

OCTOBER 2024

Democracy, Human Rights, and American Grand Strategy

Toward a Bipartisan Consensus

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A Report of the CSIS Kissinger Chair

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Acknowledgments

This report was made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.

The authors would like to thank Kester Abbot of the United States Studies Centre for research support on this report.

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Executive Summary

Throughout its history, the United States has emphasized human rights and democracy as core tenets of global engagement but struggled to balance those priorities against the exigencies of immediate geopolitical threats. At home, the definition of democracy itself is increasingly contested in a hyper-partisan political environment that foreign adversaries seek to exploit for their own strategic gain. Both at home and abroad, key foreign policy strategists are questioning whether the United States and its allies have the consensus or capacity necessary to put values at the core of their resistance to coercion and cooption by aggrieved and autocratic adversaries.

This report argues that the United States can—and must—do more to promote democracy and democratic norms internationally if it is to secure a favorable international order that preserves common prosperity and security as well as a dignified way of life for people everywhere in the twenty-first century. It further argues that it is precisely because of, not in spite of, the aggressive ambitions and methods of the autocratic powers that the United States must integrate defense of democracy and human rights into its national security strategy. It notes that despite divisions at home, a broad bipartisan commitment exists to defend and advance democratic values that can be harnessed to sustain such a strategy. The report further illustrates that in key regions of the world, U.S. allies and partners are themselves recognizing that both their security and their economic interests depend on the democratic resilience of vulnerable states in their near abroad. Many are articulating strategies and preparing tools that align with or complement U.S. approaches.

The United States therefore has a requirement and opportunities to develop an integrated democracy strategy. The point is not that military, economic, or diplomatic objectives should be subordinated to human rights or democracy priorities, but rather that these strategies should be integrated in national security planning alongside diplomatic, military, and economic objectives. Key elements would include the following efforts:

Harness democratic allies and partners: It is important that any democratic agenda not be seen as a special interest of the United States but as one shared by a diverse array of nations globally. This is not a matter of recruiting allies and partners to a singular strategy but rather empowering them to shape debates and reinforce democratic norms internationally and in their own regions. The best framing for this effort in Asia, Africa, or Latin America is around sovereignty, prosperity, resilience, and national self-strengthening rather than justice or strategic competition with China and Russia. Empirical demonstrations, for example, that accountability, transparency, rule of law mechanisms, and women's empowerment enhance national wealth and strength will be powerful. One successful example of such a regional approach is the National Endowment for Democracy's Sunnylands Initiative on Enhancing Democratic Partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

Harness the business community: The U.S. business community should understand the competitive advantage of promoting a normative agenda that enhances openness and rules given their need for a level playing field in overseas markets and to counter the corruption and kleptocracy that have become business models for the modern-day authoritarian. Private sector engagement and trade policy levers can have significant impact on transparency and good governance that in turn reinforce accountability to the governed.

Harness civil society and support democrats at risk: The United States should continue to underwrite the development of democratic institutions worldwide, including an independent civil society. U.S. leaders should be consistent in meeting with and speaking out on behalf of dissidents and champions of freedom to encourage those struggling on the front lines of the normative democratic challenge. State Department reporting on democracy and human rights, and the work of U.S. Agency for Global Media components such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, also promote norms of openness and free expression and protect democrats at risk.

Enhance resilience of international institutions: China's growing diplomatic influence in bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council has proven frustrating for U.S. interests. Efforts by autocracies to neuter or reshape international institutions should be a reason to increase U.S. diplomatic efforts rather than allow UN and regional bodies to become advocates for an authoritarian vision of regional and global order inconsistent with their origins.

Enhance U.S. strategic communications: Authoritarian regimes can often prove more agile than democracies at disseminating information and maintaining message discipline, but democratic allies enjoy the advantage of representing norms desired by

billions of people worldwide. The United States and its allies should develop a global information strategy that supports local independent media, facilitates access to balanced news and analysis, and actively counters false and self-interested narratives advanced by authoritarians.

Harness digital technology: Digital technologies, particularly social media and artificial intelligence (AI), are playing an increasingly important role in enhancing the threat of algorithmically proliferated attacks on democracies and on the idea of democracy itself. Digital literacy, social media regulation, and support for those seeking to develop digital tools that are explicitly designed to enhance conversation and compromise (i.e., democratic norms), should be enhanced. The United States and its allies should also lead on establishing international principles on AI, oppose the unauthorized and unlabeled use of deep fakes, and establish digital norms, particularly around elections.

Sustain bipartisan consensus: As with most foreign policy issues, bipartisan unity and executive-congressional consensus will ensure strategic continuity and enhance prospects for success in advancing U.S. interests. A deliberate bipartisan coalition would help advance a values-based foreign policy that reflects the best traditions of the United States and defend U.S. security, while demonstrating to allies, partners, democratic activists, and autocratic adversaries alike that American unity, solidarity, and sustained commitment to the issue is strategic and unshakable.

Democracy is said to be in decline. But it is better understood to be under attack. Citizens today who are unhappy with their leaders, in democracies and autocracies alike, seek not less of a voice in political affairs, but more. Not fewer rights and protections, but more. Not less democracy, but better democracy. And they're looking for allies.

The good news is supporting democratic development is not financially costly and plays to America's strengths. But some creativity and urgency in developing a coherent democracy support strategy is needed. Failing to do so while watching our adversaries shape global norms that conform to their illiberal model will have profound effects on U.S. and allied security.

Introduction

The essence of grand strategy is the ability to reconcile two seemingly contradictory objectives in the pursuit of national interest. No objective has been more fundamental to the founding of the American republic and the United States' role in the world than the advancement of democracy and individual rights. And no objective has proven more vexing to those who have sought to secure the republic through balance of power strategies that pursue alignments and projection of power unencumbered by debates about the political nature of other states in the system. This tension is as old as the United States itself, but it has resurfaced in the context of renewed great power geopolitical competition.

Can the United States formulate a grand strategy that incorporates liberal democratic values, avoids charges of hypocrisy, and withstands intensifying geopolitical fragmentation? This essay argues that we can—and must—do so if we are to secure a favorable international order that preserves common prosperity and security as well as the American way of life in the twenty-first century. Far from ignoring the complex realities of our times, such a strategy accounts for them. And while U.S. democracy itself is under unprecedented stress, and its return to health essential to any strategy's success, addressing that urgent challenge should not distract us from the strategic importance of promoting international norms that support human dignity and have proved in both logic and empirical study to foster international peace, security, and development. Doing so can also help knit together common threads that have traditionally united Americans across the political divide and been a source of national strength.

