experts convened to discuss the geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway over which Iran had recently asserted control. Speakers pulled no punches in their assessments of this latest crisis in the US war against Iran, including two members of CIS.

“I think the US entered this war in the belief that it could very rapidly apply overwhelming military force and collapse the Iranian regime,” said Caitlin Talmadge, the Raphael Dorman and Helen Starbuck Associate Professor of Political Science at MIT. “Make no mistake about it, this regime is terrible and brutal...but the idea that air power alone was going to produce sweeping political change was misguided at best.”

This public event, sponsored by the MIT-Middle East North Africa (MENA) Program – one of many region-focused programs at CIS – provided insights from scholars in security studies, such as Talmadge, and from those steeped in the politics and players of the region, like Dafna Rand. A former assistant secretary of state, Rand joined CIS as the 2025–2026 Robert E Wilhelm Fellow – an honor granted to accomplished leaders in international policy pursuing innovative research.

“It is very important to understand that [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi Netanyahu has believed for 20 years, and now convinced the top Israeli security apparatus and the public, that a nuclear Iran would mean the end of Israel as a state,” said Rand. “If this is your belief system, you are convinced that only a military conflict can deal with a nuclear problem.”

“Popping with different perspectives”
The forum’s frank exchange of views galvanized online and in-person audiences, as well as panelists. For both Rand and Talmadge, the Strait of Hormuz panel epitomized CIS at its best: a place where real-world experience and rigorous scholarship meet in public.
“I thought this panel really popped with different perspectives,” says Talmadge, who notes that she has incorporated Rand’s perceptions about Israeli decision-making into her class about the war. “It’s an example of having that deep well of expertise in our community to draw on, to engage the public, to inform and discuss and debate, not just in our little ivory tower, but in a broader context,” she says.
“This is where the policy perspective on international affairs can meet up with the academic study of political science,” in a space that is “trying really hard to promote the best parts of democracy – the market place of ideas.” says Rand.

Photo by iStock



For **Rand and Talmadge**, a year of dramatic change in US foreign policy reinforced their research agendas—and highlighted the constructive role CIS plays in supporting scholars’ work.

Photo courtesy US Air Force Staff Sgt Madelyn Keech

Turbulence that reinforces long-term expertise

For Talmadge and Rand, a year that brought dramatic change to US foreign policy served to validate, if not energize, their research agendas, and to underscore the constructive role CIS plays in scholars’ work.

“The turbulence reinforced the value of long-term expertise already built within CIS and the MIT Security Studies Program,” says Talmadge.

Talmadge highlights an “informal but influential” faculty discussion group that gathered regularly to talk about current events.

“It was nice to lift our heads up from our desk or take a breather from the demands of teaching and advising, and come together with an eye toward thinking about future research.”

During these sessions, Talmadge and her SSP peers discussed a range of topics, she says: “What does this war tell us about the limits of US military power or about the potential future trajectory of a US-NATO conflict or a US-China conflict? What does this war mean for the future of alliances?”

Her CIS network includes regional and global scholars and practitioners “from whom you gain more context and understanding,” says Talmadge. “It’s a testament to what CIS does that there are so many people who have expertise on different dimensions of the conflict, people from whom we try to draw an understanding of what’s going on, so we can inform the public, and perhaps influence policy decision making.”

A widely recognized expert, Talmadge has also been tapped by major media outlets to weigh in on the Hormuz crisis, including an article she wrote for *Foreign Affairs*, and being quoted in the *New York Times*, *Financial Times*, the *Economist* – to name a few.

From Washington to MIT: A year to recharge

After watching the Trump administration dramatically reorient the State Department, and witnessing the closure of USAID by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Rand says she embraced “this year as an opportunity to recharge my intellectual batteries.”

As a Wilhelm Fellow, Rand planned broadly to focus her year addressing how technologists view the federal government and national security debates, and to the question of how to reform big institutions such as federal agencies without destroying their core functions. “CIS has this special sauce of both social scientists and hard scientists, and I wanted to join this new community.”

Among her fellowship projects, Rand, who had helped implement parts of the CHIPS and Science Act in the Biden Administration, engaged MIT scientists in a panel to debate export controls and regulation. Rand believes that in order to prevent US hardware and software from enabling authoritarian surveillance and abuse, there should be a mechanism for balancing national security, human rights, commercialism, and scientific openness.

“
It was nice to lift our heads up from our desk or take a breather from the demands of teaching and advising, and come together...with an eye toward thinking about future research.

Caitlin Talmadge

She also helped co-create a “MENA Futures” concept under the MIT-MENA Program. This cross-disciplinary, problems-focused MIT initiative intends to explore and shape long-term, technology-driven futures for the Middle East and North Africa, especially around food, water, energy, and climate.

“The project depends on the slightly utopian idealism of the technologists at MIT,” and seeks to imagine concrete collaborations with governments and publics in the region. “The MIT-MENA leadership – Richard Nielsen and David Dolev – and I created something real. My hope is that MENA Futures becomes a new landmark part of the CIS program, Rand says.”

While at MIT, Rand conducted “lessons-learned” work about how the US accrues and uses leverage with security partners in places like Ukraine, the Saudis in Yemen, and Israel in Gaza “to end wars, and shape their conduct.” Her final report will be published by the Brookings Institution with a link on the CIS website.

For Rand, the CIS experience offered a bridge from raw, lived crisis-based decision-making to structured research, a launchpad for new institutional ideas, and more personally, a reset from her previous life in public service to the next phase. “There’s an inherent optimism about MIT and CIS that is really beneficial,” says Rand.

Investing in the next generation

For Rand and Talmadge, gifted, idealistic students are the beating heart of both the CIS community and MIT at large.

“I spent time with students at both the PhD level and the undergraduate level, and it’s been particularly useful to begin to understand how the brilliant minds at MIT, the people who are going to be leaders of our industry and our technological advances – think,” says Rand. “Our society and country need the talent here.”

Her students’ achievements are the true measure of her impact as a professor, says Talmadge. “I truly believe that they are amazing and do really important things in the world,” she says.

“Whether they go on to become political scientists or analysts or work in the government directly on these issues of war and peace, or on technological applications, the teaching and the research that we do at CIS can be meaningful and can contribute and have an impact.”

Rand takes this a step further: At a moment when Washington’s standing in the world has been shaken, she believes that “the US government does not need to be the only or even the main modality for US diplomacy. There’s absolutely no reason why an MIT should not be representing what’s best about America abroad.”



Dafna Rand speaking at a lunchtime seminar sponsored by the MIT-MENA Program.

Rethinking Humanitarian Aid in a World of Conflict and Crisis

David Miliband, an MIT alumnus and former CIS fellow, met with students and faculty, and delivered a Starr Forum examining how humanitarian aid must adapt to a changing world.



Photo courtesy Gabriella Mbaoua



David Miliband SM '89
2011 Robert E Wilhelm Fellow
President and CEO, International Rescue Committee

By Lisa Capone

THE CENTER WELCOMED MIT ALUMNUS and former CIS Wilhelm Fellow David Miliband back to campus in April as the featured speaker for a Starr Forum on “New World Disorder: What’s the Humanitarian Perspective.”

Drawing on his experience as president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Miliband’s talk brought together members of the MIT community to examine the changing nature of global humanitarian crises and the reforms needed to address them.

The forum was opened by Evan Lieberman, CIS director, who welcomed Miliband back to MIT, where he earned a master’s degree in political science in 1989 and later served as a CIS Robert E Wilhelm Fellow in 2011.

The discussion was moderated by MIT Professor Emeritus John Deutch, former head of the chemistry department, dean of science, and provost. He also served as the US deputy secretary of defense and director of the CIA.

“In my government service, I observed closely many cases where people were suffering in the world and nobody was paying attention. It’s important at MIT that we pay attention to the suffering around the world and what we can do to help alleviate it.”

Miliband’s return to MIT was made at the invitation of Deutch and coordinated in partnership with the Office of the Vice Provost of International Affairs.

In addition to the Starr Forum, Miliband’s visit included a meeting with MIT faculty, students, and leadership, including President Sally Kornbluth.

“At a moment when international development and humanitarian assistance are growing ever more complex, it is especially important that we come together to share ideas that can help advance practical solutions,” said Kornbluth. “David Miliband’s thoughtful, unwavering leadership has been invaluable in bringing insight, conviction, and a deep sense of purpose to this urgent work.”

Speaking at the Starr Forum, Miliband argued that our current humanitarian organizations must rethink how they respond to global crises because the geography of extreme poverty has changed dramatically over the past three decades.

Nearly a century after its founding by Albert Einstein and other humanitarians, the IRC has stayed true to its mission to provide urgent assistance and lasting solutions to communities upended by war and other crises. Yet over that same century, the world in which IRC staff and volunteers operate has profoundly changed, said Miliband.

Miliband met with MIT faculty, students, and leaders during his visit, including MIT President Sally Kornbluth.

Miliband has led the work at the International Rescue Committee since 2013.



Recent decades have seen the biggest shifts, Miliband told the MIT community, most notably the “changing geography of poverty.”

Miliband noted that 10 percent of the world’s population lives in extreme poverty, existing on less than \$3 per day.

“The biggest point I want you to take away this evening is that the distribution of that 10 percent, those 800 million people, is radically different than what it was 30 years ago. Thirty years ago, the vast bulk of the extreme poor lived in countries like China and India, which were relatively stable states,” said Miliband, who has led the IRC since 2013 after serving in several senior positions in the UK government. “Today, we’re in a radically different position. Sixty percent of the extreme poor in the world live in what are called fragile and conflict-affected states. So, it’s not the Chinas and Indias of this world. It’s the South Sudans of this world. It’s the Afghanistans of this world. It’s the Gazas of this world.”

