

# The Forward March of Democracy Halted?

World Politics and the Rise of Authoritarianism

By David Clark



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Vladimir Putin, President of Russia  
Xi Jinping, President of China  
Nicolas Maduro, President of Venezuela  
Ayatollah Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran  
Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe

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## About the Author

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## About The Henry Jackson Society

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The Henry Jackson Society is a think tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free – working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.



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# Executive Summary

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The great wave of global democratic change that began in the mid-1970s – doubling the number of electoral democracies in the space of three decades – has come to an end. Instead, we are now confronted with a powerful authoritarian backlash that is reversing some of those gains and encouraging a resurgence of anti-democratic ideas. Freedom House has charted a net decline in global freedom for the last eight years and other surveys confirm a clear trend towards authoritarian styles of government across most of the world.

The rise of China under one-party rule and the revival of Russian power under the authoritarian leadership of Vladimir Putin symbolise this trend and reinforce it at the practical and diplomatic levels. Military coups in Egypt and Thailand have shown that democracy's foothold among the medium-sized regional powers of the Global South is vulnerable. Across Asia and Africa in particular, progress towards multi-party democracy is being steadily reversed by incumbent elites determined to prevent genuine political competition and hold onto power by any means necessary. Even in Europe, democracy is under pressure in the face of disillusionment, populism and extremism.

The case for democracy is as strong as ever. Its growth underpins the development of a peaceful, rules-based world order in which countries seek to resolve their differences through diplomacy rather than war. The openness of democratic societies advances knowledge and prosperity by encouraging a spirit of freedom and innovation. Yet, at its strongest, the argument for democracy rests on a moral proposition; that people are sovereign and should not be forced to live under the dominion of unjust and unaccountable power. As such, it remains a universal ideal. International surveys repeatedly show a strong preference for democracy across all major cultures, giving the lie to the notion that its promotion equates to a form of imperialism.

Opening the way to a new era of democratic advance requires us to understand the nature of the modern authoritarian challenge. A handful of one-party states and absolute monarchies still exist and play an important role, but the defining character of the authoritarian backlash is to be found in the growth of regimes variously described as 'hybrid regimes', 'moderate autocracies' or even 'highly defective democracies'. While mimicking many of the procedures and institutions commonly found in genuinely democratic societies, these regimes are structured in a way that forecloses the possibility of political change from below. They cannot therefore be categorised as transition states in an intermediate stage of development. Instead, they represent a new mode of authoritarianism that has been built to last.

This new authoritarianism has been reconfigured for the era of globalisation, rising prosperity, and digital communications. It has developed new techniques of control and new justifications for monopolising power that enable autocratic leaders to resist pressure for democratic change. Four broad characteristics can be determined:

**1) Made-to-measure autocracy** – New authoritarian regimes don't aim to control every aspect of human life like the totalitarian regimes of the past. They only suppress political and civil rights to the extent necessary to maintain control at any given point. Multi-party elections and freedom of expression are often allowed, with the ruling elites relying on the abuse of public resources, bureaucratic manipulation and a biased state-owned media to deliver the result they want. If these techniques don't work, harsher forms of repression, including crude ballot-rigging and military takeovers, provide the necessary fail-safes.

**2) The role of the middle class** – The traditional assumption of modernisation theory is that economic development and the growth of an educated middle class lead inexorably to a demand for democratic change. The new authoritarianism confounds that optimistic expectation. China has already passed the level of economic development thought to be the trigger for democratic change, but surveys suggest that its rising middle class is content with the status quo. In places like Egypt and Thailand, middle class protestors have recently been in the vanguard of the new authoritarian backlash. Status anxiety and economic self-interest often tie the middle classes to autocratic regimes.

**3) Autocracy as sovereignty** – Unable to justify themselves in their own terms, authoritarian leaders have increasingly resorted to arguments based on cultural exceptionalism and anti-imperialism to rationalise their monopoly of power and brand their domestic opponents as agents of foreign influence. The Asian values debate started in the 1990 has been followed by Vladimir Putin's concept of 'sovereign democracy'. Proponents of these ideas assert the right of states to define their own forms of government without external oversight. Sovereignty is therefore conflated with the right to reject democratic standards. Yet, the sovereignty in question is not the popular sovereignty that underpins the idea of representative government in any genuine democracy; it is the prerogative of states and their leaders, allowing them to govern at will.

