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The Changing Geopolitical Context of US Support for Human Rights and Democracy Promotion

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MARK N. KATZ, SEP 19 2023

The promotion of both human rights and democratization has long been a feature of American foreign policy. American support for them, however, has been inconsistent. When Washington has judged that cooperating with authoritarian and illiberal democratic regimes to be in its strategic or economic interests, then the U.S. has either ignored or even made excuses for these countries' human rights and democratic deficits. This is something that human rights and democracy activists both in the West and in these autocratic and illiberal regimes have long pointed out. But while American support for human rights and democracy has been far too weak for these activists, it has been far too strong for the authoritarian and illiberal democratic regimes Washington has been supporting.

These governments have always cooperated with the U.S. more on the basis of shared strategic and/or economic interests, not shared values. For them, U.S. government criticism of their lack of human rights and democracy is not just unwelcome, but threatening in that they believe such criticism can only undermine them internally. They warn that doing so could lead to their replacement by anti-Western autocratic forces, but they have usually been just as unwilling to be replaced by pro-Western democratic ones. Both their reaction to and willingness to tolerate such criticism, though, has changed over the course of the three most recent geopolitical eras: 1) the height of the Cold War (stretching from the end of World War II until the Gorbachev era); 2) America's "unipolar moment" (from the end of the Cold War through the mid-2000s); and 3) the current era characterized by the apparent decline of America and the liberal world order on the one hand and the rise of China, Russia, and other authoritarian and illiberal powers (from the mid-2000s to the present).

During the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union, Maoist China, Marxist-Leninist and other "progressive" regimes and movements advocated an alternative vision of human rights and democracy than that offered by America and its Western allies. This Marxist-Leninist/progressive vision encompassed "national liberation" from Western imperialism, "popular democracy" (a euphemism for Marxist-Leninist or other leftist dictatorship), and state-sponsored economic planning minimizing dependence on Western multinational corporations. However inconvenient American and other Western criticisms of their human rights and democratic deficits, fear that the Marxist-Leninist/progressive vision of human rights and democracy would lead to their overthrow served to motivate pro-Western autocracies and illiberal democracies to continue cooperating with the U.S.—and served to motivate the U.S. to continue cooperating with them.

The geopolitical situation changed, though, from the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s—America's supposed unipolar moment. The reformist Soviet leader Gorbachev's decision to pursue detente with the West and halt support for Marxist-Leninist revolution (something that Communist China had stopped doing at the time of its own 1970s-era rapprochement with the West) made it safe for Washington to support the democratic transformation of entrenched authoritarian regimes in the Philippines, South Korea, and Chile in the late 1980s. Gorbachev's unwillingness to defend beleaguered hardline Eastern European communist regimes in 1989 helped usher in democratic transitions in that region, while the downfall of communism in and breakup of the Soviet Union held out the prospect of democratic transitions there.

Additional democratic transitions took place (or appeared to take place) during the 1990s and early 2000s, including

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the “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). Washington, though, seemed unwilling to pressure pro-Western Middle Eastern dictatorships to democratize during the 1990s and very beginning of the 2000s due to the perceived necessity of needing them to counter several common enemies: Saddam Hussein of Iraq, the ayatollahs of Iran, and the jihadists of Al Qaeda. But after the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration undertook U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq with the highly ambitious goal of democratizing these two countries. In his speech to the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, President George W. Bush blamed the West’s “excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East” for its remaining “a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export,” and called for “a forward strategy of freedom” to break this cycle. Anti-Western and pro-Western authoritarian regimes alike seemed to be the target of Washington’s ambitious democratization program, and the pro-Western ones sometimes made a show of complying with it.

