

ADVANCING FREEDOM, DEFEATING AUTHORITARIANISM: A DEMOCRACY AGENDA FOR 2025-2029



By Patrick Quirk



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Introduction

The next president of the United States, whether a Democrat or Republican, will enter office in January 2025 confronted by a world where freedom is under threat. This is a central challenge to the United States because American citizens benefit most when the world is free and open. Supporting democracy must therefore feature in the foreign policy agenda of any administration. How should the presidential campaigns think about this challenge, and what should they do about it once in office? What does the data tell us about the nature of today’s challenges and the most cost-effective ways to address them?

This paper examines the main challenges to democracy and offers nonpartisan policy solutions to them. It starts by surveying the state of democracy globally and articulates why underwriting the expansion of freedom (understood using the Atlantic Council’s Freedom Index definition) is vital to US interests.¹ The second section outlines priority challenges and opportunities, from the need to supercharge countering China’s malign influence to shoring up the core institutions of democracy in strategically important countries. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations that the president and US Congress can action to address challenges to US interests.²



A woman casts her ballot at the polling station at Ndiagianiao in Mbour, Senegal, March 24, 2024. Source: REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

¹ Atlantic Council’s Freedom and Prosperity Indexes, available at <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

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I. The freedom landscape: authoritarianism on the back foot?

The security of the United States, democratic partners and allies, and humanity's future depends significantly on the state of democracy worldwide. Yet, over the past seventeen years, if we look at indices like those published by the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Center, authoritarianism has risen globally, while democracy shows alarming decline in regions of importance to the United States.

After a nearly two-decade recession, democracy is showing promising signs but faces continued headwinds. Many democracies are experiencing legitimacy crises due to a long-standing failure to deliver adequately for their constituents. This core weakness has made them more vulnerable to authoritarians, disruptive information technologies, external malign attacks, and internal demagogues who now use a proven playbook to weaken democratic governance from the inside out.

Political freedom, in particular, has witnessed a pervasive decline across all regions without exception.³ Africa, often in the spotlight due to dramatic military coups, has experienced the most recent decline, spanning from 2014 to the present. This decline is primarily attributed to mounting pressures from authoritarian regimes on electoral systems and the erosion of legislative controls over executive powers.

Europe has been grappling with a decline in political freedom since 2012, regressing to levels akin to those observed in 1996. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the decline started in 2003, exacerbated by diminishing political rights and a collapse of civil liberties beginning in 2016.

The global trajectory of the rule of law has been on a downward trend since 2012, as authoritarians co-opted and undermined institutions. Nearly every region has faced mounting pressure on the rule of law. Notably, the Middle East and North Africa region has witnessed the most significant decline across most indicators, including security and judicial independence, and a rise in corruption.

These declines not only challenge US interests abroad but also directly impede prosperity and sustainable development. The global turning point of 2012 has directly impacted prosperity levels. Between 1995 and 2012, prosperity exhibited an average annual increase of 0.4 points. From 2012 onward, this progress has significantly slowed, dwindling to 0.1 points per year.

But all is not bleak. Despite significant odds, Bernardo Arevalo was inaugurated as president in Guatemala. Elections in Taiwan ushered in a decidedly pro-democratic candidate committed to maintaining the island's independence from China. Political freedoms have also expanded in Zambia following the electoral defeat of President Edgar Lungu. And Senegal, after a series of democratic setbacks, just elected its youngest president, 44-year-old Bassirou Diomaye Faye.

Citizens are also not standing by. Instead, they are mounting broad-based civil resistance movements to demand change, as in Belarus, or to root out endemic corruption, as in Iraq. Since 2017, roughly one hundred significant civil resistance movements have led to substantial reforms or the removal of thirty governments and leaders.⁴ Moreover, the number of new civil resistance movements seeking political transitions has grown over the last three decades.

1. FREEDOM ABROAD IS ESSENTIAL TO US NATIONAL SECURITY AT HOME

Supporting democracy—particularly in strategic locations—is not an altruistic enterprise. We can and should support freedom fighters and strong political institutions because doing so aligns with American values. But the main reason we promote democracy through a combination of diplomacy, investment, and foreign aid is because it is good for the United States.⁵ The United States is more secure with a world that is free and open. Democracies are more reliable trading partners, less likely to go to war with one another, and less apt to incubate and export transnational crime and terrorism.⁶

3 Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Indexes, available at <https://freedom-and-prosperity-indexes.atlanticcouncil.org/>

4 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Global Protest Tracker," <https://carnegieendowment.org/features/global-protest-tracker>

5 Tess McEnery and Patrick Quirk, "Advancing Democracy Overseas—Not Isolationism—Protects American Interests," *The National Interest*, February 23, 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/advancing-democracy-overseas-%E2%80%93-not-isolationism-%E2%80%93-protects-american-interests-209611>

6 V-Dem Institute, *Case for Democracy Conference Report*, January 2022, https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/vdem_casefordemocracy_report.pdf.