Previously, he said, aid organizations such as the IRC could work with governments such as China and India to develop support systems for impoverished communities. Today, however, most of the world’s extremely poor people live in places where their governments are not in control.

“In fact,” Miliband said, “200 million people live in areas of the world that are controlled by non-state armed groups. So, the strategies for reaching those people have to change radically to make a difference.”

Efforts to alleviate this suffering are currently hampered, Miliband said, because “the global aid system is still structured as if we’re living in the 1990 version of the distribution of poverty. The aid system still reflects the old geography of poverty, not the new.”

For example, he said, the 20 countries on IRC’s emergency watch list – where 90 percent of people in need of humanitarian assistance live – receive only 26 percent of the global aid budget. Excluding Ukraine, which he called “the best-funded humanitarian crisis in the world,” the remaining 19 poorest and conflict-affected nations share just 14 percent of global humanitarian aid funding. Compounding this imbalance, Miliband noted that 16 of the 20 rank in the top quartile of the Notre Dame Index of Climate Vulnerability, underscoring what he described as “a very stark correlation” between the climate crisis and extreme poverty.

“
In my government service, I observed closely many cases where people were suffering in the world and nobody was paying attention. It’s important at MIT that we pay attention to the suffering around the world and what we can do to help alleviate it.

John Deutch

Photo courtesy International Rescue Committee

Aside from climate, Miliband pointed to four economic, political and social forces driving the shift in the geography of extreme poverty: a hyperconnected world that makes risks, such as pandemics, more global than ever; the fragmentation of global politics, resulting in a world with several centers of power that are “in different alignments on different issues”; the “growth of impunity” and disregard for international rules; and the growing industry of “profiteering from war economies.”

Meanwhile, funding available to address these challenges has shrunk. The IRC had to absorb a \$400 million budget cut from the US government, resulting in the loss of services for two million IRC clients worldwide. The governments of Germany and the United Kingdom have also reduced their aid budgets, Miliband said.

Against this backdrop, the IRC has developed what Miliband described as a “recipe” for addressing the disorder shaping today’s humanitarian landscape. First, he said, resources must be focused on the areas of greatest need – namely the 20 countries that currently receive only 26 percent of global aid funding. Second, humanitarian organizations should invest in programs that have demonstrated measurable results.

“The biggest thing we need to do is scale the proven programs,” Miliband told the audience.

Third, he highlighted the IRC’s “innovation agenda,” which is focused on developing new products and services as well as new ways of delivering humanitarian assistance.

He added that some solutions lie beyond the reach of humanitarian organizations alone.

“Obviously, if you want to get to the roots of these problems, humanitarian aid can stanch the dying, but you need politics to stop the killing,” he said.

During a separate meeting with MIT students, Kornbluth asked Miliband to identify the greatest challenges facing humanitarian leaders today. He cited two: delivering meaningful impact in places where access is constrained, civilian protection is eroding, and community needs are increasingly complex; and defending “the very idea of principled humanitarian action.”

“Today’s biggest leadership challenge for organizations like the IRC is navigating the gap between growing crises around the world and the decline in political will to address them,” he said. “The task is not only to deliver aid effectively in increasingly complex conflicts but also to defend the principles and reform the systems that make effective humanitarian action possible in the first place.”

John Deutch served as the moderator for Miliband’s Starr Forum talk on global humanitarian challenges.





Testing Sustainability in Barcelona

A MISTI Global Classroom confronts climate change one farm and co-op visit at a time.

Photo courtesy Sofia Espindola



Kate Brown
Thomas M Siebel Distinguished Professor in the History of Science

By Danna Lorch

THIS PAST JANUARY, twelve MIT students set out for Barcelona—not just to study climate resilience, but to experience it firsthand. As part of How to Grow Resilient Futures: Regenerative Agriculture and Economies in Catalunya, Spain, a course taught by Kate Brown, they stepped beyond the classroom and into living systems of sustainability.

Offered during IAP as a Global Classroom through MISTI, the course reimagined what learning could look like. Instead of working their way through a syllabus containing texts about sustainable farming and the power of cooperatives, Brown’s students got their hands dirty.

In fact, quite literally: they visited local farms and slaughterhouses, prepped, cooked, and served a cooperative dinner to migrants, and constructed a working greenhouse. In the process, they built a lasting community and forged their own visions about sustainability and how they are compelled to confront climate change as MIT students now, and eventually, as alumni.

“I wanted the students to think about alternatives to the notion of capitalist development, where the latest technology is seen as the solution to every social problem that emerges. I wanted them to see ways people are solving problems in a place like Barcelona, where communities and ecologies are centered as part of the solution,” Brown said.

Through Brown’s partnerships at the Barcelona Urban Research Institute (IDRA) and Research and Degrowth (R&D) – and MISTI Spain’s infrastructure – the group of eight undergraduates and four graduate students had the opportunity to examine the historical roots of cooperative movements in the region while simultaneously experiencing today’s iteration of co-op work.

Brown intentionally designed the three-week syllabus to push students beyond the classroom walls and get them face-to-face with local MISTI Spain partners from across the farming and ecology sectors. For example, the class met with Pino Delàs, a pig farmer who left the industrial system to start his own localized, cyclical operation called Llavora, which supports community farming and generates significantly less waste.



Rooted in community

With more than a century of creating cooperatives – both workers and farms – Barcelona and its Catalanian roots provided an ideal environment for the students to consider Brown’s questions through fieldwork rooted in community.

Within their first week on the ground, they collaborated with volunteers at the Agora Squat. The small “pocket park” was initially slated to be developed into a luxury hotel, but a local group of 200 neighborhood residents came together to protest the plan, instead exercising their legal right to use the land, a caveat in Spanish law that allows neighbors to make a case for possessing land that isn’t being used productively. Now, the lush green square boasts a community kitchen and gardens. One night a week, volunteers provide dinner for upwards of 60 recent North African migrants, using ingredients sourced from local fruiterias and shops that would have otherwise gone to waste at the close of business.

On this particular Thursday, Brown’s students became non-profit managers and chefs, but they also became community members themselves. In just a few hours from start to finish, the students had to source donated produce from the local vendors, come up with a recipe using what they’d gathered, and then prepare a meal in the rudimentary kitchen. “They received a lot of turnips and had to create a recipe to use them,” Brown said. In the end, a flavorful stew simmered in a massive metal pan over propane burners, brought alive with fresh chilis picked from the garden.

“This was way outside some students’ comfort zones,” Brown said. Yet, that was exactly the point of the activity. By the end of the evening, the students discovered that sometimes the most profound educational moments take shape only after challenging the limits of learning.

“Many of us do not consider ourselves chefs, so it was empowering to discover that, together, we had the capacity to create a nourishing meal for 70 people, with produce that would have otherwise gone to waste. This meal that we created on the spot, in combination with many of the other workshops during the program, was a strong reminder of

how much agency each of us has to effect change within isolating and constraining systems, especially in community with like-minded individuals,” said Sonia Torres Rodriguez, a first-year PhD student in Urban Studies and Planning, Course 11.

Torres Rodriguez focuses her doctoral research on affordable and climate-resilient housing. She was drawn to the IAP program’s exploration of innovative approaches to more equitably distributing the means of producing housing and food, and was excited to be learning in person in Spain. “Cooking together, admiring healthy regenerative soil, foraging, learning traditional methods to braid grass, installing mini solar panels, and hosting poetry circles, would have been impossible to replicate on Zoom,” she said.

Calvin Macatantan ‘26, computer science and urban studies and planning, was initially drawn to the program because of his interest in resilient economies and how they support the communities they serve. Other than visiting family in the Philippines, he’d never left the United States before. He was especially moved by the group’s stay at La Bruguera, an eco-resort partnered with R&D that serves as a “living laboratory.” The cohort heard from local experts in regenerative agriculture, soil health, and low-tech agroforestry, alongside hands-on activities such as eco-art therapy sessions, weaving lessons, and the rebuilding of a greenhouse.

As part of a final project for the course, Macatantan and another student wrote and illustrated a children’s book that explains La Bruguera’s work by making the soil come to life as the main protagonist for young readers.

Brown’s course pushed Sofia Espindola de La Mora ‘29 to think more critically about everyday systems and their environmental impact. Originally from Puerto Rico, the freshman watched helplessly in recent years as climate change has increased the frequency and magnitude of natural disasters at home.

She came to MIT looking for answers and wanting to make a difference, and signed up for Brown’s course as part of that quest. “It was fascinating to see firsthand that the degrowth movement doesn’t mean slowing down is a bad thing, but instead that the constant striving for more is what has led us to many of the predicaments we now face as a society. It forced me to think about whether it would even be possible for me to sustain the life I have now using renewable energy,” Espindola de La Mora said. The course convinced her to focus her studies on climate system science and engineering.



A climate context

Broadening students’ perspectives was a priority for Brown, whose research lies at the intersection of history, science, technology, and bio-politics. She’s known on campus for courses like the History of Food Production and Environmental History. Her 2026 book, *Tiny Gardens Everywhere: The Past, Present and Future of the Self-Provisioning City*, examines urban systems including gardens.

When Brown was designing the Global Classroom – made possible through MISTI, with additional support from the MIT Energy Initiative – she centered a value she considers imperative in any course today: addressing climate and other human-driven environmental challenges.