The premise of this report is that the United States and its allies and partners are engaged in a systems-level contest in which they must prevail. It begins with a review of the U.S. historical context and an assessment of the emerging conceptual obstacles and opportunities at home and abroad that confront any values-based foreign policy strategy. The report concludes by introducing a framework for integrating “democracy” and democratic values across all instruments of U.S. national power, not to the exclusion of realpolitik, hard power considerations but in thoughtful, creative, and effective combination with them.

Values and the American Way of Statecraft

Americans have long struggled to find the proper balance between our transformational democratic values and our more risk-averse pursuit of commercial and diplomatic advantage. When the *Empress of China* set sail from New York in 1784 to open commerce with the Qing Empire for the newly independent United States, Major Samuel Shaw was sent along as the country's first diplomatic representative to what was then called the East Indies. Shaw was instructed not to emphasize U.S. democracy, which might offend the Celestial Emperor, but instead to emphasize the new republic's support for anticolonialism as a contrast to the United States' major geopolitical rival, Great Britain.¹ Similar geopolitical concerns prompted top U.S. diplomats to downplay democratic norms well into the twentieth century, including the approach to China by Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, and Brent Scowcroft in the 1970s through the 1990s, as well as the stance of multiple administrations toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations.

Other U.S. leaders have moved sharply in the opposite direction, prioritizing democracy, self-rule, and human rights over security and business interests. President Woodrow Wilson stunned the U.S. business and foreign policy establishments in 1913 by moving quickly to recognize the new Republic of China and simultaneously pushing out the Mexican junta of General Victoriano Huerta. In a similar vein, President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s rejected two decades of support for anticommunist allies and chose to condition security cooperation in Asia—namely with South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan—on improvements in human rights.

Neither of these contrasting approaches—the hard power realpolitik of Shaw, Kissinger, and Scowcroft nor the undisciplined idealism of Wilson and Carter—proved durable. Kissinger's

realism invited the pendulum swing of the Carter administration, while President George H. W. Bush's approach to the Tiananmen Square massacre invited a debilitating congressional backlash on trade relations with China that took a year to resolve.² On the other side, Wilson retreated from his early idealism and rejected self-determination for non-European peoples at Versailles at the end of World War I, in the process turning a generation of idealistic nationalists into anti-American revolutionaries (including Ho Chi Minh).³ Carter's clashes with the leaders of South Korea, the Philippines, and Central American republics in the late 1970s proved untenable in the face of Soviet expansionism in the less-developed world, and he was forced to drop human rights pressure on allies. Idealism divorced from realism proved no more enduring than realism divorced from idealism.

Some leaders in U.S. history have been notably more successful at integrating values and power politics and avoiding these pendulum swings. Thomas Jefferson and later Commodore Matthew Perry, who opened Japan in 1853, both argued that the United States had a strategic interest in supporting independent, well-governed republics in the Pacific because they would be more resistant to the hegemonic aspirations of America's expanding European rivals (this was based on the assumption, of course, that these independent republics would give the vote to white men only). The most influential strategic thinker in American history, Alfred Thayer Mahan, wrote in the 1890s that the United States needed both commercial and "moral" influence in Asia and the Caribbean. However, his idealism was limited by a recognition of the limits to the scope of this influence, and thus he discouraged extending this policy to further reaches of South America or the continent of Asia, where U.S. power and interests began to fade. Some would see this self-restraint as cynical, but Mahan saw it as a pragmatic form of a moral foreign policy.

Idealism divorced from realism proved no more enduring than realism divorced from idealism.

After witnessing the counterproductive swings between idealism and realpolitik of the Wilson administration, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sought a better balance during World War II. He championed the Atlantic Charter and the "Four Freedoms" (freedom of speech and worship, and freedom from fear and want) and set the stage for inclusion of those norms in postwar international institutions. But he was also willing to accept close relations with dictatorships in Latin America and with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in order to keep them on side against Hitler—allegedly stating that "they may be SOBs, but they're my SOBs."

These cycles of American enthusiasm for and against a values-based foreign policy have consistently been shaped—and often distorted by—geopolitical setbacks. The American entry into World War I, escalation in Vietnam, and the invasion of Iraq were all ostensibly driven primarily by hard-power considerations (restoring balance in the Euro-Atlantic, preventing the expansion of international communism, and reshaping Middle East security, respectively). However, presidents at the time framed the war efforts in moralistic terms that they believed the U.S. public would support. When

the public turned against those wars in the 1920s, 1970s, and 2000s, the democratic imperative in U.S. foreign policy also became a casualty. The horrific battlefield experiences of the Great War fueled the isolationist America First movement and a distasteful tolerance on the right for Hitlerism that split the Republican Party before Pearl Harbor. The moral confusion of the Vietnam War prompted a backlash against democratic allies and a softer line toward the Soviet Union that split the Democratic Party in the 1970s (and gave birth to the neoconservative movement). The sagging enthusiasm for democracy promotion after the Iraq War had a similar effect. CSIS surveys of foreign policy specialists in the United States and Asia in 2014 found that the U.S. respondents' prioritization of democracy, rule of law, women's empowerment, and human rights briefly aligned more closely with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Singapore than democratic Japan, India, or South Korea.⁴ This same hangover from Iraq helps to explain why President Barack Obama expressed explicit appreciation of the realpolitik approach of Scowcroft and the George H.W. Bush administration during the 2008 campaign despite discomfort among prodemocracy advocates in his own party.

After each of these instances, the American people's support for values-based foreign policy reverted to the norm with the rise of new authoritarian threats. Roosevelt's January 1941 Four Freedoms speech and August 1941 Atlantic Charter took hold because the pact between Axis powers had metastasized the spreading cancers of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The Truman Doctrine emerged from the early post-World War II clashes with Soviet ambitions in Greece and Eastern Europe. Ronald Reagan's June 1982 Westminister Speech championing international democracy promotion was embraced at home and abroad because of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's invasion of Afghanistan three years earlier. And Joe Biden's framing of a world clash between authoritarian and democratic states resonated in ways it would not have when he was vice president because of the menacing turns and growing strategic alignment of China and Russia.

