

POLICY BRIEF

ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEMBERS

While conversations with and among the advisory committee members improved this project's findings, those findings are my or the chapter author's responsibility alone. Members of the advisory committee are not responsible for, or necessarily agree with, the conclusions drawn in this report. Some members withdrew from the project on or soon after January 19, 2009, before assuming a position in the Obama administration.

Thomas Carothers
Larry Diamond
Elizabeth Dugan
Peter D. Feaver
Stephen J. Flanagan
Francis Fukuyama
Michael Fullilove
Michael J. Green
Robert E. Hunter
Gerald Hyman
G. John Ikenberry
Michael A. McFaul
Mark Palmer
Rend Al-Rahim
Mitchell B. Reiss
Anne-Marie Slaughter
Ashley J. Tellis
Almut Wieland-Karimi
Jennifer Windsor

**DEMOCRACY IN U.S. SECURITY STRATEGY:
FROM PROMOTION TO SUPPORT**

Alexander T. J. Lennon, Senior Fellow, Project Director

Zbigniew Brzezinski, recalling French strategic thinker Raymond Aron's advice, recently counseled that "the strength of a great power is diminished if it ceases to serve an idea." Since its inception and throughout U.S. history, democracy has been that idea. Yet, recent setbacks warrant reevaluating the place of democracy promotion in U.S. strategy. What role, if any, should democracy have in U.S. security strategy and public diplomacy today?

Extensive interviews with former senior policymakers and diplomats, strategic analysts and democracy experts, along with in-depth explorations of alternative strategies by Larry Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, and Michael McFaul, all enhanced by an elite, bipartisan advisory committee, helped understand the strategic community's perceived shortfalls in democracy promotion today, shape alternatives for how it might be recast, and recommend the role for democracy, or some similar concept, in U.S. security strategy.

**STRATEGIC INTERESTS:
WHY DOES THE UNITED STATES CARE?**

The consolidation and spread of democracy in the rest of the world unequivocally remains a U.S. strategic interest, but members of the strategic community hold multiple reasons why. Democracy has been central to the American identity since the Founding Fathers and the idea of the United States as a "shining city on a hill." It has subsequently been pursued by, among others, Woodrow Wilson's appeal to "make the world safe for democracy," Franklin D. Roosevelt's articulation of four freedoms, Ronald Reagan's call at Westminster "to foster the infrastructure of democracy," and the William J. Clinton administration's strategy of engagement and "enlargement of the world's community of market democracies" before George W. Bush's recent efforts.

Others may make moral or values-based claims, but democracy is today cited as an important part, but not the central animating feature, of U.S. security strategy for three main reasons. First, there is an enduring belief in at least a mild version of the "democratic peace theory" that mature democracies do not fight each other, even as concerns about unstable transitions have been raised. Second, democracies are seen to be better decisionmakers, more reliable partners, and more likely to be rule-abiding participants in a cooperative international system.

(continued on pg 2)

Third, helping aspiring states become democracies, without imposing democracy on others, would restore the U.S. image as a benevolent global power. Although each reason could potentially lead to divergent priorities within democracy strategy (for example, prioritizing the Middle East, China, or Latin America, respectively), the spread of democracy remains a strategic U.S. interest.

RECENT LESSONS LEARNED

The question is how to go about doing it, with recent lessons principally being drawn from three experiences. Although democracy was not the principal public justification for Iraq until after weapons of mass destruction were not found, it is clear that Iraq has become the poster child for democracy promotion gone awry. Broadly, the sentiment now exists to declare a new doctrine, as articulated by Michael McFaul,

“that the United States does not use military force to promote democracy, period.” Another expert elaborated that “military force should never be used to impose democracy. I think we should not rule it out to

restore democracy, which we did in Haiti with a resolution of the Security Council . . . [but] not in a country that’s never been democratic.” More than just military force, coercive democratization is now viewed skeptically. Much greater hope is placed in efforts to use foreign assistance, particularly the Millennium Challenge Account, and other incentives for democracy.

