

Shifting from Democracy Promotion to Support

by Alexander T. J. Lennon

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Throughout 2006-2008, Asian, European, and American analysts asserted with increasing conviction in conversations and on op-ed pages that the U.S. emphasis on democracy promotion, boldly declared in President Bush's second inaugural address, would be terminated or at least recast by a new U.S. administration.

The presidential campaign sketched visions of a League of Democracies, with its implications for Asia's geopolitical order, and raised questions about whether a new U.S. administration would put as much emphasis on what Japan's then-foreign Minister (now Prime Minister) Aso Taro called an "arc of freedom and prosperity".

The truth is that, for better or for worse, the role of democracy in U.S. foreign policy goes back in U.S. history at least through one of the three pillars of the Clinton administration's strategy of engagement and enlargement to Presidents Reagan, FDR, and Wilson, arguably all the way back to the founding fathers' idea of the United States as a "shining city on a hill" that could be emulated by others.

More recently, Zbigniew Brzezinski, recalling French strategic thinker Raymond Aron's advice, 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 promotion have in U.S. security strategy and public diplomacy today?

The quick answer – revealed from extensive interviews with over 40 strategic thinkers from Richard Armitage to Jim Steinberg to Fareed Zakaria and three in-depth strategy papers by experts Frank Fukuyama, Larry Diamond, and Michael McFaul – is that support for democracy remains, and should remain, a core principle of U.S. foreign policy, but that aggressive promotion of democracy can, and has, proven counterproductive to the achievement of that end.

This recent study, arguing for a shift from democracy promotion to democracy support, notes:

- *The consolidation and spread of democracy remain a strategic U.S. interest* for multiple reasons, including an enduring belief in the "democratic peace theory." Democracies make better decisions and partners for the United States and a role in spreading democracy can help the United States be, and be perceived as, a

benevolent global power. Those that would describe democracy as an element of U.S. foreign policy as "values-based diplomacy" risk underestimating this strategic rationale.

- *More than Iraq, Egypt has shaped the strategic community's views of the U.S.* The principal recent U.S. strategic mistake is not viewed as launching a democracy crusade into Iraq, which was initially a quest to eliminate WMD, but the loss of credibility from the gap between lofty U.S. rhetoric and publicly perceived action in places like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. While accusations of U.S. hypocrisy are to some extent inevitable, changes in strategy can minimize the damage to U.S. credibility.
- *The United States should support, not promote, democracy.* Promoting has become synonymous with imposing democracy. "Democracy" itself should be maintained at some level in U.S. public diplomacy, but its nuances must be "unpacked" or "clarified" by the new administration. U.S. strategy should be patient, humble, cooperative, and pragmatic, and not always active and public.

Working side-by-side with other nongovernmental, national, and multilateral actors, the United States should pursue a "democracy support" strategy, invoking these pillars:

- be a model democracy, including in resolving issues like Guantanamo and torture;
- pragmatically acknowledge in its public diplomacy that U.S. strategies and interests will vary, in order to help rebuild U.S. credibility;
- enhance political assistance by responding to recipient country initiatives, while sustainably scaling it to their size;
- use economic assistance to consolidate indigenous efforts, delivering on democracy's promise and "freedom from want";
- engage autocratic regimes – both friendly and adversarial – and their societies to facilitate democratic transitions.

Such a "democracy support" strategy, based on these pillars, can better convey patience, humility, cooperation, and pragmatism to foster U.S. strategic interests. These arguments and principles are further elaborated in a recently released 4-page policy brief and a full report, *Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy: From Promotion to Support*, available at www.csis.org/isp/democracypromotion.