Ultimately, for all its inconsistency, hypocrisy, and vacillation over the years, no power in the history of the world has done more to advance human freedom and dignity than the United States of America. However, the United States cannot afford to continue framing its approach to democracy and human rights as a reaction to world events in a series of undisciplined pendulum swings—not if the goal is to shape global norms and the balance of power, build alliances, and deter authoritarian aggression, kinetic and otherwise—over the course of a multigenerational contest. History teaches that there is risk in overplaying values as the defining characteristic of strategic competition and even greater risk in failing to understand how fundamental democratic values are to the longer-term security of the United States.

The United States cannot afford to continue framing its approach to democracy and human rights as a reaction to world events.

Realist scholars have long associated democracy with “idealism” and contrasted that with “realism.” But a “realist” foreign policy must recognize that competition over what—and whose—governance

norms, rules, and standards will prevail in the twenty-first century is no less important than the more traditional competition for predominance in outer space, cyberspace, or undersea warfare. And as with those other domains, the United States will require a strategy that is premised on an understanding of the nature of the challenges of our time, including the ideational fight we face both abroad and at home.

Difficult Terrain

Democracy's Strategic Logic, Challenges, and Opportunities Abroad

Why Democracy Matters

The logic of democracy—transparent, accountable, inclusive, and representative governance under law—is instinctive to most Americans. Without transparency and rule of law, corruption festers. When national leaders are accountable to their citizens, they have an incentive to deliver public goods and practical solutions to national problems and less motivation to engage in foreign adventures. This is the logic behind democratic peace theory: that democracies do not go to war with one another. When citizens are treated with dignity, when they have a voice in how they are governed and who governs them, and when they have reasonable confidence in equal protection under law, they are less prone to resort to extralegal means of redress, including violence. And when they have agency at home, they have less reason to flee across borders in desperation to escape political and economic injustice, affecting the security and stability of neighbors.

Overall, while some nondemocratic states may deliver positive outcomes in the short run, often by mortgaging the future for the present, the track record of autocrats is grim (see, for example, Belarus, Cuba, Iran, Myanmar, Nicaragua, North Korea, Russia, Sudan, Venezuela, or Zimbabwe), while the benefits of democracy are increasingly borne out in the data. Recent studies by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Sweden's V-Dem Institute, and others, for instance, have shown that democratic governance leads to better health, security, peace, and development outcomes.⁵

Equally important, there is also ample empirical evidence that how nations organize themselves internally will go a long way in determining how they seek to shape the environment outside their

borders. If a nation's leaders are afraid of the free flow of information at home, they will feel the same way internationally. If they rule by kleptocracy, they will welcome opaque systems of elite corruption elsewhere. If they prefer rule by law rather than rule of law domestically, odds are they will support the shaping of a similar system abroad. Allied with other powerful nations with similar illiberal values, these states can leverage their collective power to try to reshape the international system consistent with those values and their narrow self-interest rather than for the global good.⁶

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But the reverse is equally true: the alliance of common values and interests between the United States and democratic-minded citizens globally can have powerful strategic potential in the twenty-first century, particularly in the Global South with its rapidly growing, restless, and relatively youthful demographic demanding a greater voice in their future.

The Challenges Internationally

While some criticize Biden and members of Congress for framing strategic competition with China in ideational terms, the reality is that Beijing and Moscow have long viewed the spread of democracy as an existential threat, and seen strategic advantage in sowing doubts about, if not actively undermining, democratic practices.⁷ While China or Russia might have taken a more defensive stance in response to the color revolutions of the early 2000s, both have gone on the offensive in recent years. Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections is well documented even if the effects are debated. Around the same time, Beijing was caught pouring money into Australia's parliament, which led to strict foreign interference laws by Canberra (Canada and New Zealand have since had the same experience).⁸ China's foreign interference and elite capture strategies have had more success in Australia's neighborhood, most notably with the 2022 security pact that China convinced the strategically situated Solomon Islands to sign after well-funded "study tours" for its leaders to Beijing. Leaders in China and Russia have also aligned in championing a counter-democracy coalition through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meetings and the expansion of the BRICS grouping to include Iran.

In a kind of backhanded compliment, the PRC and Russia in recent years have even referred to themselves as democracies, albeit on their own illiberal terms.⁹ While seemingly absurd on its face, this is the latest of their attempts to redefine and thus frontally challenge accepted international norms, as witnessed in Chinese activity within UN agencies and other international institutions. The United States and its allies snicker at these subversive efforts at their own peril—even if in seeking to wrap themselves in democratic cloth, China and Russia inadvertently show their hand:

their recognition of the power of the democratic idea, their fear of a world that conforms to true democratic norms, and their deep insecurity over the reality of their own systems.

Under its new Global Civilization Initiative, Beijing asserts that ancient civilizations like China's provide a superior cultural legitimacy over the democratic norms advocated by the United States and its allies and partners, and reflected in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their message is that thinkers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Jefferson have no place in non-Western culture and emphasize wherever possible shortcomings in Western democratic practice. And even where Beijing and Moscow are not actively intervening, they offer diplomatic support to those resisting international pressure on democracy and human rights—most egregiously in the cases of North Korea, Myanmar, Iran, and Syria.

This combination of cultural narratives, disparagement (or malign appropriation) of democracy, support for brutal dictatorships, and elite capture in weakly governed states is backed by an increasingly well-resourced and effective strategy of disinformation by Beijing and Moscow. In its first public report on Chinese interference and disinformation, the State Department found that:

The PRC's information manipulation efforts feature five primary elements: leveraging propaganda and censorship, promoting digital authoritarianism, exploiting international organizations and bilateral partnerships, pairing co-optation and pressure, and exercising control over Chinese-language media.¹⁰

It is becoming evident that the next phase of the PRC's strategy is to harness the emerging information technology ecosystem to capture entire communities within a data environment that Beijing can control and manipulate. As the State Department report notes, Beijing is now offering to help developing countries to establish their own "smart cities" complete with Chinese technology for surveillance and one-way flows of data to Beijing. The technology competition of the twenty-first century is also fundamentally a competition about democratic norms of openness, transparency, and accountability. Beijing and Moscow's aims are being abetted by the use of bots, deepfakes, and other tools of disinformation being made available in the digital space by artificial intelligence (AI).