Hamas’s victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections, the second case, reaffirmed that elections alone do not make a democracy. But a more subtle lesson being drawn is that elections can be held too early, before a critical mass of institutions and political culture has been established. One former official outlined three baskets of democracy assistance: civil society; representative governance (free press, elections, et cetera); and governance. He and others concluded that the United States had been focusing on getting countries to that first election, but was not yet very good at governance or helping them after the first election.

The principal recent U.S. strategic mistake, however, is

seen as the loss of U.S. credibility from the gap between its grand rhetorical declarations and public action in places like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. In particular, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had canceled a planned trip to Egypt in February 2005 after Ayman Nour, a political opponent of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, was imprisoned. After he was released and rearrested, however, Rice visited Mubarak in Egypt in February 2006, soon after the Palestinian elections, and did not publicly mention Nour, raising accusations of U.S. inconsistency, hypocrisy, and the loss of credibility.

These negative lessons to avoid coercive measures, early elections, and appearances of hypocrisy are not the only ones being drawn. Four positive principles may also guide future U.S. policy. First, democracy is a long, complex, and ultimately indigenous process, not an end state. That requires the United States to be more patient—even if that will be difficult in an American political culture that often requires near-term returns or, to be more blunt,

instant gratification. It means seeking “gradual and serious” progress, not just elections.

Second, the United States needs to be more humble—both modest about the limits of U.S. power generally and

humble about the complexity of democratic transitions. “The overarching question isn’t what the U.S. *should* do, it’s what *can* the government do,” one analyst encapsulated, emphasizing that indigenous actors have to take the lead.

Third, the United States should work cooperatively, acting side-by-side with a range of actors: nongovernmental organizations, other governments (particularly European), and regional as well as other multilateral organizations. The United States may have more potential than any other single country to help democracies, but its efforts will ultimately be more effective, sustainable, and less subject to resentment and backlash when working with others.

Fourth, the United States should be more pragmatic. It should acknowledge not only that it has other interests in the world, but that it has different amounts of leverage and ways of utilizing it (such as, public or private) and that countries ultimately have different needs. Such variations mean charges of hypocrisy are inevitable, even if they can be minimized by changes in U.S. strategy.

“IT’S NOT DEMOCRACY’S FAULT, IT’S THE WAY WE PROMOTE IT”

-DEMOCRACY EXPERT

PILLARS OF A DEMOCRACY SUPPORT STRATEGY

To be patient, humble, cooperative, and pragmatic, U.S. strategy requires country-specific and regional approaches, brought together globally under the umbrella of “democracy support.” “Democracy promotion” has become a toxic term, but as one expert summarized, “It’s not democracy’s fault, it’s the way we promote it.” The new administration should redefine, or unpack, what it means by democracy to reaffirm it is not defined solely by elections. Democracies are more nuanced: they are slow, complex, and indigenous processes—struggles of self-governance—and include the United States itself today.

Promotion, however, has become synonymous with imposing democracy, with one former senior policymaker dismissing it as, “to use a synonym for stupid, counterproductive” today. Support, rather, conveys the sense that these are indigenous processes that the United States might help. Larry Diamond elaborates that supporting democracy is more modest, realistic, and incremental with greater emphasis on working through partnership, particularly with Europeans already pursuing a similar approach.

PROMOTION “CAN BE, TO USE A SYNONYM FOR STUPID, COUNTERPRODUCTIVE...”
-FORMER SENIOR POLICY MAKER

To begin to put these principles into practice, the United States should emphasize five pillars for democracy support:

Be a model democracy as the fundamental starting point.

Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and torture of detainees have harmed the U.S. reputation because they convey the appearance that Washington thinks it is above the law. Resolving these difficult issues through a transparent democratic process is the key to regaining whatever respect and credibility has been lost.

Rebuild credibility by pragmatically and explicitly acknowledging that U.S. strategies, tailored for different countries and regions as well as U.S. interests, will vary. More sophisticated and nuanced declarations about the varying needs of aspiring democratic states and the role for the United States would minimize U.S. vulnerability

to the charges of hypocrisy. The United States will be better off acknowledging inevitable inconsistencies and their rationale up front.