**4) The league of autocracies** – Authoritarian regimes increasingly offer each other a degree of mutual support in their attempts to resist democratic change. China undercuts the policies of democratic governments and international organisations in applying human rights conditionality to the provision of development aid to autocratic regimes by offering aid without strings attached. This "China effect" is matched by Russia, which has developed close bilateral ties with authoritarian regimes in countries like Syria, Iran and Venezuela. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), formed by Russia, China and the countries of Central Asia, has a strongly anti-democratic orientation. It opposes democratic change within its home regions on grounds of 'stability' and commits its member states to cooperate with each other in the suppression of dissent.

The rise of the new authoritarianism shows that democracy is not the inevitable outgrowth of modernisation and economic development. Instead, the case for it has to be made and won at a political level. Unfortunately, democracy is currently losing the global battle of ideas. Just as the War on Terror divided the democratic world and sapped its resources, the aftermath of the global financial crisis has left it looking tired and disoriented. This has been accompanied by a loss of self-confidence that has undermined the democracy's appeal. The emerging middle classes and aspirant elites of the Global South are often more likely to see the authoritarian modernisation of countries like China and Singapore as an example to follow.

In the face of this 'democratic recession', the foundations for a democratic recovery need to be built. Vladimir Putin has framed his opposition to the norms and values of democracy as a civilisational competition. The democratic world needs to accept that challenge and develop the collective means to win it decisively. It must recover its moral strength, not just its material prosperity. The guiding principle behind this approach should be democratic internationalism. The goal should be to create, within the international community, a democratic block strong and successful enough to act, once more, as a pole of attraction for emerging nations.

**Priorities for action should include the following:**

**1) A union of democracies** – Liberal democracies should see each other as their most important partners, privileging inter-democracy relations and seeking new and deeper forms of institutional co-operation. Membership of the group should bring economic and political benefits, including preferential trade access, economic support, diplomatic solidarity and collective security guarantees.

The Community of Democracies, established in 2000, should be upgraded to fulfil that role, with tighter membership rules and a real policy coordination function. It should meet regularly at heads of government and foreign minister level to agree common policies and actions.

**2) Economic cooperation** – In the spirit of the 1944 Atlantic Charter, democracies should work together not just to restore economic growth, but also to rebuild their societies around the values of fairness and social justice. The promotion of free trade should be accompanied by measures designed to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are equitably shared and contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion. Democratic countries should work together to reform the global economy in a way that sustains balanced growth and high levels of employment, especially by pressing China to contribute to the reduction of damaging global financial imbalances.

**3) Strengthening common defence** – Although democracy promotion should not be militarised, the crisis in Ukraine shows that there is a pressing need for democracies to support each other's security needs. The values of democratic internationalism should be reflected more clearly in NATO's external relations. A new category of NATO association – Democratic Partnership – should be open to any country in the world that wishes to join and satisfies rigorous democratic criteria. This would become the most privileged category of NATO partnership, offering participating nations closer co-operation on training, better equipment, new intelligence-sharing opportunities and limited security guarantees.



# Introduction

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After three decades of continuous and often spectacular growth, democracy across the world is once again in retreat. The seriousness and extent of this retreat is open to question; the direction of travel is not: it is revealed in international indices that show democracy reaching its high-water mark in 2006-08 before receding in the face of new authoritarian pressures. It is particularly visible in the failure of the Arab Spring to bring about lasting democratic change; in the pronounced authoritarian turn of countries that appeared to be democratising (like Russia, Egypt, and Thailand); and in the ease with which autocratic leaders are now able to deflect pressure to reform.

While the democratic world seems beset by economic crisis and political disillusionment, authoritarian regimes have been emboldened by the idea that history is now on their side. The rise of China and the revival of Russian power under Vladimir Putin are welcomed by some as evidence that authoritarian government provides a viable, and perhaps preferable, route to modernisation for the emerging nations of the Global South. The power elites of these countries now feel that they have a choice, and many of them are choosing to shun democracy in favour of models of governance that entrench their status and authority at the expense of their citizens.

The self-confidence and assertiveness of the authoritarian camp is reflected in a new international dynamic. During the Cold War, the West pursued a policy of containment, designed to stop the spread of communism; today, authoritarian regimes increasingly work in concert, to stop the spread of democracy. Foreign policies are aligned to blunt the democracy-promotion efforts of Western governments and provide diplomatic and economic support to vulnerable autocrats. The evidence, as of this moment, is that their strategy of ‘democracy containment’ is working.<sup>1</sup>

What the leading democracy scholar, Larry Diamond, has called the “democratic recession” is a product of wider political factors – one of which is the end of post-Cold War euphoria, which accompanied 9/11. Down with the Twin Towers came the assumption, widely shared in the 1990s, that the world was moving inexorably towards a peaceful, democratic end-state. By dividing the West and embroiling some of its leading powers in a series of costly and controversial military interventions, the aftershocks of 9/11 accelerated trends that were already paving the way for a major reordering of world power. The global financial crisis that came in its wake shattered the idea of Western economic superiority and broke the psychological link between democracy and development. As in the 1930s, this political and economic crisis of liberal democracy has provided a ramp for authoritarian ideas.