While Beijing and Moscow did not create all the conditions for deteriorating democratic norms globally, these powers have accelerated negative trend lines by actively exploiting and exacerbating areas of societal divisions and weak governance. According to Freedom House, 2023 was the 18th straight year of decline in global freedom. Freedom House noted that the key drivers globally were denial of press freedoms and increased risk of harm for expressing personal beliefs, coupled with increasing extremism and intolerance online.¹¹ Put another way, it is the ability of the governed to hold their leaders accountable that is under assault while intolerance is being manipulated to divide, demonize, and marginalize legitimate debate—and these factors in turn create even more favorable conditions for strategies of foreign interference and elite capture by malign revisionist powers like China.

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The Opportunities Abroad

Freedom House's 2024 report notes that 2023 marked the 18th consecutive year of democratic decline, yet the world has more freedom today than it had 50 years ago, and in 2024 more people will have voted around the world than ever before in history—over half of all adults on the planet.¹² And in Asia—the major arena for great power competition—Freedom House found that freedom began growing again in 2022. This finding is consistent with surveys of regional elites in the Indo-Pacific conducted by CSIS since 2009, which consistently found that thought leaders from India to Japan associated themselves more with democracy, rule of law, good governance, and human rights than contrasting themes offered by China such as “noninterference” or any sort of “Beijing consensus” around authoritarian development.¹³ This aspirational map does not mean that elites within less developed countries will automatically forego bribes on offer from Beijing (so-called elite capture) or that leaders of postcolonial states will instinctively look to the former imperial powers for lessons on democracy. But it does reinforce the point that citizens in China's own region—and perhaps in China itself—expect greater empowerment and accountability of their governments and associate their own national success with democracy, good governance, and protection of human rights.¹⁴

There are indications that democratic governments are increasingly reflecting those norms in foreign policy strategies, while younger civil society activists are also taking action. In 2020, youth across East Asia formed the Milk Tea Alliance to support students marching for democracy in Hong Kong. In 2022, Japanese civil society groups reached out to form the Indo-Pacific Platform for Universal Values and established the first regional network to host political dissidents at risk.¹⁵ Through the Sunnylands Initiative started by CSIS and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 2019, thought leaders from across the Indo-Pacific have gathered each year to push for greater alignment of efforts in support of democratic norms.¹⁶

Once-reticent governments have also become more forward-leaning about the importance of democracy to their security. Japan incorporated support for universal values in its 2022 National Security Strategy and 2023 Development Cooperation Charter. South Korea has committed to reflecting universal values in its overall foreign policy, emphasized human rights and the rule of law in its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, and hosted the third global Summit for Democracy in 2024. Australia launched a new International Development Policy that focused on supporting accountability, while its Home Affairs Ministry launched a Democracy Task Force to guard against foreign interference at home and in the region.¹⁷ While Australian diplomats sometimes caution their American counterparts against over-emphasizing democracy and human rights in the Pacific Islands, a 2024 public opinion survey by the University of Sydney's U.S. Studies Centre found that

average Australian and Japanese citizens were actually more likely than Americans to want their government to push for improvements in democracy abroad (72 percent of Australians, 69 percent of Japanese, and 61 percent of Americans).¹⁸

Once-reticent governments have also become more forward-leaning about the importance of democracy to their security.

To be clear, even close U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, or Australia will take a lighter approach on human rights or democracy issues with other states than the U.S. government or Congress. Part of this difference is size—few nations can withstand retaliation by China like the United States can. Part of the difference is cultural, since few went through anything like the American Revolution or the Civil War to define and safeguard the future of democracy. And part of the explanation is free-riding, since it has often been useful for the Americans to be the bad cop on human rights at times when Japan or South Korea were seeking relative economic gains in the region and around the world.

Yet China's coercive revisionism, foreign interference, and successful elite capture in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific have alerted the maritime democracies to an ideational threat to their strategic interests and national sovereignty. There is a pronounced alignment of government declaratory policy and civil society efforts across the region that could be harnessed as part of a grand strategy on democracy, if that strategy is iterative and not imposed from Washington.

Since the Atlantic Charter, Europe has always been the natural partner for the United States in advancing democratic norms globally, but this transatlantic alignment has grown barnacles since Brexit and the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Europeans are now less likely than publics in America's Asian alliances to say that they share common democratic norms with the United States.¹⁹ The European Union has also been beset by internal democratic challenges and extremism from Hungary's suppression of press and civil liberties to the electoral successes of the far right in Germany, as the round of European and then French elections demonstrated in the summer of 2024. Some member states like Denmark have long been active in advancing democracy abroad, but a lack of internal consensus on priorities has meant that most EU democracy support comes in the form of technical assistance when requested from host governments.²⁰ And even with effective transatlantic alignment on democracy and human rights, Beijing or Moscow will be quick to paint those efforts as the return of the imperial masters (as China's Global Times did in 2022 with a doctored photo of the G7 foreign ministers clad in the khaki uniforms and pith helmets of their armies during the Boxer Rebellion).

Nevertheless, the combination of Russian and Chinese political interference and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has raised the focus of European governments and thought leaders on the democratic challenge facing the free world. The participation of Japan, South Korea, Australia,

and New Zealand (known as the IP4) in NATO summits indicates the possibility for greater unity of effort globally by the net exporters of security in the international system. Europeans may have soured on American democracy, but polls indicate they have soured on China more and are looking to expand strategic partnerships with Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia in ways they would not have five years ago. The coalition-building opportunity is to strengthen the Euro-Pacific link as much as it is to reenergize the transatlantic one. The American approach to sub-Saharan Africa also requires European partnership to be effective, and there is growing recognition in Brussels that democratic backsliding requires new efforts to keep open civil society space, broaden political participation to women and other groups, and beat China in the digital game to ensure a clean and open information environment.²¹

Latin America continues to hold democratic elections, but monitoring by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index in 2023 all found overall negative trends, including rising authoritarianism and political strife.²² China and Russia have enabled authoritarian sustainability in countries like Cuba and Venezuela and have largely been given a pass by democracies like Mexico or Brazil. Yet Latin America's democracies continue to hold elections and maintain the key institutions of democratic governance and accountability, including functioning legislatures and courts and high levels of public education. The opportunity lies in international support for strengthening those institutions.

In summary, despite a disturbing global landscape of democratic backsliding and closing civic space, there are multiple opportunities emerging for coalitions to form in support of democratic norms. When the Biden administration hosted the first Summit for Democracy in 2021, the aim was to harness just such a coalition. However, the terms of participation were largely dictated from the White House, and key partners ranging from Japan to India attended with trepidation at the signal being sent by excluding strategic swing states like Thailand and Singapore.