Enhance political assistance, which lies at the core of U.S. efforts, to strengthen democracy and good governance abroad. Existing U.S. democracy and governance programs to develop the myriad institutions of democracy in the state, party, and electoral politics and civil society—particularly independent media—should be improved. U.S. programs should be adapted to different actors within diverse countries, sustainably scaled up in larger countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, and Pakistan for the long term, and should operationally shift from determining what indigenous actors need to responding to *their* initiatives and priorities.

Use economic assistance to help consolidate nascent democratic movements, decrease absolute poverty, and reduce corruption. Such efforts, Francis Fukuyama emphasizes, can help democracies deliver on promises made to citizens during political campaigns, enhance democracy’s appeal, and bring “freedom from want” as FDR first articulated almost 70 years ago. In this way, economic development can complement U.S. political assistance.

This fundamentally means that democracy should not be conceptually defined by elections, even if they are free and fair. Democratic governments must deliver on what citizens want most, which often means basic social services like education and health care and a higher standard of living. Elections, while important, should not be seen as occasions to end aid to countries or “graduate” them, but to broaden assistance to include economic, governance, rule-of-law, and policy initiatives to deepen and consolidate nascent democracies.

Moreover, formal democracy tends not to work well in countries with high degrees of inequality, when marginalized populations do not feel they have a stake in the system. The long-term stability of democracy and its appeal to other countries depend in large measure on the ability of democratic countries to mitigate, to some extent, unequal distributions of wealth and incomes.

Consistent with the principles of the Millennium Challenge Account, effectively conditioning aid to control corruption, Diamond also stresses, is particularly crucial to addressing one of the greatest deficiencies in democracies today. Corruption is not just another item on the checklist of democratic governance, but is at the heart of how political systems should function, why democracies malfunction when they do, and is the single most important and pervasive reason why states are weak and why they fail.

Engage autocratic regimes—both friendly and adversarial—and their societies, including democratic movements, through diplomatic and other means to facilitate democratic transitions. In friendly autocratic countries—such as Chile, South Korea, and the Philippines—internal political forces historically drove democratization, but McFaul chronicles the American engagement of both the regimes and societies that helped tip the balance in a democratic direction by constraining the unacceptable behavior of incumbent autocrats and encouraging emerging democratic forces.

In adversarial regimes, tension with the United States has historically provided a pretense for greater political oppression. Conversely, benign relations can allow space for indigenous actors to pursue domestic change, as Gorbachev did in the Soviet Union. In rethinking U.S. strategy, the first step should be to expand government-to-government relations. At the same time, the United States should also engage democratic opposition inside autocratic states, which in turn can have greater political space to operate when government relations with the United States are improving.

The consolidation and spread of democracy remains a U.S. strategic interest. Evidence already exists that we are in a global democratic recession, Diamond concludes, and a principal U.S. strategic goal should be to prevent a “reverse wave” of democratic implosions by consolidating democracy where it has already come into being. These five pillars, tailored to different regions and countries, can best do just that. Even with recent setbacks, the problem is not with democracy itself, but with the way the United States has recently been perceived to promote it. The new administration has an opportunity to clarify what it means by democracy and can today better convey patience, humility, cooperation, and pragmatism through a “democracy support” strategy to foster democracy and U.S. strategic interests.

INTERVIEWS

In addition to conversations with and among the advisory committee, the following people were generous enough to share their time and ideas in interviews for this project, for which we are grateful:

Richard Armitage
Rick Barton
Peter Beinart
Dennis Blair
R. Nicholas Burns
Derek Chollet
Lorne Craner
Chester Crocker
Patrick Cronin
James Dobbins
Paula Dobriansky
Georges Fauriol
Michele Flournoy
Carl Gershman
Marc Grossman
Richard Haass
Barbara Haig
Morton Halperin
Lee Hamilton
Francois Heisbourg
Jim Hoagland
Masafumi Ishii
Stephen Krasner
James Lindsay
Barry Lowenkron
James Mann
Jessica Mathews
Marwan Muasher
Walter Russell Mead
Joseph S. Nye, Jr.
Marc Plattner
Thomas Pickering
Bruce Russett
David Sanger
Brent Scowcroft
James Steinberg
Strobe Talbott
Karsten Voigt
Karin von Hippel
Ken Wollack
Fareed Zakaria
Philip Zelikow