

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION: THE CORNERSTONE OF AMERICA'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR

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Abstract

The spread of democracy in the aftermath of the Cold War seemed destined to replace the policy of containment as one of the most quintessential guiding principles of America's foreign policy. It was widely embraced in the academic, policy-making as well as media circles, that the promotion of democracy was essentially the U.S.'s mission in a post-Cold War world. This mission, primarily as a philosophy as well as a diplomatic strategy, is undoubtedly put into life by American idealism, which is nothing other than the belief in progress through reason and deeply enshrined in the Enlightenment's liberal principles. And it is an absolute truism that a freer and more democratic world contributes to a more secure world, a stronger and more sustainable economic growth, as well as more resilient alliances that offer better lives for their citizens. The paper argues that America's legacy in democracy promotion, i.e., liberal democracy, has benefitted the citizens of the new democracies and ultimately created a safer world. Though democracy is not an event but rather a process that requires the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in a society, that are not necessarily animated equally across the globe, the U.S.'s democracy programs have nonetheless contributed statistically as well as realistically for significant improvements in the realm of democracy worldwide, a legacy that cannot as yet be attributed to any other super power in a post-Westphalian world order.

Keywords: Democratization, U.S, foreign policy, liberal democracy, Cold War

"Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don't attack each other. They make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy".¹

President William J. Clinton

Introduction: the notions of democracy and democracy promotion

Today, it is rather difficult to discuss about democracy promotion. We are witnessing an ever present trend of rising autocracies and democracy seems to be playing the weakened defense. The global democratic trend has dramatically slowed down and in many places even stagnated if not reversed. A resurgent Russia, a de-liberalized China, a Latin America with a huge democratic deficit, as well as a troubled Middle East make democracy promotion a very difficult process. Yet, it is undoubtedly important and valuable to discuss about this concept as one of the quintessential

¹ Clinton, W., J., 'State of the Union Address', 25/01/1994 (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=50409> last accessed 20 March 2017)

strategic pillars of the United States' foreign policy, especially in the post-Cold War period. Additionally, it will help us better grasp the state of international politics.

The notion of democracy promotion in its basic understanding refers primarily to democracy assistance, democracy support, or democracy construction. As such it is a component of foreign policy adopted by governments and international organizations that seek to support the spread of democracy as a political system around the world. Among the reasons for supporting democracy include the belief that countries with a democratic system of governance are less likely to go to war, are likely to be economically better off and socially more harmonious².

In the academic circles and published works, the term is very frequently used to manifest the multitude of opinions and approaches by various international actors, be they governments, civil organizations, and/or other actors of the international political scene. This is primarily due to the fact that there is a lack of consensus in the academia as to what *democracy* actually means. It has rightly earned the title of '*essentially contested concepts*'³ in Prof. W.B. Gallies 1956 seminal work.

Democracy denotes many things, from political structures, processes, purposes, be they in combination or isolation⁴ to the classical definition of the will of the people being the sole source of power. In principle it denotes the mechanisms for the selection of political leaders, a mere competition for public votes and government restraint or the checks and balances due to public accountability, or as S. Huntington notes: "*(a) political system is democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote.*"⁵

Endeavors in defining democracy are further complicated by the differences of the classical understanding of democracy in Ancient Greece and contemporary democracy. The classical Greek democracy was based on the principle of full and direct political participation of all citizens, with a very strong sense of community, also the sovereignty of the people, as well as equality of all citizens under law. Modern democracies on the other hand, rely on elected representatives that in turn shatter that societal relationship and create spheres of public and private interests, i.e. individualism at its best.

America: the 'empire of liberty'

From the Founding Fathers onwards, America's leaders have continuously expressed the belief that the country must embrace its 'mission' of promoting democracy. Thomas Jefferson's

² Peter Burnell, From Evaluating Democracy Assistance to Appraising Democracy Promotion, Political Studies Association, Political Studies 2008 VOL 56

³ Gallie, W.B.(1956a), "Essentially Contested Concepts", Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol.56, (1956), p.184

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 6

⁵ Ibid, pp. 6-7

vision of America as an expanding ‘empire of liberty’⁶ and George Washington’s famous quote from his inaugural address that America should practice the democratic values in order to “*win the affections of [the Nation’s] citizens and command the respect of the world*”⁷ serve as a modest sign of this new mission that American leaders would embark in the decades to come. With the benefit of hindsight, this political philosophy that lay deep in its very foundation, helped model the country that would do more to strengthen the norms and practices of democracy around the world than any other country.⁸ Professor Gat rightly notes:

*If any factor gave the liberal democracies their edge, it was above all the existence of the United States rather than any inherent advantage. In fact, had it not been for the United States, liberal democracy may well have lost the great struggles of the twentieth century. This is a sobering thought that is often overlooked in studies of the spread of democracy in the twentieth century, and it makes the world today appear much more contingent and tenuous than linear theories of development suggest.*⁹

The fall of the Berlin Wall, and with that, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its support of the communist system in Eastern Europe were widely understood as an endorsement of democracy, thus prompting an active and even more vigorous promotion. America was soon to be viewed as the sole superpower and leader of the growing community of worldwide democracies. There was more opportunity for American influence and democracy promotion globally as many autocratic regimes lost their centers of support in the East.