Despite a disturbing global landscape of democratic backsliding and closing civic space, there are multiple opportunities emerging for coalitions to form in support of democratic norms.

The second Summit for Democracy in 2023 was cohosted with South Korea, the Netherlands, Costa Rica, and Zambia, giving a stronger sense of empowerment to regional—and, importantly, *non-Western*—democracies. The second summit faced some criticism because the host countries narrowed the focus of democratic challenges to fit their respective regional vantage points rather than addressing universal concerns. However, its efforts to provide a more inclusive space for discussions on addressing global democratic challenges were received as a much-welcomed approach by the participants, including those from Africa—where at least 24 countries, including many summit participants, held elections that year. The opportunity abroad is not to form what Robert Kaplan once called a “League of Democracies” under U.S. leadership, but rather to develop

a strategy that recognizes the variable geometry of regional relations and looks for leadership within regions and civil society.

By the time of the third summit, hosted by South Korea in March 2024, however, it was clear that an opportunity was missed to play to democracy's strengths—its vibrancy, creativity, and direct connection to protecting human dignity. What could have been an opportunity to celebrate the fruits of free, democratic expression, such as music, art, literature, and debate, became a dreary long march of scripted panel discussions, leader statements, and commitments to “be better.” Nowhere was democracy precisely defined, an oversight when its definition is unclear to many and under attack by others.

This requires a level of sophistication, nuance, and volume control that does not come naturally to American political discourse. But of course, domestic political support is essential.

The Challenges and Opportunities at Home

Formulating a strategy to counter these trends would be challenging enough if the threats were exogenous, but American democracy itself is also being corroded in the current environment by forces both international and domestic. In 2023, the Pew Research Center found that public trust in the federal government was ticking downward again after a brief uptick in 2020 and 2021, with fewer than 20 percent of Americans saying they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right.²³

American democracy itself is also being corroded in the current environment by forces both international and domestic.

Declining trust in democratic governance is a problem across many of the societies that should be part of an international coalition to defend and advance democratic norms. Cambridge University’s Bennet Institute found in surveys that across the Western democracies, majorities of young respondents expressed lack of confidence in their own democracies.²⁴ However, the United States suffers from particular structural factors at present, including gerrymandered districts, the rise of “angertainment” programs, the demise of local journalism, and the lack of compulsory voting—all of which tend to skew election results away from the ideological center and exacerbate partisanship. Partisanship has also infected the ability of Congress and the American people to rally around a common national vision for protecting and advancing democracy internationally. In 2023, a narrow majority of Republicans for the first time said that they favor less U.S. involvement

in global affairs, reflecting a “make America great again” repudiation of Reagan’s vision in the 1982 Westminster speech. Yet Republicans are also far more likely than Democrats to believe that the United States is the greatest country in the world, given the left’s own growing penchant for casting the West and capitalism as illegitimate, a 2021 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found.²⁵ This polarization between the increasingly vocal left and right wings of politics makes the very definition of a democracy agenda more complicated. Older Republican supporters of former president Donald Trump are far less likely to support democratic Ukraine, for example, while younger Democratic voters are equally less likely to support democratic Israel.

Yet division at home is no reason to retreat from a robust strategy of supporting freedom abroad. The Founding Fathers did not promise the world a perfect government, just a system of government that would provide the opportunity to work toward a “more perfect union.” There are opportunities to forge a common national purpose around democracy at home because majorities of the American people also recognize what is at stake—and because the United States’ most important allies and partners do as well.

The Opportunities for Consensus at Home

Despite polarization overall, Americans agree on some key elements of what would constitute a strategy to advance democratic values globally. In the Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey cited above, Americans listed “strengthening democracy at home” as second only to “strengthening education” as a necessary tool to remain a leading power. In the same survey, 86 percent of Americans listed strengthening democracy abroad as either “important” or “very important,” with only 4 percent replying that it was “not important at all.”²⁶ Congressional funding for the major tools of democracy promotion has increased over the past few years, with budgets for the NED and its affiliate institutes, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), and internal State Department programs to counter Chinese and Russian disinformation all expanding at double-digit rates.²⁷

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Congressional support for the tools of democracy promotion reflects the growing recognition that democracy is at risk abroad, but perhaps the greatest driver is the national consensus that the United States must rally to defend its interests against an increasingly coercive and revisionist China. Indeed, China policy is one of the few areas of real bipartisan consensus in Washington today, as indicated by the comity of the cochairs and the activism of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party. Even the Heritage Foundation, which has attracted criticism from Democrats and many independent media for proposals in its Project 2025 to supercharge presidential authority in a second Trump administration, issued a report on China calling for an

emphasis on democracy and human rights.²⁸ This political consensus will prove a double-edged sword, though. On one side, the clarity of purpose around strategic competition with China is yielding resources, focus, and presidential-level attention. On the other side, casting this fight for democracy as a contest with China can alienate key allies and partners that will be critical to forming a coalition in support of democratic norms, and perhaps distract governments from problems with democratic governance that are important on their own merit and not just derivative of competition with China.

It is also important to emphasize that despite the fascination with culture wars and authoritarianism on the right wing of the Republican Party, the mainstream Republican leadership includes some of the most vocal and active leaders on democracy and human rights in Congress, such as Senators Dan Sullivan and Marco Rubio. Similarly, while the progressive wing of the Democratic Party may criticize democratic nations such as Israel or India for perceived democratic regression (among other issues), the party overall sees no contradiction between speaking frankly with friends and allies about concerns—and accepting the same in return—and pursuing a strategic foreign policy. In short, there are leaders in Congress who could play a central role in forging a bipartisan consensus around championing democracy and human rights in U.S. foreign policy despite the polarization that besets the country and both parties. The key is for leaders in both parties to frame the strategy in ways that are inclusive of common values shared across the aisle and that reflect the interests of the American people regardless of party.

Toward an Integrated Democracy Strategy

A successful U.S. values-based foreign policy must move away from the historic pendulum swings between idealism and realism if it is to sustain domestic and international support and have strategic effects. Just as “integrated deterrence” has emerged as an essential component of defense strategy, so too the United States and its allies will need a new “integrated democracy strategy” to prevail in the battle of norms. The point is not that military, economic, or diplomatic objectives should be subordinated to human rights or democracy priorities, but rather that these strategies should be integrated in national security planning alongside diplomatic, military, and economic objectives.

A successful U.S. values-based foreign policy must move away from the historic pendulum swings between idealism and realism.