By contrast, authoritarians are unpredictable and can generate instability. Some of the least free states produce the most instability.⁷ From the Sahel to the Middle East, weak states characterized by predatory elites governing unresponsive institutions have consistently been breeding grounds for terrorist cells that attack American interests, servicemembers, and allies.

Democracy abroad is also better for US businesses. Autocrats often oversee regulatory regimes that are unfavorable (if not hostile) to US businesses. By contrast, countries with transparent regulations and processes are more reliable markets for American companies.⁸ According to the Atlantic Council's Freedom Index, which ranks countries on a composite score of economic, political, and legal freedom, four of the five top emerging markets for US companies are free (South Korea) or mostly free (Brazil, Mexico, and India).

A foreign policy with democracy support as a key component also positions the United States to compete with China, Russia, and Iran. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Kremlin understand that other countries' political systems affect their national security and have therefore been widely promoting an authoritarian development and governance model.⁹ The CCP is working to create a world safe for the communist party—one composed of authoritarian regimes—by exporting surveillance technology, autocratic governance practices, and other repression modalities. The CCP provides training to political parties in the Global South to promote authoritarian solutions to governance challenges. To curry favor with local elites and foster an environment favorable to China's interests, Beijing co-opts journalists and invests in the media sector to shape reporting.¹⁰

The weak regulatory environment and minimal transparency around foreign financing and investments in fragile democracies create conditions for countries to become dependent on China, whether due to unsustainable debt to Chinese state-governed banks or reliance on information communications technologies from Chinese government-linked companies. The consequence of this dependence is an expanding set of countries that will choose China as their primary economic and political partner and side with Beijing against US interests in multilateral institutions.

“By promoting democracy and countering autocracy overseas, Washington can more easily secure the blessings of liberty at home... where it has the chance to make a meaningful difference at a reasonable cost, Washington should encourage other countries to adopt democratic practices and respect human rights.”

Matt Kroenig and Dan Negrea, *We Win, They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the New Cold War, 2024*

It is no coincidence that countries that already host—or have reportedly considered welcoming—a Chinese military base on their territory are non-democracies and usually indebted to or otherwise dependent on China. Supporting democratic actors and institutions can help ensure that fewer countries find themselves in situations like Djibouti, Cambodia, and Equatorial

7 Patrick Quirk and Owen Myers, *Less Freedom, Weaker States, More Conflict: Can That Cycle Be Broken?*, Atlantic Council, September 19, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/less-freedom-weaker-states-more-conflict-can-that-cycle-be-broken/>

8 V-Dem, *Case for Democracy*.

9 Joseph Lemoine, Dan Negrea, Patrick Quirk, and Lauren Van Metre, *False Promises: The Authoritarian Development Models of China and Russia*, Atlantic Council, January 11, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/false-promises-the-authoritarian-development-models-of-china-and-russia/>.

10 See, for example, International Republican Institute, “China's Approach to Influencing Elections and Political Processes to Its Strategic Advantage,” February 15, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/chinas-approach-to-influencing-elections-and-political-processes-to-its-strategic-advantage/>.

Guinea, among others, limiting the number of countries eager to help the People's Liberation Army expand its global presence.

Russia's campaigns to undermine free societies also threaten US interests. The Kremlin, while destroying all domestic opposition and independent media, is interfering in elections across the globe and deploying Wagner mercenaries from Syria to the Sahel. Putin's invasion of Ukraine, if successful, risks incentivizing the Kremlin to attack a NATO ally. A Russian victory could also incentivize China to attack Taiwan.

Beijing and other autocracies are unabashedly trying to create a world safe for autocrats. Authoritarian regimes across the globe are learning from one another, and actively collaborating, to crush democratic movements at home and rewrite international norms to advance their interests. Their actions present clear, consequential threats to American security interests.

2. DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE IN PRACTICE: TOOLS AND PROVEN RETURN ON INVESTMENT

A world made up of a constellation of autocratic regimes is bad for America and good for Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. To advance US economic and security interests, American foreign policy must have supporting democratic governance as a central component.

Like deploying warships, employing sanctions, or transferring defensive weapons, using diplomacy and foreign assistance to help allied nations guard themselves against authoritarian incursions are tools the United States uses to advance US national security.¹¹ Democracy assistance can help achieve both security and prosperity. This argument is instrumental, not ideological or normative.

What does American support for democracy look like in practice? It is not nation building or forcing democracy at the tip of a gun, as pundits like to suggest.