The battle in which democrats now need to engage is not one that can be fought with guns and missiles. If the War on Terror has taught us anything, it is that military force has limited utility as an instrument of democracy-promotion. It may be necessary to counter acts of aggression and grave crimes against humanity, like genocide and ethnic cleansing, but, it cannot make democracy flourish if the right political conditions are not in place locally and internationally. Democratic values are, in fact, democracy’s most important weapons because the contest with authoritarianism will ultimately be won or lost in the realm of ideas. Democracy will only gain renewed momentum when it is once again seen to provide the most compelling response to the universal human desire for security and progress. The democratic world therefore needs to work together, to overcome its political and economic malaise and become, once again, an irresistible pole of attraction.

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1. Walker, C., ‘Authoritarian regimes are changing how the world defines democracy’, *The Washington Post*, 13th June 2014, available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christopher-walker-authoritarian-regimes-are-changing-how-the-world-defines-democracy/2014/06/12/d1328c3a-f0ee-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christopher-walker-authoritarian-regimes-are-changing-how-the-world-defines-democracy/2014/06/12/d1328c3a-f0ee-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f_story.html).

The case for democracy remains as strong as ever. The ‘democratic peace’ argument has often been overstated, but, it remains the case that governments accountable to their citizens are far more likely to resolve their differences through diplomacy and international law than armed force. Similarly, while there is no statistical link between democracy and growth, there is clearly one between democracy and prosperity. Authoritarian governments can mobilise resources and people, to imitate established production techniques and compete on cost at the lower end of the value chain; what they can’t do is match the innovative potential of the most advanced economies – that requires a spirit of freedom and experimentation which is only found in genuinely open societies.

Ultimately, though, these functional arguments only get us so far. The real case for democracy is based on a belief in the dignity and equality of all humans and the conviction that no one should be forced to live under the dominion of unjust and unaccountable power. Moreover, despite the claim of some – that democracy is a Western concept unsuitable for non-Western societies – there is no evidence, in the available studies of global opinion, to support the idea of a civilisational divide. The latest data produced by the World Values Survey, for example, confirms a consistently strong preference for democracy across all major cultures.<sup>2</sup> Democracy remains a universal aspiration. The self-serving argument put about by the new authoritarians and their apologists – that its promotion equates to a form of imperialism – has to be robustly challenged. Democracy is the politics of liberation; it is authoritarianism that represents the politics of domination. There can be no moral equivalence between the two.

This paper takes the unapologetically moral case for democracy as its starting point. It begins by looking at the scale and nature of the democratic recession, using the available figures to analyse the changing composition of governance across the world over the last decade. It then goes on to examine, in more detail, the character of the new authoritarianism and the challenge it poses. Subsequent sections explore the main battlegrounds in the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism: Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Europe. Finally, some ideas and proposals designed to lay the foundations for a democratic recovery are tentatively advanced.

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2. ‘WV6 Results v 2014 04 28’, World Values Survey (2014), available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>.

# Measuring Democracy's Growth and Decline

Democracy's progress since its first major extensions, in the 19th Century, has been far from smooth. Periods of advance have been followed by periods of retrenchment and retreat, as those threatened by political freedom have acted to stem its tide and reassert control from the top; the authoritarian backlash which we are experiencing today is certainly not unique.

Writing in the early 1990s, the political scientist Samuel Huntington identified three distinct waves of democratic advance.<sup>3</sup> The first started with the extension of voting rights in the United States, in 1828, and lasted until shortly after the First World War, when the number of democracies peaked at 29. A reverse wave (starting in 1922, with Mussolini's rise to power in Italy) saw that number drop to 12, as many countries succumbed to fascism and military dictatorship in the 1930s. A second wave of democratisation began with the defeat of fascism and the onset of decolonisation after the Second World War. The number of democracies again rose, to 36, before a series of military coups during the 1960s and early 1970s reversed many of those gains.