One useful point of reference is the U.S. military’s traditional “DIME” construct for assessing threats and instruments of power. The diplomatic, military, and economic pillars have been fairly consistent over time, but the “I” has evolved from “intelligence” to “information.” One more evolution is needed, and that is to consider the ideational—that is not just the competition of information and narratives but the much more foundational competition of norms and ideas. This would reflect the reality that ideational contests, whether in the United States, Asia, Europe, or the

Global South more broadly, are closely related to Chinese and Russian efforts to undermine U.S. power: its alliances, forward presence, economic interests, and political principles alike. If realism is about accurately assessing power dynamics, then it should be clear—as Joseph Nye noted in conceiving the concept of “soft power”²⁹—that the ideational dimension of competition is becoming as important as the diplomatic, military, or economic. Asserting the importance of information in the Information Age should not be a stunning insight. In the end, this is a matter of power and realism and not just à la carte idealism.

An integrated democracy strategy would harness all tools of national power in an all-of-government but also all-of-society framework. Coalition building with democratic allies and partners along with businesses and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would reinforce the traditional approach of outreach to civil society groups. The incentives and risk tolerance for business, allies, civil society, and different government agencies will vary, so this is not a matter of a single operational plan to be implemented by all actors so much as a variable geometry of coalitions to attack key problems, such as corruption, free speech, electoral integrity, government oversight and accountability, information integrity, and rule of law. The strategy would have to be authorized by the president, drafted by the National Security Council, coordinated with Congress, overseen from within the White House, and ultimately operationalized by individual agencies in support and coordination with one another. The following are key elements of this strategy that would need to be implemented by the United States.

An integrated democracy strategy would harness all tools of national power in an all-of-government but also all-of-society framework.

Harness Democratic Allies and Partners

This is not a matter of recruiting allies and partners to a singular strategy but rather empowering them to shape debates and reinforce democratic norms internationally and in their own regions. The best framing for this effort in Asia, Africa, or Latin America is around sovereignty, prosperity, resilience, and national self-strengthening rather than justice or strategic competition with China and Russia. Empirical demonstrations that accountability, transparency, rule of law mechanisms, and women’s empowerment enhance national wealth and strength will be powerful.

The NED’s Sunnylands Initiative on democracy in the Indo-Pacific is a useful example of how thought leaders in a region can help to validate and align a democracy strategy to their unique context while reinforcing that universal norms are indeed universal. First started in Sunnylands, California, by the NED and CSIS in 2020 and continued in Odawara, Japan, in 2022 and other locations in the Indo-Pacific, each Sunnylands meeting culminates in diverse regional thought leaders drafting and signing a joint statement with a vision and action plan for broad regional cooperation on advancing democratic norms and governance, including expanding support for

democracy advocates at risk, grants to regional civil society organizations, and early warning of regional democratic setbacks.³⁰

Similar initiatives in other regions would yield results. It is critical that democratic values be owned and advanced not just by Euro-Atlantic peoples but by a broad range of cultures and contexts to prevent self-interested autocrats from speciously claiming cultural alienation from those values.

Critics of a democracy agenda often assume such a policy must entail dividing the world into strict blocs—democratic vs. authoritarian—and jettisoning relationships with those that are deemed nondemocratic. Admittedly, some talk in those terms, and there is little question that relationships among fellow democracies are fundamentally stronger and more sustainable than those with poor or deteriorating human rights records. But ultimately there is no reason one cannot promote democratic norms and still work closely and constructively with nondemocratic nations in areas of common purpose and strategic interest, including in the normative sphere.

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Harness the Business Community

The business community should be particularly inclined to see the merit of this approach and positioned to shape outcomes based on the need for a level playing field in overseas markets. As a 2021 task force report by CSIS, the McCain Institute, and Freedom House put it:

Any serious effort to promote democracy and counter authoritarianism must include measures to combat corruption and kleptocracy, which have become business models for modern-day authoritarians. Corruption and its weaponization by authoritarians harms effective governance, undermines economic growth, and weakens the rule of law. It corrodes public trust and is interwoven with security issues like organized and transnational crime, terrorism, human rights abuses, and conflict.³¹

U.S. trade policy, though anemic compared with years past, can still provide an important tool to reinforce good governance and accountability. The Trans-Pacific Partnership agreements provided market access that incentivized Vietnam to improve labor rights and transparency. The current Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) offers no such market access opportunities but could still be utilized to strengthen rules on digital trade, labor rights, and the environment where those priorities align with other key partners like Japan, Australia, or South Korea. Global standards on anti-corruption can also be compelling for governments because of the clear link to improved investment and growth, as the Financial Action Task Force has demonstrated.³² The business community will be less well positioned to use its leverage to protect democrats at risk

or impose punishments for human rights abuses, except when legislation, national policy, or reputational risk compel them to do so—as occurred with the Uyghur Forced Labor Protection Act signed into law in 2022.³³ Nevertheless, private sector and trade policy levers can have significant impacts on anti-corruption, transparency, and good governance that in turn reinforce accountability to the governed.

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Harness Civil Society and Support Democrats at Risk

An effective integrated democracy strategy would be an “all of the above” strategy. Companies or smaller allies might not be able to accept the risk associated with condemning human rights abuses or protecting democrats at risk. Size does matter, and the U.S. government can absorb retaliation in a way no other state or firm can. Consequently, the president and the secretary of state should meet with and speak out for dissidents or champions of freedom like the Dalai Lama even when that carries diplomatic risk. Legislation passed in Congress by a wide margin in 2024 to counter disinformation against the Dalai Lama is another example of the bipartisanship that is possible on such issues.³⁴

Consistency in this regard is critical: it encourages those on the front lines of freedom, it sets an example for other world leaders, it keeps authoritarian states on notice, and it prevents a backlash at home that could force overcompensation that proves more destabilizing for diplomacy. It is worth noting that Reagan developed a strong dialogue with Mikhail Gorbachev despite years of support for dissidents and George W. Bush did the same with former Chinese president Hu Jintao despite regular meetings with the Dalai Lama. The key was that these presidents did so out of conviction and not political calculation. That conviction must remain consistently in evidence to avoid the appearance that support for dissidents is gratuitous, episodic, or politically motivated.