The disappearance of superpower competition in conjunction with American economic boom helped produce worldwide the final boom of the ‘third wave’ of democratization that had begun in the 1970s.¹⁰

To support this process, President Ronald Reagan was the first to truly position the ideology of ‘democracy’ as a guiding principle of US foreign policy, in the belief that ‘freedom’ could defeat

⁶ The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 4, 1 October 1780–24 February 1781, ed. Julian P. Boyd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951, pp.237-238, (https://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/empire-liberty-quotations#_note-0 last accessed 28 March 2017). For more on this context refer to: Tony Smith, America’s mission: the United States and the worldwide struggle for democracy in the twentieth century, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, p.286

⁷ George Washington, “Inaugural Address,” April 30, 1789 (https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/inaugtxt.html last accessed on 3 April 2017)

⁸ Michael McFaul, Democracy Promotion as a World Value, The Washington Quarterly, 2004, p.158 (https://web.archive.org/web/20070101192608/http://twq.com:80/05winter/docs/05winter_mcfaul.pdf last accessed 3 April 2017)

⁹ Azar, Gat, ‘The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers’, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 86, No. 4, 2007

¹⁰ For more on the ‘waves’ of democratization, read: Samuel P. Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991),

the ‘evil empire’ of the Soviet Union.¹¹ The Reagan administration subsequently formulated the strategy of democracy promotion, establishing much of the ‘infrastructure of democracy’, as for example the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) established in 1983, and implementing reform initiatives in countries as diverse as the Philippines, Chile and Poland.¹² In doing so, the American government relied on three pillars that supported this political philosophy, namely:

- a) The values and principles of the Western liberal democracy are universal. Democracy is not culturally bound. Therefore, the promotion of democracy is for the good of mankind.
- b) Democracies do not fight each other. Therefore, exporting democracy means to promote regional and even global peace. We can notice here a linkage between democracy and regional and global security.
- c) The promotion of democracy makes the world safer and more prosperous for the United States.¹³

In support of this strategy, doctrine, or simply a foreign policy tool, the United States accordingly created a legal infrastructure with a series of acts and institutions that would legal backbone of democracy promotion. Namely, the Foreign Assistance Act in 1962, the National Endowment for Democracy Act in 1983, the Support Eastern European Democracy Act, the Freedom Support Act in 1989-mandating support to the former Soviet Union successor states and the Millennium Challenge Act of 2003 (mandating stronger democracy and governance criteria for eligibility in economic development programs), to name a few.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War created substantial opportunity and ‘demand’ around the world for established democracies such as the United States, which no longer faced major ideological ‘opposition’ or counter-power. This void was filled with a high degree of success by the United States through its democratization policies. Data in support of the rising democracies in the post-Cold War period are abundant. The number has tripled if not quadrupled.¹⁴ As noted earlier though, there is a series of setbacks to this trend, and autocracies are on the rise. This in turn calls for additional institutional efforts of the United States and all other relevant organizations of the likes of EU, UN, NATO, and others, to coordinate and push forward the democratization agenda.

Undoubtedly, the US has a far challenging agenda ahead of it, if it wishes to maintain its credibility in this domain, this when knowing that its enthusiasm for democracy promotion has been shaken in recent years due to a number of political and economic setbacks. These include

¹¹ Reagan, R., ‘Address to Members of the British Parliament’, 8/6/1982, (<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/60882a.htm> last accessed April 5, 2017)

¹² Ibid

¹³ For more on US foreign policy doctrines, see: Packenham, Robert A. (1973). *Liberal America and the Third World*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Hartz, Louis (1955). *The Liberal Tradition in America - an interpretation of American political thought since the revolution*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

¹⁴ There is a wide array of organizations that conduct democracy rankings. The most prominent one are the following: freedomhouse.org; the Economist Group’s eiu.com; democracyrankings.org; ourworldindata.org, etc.

Russia's growing appetites for Soviet glory in its geographical surrounding and further in the Balkans, the developments in the Middle East, turmoil in post-Arab spring Middle East, recent political developments in Turkey, election results favoring right wing extremists in the heart of Europe and the Western Balkans, growing doubts about the success of neoliberal economic model, the rise of the 'illiberal democracies', will affect the degree to which the United States new administration prioritizes democracy promotion within its foreign policy.

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