A new geopolitical era began to arise in the mid-2000s, though, as American foreign policy experienced a number of setbacks while authoritarian great powers—China and Russia in particular—seemed to grow stronger. The U.S.-led military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which had at first appeared successful, came increasingly to be seen as failures instead. The Bush Administration’s enthusiasm for democracy in the Arab World declined when the strongly anti-Israeli Hamas movement won the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections which Washington had insisted be held. The Obama Administration prioritized reaching a nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran over support for the democratic Green Movement which erupted there in 2009. Further, the democratic transitions that some countries at seemed to be making in the 1990s and early 2000s ended up backsliding into illiberal or even autocratic regimes instead. The initial hopes that the Arab uprisings of 2011 would bring democracy to the Arab World proved forlorn, resulting instead in dictatorship, civil war, or both. And just as the American vision of an expanding liberal democratic world order appeared to be failing, the authoritarian leaders of Russia and China articulated a critique of how American-backed “color revolutions” did not lead to democracy but chaos and were instigated by Washington to advance its strategic objectives.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin in particular espoused a vision of the world in which Russia was a conservative status quo power which respected similar authoritarian but “legitimate” governments while the U.S. was a disruptive power seeking “a world where true independent states would be replaced by an ever-growing number of de facto protectorates and externally controlled territories.” This message resonated with many traditionally pro-Western authoritarian governments, especially in the Middle East. In their view, American criticisms about their human rights records and democracy deficits threatened to undermine them, whereas Russian and Chinese expressions of respect and support for existing governments helped strengthen them. Moscow’s success in defeating Georgia in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014, occupying part of eastern Ukraine later in 2014, and successful military intervention in Syria beginning in 2015 also contributed to the image of a rising authoritarian Russia.

This new geopolitical configuration that has been developing since the mid-2000s (rise of authoritarian great powers/decline of America and the West) is much more advantageous for pro-Western autocratic and illiberal regimes than either the Cold War or America’s unipolar moment. Uncomfortable with American and Western criticisms (no matter how circumscribed and ineffectual) about their human rights and democracy records, these regimes had to put up with them during the Cold War since the Marxist-Leninist/progressive critique of them was even more threatening. During America’s unipolar moment, there was no countervailing great power for them to turn to. In the present era, though, traditionally pro-Western dictatorships and illiberal democracies can turn toward a supportive Russia and China if American and Western criticisms become too inconvenient. At the very least, those pro-Western autocratic and illiberal democratic regimes that wish to continue cooperating with the West can incentivize Washington to curb its criticisms by threatening that they might turn even more toward Moscow and Beijing otherwise.

The current geopolitical era (authoritarian rise/Western decline), then, has given greater freedom of maneuver to traditionally pro-Western authoritarian and illiberal regimes than they had during the previous two (Cold War and unipolar American moment) eras. Donald Trump even seemed to embrace this through his efforts to court authoritarian regimes (whether traditionally pro- or anti-Western) and his frequently expressed disdain for America’s longstanding alliances with democratic nations. This, however, may have been less a deliberate strategy and more Trump responding positively to authoritarian governments willing to flatter him and negatively to democratic

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governments unable to continue or even begin doing so. While Joe Biden expressed both high regard for America's Western democratic allies and criticism of undemocratic ones during his presidential campaign and the beginning of his administration, he has pulled back from this and sought more cooperative relations with such regimes (especially those which export oil) despite their unwillingness to join the West in supporting Ukraine and sanctioning Russia.

This situation is not likely to change unless and until the overall geopolitical situation changes once again. Possibilities for this include a Russian defeat in Ukraine, the downfall of Putin, and/or prolonged economic decline in China. Just like the end of the Cold War, such events could serve to revive the image of America and the Western liberal order as strong. But this is not what traditionally pro-Western (much less anti-Western) authoritarian regimes want, as it could bring about renewed American efforts to promote human rights and democracy which the weakened authoritarian regimes in Russia and China would be less able to help them counter. Indeed, it is to prevent just this from occurring that America's traditional authoritarian and illiberal partners have been cooperating with Russia and China as much as they have. It is another American unipolar moment arising that they fear most and not the authoritarian regimes in Russia or China which they see as status quo powers like themselves.

In the present geopolitical context, then, it might seem counterproductive for the U.S. to support human rights and democratization in authoritarian regimes it has traditionally worked with for fear that doing so is not only unlikely to succeed but will only result in driving such regimes more firmly into the embrace of Russia and China. Yet America's past experience during both the Cold War and the unipolar American moment shows that authoritarian regimes can succumb to democratic opposition movements, and that this can occur very quickly and surprisingly.

Despite its seeming disadvantages at present, then, support for human rights and democratization is not something that is necessarily at odds with the pursuit of American strategic interests. Indeed, sometimes support for human rights and democratization can advance them, as they did for the U.S. at the end of the Cold War and afterward. At a time when neither Russia nor China is advancing human rights and democratization, America's doing so when possibilities for this arise could prove to be a highly strategic move indeed.

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