## CHANGES IN GOVERNANCE DURING DEMOCRACY'S THREE WAVES, 1922-90

Year	Democratic States	Non-democratic States	Total States	% Democratic States
1922	29	35	64	45.3
1942	12	49	61	19.7
1962	36	75	111	32.4
1973	30	92	122	24.6
1990	59	71	130	45.4

Note: These figures exclude countries with populations of less than one million

Source: Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*

The third and most extensive wave of democratisation started with the fall of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal, in 1974, and is generally considered to have lasted until the turn of the century. It spread from Southern Europe to South America and parts of Asia, in the late 1970s and 1980s, before sweeping away the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, between 1989 and 1991, and even making significant inroads into Africa, in the 1990s. There is considerable debate about when the third wave came to an end and whether some of these later democratisations should be regarded as part of a separate, fourth wave, but, there can be little doubt that, as with earlier periods of democratic change, it has now given way to a counter-wave of authoritarian reaction. This is evident in the negative trends away from democracy in strategically important countries like Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Nigeria, Thailand and Indonesia, and is confirmed in the surveys compiled by independent analysts.

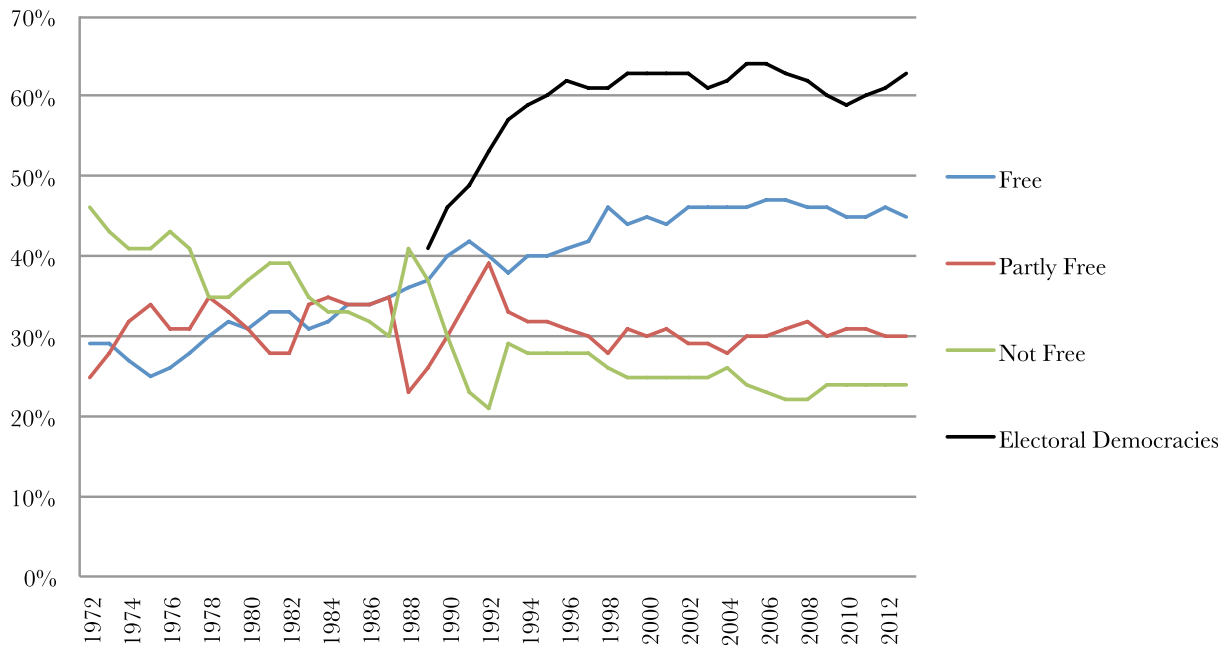
Freedom House produces probably the best-known measure of global democracy, in its annual *Freedom in the World* survey (first published in 1973). Using seven measures of civil liberties and political rights, it allocates every country in the world to one of three categories: 'free', 'partly free', or 'not free'. Chart 1 shows the percentage of countries in each of these categories since the survey began and charts the dramatic rise of democracy during the third wave – from the mid-1970s

3. Huntington, S., *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991).

to the end of the century – during which the number of ‘free’ countries nearly doubled before levelling out. The peak years are given as 2006-07, when 47% of countries were listed as ‘free’, before falling back to 45% in the most recent survey. The proportion of ‘not free’ countries rose in the same period, from 22% to 24%.