“I’m focused on training students to approach these problems at the local level, so they see what happens when they’re working through communities, rather than prescribing to them something to scale all over the world,” Brown said.

That localized, individualized approach helped expand on what the students initially believed was possible and compelled them to become part of the solution through their studies and in their professional lives.

Since their return to campus, Brown’s students have continued to lean on one another and build community one meal at a time. Many Tuesday nights, they come together to cook dinner, Barcelona squat style. Each individual brings their ingredients, and together they create a recipe that nourishes and sustains.

“

MISTI Global Classrooms like this show what happens when learning extends beyond the MIT campus.

Alicia Goldstein Raun, managing director of the Center’s MIT-Spain Program and associate director of MISTI

“I was losing a lot of faith in the world before this trip,” Macatantan admitted. “We’re constantly surrounded by consumption and the drive to do more. This experience helped me realize that I want to do something that impacts people. For me, that will look like research. I want to become an expert in a subject and become someone who can help communicate that knowledge to people who need it.”

“I was excited when Professor Brown approached me to help shape this new class, knowing it would resonate with students,” said Alicia Goldstein Raun, associate director of MISTI and managing director of the MIT-Spain Program at CIS. “The students tackled global challenges like climate change and explored the degrowth movement while immersing themselves in Spanish communities and culture.”

“MISTI Global Classrooms like this show what happens when learning extends beyond the MIT campus,” said Raun.

Learn how to design a MISTI Global Classroom here
misti.mit.edu/starting-global-classroom



Alexandra Zorn (left), an MBA candidate at Sloan, and Sonia Torres Rodríguez, a PhD student in DUSP, participated in the MISTI Global Classroom designed and taught by Kate Brown.



Regional Flashpoints: Ukraine

As Ukraine continues to confront the devastating consequences of war, CIS is bringing together faculty, students, visiting scholars, and global partners to address some of the conflict’s challenges and help contribute to immediate resilience and long-term recovery.

Photo by Oleksandr Zhabin on Unsplash



Programs & Initiatives

Five Years In: The MIT-Ukraine Program

Elizabeth Wood reflects on the program’s origins, growth, and future.

What inspired you to launch the MIT-Ukraine Program, and how has your vision evolved over five years?

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, hit me hard. I had been talking with military experts who were convinced an invasion was imminent, and when it happened, it became clear that MIT could play a meaningful role in supporting Ukraine through research, education, and collaboration.

Since then, the MIT-Ukraine Program has continually evolved in response to changing needs both in Ukraine and at MIT. My vision – always co-created with program manager Svitlana Krasynska – is to continue expanding those connections. Our next step is to launch quarterly workshops that bring together the many MIT researchers already working with Ukrainian partners in fields ranging from urban planning and mechanical engineering to water resources and demining.

Tell us about your research and how it is implemented in the program.

I have two different principal bodies of research. The first, chronologically speaking, was work on the early Soviet Union, particularly policies on gender and a kind of mock trials that were used to teach about morality and the public sphere. In 2004, I became a Putin watcher – though never a Putin sympathizer. I have written about his hypermasculinity, his populist appeals (especially in comparison to the Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan), his use of WWII imagery and propaganda as a mobilizing device, and the gender makeup of the upper reaches of Russian power. I also had a small interlude when I worked on US-Russian science partnerships.



Elizabeth Wood
Faculty director, MIT-Ukraine Program
Faculty co-director, MIT-Eurasia Program

Of late, I have been rapidly filling in the holes of my knowledge of Ukrainian history (which fortunately are not as massive as they might have been, thanks to some excellent training I got in the period of early Rus and the early modern period). Together some colleagues across the Institute and I are launching a new project we are calling “CoCreation Roadmap” to serve as a set of questions and insights about MIT researchers’ interactions and knowledge co-creation with Ukrainian counterparts.

What are some current or prospective research opportunities for MIT collaborations with Ukraine?

Our research opportunities continue to expand as new partnerships emerge across Ukraine and Europe. One major area of focus is digital democracy and what we call “digital frontlines” – research aimed at countering Russian disinformation and propaganda using AI-assisted methods. We’re now in our third season of this work, and we’ve already published our first article on the project.

We’re also collaborating with partners on municipal infrastructure and water recovery efforts in Mykolaiv, helping analyze data and strengthen local planning. Another exciting initiative is the development of a new housing community in Kyiv for internally displaced families in partnership with the Ukrainian nonprofit Vid Sertsya Budova.

Beyond these projects, we’re exploring the role of cultural diplomacy through a partnership with the Ukraine in a Changing Europe Research Center at Charles University in Prague, while another collaboration in Vilnius engages MIT students in teaching STEM to Ukrainian refugee children.

These projects illustrate the wide range of ways MIT researchers and students are working alongside Ukrainian partners to address both the immediate challenges of war and the long-term work of recovery and resilience.



Mariana Budjeryn
Senior researcher, Center for Nuclear Security Policy, Security Studies Program

Publications & Commentary
What Is the Current State of Ukraine’s Politics and How Could This Affect a Peace Deal?

by Mariana Budjeryn

Over the past three decades, Ukraine's political system has evolved in sharp contrast to Russia's. Power in Ukraine has been dispersed, rather than centralized, and shared among multiple stakeholders, including a diverse and flourishing civil society. Ukraine's capacity for societal mobilization and self-organization proved critical in repelling the initial thrust of Russia's full-scale invasion and in continuing to support the defense effort. At the same time, the necessary centralization of decision making in the hands of the executive, the marginalization of the legislature, and the suspension of peacetime democratic procedures, such as elections, in wartime, put unprecedented pressure on Ukrainian society to maintain cohesion while finding alternative ways to keep its officials accountable.

Ukraine's society has proved it can and will mobilize around political issues, not only to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty against external threats but also to fight corruption in the halls of state power domestically. In summer 2025, attempts by the Zelenskyy government to curtail the independence of Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions were halted by widespread popular protests – the first significant expression of public disapproval since February 2022. With their autonomy preserved, the anti-corruption institutions continued their investigations and exposed a massive corruption scheme, prompting important personnel changes in the office of the president, including the removal, in November 2025, of Andriy Yermak, the powerful head of the presidential office.

Meanwhile, in spring 2026, Ukraine revealed its deep- and mid-strike drone capabilities and has proceeded to substantially degrade Russian oil infrastructure, military production, and logistical routes that support Russian war effort,

strengthening its negotiating position in any future war termination talks. Ukraine's drone prowess is also a product of its predisposition to grassroots solutions that allowed the country to effectively harness the ingenuity of private sector innovators for the prescient needs of its defense effort.

Ukraine's friends and foes would do well to keep in mind this aspect of Ukraine's socio-political constitution and how it might shape the continued prosecution of war and any prospective peace. Ukraine's societal actors in their manyfold forms – NGOs, media, business – have real agency. Whatever war termination formula is agreed by a handful of men on the sidelines of G7, in Abu Dhabi, or elsewhere, will have to find broad-based support among the Ukrainians, who, bled and exhausted though they are, are determined to safeguard their dignity and liberty from internal and external threats alike.

Zelenskyy Photo courtesy Wikipedia Commons.



Halyna Padalko, a Fulbright Fellow and research affiliate of the MIT-Ukraine Program, co-taught the course AI and Propaganda in Contemporary War with Elizabeth Wood.

Featured Publications & Commentary

Artificial intelligence and disinformation

A book chapter in *Foundational Principles of AI Governance and Policy* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026), co-authored by Halyna Padalko, examines how artificial intelligence is transforming the spread of disinformation while exploring governance strategies and policy frameworks that can help strengthen democratic resilience against manipulation and propaganda.

Trump changes his mind on Ukraine

On *National Public Radio*, Jim Walsh analyzes the implications of President Trump's remarks suggesting Ukraine could reclaim territory occupied by Russia. His commentary last year examines how a shift in US policy could influence the course of the war, transatlantic security, and the future of European defense.



Jim Walsh
Senior research associate, Security Studies Program

Events & Activities

Build for Ukraine Hackathon

During last January’s Independent Activities Period (IAP), students, researchers, and partners across seven time zones came together to tackle urgent technical challenges facing Ukraine as the full-scale war enters its fifth year.

The four-week hackathon, Build for Ukraine 2.0, brought MIT students and Ukrainian collaborators into a shared innovation environment where power outages, air-raid alerts, and subzero temperatures were part of the daily reality of teamwork.

The event was co-sponsored by the MIT-Ukraine Program, MIT Edgerton Center, and MIT Lincoln Laboratory Beaver Works, with support from Mission Innovation X, MathWorks, and MIT.nano.

Designed and taught as an IAP course (EC.S01/EC.S11), the hackathon paired technically diverse participants with Ukrainian organizations seeking near-term solutions to problems arising directly from wartime conditions.

Build for Ukraine centered on co-design and rapid prototyping with in-country partners. Organizers spent the fall semester gathering challenge statements from stakeholders in Ukraine, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, Spain, and across the United States. The goal: identify problems where a small, interdisciplinary team could make measurable progress in one month.

The participant pool reflected MIT’s open IAP structure. First-year undergraduates worked alongside senior engineers, international researchers, and Ukrainian colleagues participating remotely despite frequent blackouts. Many joined meetings from darkened apartments in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Cherkasy – often relying on unstable heaters and back-up battery packs. One participant excused himself from a design review due to an air-raid alert.

“These groups developed what I call ‘quantum entanglement,’” said Svetlana Boriskina, a principal research scientist and director of the Multifunctional Metamaterials Laboratory in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. “They were sharing data in real time across continents, while experiencing the war’s impacts directly and indirectly.”

