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CONFERENCE MEMO

Anything, Anywhere, All at Once: The Case for a (Multi- Dimensional) National Democracy Strategy

Alex Thier

PANEL 4:

Defending Democracy at Home and Abroad

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE:

"The Autocratic Challenge to Liberal Democracy and the Future of Global Development: The World 20 Years After the Founding of CDDRL" was a one-day workshop examining the state of democracy and development today held on November 4, 2022, in celebration of CDDRL's 20th anniversary.

The workshop brought together current and former CDDRL scholars to understand the causes and consequences of these global challenges, and to advance a research agenda that can underpin an era of democratic renewal.

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Anything, Anywhere, All at Once
The Case for a (Multi-Dimensional) National Democracy Strategy

Alex Thier

The Threat

The profound negative trends for democracy in every region of the world require a long-term reorientation of US policy at home and abroad. The depth of this democracy crisis imperils global political, economic and security stability and our collective ability to address fundamental challenges to human dignity and prosperity including climate change, threats to global health, economic upheaval and inequality, and repressive, revanchist totalitarians.

President Biden has made several calls to action based on this idea.

Democracy itself is in peril, here at home and around the world. May 31, 2021

In my view, this is the defining challenge of our time... We stand at an inflection point in our history... The choices we make... in this moment are going to fundamentally determine the direction our world is going to take in the coming decades. Will we allow the backward slide of rights and democracy to continue unchecked? Or will we together ... have the vision... and courage to once more lead the march of human progress and human freedom forward? December 9, 2021. Summit for Democracy

I'm asking our nation to come together, unite behind the single purpose of defending our democracy regardless of your ideology. September 1, 2022.

A Strategy that Rises to the Level of the Threat

We should expect, from such a stark prognosis, a bold response. If democracy is truly imperiled in the U.S. and abroad, then what must be done about it? How much power and persuasion should be put toward addressing the challenge? Should the U.S. take significant risks, make big bets, shake up the establishment, eschew business as usual? If so, how should the vision be articulated? How should decisions be made on why, where, and how to focus? How are the complex institutional responses coordinated despite the prerogatives, politics, preferences, and sheer bureaucratic inertia standing in the way? How are allies, dealing with their own internal and external challenges, brought along? What about reluctant partners for whom elusive gains are weighed against certain blowback?

The importance of the questions and complexity of the answers requires a consequential strategy, based on theories of change and a thoroughness of analysis, evidence, and options not presently on offer.

In April 2021, the overarching message of the bi-partisan Task Force on US Strategy to Support Democracy and Counter Authoritarianism was “elevate support for democracy and countering authoritarianism to the heart of US foreign policy and national security.” Within that overall frame, the first concrete recommendation was that “the Biden administration should develop a first-ever National Democracy Strategy that articulates a detailed multiyear vision of domestic and international policy to strengthen and advance democracy.” The Task Force - co-convened by Freedom House, the McCain Institute, and CSIS - was clear-eyed about the practice of policy-making *and* implementation - having been composed of and consulted broadly with a wide-array of policy makers and experts with practical experience in the bureaucratic trenches.

The spring of 2021 was a hopeful moment amidst a long dark stretch for the democracy community. President Biden himself repeatedly delivered powerful rhetoric about the *existential* importance of taking significant action to shore up declining democracy at home and abroad, and to combating aggressive and advancing authoritarianism. The President had committed to holding a Summit for Democracy with allies and partners in his first year in office, senior Administration officials were echoing these priorities, and a new super-coordinator position was created at the National Security Council.

By the end of the year, the Summit for Democracy had been held, and several new initiatives launched, including the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, and USAID’s Partnerships for Democratic Development. The Presidential Initiative focuses on four areas - important to the growth and defense of democracy: corruption, digital repression, and attacks on elections and independent media. This has also been followed by a new USAID “Bright Spots” initiative, aimed at focusing additional resources on countries experiencing democratic breakthroughs or at least compelling opportunities for consolidation. These programmatic initiatives have been accompanied by diplomatic efforts to align democratic actors around big problems - most notably Russia and Ukraine.