## Chart 1

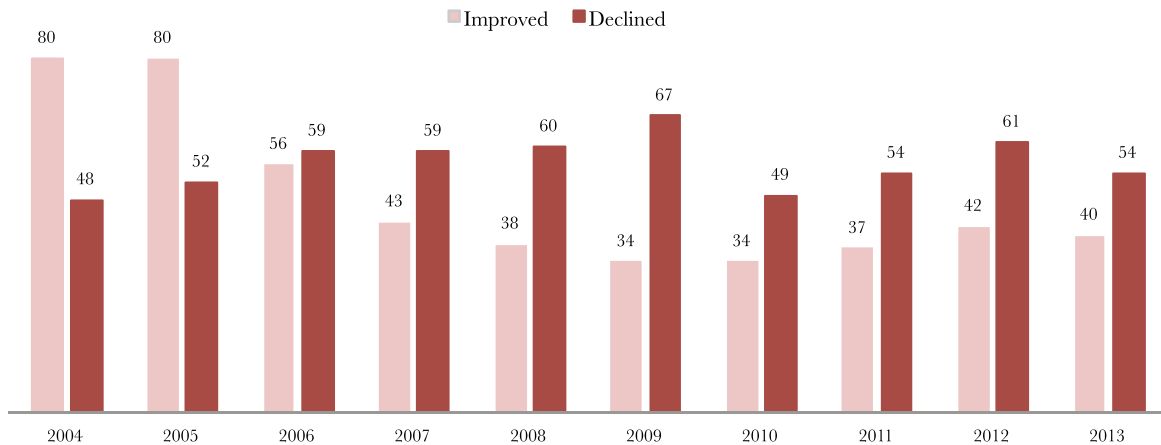
**FREEDOM HOUSE COUNTRY RANKINGS, 1972-2013**



Since 1989, Freedom House has also given an annual figure for the number of electoral democracies, as indicated by the black line on Chart 1. This seems to present a more optimistic picture, with the number of electoral democracies in 2013 rising to 63% – close to the historic high of 64% recorded in 2006. However, the threshold for inclusion in this category is relatively low, and a closer inspection of the figures shows that the rise in the number of electoral democracies has been accompanied by a marked deterioration in the overall quality of political freedom during the same period. As Chart 2 shows, the number of countries registering a decline in political rights and civil liberties has outstripped the number of countries registering an improvement, for the last eight years in row.

## Chart 2

### IMPROVEMENTS AND DECLINES IN FREEDOM, 2004-13 NUMBER OF COUNTRIES



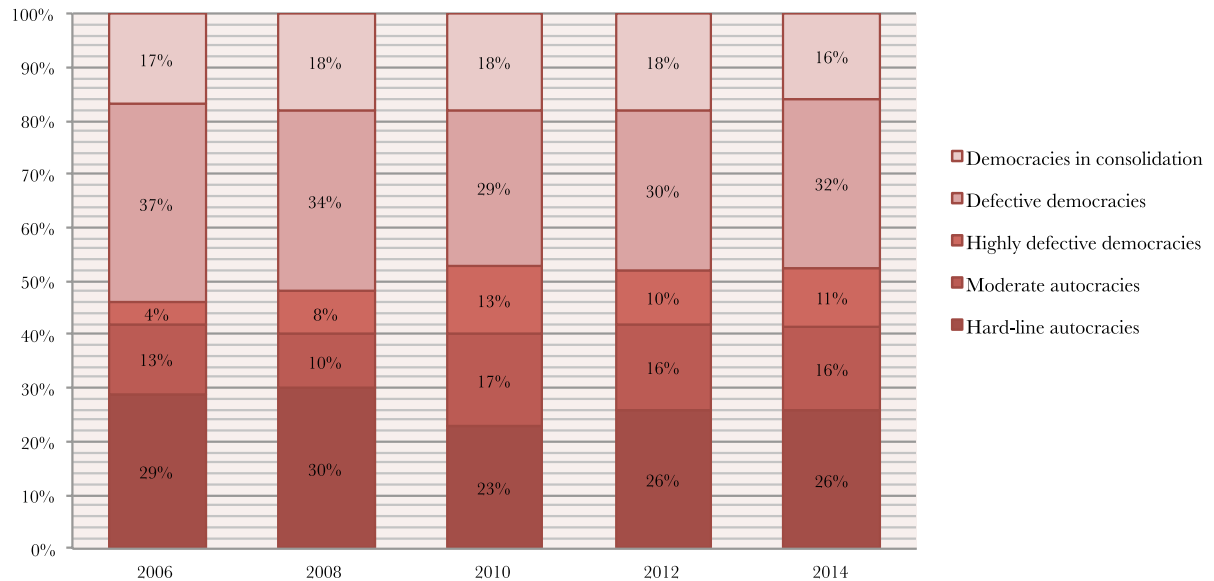
The reason behind this apparent paradox becomes clear if we look at some of the other surveys that measure global democracy. The Bertelsmann Foundation compiles a biennial Transformation Index that categorises 129 developing and transition countries according to five regime types: ‘democracies in transition’, ‘defective democracies’, ‘highly defective democracies’, ‘moderate autocracies’, and ‘hard-line autocracies’. This shows democracy cresting in 2006, when 54% of the countries surveyed were classified as either ‘democracies in consolidation’ or ‘defective democracies’; by 2014, that figure had fallen to 48%. The two categories registering increases in that period were highly ‘defective democracies’ (from 4%, to 11%) and ‘moderate autocracies’ (from 13%, to 16%). In its commentary, the Bertelsmann Foundation describes this as “trending toward the center”.<sup>4</sup> If so, it is a trend with a pronounced bias towards the lower end of the spectrum, as most of the changes are accounted for by a deterioration of democratic standards.