Democracy support is assistance the United States provides to protect and strengthen democratic governance abroad. The two main tools are complementary: foreign assistance programs that strengthen the capacity of democratic institutions

or actors within and outside government; and US diplomatic engagement that champions local democracy advocates and holds despotic regimes accountable for their actions.¹²

In addition to coordinated diplomacy and development assistance, the United States enforces human rights criteria for export controls; deploys visa restrictions or financial sanctions to punish and change the behavior of kleptocrats and autocrats; restricts military aid based on human rights standards; and offers economic support for allied countries targeted by China, Russia, and other malign actors.

Democracy assistance can help strengthen institutions to make them more effective and accountable; bolster democracy advocates working to hold corrupt leaders accountable; and advance more transparent regulatory regimes, among other benefits. These changes that democracy promotion can help bring about deter malign states from exerting their influence in a target country or, at a minimum, make it more difficult for them to do so. Robust electoral processes defend against interference in elections and help maintain public confidence in democracy. An independent civil society and media help hold leaders accountable and mitigate against external actors corrupting and ultimately co-opting them. Democracy support helps bolster transparency and counter CCP and Kremlin efforts to capture political and economic elites that, if unchecked, can result not only in reduced political accountability but in policy and commercial decisions in line with China's or Russia's interests and contrary to those of Washington and US businesses.

Democracy assistance is effective and shows a strong return on investment for US taxpayer money to advance US interests overseas. Studies show that this investment delivers real results. A study of US democracy promotion programs conducted between the critical post-Cold War period of 1990 and 2003 found that democracy assistance had "clear and consistent impacts" on overall democratization, including civil society, judicial and electoral processes, and media independence.¹³ And despite the recent global democratic recession from 2012 to 2022, eight countries that were veering toward autocracy bounced back to democracy in 2023. International democracy support and protection was an important factor in securing these gains.¹⁴

11 Patrick Quirk and Caitlin Dearing Scott, *Maximizing US Foreign Aid for Strategic Competition*, Atlantic Council, June 29, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/maximizing-us-foreign-aid-for-strategic-competition/>.

12 Congressional Research Service, "Democracy and Human Rights in US Foreign Policy: Tools and Considerations for Congress," January 4, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47890>.

13 Steven E. Finkel, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, and Mitchell A. Seligson, "The Effects of US Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building, 1990-2003," *World Politics Review*, 59, no. 3 (April 2007), p. 46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40060164>.

14 V-Dem Institute, "Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization," https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

II. Democracy agenda 2025-2029: core priorities

The next president's democracy agenda should focus on four priorities, centered on the main threats to US interests and evidence-based approaches to addressing them.

- **Shore up countries' resilience to Chinese and Russian malign influence and co-optation.** If the United States wins, China loses.¹⁵ Plain and simple. This confrontation with China and Russia, of course, has a military component but is more fundamentally ideological. We therefore need to center the democracy agenda on ensuring China fails in the battle of ideas and narratives about the superiority of its system. This stream of work should have two core pillars. First, we need to make sure that China cannot co-opt or otherwise influence local politicians to pass policies/laws or agree to opaque deals that together or apart benefit CCP interests at the expense of that country's citizens and the United States. This involves strengthening institutions and policies in countries the CCP or Kremlin targets to make these states and political systems more resilient to outside aggression. Second, we need to scale up messaging, internationally and to target countries, on why democracy is superior—based on facts—to the authoritarian model on offer from Beijing and Moscow. This stream of work, as with all democracy promotion, should not center on forcing any model on another country.
- **Focus US democracy assistance on bolstering the core political and institutional elements of democracy and governance (namely, political parties, legislatures, electoral commissions, and other related ministries) and empowering newly elected, reform-minded leaders to deliver.** Strong institutions and political party systems promote resilience to Chinese and Russian malign influence. These institutions are also the best bet for ensuring democracy delivers for citizens. Strong institutions set the playing field for robust competition of policy ideas and offer better return on investment than approaches rooted in a specific social agenda. The United States, in deciding which types of democracy support to focus on, has in recent years drifted too far toward helping grow civil society in target countries so these actors can push elected leaders for specific policy solutions. Absent capable officials and institutions to advocate to, however, such groups will be screaming into a void. The United States, in deciding how to allocate finite resources, needs to focus on shoring up political institutions and political parties (the key link between citizens and their government) first and civil society second.
- **Advance a vision for technology advancement grounded in democratic principles and thwart “digital authoritarianism.” Couple this offensive agenda with one that helps partners push back against digital authoritarianism.** A proliferation of new technologies has affected nearly every aspect of human existence. The way countries govern is no exception. The United States, first during the Trump administration and to a lesser extent during the Biden White House, worked with other democracies to ensure this proliferation of technologies leads to a “technological ecosystem” globally that is based in “openness, trust and security, and that reinforces democratic principles and human rights.”¹⁶ This vision is in stark contrast to the CCP's vision for technology, one rooted in censorship and centralized control. The next president needs to further advance this vision for technological use (from rules governing the internet to those shaping the rollout of AI) based on freedom and openness. They also need to forcefully push back against Chinese and Russian attempts to the contrary.
- **Revamp how the United States uses diplomacy to advance democracy and recommit to encouraging burden-sharing among allies to support democracy globally.** The extant US diplomatic playbook for supporting democracy overseas is shopworn and largely ineffective. Successive administrations resort to the same set of public messages condemning human rights abuses or a fraudulent election, yet with few, if any, consequences attached to these words. The repressive regime targeted by US rhetoric yawns. We need a new template. The same applies for how we use multilateral diplomacy to advance democracy interests. The United States cannot and should not foot the bill for democracy support everywhere. We must ramp up not only coordination with allies—through groupings like the G7—but also agree to a division of labor in select countries.