These efforts are strengthening the tool box and building towards an allied group willing and able to wield the tools. It is too soon to say whether they will bear fruit and change the democratic trajectory locally, let alone globally. But a broad theory of change has not been articulated, nor a compelling thesis of why these steps, taken together, will result in that change. There is little sign of the demanding policy, fiscal, or bureaucratic realignment necessary for fundamental shifts, nor the hard choices required of material change. *Taken together, we are still fighting a forest fire with a bucket brigade.*

The issuance of a new National Security Strategy on October 12, 2022 was a critical opportunity to steer the ship of state. At the highest level, the NSS makes a strong statement about the centrality of democracy to achieving our highest priorities:

We will work to strengthen democracy around the world because democratic governance consistently outperforms authoritarianism in protecting human dignity, leads to more prosperous and resilient societies, creates stronger and more reliable economic and security partners for the United States, and encourages a peaceful world order.

This somewhat utilitarian-leaning formulation speaks more to the value of democracy than the values of democracy. Indeed, in the document's most urgent formulation, it elides falling democracy and rising authoritarianism, "the defining challenge of our time" in favor of other priorities.

This decade will be decisive, in setting the terms of our competition with the PRC, managing the acute threat posed by Russia, and in our efforts to deal with shared challenges, particularly climate change, pandemics, and economic turbulence. If we do not act with urgency and creativity, our window of opportunity to shape the future of international order and tackle shared challenges will close.

The NSS seems to repeatedly set up a tension - one that runs through the oft-troubled heart of U.S. foreign policy - between "democracy" and "order."

Overall, the last two years have made the need for a National Democracy Strategy even more compelling.

What Would A National Democracy Strategy Look Like?

A National Democracy Strategy that rises to this moment would need to do several things.

First, it must assess and articulate the costs of the path that we are on, and benefits of positive shifts. This costing should involve a serious effort to spell out the mortal, economic, and security costs of declines or improvements in various facets of democracy and authoritarianism. How do we assess the value for each human year at a certain level of freedom? What are the costs to the US (and allies) of rising authoritarianism (competition, war, lack of progress on key issues) or failed states (refugees, famine, regional destabilization). These numbers will lack precision and require difficult judgment calls on how to even arrive at them - but it will be a worthwhile exercise to set up the context of cost-benefit decisions to follow. Measuring the systemic effects and costs of public health crises, climate change, discrimination has been valuable for policy and advocacy. To establish a baseline of facts and expectations, the White House should request a

National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) to assess the global state of democracy, the drivers of decline, and related impacts on U.S. security.

Second, the strategy must articulate a compelling theory of change. Rather than doing a bunch of things in a bunch of places and calling that list a strategy - we need an articulation (based on some evidence) of why doing a certain set of things will lead to the desired outcome. In other words, what sorts of policies, actions, and investments have the potential to make real change over what time frame? This would be an important opportunity to assess the different tools we have - security, political, economic development - and think about how they can be better aligned towards the overarching goal of supporting and increasing democracy and confronting authoritarianism.

To this end, I've long argued that we should be "doing development democratically." Too much of global development investment seems agnostic about democracy, instead focusing on "effectiveness" and "delivery." This approach gets the dynamic of sustainable development and democratic transformation backward. It is always the citizens struggling on the front lines who bring about change in their own societies. Just governments derive their sovereignty from the will of the people, and must strengthen and adhere to the social contract in order to remain legitimate. Foreign assistance too often breaks, rather than reinforces, this chain of accountability. We need to align economic, trade, development policy to support democratic consolidation and reduce vulnerabilities to malign influence.