The IAP course was co-sponsored by the MIT-Ukraine Program, MIT Edgerton Center, and MIT Lincoln Laboratory Beaver Works, with support from Mission Innovation X, MathWorks, and MIT. nano.



Build for Ukraine 2.0 participants included MIT students and Ukrainian collaborators who worked together to develop solutions amid the realities of wartime Ukraine.



Peter Pomerantsev, senior fellow at Johns Hopkins’ SNF Agora Institute, spoke on the challenges of modern information warfare using the war in Ukraine as a case study. Halyna Padalko moderated the discussion.



Carol Saivetz, a senior fellow in the Security Studies Program, moderated a talk featuring Fiona Hill on the war in Ukraine’s potential for political instability within Russia. The talk was part of the Center’s Focus on Eurasia series co-chaired by Saivetz and Elizabeth Wood.

Featured Events & Activities:

Russia’s War Against Ukraine: Will It Lead to Crisis in Moscow?

As part of the Center’s ongoing Focus on Eurasia seminar series, Fiona Hill joined Carol Saivetz and Elizabeth Wood for a timely discussion examining the political and strategic consequences of Russia’s war in Ukraine. The conversation explored the potential for instability within Russia, the evolving dynamics of the conflict, and the broader implications for European and global security.

Economy and Financial Stability: A Conversation with Andriy Pyshnyy

Andriy Pyshnyy joined the MIT community for a discussion on leading Ukraine’s central bank during wartime. Drawing on his experience guiding the country’s monetary policy and financial system through unprecedented challenges, Pyshnyy examined Ukraine’s economic resilience, the role of international partnerships, and the financial strategies supporting the nation’s recovery amid ongoing conflict.

AI and Propaganda: Nothing Is True, and Everything Is Generated

Peter Pomerantsev joined Halyna Padalko for a conversation exploring how artificial intelligence is transforming propaganda, disinformation, and modern information warfare. Drawing on lessons from Ukraine’s experience countering Russian disinformation, the discussion examined the challenges AI poses to democracy, public trust, and critical thinking, as well as emerging strategies for identifying and combating information manipulation.

Scholars & Fellows

Global MIT At-Risk Fellows

Each year, scholars from Ukrainian universities and research institutions join CIS as part of the Global MIT At-Risk Fellows program. The fellowship enables them to continue their work, collaborate with faculty, and exchange ideas across disciplines while maintaining academic connections during a time of war.

Last spring's fellows brought expertise spanning urban planning, transportation, nuclear engineering, land governance, and digital education, working alongside MIT faculty to address challenges with implications for both Ukraine's recovery and global research.

Andrii Galkin, a specialist in transportation and logistics, worked with Brent Ryan and the Norman B Leventhal Center for Advanced Urbanism (LCAU) to examine how cities maintain transportation networks under wartime conditions, balancing public safety with the need to keep essential services moving.

Andrii Popov, an expert in land governance and spatial planning, collaborated with Brent Ryan and Liz Reynolds, professors in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, on questions of rural land redistribution, sustainable planning, and postwar recovery, while also contributing to MIT's Innovating in Ukraine course.



Alyona Glushko, Global MIT At-Risk Fellow

Alyona Glushko joined the Department of Nuclear Science and Engineering, where she worked with Mike Short, professor of nuclear science and engineering, on advanced materials for piping systems used in nuclear energy reactors.

Radmila Segol collaborated with MIT Open Learning's Sheryl Barnes, director of Digital Learning in Residential Education, to explore innovations in distance learning, information technology education and the growing role of artificial intelligence in education.



Divya Krishna and Maria Calvo discuss their academic journey and engage in conversation with students at Charles University in Prague.

Students Abroad

Advancing Ukraine's Recovery

Through the MIT-Ukraine Program, 11 students spent part of their summer working alongside European partners on projects that support Ukraine's resilience and recovery. Learn more about the students and their projects:

Claire Chen (Course 6-4) and Miriam Lubashev (Course 18) developed online tools to counter online disinformation and propaganda at the University of Cambridge in collaboration with SINTEF.

Divya Krishna (Course 16; Course 6-5) and Maria Calvo (Course 2; Course 15-3) conducted research on cultural diplomacy in wartime Ukraine at Charles University in Prague, examining the intersections of societal security, European integration, and musical diplomacy.

Phoebe Meyerson (Course 11) analyzed data supporting municipal infrastructure recovery for the Mykolaiv Water Hub.



Ukrainian refugee children participating in STEM activities designed by Kendra Culyer during her time at the Ukrainian Center in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Global MIT At-Risk Fellows featured with MIT-Ukraine Program's Elizabeth Wood and Svitlana Krasynska along with Duane Boning, Vice Provost for International Activities, and Elizabeth Dupuy, senior director, Office of the Vice Provost for International Activities



Regional Flashpoints: China

As the United States and China navigate one of the defining geopolitical relationships of the 21st century, CIS brings together scholars, policymakers, students, and practitioners to deepen our understanding and inform decisions on issues ranging from security and trade to technology and climate.

Photo by Edward He on Unsplash

Events & Activities

The Future of US-China Relations

On February 18, the Center hosted a Starr Forum on the future relations of the United States and China. The talk, which drew more than 500 attendees, featured Ambassador Nicholas Burns and was moderated by Yasheng Huang, the faculty director of the Center's MIT-China Program and professor at the MIT Sloan School.

Ambassador Burns, who also serves as professor of the practice and diplomacy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, stated that the United States and China are entering a prolonged era of strategic competition that must be carefully managed to avoid military conflict.

Drawing on his experience serving as US ambassador to China from 2021–2025, Burns sees China as both an extraordinary civilization and America's principal geopolitical competitor. He emphasized that appreciating China's achievements and respecting its people is entirely compatible with recognizing the profound strategic challenges posed by the Chinese government.

“

China is an adversary. It's a competitor. It's a rival. It's not an enemy.

Ambassador Nicholas Burns

His central message was one of strategic realism rather than pessimism. He argued that competition with China is unavoidable, but conflict is not.

“China is an adversary. It's a competitor. It's a rival. It's not an enemy,” he said.

Success, Ambassador Burns stated, will depend less on “winning” against China than on strengthening America's own institutions, alliances, research ecosystem, and diplomatic capacity while preserving enough cooperation to reduce the risk of war.

As moderator, Huang consistently broadened the conversation from bilateral relations to global strategy, separated economic competition from security concerns, and emphasized the importance of alliances and global engagement. He also asked Ambassador Burns to explain why US policy has succeeded or failed.

“If you want to compete with any country, China included, you need to match the rhetoric with the action. So we only see the rhetoric without seeing the action,” explained Huang, arguing that Washington has often criticized China's global initiatives without offering comparable alternatives.

The discussion ultimately presented a vision of disciplined competition – firm where necessary, cooperative where possible, and always mindful of the enormous consequences should rivalry spiral into confrontation.



China's Big Science Bet

A Security Studies Program's Wednesday Seminar explored Beijing's ambitious investments in large-scale scientific infrastructure, basic research funding, and frontier initiatives spanning materials science, astrophysics, and nuclear fusion. These long-term efforts aim to build a national scientific enterprise that parallels, yet diverges in critical ways, from the US model. The talk, featuring James Goodrich from the RAND Corporation and chaired by Taylor Fravel, director of the Security Studies Program, also examined the strategic and security implications of China's approach to science and innovation.

Publications & Commentary

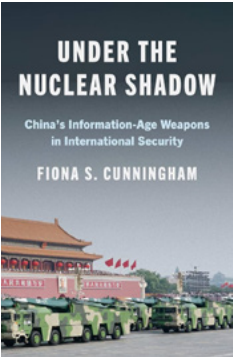
Books on China

CIS scholars continue to shape global conversations on China’s economic transformation, strategic ambitions, and role in the international order through influential new books and research.



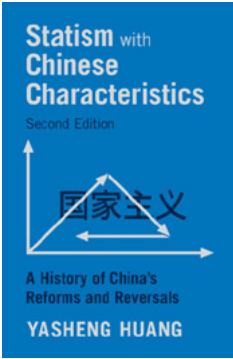
Retrench, Defend, Compete

Charles Glaser, senior fellow in the Security Studies Program, explores how the US should respond to China’s growing power, advocating a strategy that protects core US interests while avoiding unnecessary confrontation and costly commitments in *Retrench, Defend, Compete: Securing America’s Future Against a Rising China* (Cornell University Press).



Under the Nuclear Shadow

Fiona Cunningham PhD ‘18, an affiliate of the Security Studies Program and assistant professor at University of Pennsylvania, has been awarded the 2026 Peter Katzenstein Book Prize for *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China’s Information-Age Weapons in International Security* (Princeton University Press).



Statism with Chinese Characteristics

Yasheng Huang, faculty director of the MIT-China Program and Epoch Foundation Professor of International Management, offers a fresh interpretation of China’s economic rise in the second edition of *Statism with Chinese Characteristics: A History of China’s Reforms and Reversals* (Cambridge University Press). Drawing on decades of research, Huang challenges the conventional view that China’s success was driven primarily by state intervention.

In the *East Asia Forum*, Sojun Park examines the effectiveness of Washington’s AI export controls on China and their implications for the global AI industry. Pictured is Jensen Huang, CEO and co-founder of NVIDIA, whose company sits at the center of the competition over advanced AI chips.