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4. ‘Transformation Index BTI 2014’, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2014), pp. 18-21, available at: <http://www.bti-project.org/reports/book-bti-report/>.

### Chart 3

**BERTELSMANN TRANSFORMATION INDEX, 2006-14**  
PERCENTAGE OF COUNTRIES



The Democracy Index, published annually by the Economist Intelligence Unit, produces very similar results. It surveys 167 countries and divides them into four categories: ‘full democracies’, ‘flawed democracies’, ‘hybrid regimes’, and ‘authoritarian regimes’. Again, this shows democracy reaching a peak in 2006, when 51.3% of the world’s population was living in full or flawed democracies. By 2013, that figure had shrunk to 47%, with the majority (53%) living under hybrid or authoritarian regimes. Again, the biggest area of growth was in the lower mid-range, where the number of ‘hybrid regimes’ rose from 10.5%, to 16%.

### Chart 4

**ECONOMIST INTELLIGENCE UNIT DEMOCRACY INDEX, 2006-13**  
PERCENTAGE OF WORLD POPULATION



The optimistic way to look at these figures would be to interpret them as a temporary pause in democracy’s forward march after the long exertions of the Third Wave. Certainly, many of the countries classified today as ‘partly free’, ‘highly defective democracies’ or ‘hybrid regimes’ would previously have been regarded as transition states: although struggling on the path to democracy,

they would be expected to get there eventually. Yet, the persistence of these groups and their growth over the last decade points to a different conclusion: that we are not dealing with a problem of transition, but with a new category of state that is likely to remain an enduring feature of world politics for the foreseeable future.

Outwardly, many of these states retain the main features of democratic governance, like regular, multi-party elections, a degree of media pluralism and a large measure of personal freedom. However, they do so in ways that enable incumbent leaders to maintain control, while denying meaningful opportunities for political accountability or change. Moreover, these polities are the products of conscious design rather than botched or incomplete reforms. Since their architects understand perfectly well what they are doing, it makes no sense to treat them as states in an intermediate phase of development. As Karen Dawisha has said of Putin's Russia, these are not democracies in the process of failing, but authoritarian projects in the process of succeeding.<sup>5</sup> Coming to terms with this new authoritarianism and how it works is the essential first step towards developing a successful policy response that might open the way to a new wave of democratisation in the future.

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5. Dawisha, K., *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia* (2014), p. 7.

# What's New about the New Authoritarianism?

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Authoritarian styles of government have a much longer pedigree than their democratic counterparts. They have spanned the gamut: from the empires of antiquity, to the absolute monarchies of medieval Europe, to the totalitarian regimes and military dictatorships of the 20th Century. The authoritarian idea has proved highly adaptive, especially in response to the challenge of democracy. As old justifications based on divine right have faded away, new claims based on popular notions of class, race and nation have taken their place. However, while the form of authoritarian rule has changed radically over time, the basic premise behind it has remained the same: that power belongs to those who wield it, rather than the people they govern. Authoritarian rulers are masters, not servants.

Authoritarianism still takes many forms. A handful of absolute monarchies and one-party states remain in place, as reminders of past eras of authoritarian ascendancy. However, the emerging strain of modern authoritarianism has been powerfully influenced by the political, economic and social changes that occurred during democracy's Third Wave. It has developed new techniques of control and new justifications for monopolising power that, to a greater or lesser extent, pay lip service to the demands and concerns of the people. This new authoritarianism has been reconfigured for the era of globalisation, rising prosperity, and digital communications. Four broad characteristics can be defined, covering: the techniques used to maintain political control, the social basis of regime support, the ideological justifications used to maintain authoritarian rule and the extent to which autocracies work together within the international system.