Third, the strategy must set the methods for decision-making. This is about both the *who* and the *how*. Coordinated, aligned, coherent...cross-government decision-making always sounds like a good idea in think-tank papers, but is enormously challenging in practice. The means for coordination of whole-of-government decision-making are often weak, and almost always resisted by the first law of bureaucratodynamics: entropy. Agencies have agency. And limited bandwidth. So an effective strategy will need special mechanisms to achieve and maintain alignment. The Democracy Task Force recommended that the Biden Administration issue a Presidential Directive articulating an integrated, interagency approach to supporting democracy and countering authoritarianism. The Directive, focused on diplomacy, development, and defense, with democracy as the new "fourth D," would direct the National Security Advisor and the Director of the Domestic Policy Council to develop the National Democracy Strategy, and establish a new National Democracy Council at the White House to create, coordinate, and oversee implementation of a National Democracy Strategy.

The strategy should also provide guidance on how to make decisions, to ensure that a truly robust process of assessment and debate is undertaken. The hypotheses of costs and theory of change must be weighed against additional dimensions - costs of responses, likelihood of success, timeframes, and comparative value of different areas of focus (geographic and

functional). In other words, there must be a way to judge the impact of decisions and set priorities.

Caveats and Conclusions

There are many reasons to believe the creation of a U.S. National Democracy Strategy would do little to change the course of history, let alone U.S. policy to an appreciable extent.

The Summit for Democracy and the National Security Strategy are Exhibit A. If a presidential summit and legally-mandated quadrennial strategy weren't enough to warp policy gravity, what would a late-breaking (post mid-term) democracy strategy do better? In short, it's never too late to do the right thing, or to make a more compelling argument backed by structure.

The importance of the decline of democracy in the U.S. is deeply relevant to global trends, yet this very fact also makes it toxic to address. A bold new approach on democracy will be very difficult to manage in a U.S. domestic political environment where a significant strain of one party in a two-party system has anti-democratic elements. Relatedly, it is not clear in a time of economic, health, and climatic disruption that voters will prioritize the policy choices and investments needed to save democracy. Convincing people and allies to focus on a long term challenge that doesn't necessarily immediately address kitchen-table issues is hard. As a New York Times headline put it recently, "Voters See Democracy in Peril, but Saving It Isn't a Priority." The misguided flip-flopping on relations with Saudi Arabia not only didn't address prices at the pump, but it also sent an unmistakable message that we will sacrifice core principles for short term gain.

For many reasons, the U.S. has lost credibility around the world as a beacon of democracy, imperiling efforts to lead and galvanize allies let alone more reluctant partners. Although being knocked off our pedestal may, ironically, make us more likely to succeed. While engaging with leaders in the emerging Chinese foreign aid infrastructure between 2013 and 2015, I was particularly struck by one defining element of their worldview: the Chinese understand what development and poverty reduction really feels like, because they have lived it every day for decades. They felt that they knew what governments, citizens, partners were going through - the trade-offs, the hurdles, the politics, the bandwidth. In their view this made them a good development partner, while the US - so far from the political, social, and economic realities of low-income countries - was not. Today, America is much more down in the dirt with others - dealing with elections, disinformation, corruption, even political violence. The near term experience of struggle should serve sharpen our own urgency and responses. Moses has come down from the mountain after decades of pious leadership from on high, and we find ourselves back in the real struggle of the masses yearning to be free while others are enticed by false idols. Our commandments appear to be smashed.

Nonetheless, it is also for these reasons, not despite them, that the effort to create a National Democracy Strategy should be undertaken. There is simply too much at stake, too much to unearth and expose about what we could and should be doing. The extreme costs of failing to try vastly outweigh the relatively low risks of another inter-agency strategy that didn't live up to its promise.

ABOUT CDDRL

Since 2002, the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

CDDRL bridges the worlds of scholarship and practice to understand and foster the conditions for effective representative governance, promote balanced and sustainable economic growth, and establish the rule of law. Our faculty, researchers, and students analyze the ways in which democracy and development are challenged by authoritarian resurgence, misinformation, and the perils of a changing climate.

Contact the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law:

Encina Hall
616 Jane Stanford Way
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-6055

Phone: 650.723.4610

Fax: 650.724.2996

cddrl.stanford.edu



@stanfordcddrl



@stanfordcddrl



@stanford_cddrl

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