Featured Publications & Commentary

Washington Needs Allies to Make AI Export Controls Work

Sojun Park, *East Asia Forum*, June 26, 2026

In a recent article in the *East Asia Forum*, Sojun Park, a postdoctoral associate at CIS, argues that Washington’s AI export controls cannot effectively slow China’s technological development without sustained cooperation from allied countries, many of which are deeply integrated with Chinese markets. Divergent commercial interests and uncertainty about the strength of Washington’s own policy commitments give US allies little incentive to swear off the Chinese market.

Doubts About Trump Strain Southeast Asia’s US-China Balancing Act

Joanne Lin, *South China Morning Post*, April 12, 2026

CIS Fulbright Fellow Joanne Lin analyzes growing concerns about US leadership among Southeast Asian countries, as reflected in this year’s State of Southeast Asia Survey. Her commentary was featured in the *South China Morning Post*.

Xi’s Military Purge and the PLA’s Leadership Void

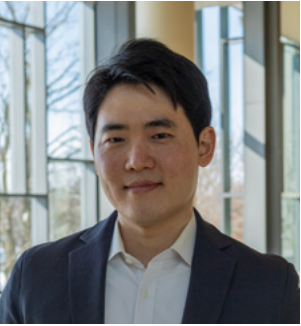
Taylor Fravel, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, February 24, 2026

Taylor Fravel, director of the Security Studies Program, states that the unprecedented removal of senior Chinese military leaders under Xi Jinping is a sweeping shakeup that has disrupted more than half of the People’s Liberation Army’s top leadership positions. His analysis explores how this leadership turnover could slow military modernization, weaken operational readiness, and complicate China’s ability to conduct large-scale operations, including a potential conflict over Taiwan.

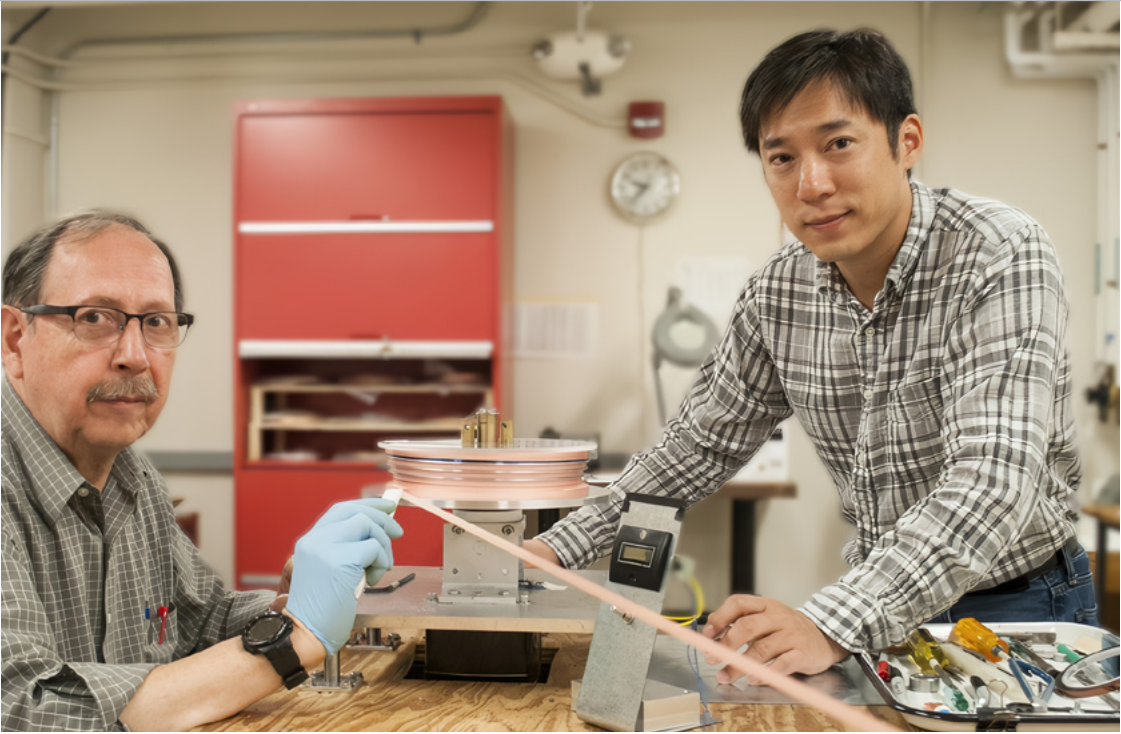
Designing Wedge Strategies: US Response to China, Russia, and Their Alignments

Chengzhi Yin and Mihaela Papa, *International Negotiation*, Online Publication, December 24, 2025

Mihaela Papa, director of research, principal research scientist, and founding director of the BRICS Lab at CIS, and her co-author explore how the United States can use diplomatic strategies to weaken or prevent strategic partnerships among rival powers. The article examines US responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and growing China-Russia cooperation, arguing for more flexible approaches as emerging groupings such as BRICS reshape global power dynamics.



Sojun Park
Postdoctoral Associate, CIS



Dongkeun Park (far right) and Juan Bascuñán of MIT's Plasma Science and Fusion Center are collaborating with researchers at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China.

International Collaborations

Global Seed Funds in China

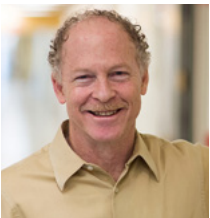
Through the MIT Greater China Fund for Innovation, the Global Seed Funds program supports cross-border research collaborations, demonstrating the value of international partnerships even amid heightened geopolitical tensions. MIT researchers continue to work with colleagues across China on projects ranging from planetary science and advanced materials to urban planning, spectroscopy, and fusion energy. Together, these partnerships show how the pursuit of scientific discovery can bridge national boundaries and generate knowledge with global impact.



Gaia Stucky de Quay



Brent Ryan



Keith Nelson

Recently Funded Projects

- Automating crater mapping for martian and lunar chronology**

MIT: Gaia Stucky de Quay, Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences
Collaborators: Xie Hu and Yiling Lin, Peking University
- Planning for foreclosed homes in the US and China**

MIT: Brent Ryan, Urban Studies and Planning
Collaborator: Shuqi Gao, Southeast University
- Metasurface-enabled on-chip terahertz and far-infrared spectrometer**

MIT: Keith Nelson, Chemistry
Collaborator: Linjie Dai, Peking University
- Integrated quench prevention and protection strategies for reliable ultra-high-field high-temperature superconducting magnets**

MIT: Dongkeun Park, Plasma Science and Fusion Center
Collaborator: Timing Qu, Tsinghua University

Students Abroad

PhD Student Research Grants

From cloud computing to climate migration and comparative political economy, CIS PhD Student Research Grants help emerging scholars pursue ambitious international research that depends on fieldwork, archival research, and firsthand engagement around the world. By supporting original empirical research, the PhD student research grants enable MIT doctoral students to tackle complex global questions and produce scholarship with real-world relevance.

China-Focused Grants

- JS Tan, Urban Studies and Planning: High-versus low-road development in China's cloud computing sector**, examining how China's cloud computing industry is evolving and what it reveals about technology, industrial policy, and economic development.
- Ashley Vicary, Center for Real Estate: Climate shocks, internal migration, and left-behind children in rural China**, exploring how climate-driven migration is reshaping families and communities across rural China.
- Jingtian Chen, Political Science: The political origins of market structures in China, the European Union, and the United States**, a comparative study drawing on research in China, Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy to understand how political institutions shape modern markets.

MISTI Global Classroom

During a MISTI Global Classroom over January's IAP, 21 undergraduates spent three weeks immersed in the language, history, and cultures of Chinese-speaking societies through an intensive, multi-city experience across East Asia.

Students began the program in Kaohsiung before traveling to Taipei, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen – the first time the program has connected four major port cities in a single journey. Along the way, they strengthened their Mandarin language skills while exploring the diverse histories, cultures, and traditions that shape the Chinese-speaking world. Visits to historical and cultural sites, including those focused on Buddhist history and practice, provided context that deepened classroom learning and broadened students' cross-cultural understanding.

“Through cultural immersion, academic exchange, and new friendships, I gained a deeper understanding of Chinese and Taiwanese culture, expanded my sense of the world beyond the United States, and also deepened my own relationship with my identity.”

Mindy Zhang '26, computer science and cognitive science, mathematics





Erik Lin-Greenberg
Co-director, Wargaming Lab



Eric Heginbotham
Co-director, Wargaming Lab

Programs & Initiatives

Wargaming on China

The Security Studies Program is helping shape understanding of one of today's most consequential security challenges through its Wargaming Lab. Co-directed by Erik Lin-Greenberg, the Leo Marx Career Development Associate Professor in the History and Culture of Science and Technology, and Eric Heginbotham, principal research scientist at SSP, the Lab brings together scholars, military experts, and policy-makers to simulate crises involving China and assess the strategic decisions they demand. The Lab's research informs public policy while advancing new approaches to wargaming, including AI-enabled simulation.

Recent exercises have examined a US-China economic crisis, a nuclear contingency in the Taiwan Strait, and the role of commercial actors in a future conflict.

The largest event of the year was the Lab's flagship game, held in June at MIT's Endicott House. Building on previous research examining conflict in the Indo-Pacific, the game explored the interaction between military and economic dynamics during a hypothetical Chinese blockade of Taiwan and subsequent US intervention. Consistent with the Lab's emphasis on integrating public and private-sector perspec-

tives, the exercise included both governmental and commercial actors, enabling participants to examine how economic considerations might influence strategic decision-making during a major international crisis.