¹⁵ Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negrea, *We Win, They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the New Cold War* (Washington, DC: Republic Book Publishers, 2024).

¹⁶ White House, Fact Sheet: Advancing Technology for Democracy, March 29, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/29/fact-sheet-advancing-technology-for-democracy-at-home-and-abroad/>.

III. A policy framework for advancing democracy

The sections above establish that expanding freedom is vital to US national security and articulate the four areas our next president should focus on to advance democracy abroad. This section outlines a roadmap for realizing this aim. It includes two sets of recommendations: one centered on changes to the US government bureaucracy necessary to maximize the probability that America can advance democracy overseas; and the second focused on actions to advance the four priorities outlined above.

1. REFORMS TO THE US GOVERNMENT

Delivering on priorities requires having the bureaucratic structures in place to carry out policy, develop a strategy to execute said policy, and then deliver the associated goals and objectives through coordinated action overseas. The extant structure of the executive branch has several deficiencies that must be changed to realize the priorities listed above. These recommendations are divided into adjustments necessary to maximize the impact of US democracy promotion efforts specifically and US foreign aid more broadly.

Structural changes specific to democracy promotion

- **Prioritize supporting democracy in foreign policy deliberations.** The state of democracy directly influences America's ability to advance key US foreign policy objectives, whether to enable our companies to invest overseas or to prevent the CCP from co-opting strategically important countries. The United States must therefore place democracy protection and promotion on par with—or close to—other factors key decision-makers consider. Democracy promotion will not, and should not, trump many purely security considerations. Nor will prioritizing democracy promotion mean cutting off collaboration or engagement with less democratic states. The United States will need to engage non-democracies to address pressing security challenges, in particular those that imperil US citizens and American territory.

However, if the United States is to succeed in shoring up democracy to compete with our adversaries, then the American government must actively consider implications for democracy in its foreign policy deliberations. Failing to

do so, and blindly prioritizing short-term security gains, will feed the vicious cycle we see globally—from the recent string of coups in the Sahel to people seeking to overthrow governments in the Middle East. This approach has fueled grievances undermining democratic governance and produced instability that hurts our interests, rather than sustainably advance our objectives. At a practical level, this should involve elevating the functional offices and bureaus at the State Department and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that work on democracy issues to ensure they have an influential seat at the policy decision-making table.

- **Draft a US democracy strategy that outlines clear goals and metrics for success.** Given how central democracy promotion is to US interests, each administration should be required to develop and deliver to Congress a strategy for doing it effectively. The next president should direct their national security advisor (NSA) to draft a democracy strategy and an executive action that cements this strategy as US policy. The strategy should encompass all relevant agencies and departments, and articulate short- and long-term goals as well as theories of success for realizing these objectives.

The strategy should include as its stated end goal a world where democracy is the predominant form of governance because this is the model that best delivers for US interests as well as global prosperity and security. The strategy for realizing this overarching goal should convey regional and country-specific priorities and a theory of the case for achieving these priorities. The president should task their deputy national security advisor with overseeing execution of the strategy and holding involved departments and agencies accountable for results. The strategy should have metrics for success to gauge change in target countries as well as changes, internal to the US government, required to be effective. The strategy must affirm that political change in target countries can take years—not months—and structure its components and objectives accordingly.