U.S. support for accurate reporting of democracy and human rights conditions is equally important. The organizations under the USAGM (such as Radio Free Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio Marti) should remain robustly resourced and free to spotlight conditions as they find them.³⁵ In the same vein, U.S. ambassadors need to understand the strategic value of democratic norms and be both authorized and equipped to speak confidently and assertively about them in their assigned countries. Likewise, officers in U.S. embassies must be authorized to report fully and accurately on issues such as trafficking, human rights, or women’s rights as they find them.

Finally, U.S. funding of global democracy support work should continue to increase and U.S. State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding should continue going toward building capacity of democratic institutions, including domestic civil society groups. The

funding should not—as most Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) donors choose—be based on host government preferences. In fact, Japan and South Korea have begun debating how to delink some grants so that they can go directly to civil society groups. The U.S. government should encourage this trend and allies’ broader support of democratic institutions internationally. Support for marginalized groups may not always be popular with host governments, but it builds more resilient and accountable societies. For example, empowering women has proven an effective tool for achieving accountability in ceasefires and trade agreements, sustaining the peace once achieved, and increasing economic productivity.³⁶

Do Not Cede International Institutions

China’s growing diplomatic influence in bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council has proven frustrating for U.S. diplomacy.³⁷ However, it is worth remembering these and other major international institutions are fundamentally American in origin. Eleanor Roosevelt herself lobbied to integrate her husband’s Four Freedoms into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moreover, international institutions have proven useful in ways not originally envisioned. The Helsinki Accords were signed in 1975 with one basket (of four) focused on emigration, press freedom, and social issues. Most negotiators at the time had low expectations that these areas would be implemented, but they ultimately proved crucial to holding the Soviet Union to account for the free emigration of Jews and other human rights issues over the next 15 years.³⁸

The United States cannot cede the field in these international institutions; rather, it should engage and seek to shape them in normative directions for which they were originally conceived. The position of the democracies is stronger than the results reveal. Beijing’s influence is a result of effort and not just size. When the Human Rights Council debated whether to put the UN Human Rights Commissioner’s report on crimes against humanity in Xinjiang on its agenda in 2022, President Xi Jinping personally called members of the council to persuade them to vote against the move. The United States relied on its ambassador in Geneva to rustle support and even then, China won by only two votes.

Stepping up the effort on these battles is important, as retreat would

- allow China, Russia, or Iran to increasingly turn these institutions into mouthpieces for their values and norms and against the United States and its allies with the Global South, while advancing resolutions endorsing China’s Global Civilization Initiative, defending Russia’s war in Ukraine, and reflexively condemning Israel
- make it much more difficult to use these institutions to address true human rights violations
- deny the United States a key forum for aligning positions on crucial human rights and democracy issues with allies and partners and to coordinate international approaches

It will also be important to look beyond the UN institutions to consider regional organizations. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established an Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights in 2009, which has underperformed in the face of coups in Thailand and Myanmar and shows a general division over values. Yet capacity building and engagement with

the commission could yield future dividends in the ways the Helsinki Accords surprised many. The African Union established the Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 1987 (when the grouping was still the Organization of African Unity). That commission is more active than ASEAN's and regularly calls out member states for human rights violations. The United States has been relatively unengaged with the Pacific Islands Forum, which also has a secretariat with a charter to advance good governance and democracy.³⁹ These regional organizations can be far more effective venues for advancing human rights and democracy for the obvious reason that they reflect regional values and priorities. Beijing is stepping up its own diplomatic engagement and offering significant funding to these regional organizations, for example, building the African Union's new headquarters building in Addis Ababa. The United States and its allies should not be constructing buildings, but they can do more to invest in work on democracy, good governance, and human rights.

Enhance U.S. Strategic Communications

Authoritarian regimes can often prove more agile than democracies at disseminating information and maintaining message discipline, but they also have a far weaker brand to sell. Democratic allies enjoy the advantage of representing norms—including open access to quality information—that are desired by billions of people worldwide, along with an honest interest in the sovereignty and well-being of others. The United States and its allies ought to play to these strengths by developing an information strategy that supports local independent media, facilitates access to balanced news and analysis, and actively counters false and self-interested narratives advanced by authoritarians. In addition to ensuring adequate resourcing of existing USAGM global media entities, a new entity ought to be established to provide free-of-charge, fact-based information to Global South countries whose media are littered with PRC and other authoritarian-influenced propaganda.

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The U.S. government has long suffered from an inability to develop, let alone coordinate, a disciplined strategic communications strategy, with the Pentagon focused on “cognitive warfare” and the State Department on “public diplomacy.” While strategic oversight from Washington is required, there is a risk of overcentralizing implementation. U.S. ambassadors in the field, in partnership with local embassy staff and civic partners, are likely to have a far more nuanced and effective understanding of local media and narrative environments.

While in recent years the United States has become adept at using instruments such as the State Department's Global Engagement Center to better understand how and where PRC and Russian disinformation have made inroads in third countries, the United States needs more tools to address

the challenge, including those outside of government. One successful example is the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, which demonstrated how independent research institutions can sometimes move more nimbly, with more credibility, and have broader impact than the U.S. government can.⁴⁰ In the democratic space, think tanks and independent NGOs have the reach to not only assess the challenge and be effective messengers on disinformation but also to build capacity, jointly develop solutions, and create networks among countries facing similar challenges. At the same time, it will be important that these institutions retain their independence and not be used as mouthpieces for U.S. or other governments' national narratives.

In short, while an “all of government” approach to countering disinformation has proven challenging, an “all of society” approach will bring certain advantages that closed, authoritarian states will not enjoy.

Harness Digital Technology

The State Department's recent report on PRC disinformation activities highlighted the important role of digital technologies, particularly social media, in enhancing the growing threat of AI-enhanced deepfakes and algorithmically proliferated attacks on democracies and the idea of democracy itself. Those organizations working for democratic governance, particularly international NGOs, need support to develop and share the digital tools necessary to fight back. The conflict in Gaza has offered an alarming picture of what losing the digital information battle looks like, with one poll showing that the majority of young people who claim to support the slogan “from the river to the sea” do not know which river or which sea to which it refers.⁴¹

The United States and its allies must support digital literacy.