The game brought together an accomplished group of participants from government, industry, academia, and the military. Over multiple game moves spanning two days, participants confronted evolving military, economic, and political developments, forcing them to navigate complex tradeoffs while responding to rapidly changing conditions. The scenario represented one of the Lab's most ambitious efforts to date to examine the intersection of economic statecraft and military conflict. As with previous flagship events, the game generated valuable research insights while also strengthening professional relationships among participants from diverse backgrounds.



Working Groups on China

The Center helps cultivate scholarly communities that connect researchers across disciplines and institutions through working group grants. Grants are available to graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, or faculty seeking to explore global research topics through regular group meetings. Below are last year's working groups that focused on China.

The **China Group on Climate Change and Sustainability** brings together Chinese graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty working across Earth, atmospheric, engineering, and policy fields to strengthen research collaboration and foster a supportive academic network. Through workshops on communicating climate science, career-

development discussions, and interdisciplinary conversations, the group encourages new approaches to one of the world's most pressing global challenges.

For more than 15 years, the **Chinese Politics Research Workshop**, led by Taylor Fravel, has connected graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty from MIT, Harvard and Boston University to present research, exchange ideas, and discuss the practical and methodological challenges of studying Chinese politics. The workshop has become an important forum for emerging scholars while advancing new research on one of the world's most consequential political systems.



Learn about Working Group grants here
cis.mit.edu/opportunities



Regional Flashpoints: MENA

From conflict prevention and economic development to artificial intelligence, energy, migration, and education, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains central to many of today’s most pressing international challenges. Lasting progress depends on collaboration that extends beyond political boundaries.

Photo by Abedin TaherKenareh (Shutterstock)

International Collaborations From Seed Grants to Lasting Partnerships

It was a strong year for MIT Global Seed Funds in the MENA region with \$467.2K awarded to 16 projects bringing the total of active grants across the region to 40 in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and the UAE.

Behind each seed fund award is a partnership with the potential to grow well beyond its initial grant period.

One example began in 2024, when Cynthia Breazeal (MIT) and Mohammad Aljayyousi (Philadelphia University, Jordan) received an MIT–Jordan Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation Seed Fund grant for “Games and Socially Assistive Robots for Arabic-Speaking Learners and Refugees.”

What began as a shared curiosity about how technology could serve Arabic-speaking children has grown into a cross-continental collaboration across the Middle East.

The project explores how socially assistive robots and AI-powered educational games can support literacy, language learning, and social-emotional development for Arabic-speaking children – including refugee populations. The robot interacts with learners in both Arabic and English, using personalized AI algorithms that adapt to each child’s emotional state, language level, and learning preferences. It is designed not only as a teaching tool, but also as a companion that meets children where they are.

The seed fund grant brought Mohammad Aljayyousi to MIT, where the teams worked together on shaping the educational content and game design, informed by Mohammad’s expertise in curriculum design and his understanding of the cultural context.

The MIT team then traveled to Jordan, visiting the Shoman Foundation and meeting with officials from the Ministry of Education’s digital transformation office and led a workshop for 200 people (in person and online).

These interactions opened up opportunities for funding and collaboration across the region. The team is now exploring how MISTI’s internship program and Global Teaching Labs could play a role in expanding this engagement, through training students at MIT and then deploying them to help implement programs on the ground in the region.



Polina Golland
Priscilla Chou Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science

By developing advanced tools to better interpret fetal MRI data, Golland aims to improve early assessment and ultimately patient care.

Another example is the MIT-Israel Zuckerman STEM Fund Seed Fund project “MRI Biometrics for Fetal Assessment,” led by Polina Golland (MIT) and Leo Joskowicz (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Golland and Joskowicz are both long-standing leaders in medical image analysis and computer-aided medicine.

While this collaboration builds on years of overlapping research interests and prior familiarity, the MIT Global Seed Funds call provided the timely catalyst to formalize and deepen their partnership.

By developing advanced tools to better interpret fetal MRI data, they aim to improve early assessment and ultimately patient care.

Beyond the technical goals, the partnership highlights the value of international collaboration in healthcare research, bringing together different clinical systems, perspectives, and problem-solving approaches.

In the near term, the seed funding has enabled a joint proposal to the US-Israel Binational Science Foundation. In the long term, it is expected to foster deeper scientific engagement and generate innovative solutions emerging from sustained, cross-cultural scientific exchange.



Mai Hassan, faculty director of the MIT-Africa Program and an associate professor of political science, co-authored a guest essay in the *New York Times* on the crisis in Sudan.

Publications & Commentary
Timely Analysis from Our Scholars

Sudan Is What Happens When You Recognize a Junta

Mai Hassan (with Suliman Baldo)
September 21, 2025, *New York Times*

Mai Hassan and Suliman Baldo explore a central dilemma in Sudan’s civil war: who should represent the country in international negotiations. The authors argue in a guest essay for the New York Times that empowering the Sudanese Armed Forces and other armed factions risks rewarding those responsible for derailing Sudan’s democratic transition and overlooking the civilian coalitions advocating for democratic governance.

In the Strait, Iran Holds the Advantage – and America Has No Good Options

Caitlin Talmadge
March 13, 2026, *Foreign Affairs*

Within days of the 2026 escalation of conflict between the US and Iran, Caitlin Talmadge examined how the Strait of Hormuz could become a central flashpoint in the crisis. She argued that Iran’s greatest leverage lies not in its conventional navy but in its ability to disrupt shipping through mines, drones, missiles, and small attack craft. Even limited mining of the strait, she warned, could significantly disrupt global energy markets, while mine clearance would be slow, costly, and dangerous for the United States, making prevention and de-escalation the most effective path forward.

Photo Ben Gebo

Featured Publications & Commentary

Kidnapping Politics: The Sorcerer’s Apprentice Effect

European Journal of International Security, 2026, 1–22.
Nick Ackert and Richard Samuels

Drawing on scholarship in international relations and the study of political emotions, Richard Samuels and Nick Ackert examine how political entrepreneurs mobilize anger, fear, and contempt—often amplified by media, civil society, and state institutions—to build electoral support. Through case studies, including the Israeli government under Benjamin Netanyahu, they show how efforts to leverage public outrage over kidnappings for political gain can produce unintended and counterproductive consequences.

The Supply of Conspiracism in State-Controlled Media

The Journal of Politics, 2026
journals.uchicago.edu
Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Richard Nielsen, and David Romney

Richard Nielsen and co-authors build on claims that autocrats use misinformation for diversionary purposes by showing that the level of threat a regime faces affects conspiracism: a mix of “classic” conspiracy theorizing and conspiratorial language. Governments facing threats may attempt to stave them off by promoting conspiracy theories in state media. They tested their arguments by examining conspiracism in Egypt’s print media between 2005 and 2018.

Photo Ben Gebo

Joanne Lin
Fulbright Fellow, CIS

The End of the American Way of War?

Brookings Institution, June 10, 2026
Caitlin Talmadge

Caitlin Talmadge and Mara Karlin argue that the Iran conflict exposed vulnerabilities in the longstanding US approach of relying on forward bases and naval power projection, as adversaries increasingly develop capabilities designed to challenge those assets.

Airpower’s Track Record in Attempting Regime Change

Brookings Institution, March 2, 2026
Caitlin Talmadge and Michael O’Hanlon

Part of Brookings’ “After the Strike: The Danger of War in Iran” series, this analysis examines historical cases to argue that airpower alone rarely produces durable political outcomes or successful regime change.

US-Iran Ceasefire on Fragile Ground

Fox News, June 2026
Jim Walsh

Jim Walsh discusses the significance of renewed US-Iran strikes following ceasefire violations, describing them as low-level exchanges.

Civilian Tools, Not Bombs

Brookings Institution, March 2, 2026
Dafna Rand

Dafna Rand argues that lasting change in Iran is unlikely to come through military intervention alone and instead requires sustained investment in civil society, human rights, democratic institutions, and international partnerships.

More ASEAN States Could Negotiate with Iran on Letting Their Ships Cross Strait of Hormuz, but at What Cost?

Channel NewsAsia, April 1, 2026
Joanne Lin

Joanne Lin examined how disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz could affect Southeast Asia’s energy security and supply chains, and the diplomatic trade-offs ASEAN states face in seeking safe passage arrangements with Iran.



Events & Activities

Rethinking US Technology-Enhanced Development in Egypt and Jordan

By Lydia Shaw

The MIT-MENA Program launched its new MENA Futures speaker series last March with a discussion on the changing landscape of US technology-enhanced development in Egypt and Jordan. The inaugural event brought together experts to examine shifting priorities in employment, energy, and water, and to consider the role academic institutions can play in advancing sustainable development across the region.

Dafna Rand, a Robert E Wilhelm Fellow at CIS and former US assistant secretary of state, moderated the discussion featuring former USAID mission directors Leslie Reed (Jordan) and Sean Jones (Egypt), alongside MIT faculty and researchers.

Rand began by situating US development assistance within its broader historical and strategic context. Large bilateral aid programs in the Middle East were originally shaped by geopolitical agreements such as the Camp David Accords, as well as US foreign policy priorities during the post–Cold War and post–9/11 periods. These programs combined financial assistance with technical expertise, aiming to transform partner countries from aid recipients to trade partners. Over time, USAID missions in Egypt and Jordan developed broad portfolios spanning water infrastructure, education, public health, economic reform, and governance support.

Reflecting on Jordan’s development challenges, Reed highlighted persistent issues such as water scarcity, women and youth unemployment, limited private sector growth,

and pressures stemming from regional conflict and refugee flows. Among these areas, water programming, particularly desalination and infrastructure projects, was cited as one of the most successful sectors, due in part to strong government-to-government collaboration. By contrast, efforts to expand women’s participation in the workforce and stimulate private sector employment proved more difficult. Reed emphasized that many of the region’s challenges are multi-sectoral, requiring integrated approaches that link energy, employment, and fiscal sustainability.