The president should formalize the strategy in a national security directive (NSD) because doing so codifies the strategy as US policy and therefore carries with it the expectation that relevant components of the federal government will execute the strategy. Every president since Harry Truman has used NSDs to articulate their policies and vision for

achieving them. The Trump administration, for instance, issued eighteen directives while the Obama team issued forty-three. Accountability is the key advantage of codifying policy in a national security directive—federal departments and agencies must deliver on the president’s vision.¹⁷

Structural changes related to US foreign assistance

- **Fully empower the US Department of State’s Office of Foreign Assistance to fulfill its mandate of aligning foreign aid with policy goals and maximizing impact.** The Office of Foreign Assistance is charged with ensuring foreign aid allocations and spending is aligned with US foreign policy objectives. In practice, however, USAID and other aid-providing departments exercise too much independence and spend funds on priorities tangentially related to American priorities. The secretary of state should empower the Office of Foreign Assistance to fulfill its mission by mandating oversight of planning and allocation back to its director. This will help make sure that aid generally—and democracy assistance in particular—is used to advance specific foreign policy objectives. Some have called to eliminate this office, in the spirit of streamlining the US government bureaucracy to more efficiently advance US national security. Doing so would be counterproductive to that very aim. We need an empowered central body to coordinate and guide spending, in line with policy aims, not more decentralized decision-making on where and how to use US foreign aid monies.
- **Instead of prioritizing “localization” of US foreign aid—the policy which mandates sending a predetermined amount of foreign assistance to local organizations—focus on maximizing the impact of democracy assistance to achieve results that advance US national security.** Foreign aid benefits American citizens by leading to changes in a recipient country—stronger electoral commission or laws, for example. American citizens do not benefit if a specific amount of aid, say 30 percent, goes to local organizations. The next president should pursue increasing host government “self-reliance,” a key element of the Trump administration’s foreign aid agenda, where feasible—for example, in the areas of health or education—but jettison arbitrary requirements for a specific portion

of funding to go to local organizations, and instead focus staff time on crafting foreign assistance interventions that deliver. Said interventions can and should include components to increase the capacity of local entities to execute specific types of work. The interventions should also include direct support to movements or organizations that can—through financial and managerial controls—ensure proper use of taxpayer funds. The United States should call for this as part of program design, provided it helps achieve the government’s goal, instead of using a percentage of aid to local organizations as a goal in and of itself. If the next administration wants to retain some focus on “localization,” the United States could leverage philanthropy to meet its percentage targets. Prominent philanthropic entities can use funds as they see fit, as they are not responsible for delivering to the US taxpayer, and therefore can and should aid organizations directly as they see fit.¹⁸ By contrast, foreign aid is a statecraft tool used to advance American interests. It is not charity.

- **To maximize return on investment of taxpayer dollars, reduce the US government’s use of contracts (for profit) to fund democracy assistance work overseas and shift this spending to grants (nonprofit).** This is another straightforward step the United States can take to reduce waste and maximize the return on every dollar invested. During the Biden administration, USAID has drastically expanded its use of contracts over grants. The result has been more money going to for-profit firms as a fee, and fewer resources being spent overseas to help realize changes that benefit American citizens. Why should the US taxpayer foot the bill for contractor profits instead of having these monies go to advancing American security and economic interests overseas? Contracts can be a useful vehicle for foreign aid spending in very specific instances—for example, to procure a set number of textbooks or building materials. Ordering and delivering these items is straightforward. However, the rigid and costly nature of contracts makes them ill-purposed for implementing democracy and rights programs in highly complex environments that require adaptation and flexibility. The White House should direct USAID to increase its use of grants/cooperative agreements—created with the explicit purpose of offering flexibility that enables results in highly complex and fluid environments—and scale down monies flowing via for-profit contract mechanisms.

¹⁷ For a list of these directives, see the Federation of American Scientists website, <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nspm/index.html>.

¹⁸ A good example of this approach is USAID’s Powered by the People Initiative that USAID, in partnership with Humanity United, used to “provide flexible and accessible support that strengthens the agency, resilience, and efficacy of organizers and citizen-led social movements that are advancing human rights, social justice, democracy, and inclusive development around the world.” Humanity United, a philanthropic organization dedicated to cultivating the conditions for enduring peace and freedom, has committed \$750,000 over three years toward Power by the People. For more information on this initiative, see: <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/oct-16-2023-usaid-announces-45-million-support-efforts-advancing-human-rights-social-justice-democracy-and-inclusive-development#:~:text=PxP%20provides%20flexible%20and%20accessible,inclusive%20development%20around%20the%20world>.

2. ADVANCING THE DEMOCRACY AGENDA PRIORITIES

With the above bureaucratic and policy recommendations in place, the United States should implement the following steps for each of the four priorities comprising our democracy agenda framework. These recommendations and those above are meant to serve as a broad framework to guide decision-making and transition team ideas and policies and are not meant to represent a comprehensive set of solutions.

