**Democracy Promotion in the Age of Trump**

*On June 6, 2018,* [*Adrian A. Basora*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/people/adrian-basora)*, former U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic, and* [*Maia Otarashvili*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/people/maia-otarashvili)*, deputy director of the Eurasia Program at Foreign Policy Research Institute, gave a talk at Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs entitled* "[*Democracy Promotion in the Age of Trump*](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20180510-democracy-promotion-in-age-of-trump)*.*" *The following is an excerpt from Basora’s remarks about why democratization should remain a U.S. priority abroad. Basora was ambassador to the Czech Republic from 1992 to 1995. From 1989 to 1991, he served as director for European affairs at the National Security Council, where he participated in shaping the U.S. response to the fall of the Berlin Wall and designing early programs of support for democracy in the post-Soviet region.* ***The following excerpt has been modified for classroom use.***

…American interests are indeed best served, at least in the long run, if there are more democracies in the world. The spread and consolidation of democracy is a good thing for us abroad. However, very importantly, there [are] important areas of disagreement as to why, where, and how we should promote democracy or even whether democratization should be given much priority…

My own personal view…is that the strengthening of democracy around the world should remain a major goal of U.S. foreign policy, and I am convinced that this is a goal that can be justified by our ethical values as a nation. But I also believe strongly that to be fully effective, if we advocate for the support of democracy abroad, we have to take into account very powerfully the realist**[[1]](#footnote-1)** objections…

In my view, the health of democracy in the world is indeed deeply intertwined with our core national interests, such as countering terrorism, defending ourselves militarily, [and] our economic prosperity. These are deeply enhanced…if there are more democracies in the world, if the liberal world order[[2]](#footnote-2), which we have tried to create over the last 70 years, is preserved and continues to be enhanced.

However, the reason I've generally shied away from using the moral or values arguments to justify democracy support as part of U.S. foreign policy is that I have seen how glibly [casually] the opponents and the skeptics dismiss so easily these moral arguments. In effect, moral rationales are called "naïve." Some also attack democracy as unsustainable simply on practical grounds of budget limits: "We have so many needs at home. Therefore we can't afford to do much on this any longer abroad."

But let's look back for a moment. For over 70 years after World War II the United States had a very clear and very consistent foreign policy with bipartisan political backing, and the goals were these:

* First, encourage the spread and consolidation of democracy[[3]](#footnote-3) abroad wherever feasible.
* Second—and deeply related with it; I could have put it first—to counter Soviet, Chinese, and now Russian and other attempts by authoritarians to intimidate or to subvert democracy, either in their own countries or by intimidating neighbors.

**Arguments Against Democracy Promotion Abroad**…[M]any of these longstanding bipartisan policy tenets [are] being increasingly called into question…Here are the three essentials of what I consider very misleading arguments that have been used to attack the idea that the United States should continue to support democracy abroad as we have for 70 years:

* First, it doesn't matter if other countries are democratic as long as the bilateral relationship is net-positive for the United States. Of course, in measuring these bilateral relationships, all that counts is the advancement of our hard-headed national interests, such as economic, military, and [countering terrorism]. Therefore, democracy-support advocates are dismissed, as I said, as naïve moralists who lose sight of our "real" interests as a nation.
* The second argument is that the United States has for too long carried an unfair military and economic burden as we have assisted democratic allies around the world, tried to protect them, and tried to maintain the military alliances that have been part of the equation, and, of course, supposedly massive foreign aid programs have resulted, putting great pressure on our national budget.
* The third misconception is that the multilateral institutions that the United States created after World War II—in our own likeness and image, by the way—in fact undermine American interests and that our adversaries take advantage of them to exploit America economically and to undercut us politically.

**Why Democracy Matters**…The fact is that democracy does matter. It matters deeply to our national well-being, not only to our values but to our core interests.…[If] you just look very quickly at the waves of democratization, the second wave—1943-1962, in other words, the immediate results of World War II—and then the third wave of democratization in the latter part of the Cold War but then also very importantly the fall of the Iron Curtain, there were tremendous leaps forward.[[4]](#footnote-4) We are now…in a reverse wave, quite serious and quite worrisome.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nevertheless if you look at the historical perspective it should be manageable if the United States wishes to resume its role as an advocate of democracy and a supporter.

Democracy has spread wide, and the vast majority of the world's democracies…share our values and have many common interests, and they are more likely to be reliable allies. In fact, many of them are deeply committed allies--although it is also true that not all democracies always align with us and that some autocracies have also been long-term reliable allies…

The fall of the Berlin Wall…in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later were absolutely decisive triumphs for the United States and its democratic allies and the democratic values that we're talking about…So we triumphed. Why throw out that 70-year policy? We have more allies in the world now by far than we had before, and they are now more prosperous and more secure. We are more secure; they are more secure.

**Recommendations for Democracy Promotion**The first and most central recommendation…is that U.S. foreign policy should assign a clear and high priority to supporting the spread of democracy abroad, but recognizing, of course, that this must remain only one among several key goals in our overall national strategy.

Second, times have changed. It is time to review, and we recommend very specific ways in which a review of how we deliver our democracy support should be addressed, because the challenges facing democracy today are far more complex and far more difficult than they were in the 1990s.