The rapid withdrawal of USAID from these countries came as a surprise to all actors. This brought up questions about the future of US trustworthiness and hegemonic role in the region.

A parallel perspective from Egypt was offered by Jones, where USAID’s strategy focused on inclusive private-sector-led growth, strengthening human capital, and promoting gender equality. He highlighted visible achievements in water access, public health, education, and historic preservation, noting that these programs often benefited from long-term partnerships and support from the Egyptian government. At the same time, progress in areas such as entrepreneurship, agriculture, and STEM education was uneven, often suffering from lack of host-country investment. Jones emphasized that development outcomes frequently hinge on political incentives: reforms that enable private sector growth require sustained domestic support, which may not always align with regime priorities.

Participants also discussed the shifting development landscape following reductions in US bilateral assistance. Panelists observed that other actors have not fully filled the gap. Europe, Gulf countries, nor China have expressed interest in continuing patterns of bilateral US aid to Egypt and Jordan. The rapid withdrawal of USAID from these countries came as a surprise to all actors. This brought up questions about the future of US trustworthiness and hegemonic role in the region.



Richard Nielsen
Faculty director,
MIT-MENA Program

Photo by Ceri Breeze (iStock)

The abrupt withdrawal of USAID from the region raised questions about the future of US engagement, trustworthiness, and influence.



Looking ahead, panelists emphasized the importance of targeted, locally driven initiatives. Rather than broad aid portfolios, future efforts may focus on specific sectors such as renewable energy, desalination, tourism, or workforce development.

The conversation also explored structural barriers to private sector development. Both speakers noted that political and security considerations often shape economic policy decisions. In Egypt, for example, state involvement in the economy has expanded significantly, creating challenges for entrepreneurship and technological innovation. Cultural norms and regional instability further complicate workforce participation, particularly for women. They added that foreign investors must account for geopolitical risk, regulatory uncertainty, and infrastructure constraints which slows investment, especially during periods of upheaval.

Looking ahead, panelists emphasized the importance of targeted, locally driven initiatives. Rather than broad aid portfolios, future efforts may focus on specific sectors such as renewable energy, desalination, tourism, or workforce development. These are areas where technological innovation could have a measurable impact. They suggested that future approaches involve blending grants, investment capital, and research collaboration to support sustainable development outcomes.

The discussion concluded with reflections on MIT’s potential role. To that end, the panelists suggested that MIT could deepen partnerships with regional institutions and companies, focus research on scalable technologies suited to resource-constrained environments, and prioritize areas such as low-cost cooling, water systems, and energy efficiency.

MENA Futures

By bringing together expertise across research, technology, policy, and practice, the series seeks to imagine new pathways for MIT engagement with the region, from leveraging technology to tackle regional challenges to the future of climate mitigation to strengthening ties with MIT colleagues to enhance research, understanding of and collaboration with others in the region. Sponsored by MIT-MENA, “MENA Futures” is open to the MIT academic community.

Contact us to learn more about MENA Futures
mit-mena@mit.edu

Featured Events & Activities

AALIMS-MIT Conference on the Political Economy of the Muslim World

On April 10 and 11, MIT-MENA co-hosted the annual conference of the Association for Analytic Learning about Islam and Muslim Societies (AALIMS). The conference brought together scholars from economics, political science, sociology, history, and other cognate fields to present cutting edge research. The topics included the rise of Salafi Islam in Africa, the impact of ending Saudi Arabia’s driving ban for women on the labor force, and the politics of mosque construction in Egypt and Turkey. In addition to the Center’s MIT-MENA Program, co-sponsors included the Institute for Data, Systems, and Society, and the Department of Political Science, and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The Future Is Peace – lunch discussion with authors Aziz Abu Sarah & Maoz Inon

The 3rd Space at MIT and MIT-MEET were honored to be joined by Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon on April 27 for a discussion on the theme of their new book, *The Future Is Peace*.

The Geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz

In March, the MIT-MENA Program hosted a panel discussion on the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz amid escalating regional tensions. Moderated by Richard Nielsen, the conversation featured Caitlin Talmadge, Nader Habibi, Ali Kadivar, and Dafna Rand, who examined the conflict through the lenses of military strategy, economics, history, and diplomacy. The panel explored the risks of escalation, the global implications for energy markets and security, and the Strait’s central role in international geopolitics.

Visions of Conflict: Syria and Sudan

On October 27, MIT-Africa and MIT-MENA co-sponsored a presentation featuring Moise Saman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer. For more than 10 years, Saman has been exploring the humanitarian impact of war in the Middle East. His work blends traditional conflict photography from a deeply personal point of view. The event featured his work on the human impact of war in Syria and Sudan.

A Mini-Course on International Relations in MENA

The MIT-MENA Program offered a three-part webinar series for the MIT community examining competing perspectives on international relations in the Middle East and North Africa. Taught by Peter Krause PhD ’11, associate professor of political science at Boston College and a research affiliate at the Security Studies Program, the online course explored the war in Gaza and the future of Palestinians, Iran-Israel relations, and the Abraham Accords and Arab-Israeli relations, providing historical context for some of the region’s most pressing geopolitical challenges.



Students Abroad
MIT Students Find New Opportunities in Egypt

This summer marked a major milestone for MISTI Arab World with the launch of the program’s first internship cohort in Egypt. Fifteen MIT students participated in the new program, working with leading organizations across Egypt’s growing innovation, technology, healthcare, and research sectors.

Through collaborations with Paymob, The Children’s Cancer Hospital, Robin, Rology, The Egyptian Space Agency, and The American University in Cairo, students gained hands-on experience addressing real-world challenges in healthcare, artificial intelligence, aerospace, advanced manufacturing, entrepreneurship, and technology. Working alongside researchers, engineers, physicians, and entrepreneurs, students applied their classroom knowledge in professional settings while gaining deeper insight into Egypt’s rapidly evolving innovation ecosystem.

Among the inaugural cohort were aerospace engineering students Jordan Tran and Seth Burrowes, who interned at The Egyptian Space Agency. Their placement provided a unique opportunity to gain firsthand exposure to the country’s growing space sector while contributing to projects in a professional research environment.

The students also had the opportunity to connect with MIT alumni in Cairo, learning from professionals working across a range of industries and sectors. These interactions provided mentorship, career insights, and valuable networking

opportunities while strengthening connections between current students and MIT’s growing alumni community in the region.

In addition to the summer internships in Egypt, MISTI Arab World students also engaged in opportunities across the broader Gulf region.

During MIT’s Independent Activities Period (IAP), twelve students participated in a Global Classroom collaboration with Khalifa University focused on healthcare innovation and cross-cultural teamwork. While another dozen students completed internships with startup companies in Dubai, gaining exposure to one of the region’s most dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Working alongside researchers, engineers, physicians, and entrepreneurs, students applied their classroom knowledge in professional settings while gaining deeper insight into Egypt’s rapidly evolving innovation ecosystem.



The MIT-MENA Program hosted a talk on the geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz.

Year in Review

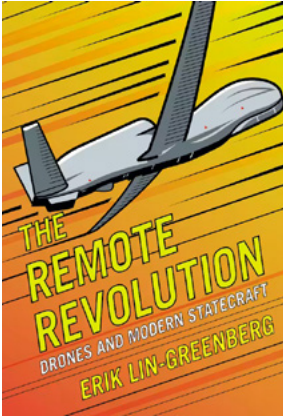
The 2025–26 Academic Year at a Glance

Ideas that Shape the Global Conversation Selected Publications, Research, and Analysis from Across the CIS Community

Featured Book
The Remote Revolution: Drones and Modern Statecraft
By Erik Lin-Greenberg

Erik Lin-Greenberg’s *The Remote Revolution: Drones and Modern Statecraft* received the 2026 Best Book Award from the American Political Science Association’s Foreign Policy Section. The book examines how remotely operated weapons are changing statecraft and the calculations of leaders during crises that fall below the threshold of war. Lin-Greenberg finds that while drones can make the use of force more frequent, their lower costs can also reduce the likelihood that conflicts escalate into broader wars.

Publication: Cornell University Press, 2025



Explore our publications, commentary, and analysis here
cis.mit.edu



Featured Analysis
Trump’s Nuclear Review

As the Trump administration undertakes a close-hold review of US nuclear strategy, Vipin Narang and four former senior nuclear policy officials offer a set of guideposts for the review. They argue that the United States must adapt its nuclear deterrence strategy to a more complex security environment shaped by Russia and China’s expanding capabilities, while strengthening both strategic and regional forces and maintaining credible extended deterrence for US allies.

Publication: “Trump’s Nuclear Review,” *RealClearDefense*, May 26, 2026. By Madelyn Creedon, Eric S Edelman, Franklin C Miller, Vipin Narang and Keith B Payne.

Featured Research
Democracy & Safe Water

Research by Evan Lieberman and Naomi Tilles examines whether democratic governments are better at delivering one of the most basic public goods: safe drinking water. Analyzing data from 96 low- and middle-income countries, they found that while democracies may have a modest advantage in providing basic water access, they have been less successful at ensuring that water is actually safe to drink.

Publication: “Beyond The Tap: The Limited Value of Democracy for Delivering Universal Safe Water Access In Low-And Middle-Income Countries,” *World Development*, Volume 204, August 2026, Article 107436.

