

OPINION>INTERNATIONAL

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The ground game: Supporting democracy must be part of America's global strategy

BY DEREK MITCHELL, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 09/15/22



AP/Alexei Druzhinin, Sputnik, Kremlin pool photo
Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping smile at each other during their meeting in Beijing on Feb. 4, 2022.

Today's International Day of Democracy offers an opportunity to review the state of global democracy and also democracy's essential, if often overlooked role, in U.S. global strategy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, along with China's and Russia's freshly minted "no limits" partnership, emerging alliance with brutal authoritarians around the world, and unapologetic affirmation of illiberal values at home and abroad, validate the Biden administration's view that the contest between democracy and autocracy is a defining challenge of our times.

The free world should recognize it has a substantial strategic advantage in this contest, because, fundamentally, people do not want to live in a world dominated by

authoritarians or authoritarian values. Polls show large majorities worldwide consider democracy their preferred form of government.

In fact, many of the same studies that have measured a steady decline in democracy worldwide have also tracked the increase in popular protest. Populations are organizing in greater numbers than ever to make their voices heard, assert their rights and demand change.

As they vent their frustration, they likewise chafe at foreign powers contributing to their plight — through opaque deals, predatory contracts, and illiberal norms that subvert their politics, destroy their natural environment, undermine domestic labor standards, and mortgage their future to kleptocratic elites. These peoples are demanding transparency, accountability and justice, and they welcome international assistance to solidify democratic institutions and standards in their country. There is clear strategic value in answering the call.

It should not take a political strategist to understand how a world dominated by autocracies leads to a more brittle and less stable international security environment. It should make self-evident strategic sense to advance a normative system that studies have proved to result in better health, security and development outcomes.

U.S. and allied governments have proposed a plethora of economic, political, military, informational and technological prescriptions to address the China challenge. But few, if any, have placed sufficient strategic value on assisting the efforts of citizens to take on this challenge themselves, in their own interest, protecting their rights and sovereignty, by assisting them to advance democratic norms that would implicitly challenge China's way of doing business and illiberal influence.

But democracy support also offers a compelling, if under-appreciated, potential contribution to any China-specific strategy in the coming decades. More and more nations are waking up to the complicated impact China is having in their countries. While Chinese entities may offer some investments, goods and services that benefit nations, too often they bring with them a carrying cost — corruption, opaque dealing, environmental and labor hazards, and unaccountable governance.

Such assistance includes helping populations strengthen parliamentary oversight over executive action, supporting civil society and independent media as service providers and public watchdogs, helping them counter disinformation campaigns and combat censorship, promoting labor rights, and mitigating other corrosive impacts of foreign capital.

The United States and others have supported this type of work in nascent democracies for decades. But the times require new commitment, greater creativity and, ultimately, priority attention.

Just as the U.S. defense establishment recognizes the importance of proactively shaping a more stable and open security environment through global engagement, shaping political norms should be considered of equal priority. The alternative is leaving

a vacuum for illiberal powers to shape a different future aligned with their self-interest, and that of selected elites, at the expense of nations and general populations everywhere.

China and Russia clearly understand the stakes, which is why they spend billions of dollars on foreign assistance, strategic communications and public diplomacy to control and subvert the free flow of information, promote falsehoods, peddle disinformation, and promote their governance model. It's also why they devoted an entire section at the top of their February 2022 [joint statement](#) to redefining democracy — to the point where the concept is functionally unrecognizable.

In doing all this, however, they inadvertently reveal what they fear and expose their own vulnerability. They clearly see democracy as a strategic threat. When adversaries tell you what they fear, you should give it priority attention, as well as extra energy, focus and resources. As the United States does so, however, it must proceed with care.

To be effective, democracy support must maintain its basic integrity. It must remain affirmative in spirit, and its activity focused on the sovereign desires and interests of partner populations.

The work has inherent strategic value simply in affirming the right of people to know about the activities of their government, to hold their leaders to account, to speak and organize, and to have a voice in their future.

Such norms inherently play to the advantage of the United States and its allies, in addition to advancing a more safe, secure and prosperous world. And it is precisely the kind of world illiberal players such as China fear most, because it implicitly creates millions of foot soldiers dedicated to affirming liberal values and popular sovereignty, posing fundamental strategic challenges to illiberal global influence.

In the 21st century, it is willful blindness to believe that political systems do not matter and that popular will is not an increasingly important factor in national affairs and international security. It is encouraging that the Biden administration understands this and that bipartisan support for democracy assistance in Congress remains strong. But the administration, Congress and our allies must act with greater urgency and pursue this agenda with resources and strategic focus. We must prepare a “National Democracy Strategy” to supplement the upcoming National Security Strategy.

The stakes are high — but policies that support citizens struggling for their democratic rights can serve as an effective “ground game” that marries U.S. values and interests and complements other government-led approaches to today's complex, urgent strategic challenges.

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