Shore up countries' resilience to Chinese and Russian malign influence and co-optation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Expand initiatives focused specifically on detecting, preventing, and countering CCP and Kremlin interference.** Strong institutions, addressed in priority two below, are an effective source of resilience to foreign malign influence. They are necessary, but unfortunately not sufficient, to guarantee mitigating attempts by Beijing or Moscow to influence political systems of other countries and undermine democracy, and US interests, in the process. The United States must therefore pair institution-strengthening with diplomacy and foreign assistance-supported programming in areas that have proven effective in building democratic resilience to foreign authoritarian influence: (1) supporting independent media that can produce independent reporting on Chinese and Russian influence efforts; (2) people-to-people exchanges where citizens abroad, and in particular those countries in PRC or Kremlin crosshairs, visit the United States to witness first-hand the efficacy of our institutions and benefits of our model; and (3) dialogues between elected officials, from the United States and other nations, to share understanding of foreign influence operations and solutions to address them.
- **Ensure the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is adequately funded to combat or address the plethora of democracy-related challenges.** The NED and its four core institutes are the preeminent US democracy assistance organizations. All are nonprofit entities with low overhead budgets that focus resources on addressing threats to democracy—and US interests—rather than turning a profit. The NED is a mission-oriented enterprise with one

goal: to defend freedom and spread democracy. These organizations are the logical partners for on-the-ground work because they have long-standing relationships with local partners and individuals, rooted in trust, and can therefore better deliver results. The current NED budget (\$315 million) is not sufficient. Congress should increase or at least maintain NED's budget, so its leadership can expand work specifically on countering China. Congress can offset this increase to NED's budget with a commensurate decrease in the budget for humanitarian assistance. The next president will need to prioritize spending, and helping our partners gird themselves against Chinese and Russian incursions to their political systems is more important than distributing aid in the wake of a natural disaster.

- **Congress should pass new legislation (the "Non-Kinetic Competition Act") to require the White House to submit multiyear plans outlining the US approach—harnessing all nonmilitary statecraft tools, including foreign aid and diplomacy—to compete with China in select priority countries.** Congress, through other legislation, has mandated that the executive branch develop and submit plans for addressing fragility and instability in specified countries. It should do the same for competition with China and Russia. Congress should require that strategies feature support for democracy as a centerpiece.¹⁹

Focus US democracy assistance on bolstering the core political and institutional elements of democracy and governance (namely political parties, legislatures, electoral commissions, and other related ministries) and empowering newly elected, reform-minded leaders to deliver.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **In priority countries, assess the state and capacity of political parties, electoral commissions, legislatures, and related institutions, and focus democracy assistance on shoring up gaps.** Country teams can assess these needs and advise on how best to use foreign aid to address them. Diplomats can focus their engagement on pushing host government officials to make good on existing—or start new—reform agendas.

¹⁹ The strategies should include a clearly defined goal, as well as a theory of the case. The legislation could be modeled on the Global Fragility Act (GFA), which requires the executive to deliver a strategy for preventing violent conflict and promoting stability globally, and ten-year plans for achieving these aims in select priority countries. Unlike the GFA, however, the legislation proposed here need not require the executive to publicly release plans, given the sensitive nature of the content.

- **In countries experiencing a democratic opening, surge support to the newly elected and reform-minded leader to ensure they can deliver on campaign promises and therefore head off disenchantment with democracy not delivering.** The Biden administration has rightfully attempted to address this critical need through its Democracy Delivers Initiative (DDI), which involves the US government mobilizing resources from across US agencies to help selected “countries cement early democratic gains, create space for further reforms, and promote the global progress of democracy.” Moving forward, a key part of DDI or its successor should be to surge support to newly elected leaders to ensure they have the resources to deliver. The county and regional strategies, to be required in the democracy strategy referenced above, should have a focus on supporting countries showing signs of democratization and having experienced a recent opening. US support cannot and should not just mean procurement of resources or material goods. It should include surge support of staff to support on key technical and policy areas for specific ministries. It should also mean changing key US policies—for example, lifting sanctions where warranted—that make it easier for the new government to deliver.
- **Support pro-democracy movements in authoritarian/closed societies to continue a push for reform and ensure actors are in place to lead once the autocratic government falls.** In some contexts, institutions are captured by the ruling authoritarian regime and therefore do not warrant support. In these closed spaces, the United States should focus on supporting nonviolent civil resistance movements that have proven to be vital to advancing democracy and reversing authoritarianism. In closed societies, these movements offer the best bet, and return on US investment, for enabling a democratic opening—and ensuring there are pro-democracy actors present to lead once the authoritarian regime falls or reforms begin. Popular civil resistance movements—using tactics such as strikes, boycotts, protests, and other tactics of noncooperation—are historically one of the most powerful drivers of democracy worldwide. The United States should follow a well-researched playbook for supporting these movements, which includes providing support to movements earlier, particularly in the early organizing phase, and using convening power to bring together movement activists and potential external supporters to discuss coordination of external support. In countries where movements succeed in removing an authoritarian government, we often see movement leaders outmaneuvered by the former regime actors. They lack political skills, not just technical ones,