## 1. Made-to-measure autocracy

The new authoritarianism functions according to an economy of repression, in the sense that political and civil rights are limited only to the extent necessary to maintain control at any given time. Many of the regimes in question can, of course, be highly repressive when the need arises. The main difference is that, unlike the totalitarian regimes of the past, most modern authoritarian regimes don't aim to monitor and control every aspect of human life. They are not interested in trying to create a 'new man', in pursuit of some grand utopian vision; they are concerned exclusively with the task of retaining power in their own interests.

The latest edition of *Freedom in the World* explains the subtleties and paradoxes of this approach, as follows:

Central to the modern authoritarian strategy is the capture of institutions that undergird political pluralism. The goal is to dominate not only the executive and legislative branches, but also the media, the judiciary, civil society, the economy, and the security forces. While authoritarians still consider it imperative to ensure favorable electoral outcomes through a certain amount of fraud, gerrymandering, handpicking of election commissions, and other such rigging techniques, they give equal or even more importance to control of the information landscape, the marginalization of civil society critics, and effective command of the judiciary. Hence the seemingly contradictory trends in *Freedom in the World* scores over the past five years: Globally, political rights scores have actually improved slightly, while civil liberties scores have notably declined, with the most serious regression in the



categories of freedom of expression and belief, rule of law, and associational rights.<sup>6</sup>

Russia is the country that has probably gone furthest in pioneering and perfecting these authoritarian techniques. Instead of banning opposition parties and overtly censoring the media, Vladimir Putin has managed to consolidate power using more subtle and indirect methods. Regular elections still take place, but, genuine opposition parties find the bureaucratic hurdles too high. Administrative resources, including public bodies and the state budget, are used to promote the ruling party at election time, and state employees are warned that their careers will suffer if they fail to vote the right way. Critical opinions are allowed in low-circulation publications and on local radio, but, the national broadcasting network is under the control of Putin and his allies. There is an independent civil society, but, NGOs that step out of line are labelled as foreign agents and are subjected to hostile tax audits.

Another favoured, new authoritarian tactic pioneered by Putin and imitated elsewhere is hyper-legalism. This involves the subordination of the judicial system to the point where judges and prosecutors are willing to pursue politically-motivated charges against those deemed to be too much of a threat to the regime. The most high-profile use of hyper-legalism in Russia was the prosecution and imprisonment of Mikhail Khodorkovsky. It has also been used recently against dissident blogger Alexei Navalny and out-of-favour oligarch Vladimir Yevtushenkov. Elsewhere, the same tactic has often been used by authoritarian leaders to deal with deposed or defeated rivals. Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko was imprisoned for two years by the Yanukovych regime; Thaksin Shinawatra was tried *in absentia*, after being toppled by the Thai military; Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim has been sentenced to five years in prison; and ex-Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has been charged with abuse of office. In each case, there are strong indications that the prosecutions are politically motivated. These tactics are not only common in former Soviet countries, where the rule of law has traditionally been weak, but are also now found in places like Thailand, where it seemed to have taken root.

Public opinion is taken seriously by new authoritarian leaders, albeit as an object of manipulation. Putin has made extensive efforts to generate and sustain domestic consent, using a synthesis of Western public-relations techniques and Bolshevik-style ‘active measures’ – what the Eastern Europe analyst Andrew Wilson has called “virtual politics”.<sup>7</sup> Photo opportunities and stunts are used to build Putin’s image as a strong national leader; fake political parties and movements are created to confuse, divide, and draw support away from real opposition groups; teams of ‘political technologists’ pore over opinion polls and map out strategies and dirty-tricks campaigns; supposedly spontaneous, regime-friendly groups like *Nashi* are organised and funded from the centre; and cyberspace is populated with bloggers and activists willing to spread disinformation or the latest pro-Kremlin meme.

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**Putin has made extensive efforts to generate and sustain domestic consent, using a synthesis of Western public-relations techniques and Bolshevik-style ‘active measures’**

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6. ‘Freedom in the World 2014’, Freedom House (2014), available at: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Freedom in the World 2014 Booklet.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Freedom%20in%20the%20World%202014%20Booklet.pdf), p. 3.