215+

Books, Reports, Journal
Articles, Commentary



Featured Report
**Envisioning Global Leadership:
The G20 and BRICS in 2026**

Mihaela Papa and an international team of researchers examine whether the G20 and BRICS can provide avenues for cooperation at a time of intensifying geopolitical rivalry. With the United States chairing the G20 and India leading an expanded BRICS, the report considers whether the two groupings can foster issue-based cooperation and contribute to more effective global leadership—or instead reinforce competing spheres of influence.

Publication: “Envisioning Global Leadership: The G20 and BRICS in 2026” *Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy*, March 2026. Authors: Mihaela Papa, Gustavo de Carvalho, Akshay Mathur, Damyana Bakardzhieva and Miriam Prys-Hansen.

Featured Commentary
Russia’s Desperate Commanders

In a *Boston Globe Ideas* essay, Lilia Yapparova, the 2026 Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow, examines the brutal tactics Russian military commanders are using to compel soldiers to enlist and follow orders after years of heavy casualties in Ukraine. Her reporting sheds light on coercion and abuse within Russia’s military as the war continues to place extraordinary demands on its forces.

Publication: “Russia’s Desperate Commanders Resort to Humiliating Their Soldiers,” *The Boston Globe*, April 8, 2026.

International Collaborations MIT Research Meets the World’s Biggest Challenges

Through the Global Seed Funds program, the Center connects MIT researchers with partners around the world to tackle complex global challenges—from climate resilience and sustainable energy to artificial intelligence, health, cities, and education. With last year’s new awards, the program currently supports more than 250 active projects. Below are highlights of recent awards, grouped by topics:

Climate, Ecosystems, and Environmental Resilience

Amazon climate science and education for forest resilience. Cesar Terror, MIT Civil and Environmental Engineering Izabella Aleixo, Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia (INPA), Brazil

Fog, people and time: Integrating archaeology, geomorphology and community knowledge to understand and sustain Peru’s central coast Lomas ecosystems. Taylor Perron, MIT Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences Giancarlo Marcone, UTEC, Peru

PRISMA: Process-based interdisciplinary integrated assessment of coastal marine ecosystem health. Andrew Babbin, MIT Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences Grazia Marina Quero, Manuela Coci, and Gian Marco Luna, National Research Council, Italy

Co-designing for food-water system transformation. Rohit Karnik and Gregory Sixt, MIT Kim Geheb, Khalil Walji, and Immaculate Edel Moruri, CIFOR-ICRAF, Kenya

Technology, AI, and the Future

Exploiting decades of seismic data with machine learning. William Frank, MIT Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences Sergio Ruiz, Universidad de Chile, Chile

Efficient supercomputing for science and AI: Abstraction meets acceleration. Alan Edelman, MIT Mathematics Ben van Werkhoven, Leiden University, Netherlands

Bioacoustics and AI. Sara Beery, MIT Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Yossi Yovel, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Probabilistic digital twins for safe and optimal human–robot manufacturing Pierre Lermusiaux, MIT Mechanical Engineering Muhammad Saeed, University of Stuttgart/ARENA2036, and Alexander Brem, Germany

Health and Human Wellbeing

A single-cell spatial genomics approach to understanding poor outcomes in HIV HBV-driven liver cancer. Alex Shalek, MIT Sanju Sobnach, Mark Sonderup, Wendy Spearman, and Eduard Jonas, University of Cape Town/Groote Schuur Hospital, South Africa

A portable, affordable, and label-free optical imaging platform for anemia screening in the developing world. Peter So, MIT Mechanical Engineering Rishikesh Pandey, IIT Roorkee, India

Implementation of a deep-learning breast cancer risk assessment model developed at MIT into clinical practice in Israel. Regina Barzilay, MIT Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Tanir Allweis, Hadassah Medical Center and Hebrew University, Israel

250+

International Collaborations

Cities, Society, and Global Change

Linking industry composition, transportation infrastructure, and commuting behavior: Understanding mode share dynamics in the US and Korea. Jinhua Zhao and Xinyi Wang, MIT Urban Studies and Planning Sung Hoo Kim, Korea University, South Korea

Economic diversification in Colombian mining territories. Libby McDonald, MIT Morningside Academy of Design Oscar Jaime Restrepo Baena, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia

Equitable climate resilience across governance levels in Europe. Janelle Knox-Hayes, MIT Urban Studies and Planning Riccardo Luporini, Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies, Italy

The transnational religious right: Uncovering sociotechnical flows. Rebekah Larsen, MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing Katie Gaddini, University College London, United Kingdom

Explore the 2025–2026 awards and learn how to apply here
cis.mit.edu/opportunities/faculty/global-seed-funds

Global Expertise
A Growing Community of Experts

Explore all CIS experts here
cis.mit.edu/our-people

Visiting scholars and fellows joined CIS’s resident faculty and scholars, expanding our community to more than 100 experts. The people featured below represent a few of the many individuals who joined CIS during the past academic year.

100+
Experts at CIS



Daniel Hidalgo, associate professor of political science, joined CIS as the faculty director of MIT-Brazil Program.



Evelyn Wang, MIT vice president for energy and climate, joined CIS as an affiliate of the Security Studies Program.



Joshua Byun (assistant professor, Boston College), **Florian Galleri** (historian and scholar), and **Beenish Pervaiz** (PhD ‘25, Brown University) joined the Security Studies Program’s Center for Nuclear Security Policy as the 2025-2026 Stanton Nuclear Security Fellows.



Habib Adebisi Abubakar (lecturer, Department of Chemical Engineering, Ahmadu Bello University), **Obumneme Onyeka Okwonna** (lecturer, Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State-Nigeria), **Odinakachukwu Chidinma Echeta** (lecturer, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering University of Lagos) and **Usman Garba** (senior lecturer, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Nigeria) joined CIS as 2026 spring fellows in the MIT-Empowering the Teachers program.

Events & Activities
Highlights from a Year of Public Events, Seminars, and Conversations

Watch past events here
youtube.com/user/MITCIS

100+
Events & Seminars



Starr Forum

Public conversations on the most pressing international issues.

Among the Starr Forums offered last year was “Rethinking Globalization: America First, the World Last?” featuring Suzanne Berger and Simon Johson. Richard Locke moderated the conversation.

3,000+
Attendees



Global Research & Policy Seminar

Connecting academic research with real-world policy challenges.

The seminar series offered more than a dozen talks including a debriefing of the outcomes of COP30 featuring Evelyn Waugh, Bethany Patten, Kent Larson, Catherine Wolfram, and Andre Zollinger. The talk was moderated by Evan Lieberman.



Security Studies Wednesday Seminar

Research and debate on international security issues.

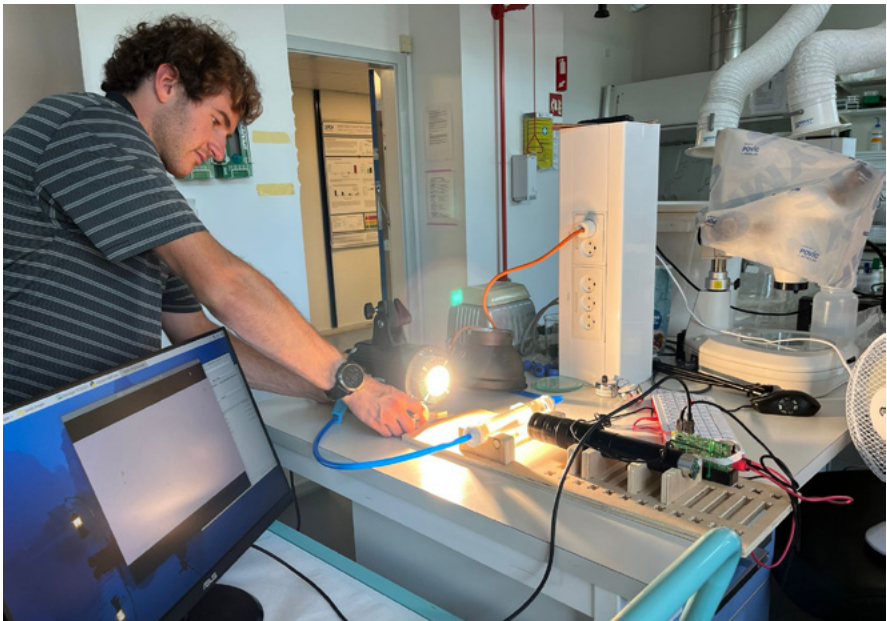
The long-established lunchtime series featured weekly in-person talks for the academic community and as a livestream for the public. Heidi Urban was among the invited speakers, and spoke on the internal accountability in the US military.

Students Abroad
From MISTI Placements to Supporting PhD-Level Fieldwork

1250+
MIT students abroad

50+
Countries

Explore all student opportunities at
cis.mit.edu/opportunities/students



Max Katz ‘26, computer science, participated in a MISTI Scandinavia internship at FQ Aqua in Copenhagen. The startup builds underwater microscopes for detecting threats to salmon farms.

précis is a concise summary of essential points, statements, or facts.

Connect with Us

CIS offers opportunities to connect with colleagues across the Institute and engage with the broader academic community through events, seminars, publications, and newsletters, including **m3** – featuring research from around the world and across disciplines, with a focus on today's global challenges.

Join our mailing lists to receive CIS news, event announcements, regional updates, and the latest research and publications.

cis.mit.edu/connect-us

MIT Center for International Studies
Building E40-400

1 Amherst Street
Cambridge, MA 02142-1309

cis-info@mit.edu
cis.mit.edu



**MIT Center for
International Studies**
Celebrating 75 Years