and we can help them succeed through both programming (technical assistance) and policy (public support where it’s helpful, connections with international business, etc.). In countries where kleptocratic capture is the defining feature of governance, efforts to assist democratic activists should prioritize integrity champions.²⁰ Anti-corruption campaigns can galvanize broader collective action oriented toward openness, helping create a window of opportunity for meaningful reform.

Win the race to leverage technology by articulating and then supporting enacting a positive vision for how technology can deliver on democratic principles. Couple this offensive agenda with one that helps partners push back against digital authoritarianism.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Invest in efforts to foster and sustain a global movement to embrace technology as an advantage rather than a harm for democratic societies.** Digitally native democracies empower citizen engagement, improve transparency, strengthen citizen trust, and position democracies to be resilient, responsive, and effective even as new geopolitical threats emerge. Investing in democratic stakeholders that effectively use technology can demonstrate democracy’s ability to evolve, be effective, and better deliver for citizens than authoritarian models of governance. With the rise of AI, this emerging technology can be a positive enabler of democracy, if used with the appropriate safety and regulatory measures in place. Democracies should leverage AI to improve citizen engagement, enhance information accessibility and provision, and service delivery—especially during important political processes—while establishing guardrails to encourage democratic uses of the tool, facilitate prosocial design by AI developers, and ensure no one gets left behind.
- **Boost the support surveillance/censorship circumvention technologies and mainstream these internet freedom technologies into democracy assistance.** The values embedded in internet freedom—an open, free, global, interoperable, reliable, and secure internet—are essential infrastructure for democracy, human rights, and governance. Unfortunately, authoritarians are effectively using technology to further their values, principles, and goals. The United States and its partners need to do the

20 For a full set of recommendations on supporting nonviolent movements and countering authoritarianism, see Hardy Merriman, Patrick Quirk, and Ash Jain, *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave: A Playbook for Countering the Authoritarian Threat*, Atlantic Council, March 28, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/fostering-a-fourth-democratic-wave-a-playbook-for-countering-the-authoritarian-threat/>.

same. Funding for the critical technologies and programs that keep democratic actors safe, facilitate access to information, and make democratic organization possible needs to keep up with the threat environment. Internet freedom funding also needs to be mainstreamed into broader democracy assistance.

- **Work with partner nations to strengthen their domestic laws and regulations to improve cybersecurity.** Such interventions could support executive branch institutions, judicial institutions, and legislatures, as well as bolster awareness and training within political parties and civil society.²¹ Subsequent support could be provided to ensure implementation across national and subnational governments. The US House Democracy Partnership, a congressional diplomacy initiative, could leverage its global platform to spotlight and share comparative examples of quality cybersecurity frameworks with allied governments for consideration and adoption.²² The United States should require that the data/information management systems of all partners and implementers meet or exceed minimum standards and requirements for best practices. That might mean, for example, accelerating movement to secure cloud services, and ensuring investment in technology and personnel to match these goals. This could involve an executive order that applies to foreign aid comparable to that on improving the cybersecurity of the United States.²³ To address resource and capacity constraints, partners should adopt a risk-based approach which prioritizes the most critical assets and systems.

Revamp how the United States uses diplomacy to advance democracy and recommit to burden-sharing with allies to support democracy overseas.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Recalibrate the US approach to engaging “hybrid regimes” to stop giving them a pass on repressing freedoms because they might be relevant to other American interests, and start holding them accountable because doing so better advances American objectives.** Hybrid regimes are countries like El Salvador and the

Philippines that want to be seen as democracies but lack the fundamentals of a democracy. They hold elections, but the playing field is uneven, and the electoral management body often compromised. They have governance institutions, but said bodies often serve the regime’s interests first and those of citizens second. Unfortunately, since these governments hold elections and display other trappings of democracy, some policymakers give them a pass on their democratic track record—especially if the country is tied to other American interests. Giving these regimes a pass is a policy mistake. Hybrid regimes vote less frequently with the United States at the UN and are more prone to instability. The United States must balance collaborating with hybrid regimes, when it is necessary at all, with pushing their rulers to reform and advance democratic progress. To do so, the United States and G7 allies should: (a) make clear they will not welcome leaders chosen through dubious, substandard elections; (b) increase the use of public sanctions, including asset freezes and visa bans, on regimes proven to engage in election fraud/malfeasance; and (c) improve the use of high-level diplomatic engagement, including Cabinet-level delegations and the legitimacy they confer to the recipient country, to incentivize governments to reform and adhere to international democratic best practices.²⁴