The United States and its allies must support digital literacy not only at home but also in third countries. The U.S. government should partner with, and as needed regulate, social media giants to ensure that they take responsibility for the disinformation on their platforms. Governments should actively support those seeking to develop digital tools that are explicitly (and algorithmically) designed to enhance conversation and compromise—in other words, democratic norms—and not hate and division. The Open Technology Fund and similar democracy-affirming organizations should receive increased funding to this end. This is crucial in societies with relatively higher levels of political polarization and citizen mistrust toward traditional news media, which are more vulnerable to disinformation activities by domestic and foreign actors alike. In more open economies with a larger and more diverse set of competing advertising and social media markets, exposure and susceptibility to disinformation content is especially concerning.⁴² David Lauer's study of social media platforms like Facebook, for example, underscores that their algorithms can exacerbate societal divisions and polarization by often promoting eye-catching and inflammatory

content such as disinformation, extreme political views, and conspiracy theories to garner greater public engagement over their commercial rivals.⁴³

The United States and its allies should also lead on establishing international principles on AI, oppose the unauthorized and unlabeled use of deep fakes, and establish norms that may be adopted in nations most vulnerable to Chinese or Russian disinformation, particularly around elections. The United States has already made significant strides in this area. In February 2024, the Biden administration launched the Artificial Intelligence Safety Institute Consortium (AISIC), fulfilling its commitment from the first global AI Safety Summit in the United Kingdom in November 2023. Collaborating with over 200 technology companies and organizations, including Apple, the consortium is housed within the U.S. AI Safety Institute and ensures that the U.S. government plays a pivotal role in setting national AI standards and developing tools to mitigate potential risks from the emerging technology.⁴⁴ The U.S. AI Safety Institute will also collaborate with its international counterparts, already including the United Kingdom's AI Safety Institute, on developing methods of evaluating the safety of AI tools and the systems that underpin them.⁴⁵

Additionally, in July 2024 members of Congress proposed the Content Origin Protection and Integrity from Edited and Deepfaked Media Act (COPIED Act) to protect original content from unauthorized use in AI training.⁴⁶ These moves reflect the increasing recognition among U.S. political and private industry leaders of the need for a robust approach to AI safety, both domestically and internationally.

Sustain Bipartisan Consensus

As with most foreign policy issues, bipartisan unity and executive-congressional consensus will ensure strategic continuity and enhance prospects for success in advancing U.S. interests. As noted, leading members of both parties in the Senate and the House have expressed strong commitment to defending and promoting democratic values globally to counteract the malign influence of China, Russia, and others. While differences remain between and within political parties on specific policies, their unity of principle offers a critical strategic opportunity that must be cultivated. In partnership with a compliant White House going forward, a bipartisan coalition could help frame, fund, and overcome political logjams to advance a values-based foreign policy that reflects the best traditions of the United States and defends U.S. security against the authoritarian onslaught, while demonstrating to allies, partners, democratic activists, and autocratic adversaries alike that American unity, solidarity, and sustained commitment to the issue are as strong as ever.

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FINAL NOTE: DEMOCRACY AT HOME

Some will charge that the United States has little credibility to promote democratic values globally when its own democracy is in such disrepair. This is a false dichotomy. There is no doubt that the American example matters. The United States does the authoritarians' work for them when democratic practices are undermined at home or its politicians mirror the rhetoric, actions, and attitudes of authoritarians in their conduct. The U.S. democratic model is often considered the ultimate standard—despite endemic flaws throughout its history—so when egregiously dysfunctional, it can degrade the democratic brand overall.

But the logic behind the intrinsic value of democracy and democratic norms in international affairs stands on its own, independent of the health of U.S. political society at any given time. America's domestic challenges, if anything, only make it more urgent that other democratic nations step forward to fill gaps or complement U.S. democracy promotion work. Struggling populations around the world are not waiting for the United States to get its house in order before seeking dignity and rights for themselves. To the contrary, they are seeking international solidarity and support more than ever. Regardless of what is happening at home, the institutionalization of democratic norms globally will remain critical to U.S. strategic interests and those of other like-minded peoples around the world.⁴⁷

Conclusion

If a strategist were told that a single factor would advance global peace, development, health, and security outcomes while making one the natural ally of billions of people worldwide, one would think that issue would be considered a strategic priority. But dismissal of—if not hostility toward—considering a twenty-first-century democracy agenda remains far too prevalent. Saddled with mental baggage fortified by excesses from the recent past, too many policymakers and strategists resolutely avoid considering a careful and creative approach to integrating democracy promotion into the U.S. foreign policy tool box.

If a strategist were told that a single factor would advance global peace, development, health, and security outcomes while making one the natural ally of billions of people worldwide, one would think that issue would be considered a strategic priority.

In many ways this is odd. For decades the United States and its allies have celebrated the advantages of a forward-leaning U.S. global posture to help shape the international security environment. It should not be a substantial conceptual leap, then, to pursuing a more active, forward-leaning, and thoughtful “shaping” policy in the political realm given the ever-increasing empirical data connecting a more democratic world to global security and development.

Ultimately, a smartly implemented democracy agenda would play to one of the most valuable strategic assets in the U.S. arsenal: the power to inspire and attract billions of people worldwide who seek the same rights and dignity reflected in the American ideal. To that end, the concept of “democracy promotion” must never again be connected to the offensive application of U.S. military power, but instead conducted peacefully and confidently in support of the aspirations of billions around the world for more transparent, accountable, inclusive, representative governance under law. In so doing, democratically empowered citizens globally—in defense of their own interests, protecting their own sovereignty—may become force multipliers in the defining normative competition of the coming century. They can help counter China and Russia as those countries seek to unapologetically shape norms within their own countries and internationally—where might makes right, elite corruption is tolerated if not encouraged, individual freedom is suppressed, information is controlled or manipulated, and strongman rule replaces rule of law.

Democracy is said to be in decline. But it is better understood to be under attack. From Myanmar to Belarus, Nicaragua to Hong Kong, Venezuela to Zimbabwe to Ukraine and beyond, millions of citizens in every corner of the globe continue to fight for their political rights and liberties even in the face of unspeakable violence. Those frustrated with the quality of their politics—including in troubled democracies—are seeking not less of a voice in political affairs but more. Not fewer rights and protections, but more. Not less democracy, but better democracy. And they’re looking for allies.

The good news is supporting democratic development is not financially costly and plays to America’s strengths. But some creativity and urgency in developing a coherent democracy support strategy is needed. Failing to do so while watching American adversaries shape global norms that conform to their illiberal model will have profound effects on U.S. and allied security.

In short, focusing only on the “three D’s” of U.S. foreign policy—defense, diplomacy and (economic) development—will be insufficient to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. A fourth “D”—democracy—must be added as the essential foundation for the rest.

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