…We advocate very precise targeting of democracy support.…This is for a number of reasons. There are some countries in which democracy-promotion programs are simply not feasible: Russia and China are very clear examples. In other countries our programs can be counterproductive, for example, through manipulation by the local regime to create a false veneer of respectability. There are also some countries that are so critically important to other very urgently pressing national security concerns that we cannot afford to alienate the regime by pushing democracy very urgently while we're pushing other priorities.

Nevertheless, there are many countries around the world where we can and should have very active approaches on the democracy front. This is not just programmatic assistance and technical assistance; this is also leverage, persuasion, and a variety of other things.

[There are] three different types of countries where there is realistic opportunity to promote democracy in one way or another. The first group that we try to identify is investing in the most promising new cases. I believe that the most fertile ground for encouraging democracy is often to be found in countries where autocratic regimes have recently fallen through revolution or have agreed to a pacted transition. Examples of this are [Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Ukrainian_revolution); we can talk about the [Velvet Revolution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Velvet_Revolution) period and then again now more recently, [Tunisia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisian_Revolution); and [Indonesia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Suharto).

Others are where autocratic governments are visibly weak and look likely to be replaced by a broad-based reform movement. An early example of that was Poland, which saw the [Solidarity movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solidarity_(Polish_trade_union)) in [1989](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish_legislative_election,_1989)…This presents tremendously fertile ground if we act quickly and effectively—not we [the U.S] only but our Western European and other allies—to help nurture and help the new reformers establish an effective democracy and a system that satisfies the citizenry of the country.

The second group [to protect is] earlier [democratic] gains…This is because of the intensity of the autocratic resurgence problem that we've seen over the past decade. Given the aggressive nature of the current authoritarian offensive, we need to safeguard existing democracies, either in cases like [Poland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaros%C5%82aw_Kaczy%C5%84ski) and [Hungary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Orb%C3%A1n) where an internal autocratic is trying to subvert democracy, or from foreign attempts to weaken, subvert, or otherwise eliminate them.

The third group—and a very important one and one that doesn't get anywhere near in my view the attention that it deserves in the general press or even in certain parts of the academic world or policy world—is the need to deal opportunistically with hybrid regimes or…"competitive authoritarian regimes." These are the countries that fall somewhere between democracy and dictatorship, and they are run by autocratic elites who feel it necessary in order to maintain their legitimacy to maintain significant trappings of democracy such as elections that have some semblance of competition, permitting international travel and educational exchange, and they leave space for some degree of private economic initiative or media or other forms of openness of some civil society.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Some of these regimes are viewed generally as rock-solid authoritarian. In fact, many of them are much less durable than they appear…So there can be unanticipated opportunities for democratization. In this case, we and our allies need to be very quick, very nimble and agile in stepping in and helping the reformers create democracy in that country. But even in these hybrid regimes where there isn't a split and there isn't an opportunity for major democracy-support programs, there is still room for educational exchanges, business exchanges, scientific exchanges, and other things that help lay the seeds for democracy, and we should not neglect doing that.

**Why do we need to promote democracy abroad?**…[O]ur own democracy and democracies around the world are under systematic attack from outside and from some internal voices. So is the liberal international order that I've described, that has brought in my view so much good to the world. Therefore, a failure to counter this current authoritarian offensive would in my view clearly be a failure to defend our own democracy, all of its values, all of its security, and it would mean an abandonment of the international institutions that we rely on for so much of our military and economic security as well as our leadership of the world.

So, American democracy in support of democracy in the world is a clear-eyed decision to protect our own core national interests but is also justified by profoundly ethical considerations in our foreign policy. Democracy for all its faults is ultimately a better system of government for a majority of individuals, and the inherent worth of the individual and his or her rights are the core of the ethical system to which I adhere and to which I believe most Americans adhere.

The opposite side of the coin, authoritarianism, downgrades individual rights. We have seen with fascism the brutality that can occur in the fascist examples of the 1930s, the [Stalinist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalinism)and the [Maoist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao_Zedong)regimes, and the brutality of a [Putin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Putin) or a [Mugabe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Mugabe) more recently.

In my view, as long as the United States does not abandon the field for too long, I still believe that the democracies of the world can manage to overcome this antidemocratic trend of the past decade and the authoritarian offensive that we're now facing and that there is not only hope but a probability that we can succeed…[I]f so, our support of democracy in the world is not only in our national self-interest and in the interests of others in the world, it is clearly the right thing to do.

1. Realist theory views relations between countries as a constant competition for global (usually military) power. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Liberal world order is the organization of countries, international institutions, norms and agreements after WWII that were meant to stabilize the global system using capitalist democratic thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Democracies are typically only considered consolidated after several undisputed transfers of power from one democratically elected government to the next. There is less of a risk in backsliding to an authoritarian system. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Not mentioned is the first wave of democratization, which was from 1828-1926 according to Samuel Huntington. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more information about the reverse of democratization, see Freedom House’s "[Democracy in Crisis](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018)." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Civil society is the participation of citizens in community life outside of formal governmental institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)