- **Establish and make public a framework of consequences the United States will impose on regimes should they repress their people/movements.** US statements condemning, for example, a fraudulent election or a government repressing its citizens are necessary and welcome. However, such talk is cheap and rarely (if ever) changes the target regime’s behavior. To make repressive leaders stop abusing their power, the United States and its allies need to pair messages with consequences—and make sure autocrats understand the consequences of their actions in advance, so they mitigate against action in the first place. To further deter authoritarian repression, the United States with G7 allies should develop a tiered framework for imposing costs in response to escalating domestic (and at times international) repression of civil resistance movements. This tiered approach, which the author and colleagues have advanced in a separate publication, would indicate proportional US and allied responses to repression and abuse of power—with lower costs for shutting down a small section of the internet or jailing a single opposition

21 International Republican Institute, “Political Parties Playbook: A Guide for Digitizing Party Operations,” January 11, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/political-parties-playbook-a-guide-for-digitizing-party-operations/>.
 22 For more information, see <https://housedemocracypartnership.house.gov/about>.
 23 For the executive order boosting national cybersecurity, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/05/12/executive-order-on-improving-the-nations-cybersecurity/>.
 24 For an expanded set of these recommendations, see Patrick Quirk and Santiago Stocker, “Dealing with Hybrid Regimes: Pursuing U.S. Interests Without Giving them a Pass on Democracy,” Just Security, May 17, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/86604/dealing-with-hybrid-regimes-pursuing-us-interests-without-giving-them-a-pass-on-democracy/>.

leader (although, to some extent, this depends on who the leader is), and more robust consequences for a regime that authorizes lethal military force against nonviolent demonstrators (e.g., the Syrian government in 2011) or incarcerates and tortures movement participants.²⁵ At the highest “tier” of this framework, a regime engaged in widespread jailing or killing of activists—as is occurring now in Nicaragua—would be met, for instance, with deep and broad sanctions; removal from SWIFT, the network banks use to send information; cyberattacks to disrupt the regime’s coercive apparatus; and taking steps, with allies abroad, to apprehend and jail regime authorities should they travel. While undoubtedly difficult to implement such a framework, if followed, it would add bite to America’s diplomatic bark.

- **Work with G7 partners to identify shared democracy advancement priorities and develop plans to pool funding to address them.** The G7 offers an already established and

proven mechanism for strong democracies to collaborate. Its members command more than 50 percent of global GDP and associated government resources, diplomacy, and foreign aid for advancing democracy and combatting authoritarian aggression. This group, or an expanded version of it (e.g., the D-10), can also work with NATO to ensure its strategic concept conveys the importance of protecting and promoting democracy.

- **Leverage our strongest bilateral partnerships—with the UK, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and others—by identifying shared priorities and devising plans to advance them.** This can include supporting key regional allies to do more to advance democracy in their respective regions. The United States could, for example, help Korea—which can finance foreign assistance work but does not yet have the infrastructure to execute projects—to identify priorities, ways to fund them, and mechanisms for advancing them.

25 For the fully elaborated tiered framework, see Merriman, Quirk, and Jain, *Fostering a Fourth Democratic Wave*. For a compelling take on how to do the same when leaders violate term limits, see Jon Temin, “When Leaders Override Term Limits, Democracy Grinds to a Halt,” *Lawfare*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/when-leaders-override-term-limits-democracy-grinds-halt>.

IV. Conclusion

Strengthening democracy will never trump immediate security concerns. However, failing to strengthen governance, even over the medium term, will lead to a repeat of many security challenges, from coups across Africa leading to unpredictable partnerships to terrorists launching attacks from semi-governed spaces. This paper outlines a measured proposal for supporting democracy in the places that matter most for US interests and in a manner that maximizes return on investment.

About the author



Patrick Quirk is a nonresident senior fellow with both the Atlantic Council's Freedom and Prosperity Center and Scowcroft Strategy Initiative at the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. He also serves as Vice President for Strategy, Innovation, and Impact at the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonpartisan organization dedicated to supporting democracy worldwide.

Before joining IRI, Quirk served as a member of the US secretary of state's Policy Planning Staff as the lead advisor for fragile states, conflict and stabilization, and foreign assistance. Prior to this role, he served in the US State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) as senior advisor for policy and strategy. In this capacity, he was the chief political scientist for, and a lead author of, the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review;

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Prior to his government service, Quirk served as a nonresident fellow in the Foreign Policy program of the Brookings Institution, a research fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and a senior manager at Creative Associates International.

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