7. Wilson, A., *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post Soviet World* (2005).

This style of governance has been called “competitive authoritarianism”, denoting systems in which the electoral contest for power is “real but unfair”.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the ultimate test of whether competition is real is the willingness of incumbent leaders to hand over power to the opposition when they lose. For all the claims of increasingly autocratic behaviour, Mikhail Saakashvili did cede power when he lost the Georgian parliamentary elections in 2012. The Ukrainian President, Leonid Kuchma, eventually did the same in 2004, handing the presidency to the opposition candidate rather than his chosen successor, after blatant ballot rigging sparked the Orange Revolution. Vladimir Putin, however, did the opposite in 2011. Mass protests against rigged Duma elections were followed by the arrest of opposition leaders and a battery of new repressive measures. In this case, the willingness of the elite to do whatever it takes to stay in power renders the idea of competition, fair or unfair, entirely meaningless.

Another example of how new authoritarians react when they try and fail to rig the system in their favour is Thailand. After the 2006 military coup overthrew the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the Army drafted a new constitution as the basis for restoring civilian rule. This included a number of measures intended to prevent pro-Thaksin forces from returning to power, such as changes to the electoral system – intended to reduce the influence of voters in the rural north – and the replacement of an elected Senate with a partly appointed chamber. Thaksin’s party won the subsequent election anyway. A year into its term of office, the party was banned and removed from power by the constitutional court. It then reformed and won the 2011 parliamentary election. Unable to stop Thaksin’s supporters from winning at the ballot box, the Armed Forces seized control again, in May 2014. In a wave of repression, the military junta has detained hundreds of activists, journalists and academics, banned political gatherings, censored the Internet and seized control of the media. The return of civilian rule, if and when it comes, is likely to be accompanied by even more restrictions intended to prevent the ‘wrong’ result.

## **2. The role of the middle class**

Modernisation theory has been extremely influential in shaping our perceptions of how democratic change comes about. By linking it to higher levels of economic development, it has fostered a number of important policy assumptions, such as the idea that free trade is more effective than human-rights conditionality in promoting the democratisation of emerging countries like China. As the economies of developing countries open up and grow, an expanding middle class with the resources and time to think beyond their own basic needs will increasingly demand political freedoms to go with their economic freedoms. In the boom years of the late 1990s, it was this logic of economic determinism that seemed to give democracy the force of historical inevitability: countries were only going to get richer and could only become more democratic as a result.

The new authoritarianism has confounded that optimistic expectation. As Joshua Kurlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations has noted, far from performing their expected function as advocates of democratic change, the rising middle classes of the Global South have, in many cases, been in the vanguard of the authoritarian backlash, supporting autocratic regimes in some countries and precipitating the overthrow of elected leaders in others.<sup>9</sup> In the case of China, for example, survey data compiled by Professor Jie Chen shows that the middle class is less likely to favour democratisation and more likely to identify with the interests of the Communist leadership than the Chinese people as a whole are. Indeed, there is evidence that the regime sees this social class as a bulwark and is keen to expand it as a result.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in Egypt and Thailand, middle-class protestors have played an instrumental role in supporting military seizures of power over the

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8. Levitsky, S. and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (2010), p. 5.

9. Kurlantzick, J., *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government* (2013).

10. Chen, J., *A Middle Class Without Democracy: Economic Growth and Prospects for Democratization in China* (2013).

last two years.

Two factors help to explain why the assumption that rising prosperity and economic development would lead automatically to greater democracy has proved to be misplaced. One is the extent to which the interests of the middle class are linked to processes of authoritarian modernisation and state-led economic development. Surveys suggest that this connection is particularly strong in East and South East Asia.<sup>11</sup> A second important factor is status anxiety. As with the debates that accompanied the extension of voting rights in the developed world, the property-owning minority's fear that the ballot box would be used, by the property-less majority, to secure policy changes at their expense has been a factor in the middle-class backlash against democracy in a number of countries. The sobering conclusion is that economics cannot be expected to do the job of politics in advancing the case for democracy.

### **3. Autocracy as sovereignty**

During the Cold War, authoritarian regimes could protect their positions by seeking the sponsorship of one or other of the superpowers, gaining financial support, military hardware and immunity from criticism in exchange for political loyalty. That option expired with the fall of the Berlin Wall, leading to a surge of democratisation in the decade that followed. With the ideological struggle between East and West a thing of the past, authoritarian regimes had nowhere left to hide; the growth of people power and an unprecedented focus on international human-rights norms meant that they faced pressure to reform from above and below. New methods of regime defence would have to be found.

Very few authoritarian regimes attempt to justify themselves, in their own terms, as instruments of elite dominance; so, increasingly, they have tried to develop new justifications for resisting or reversing democratic change rooted in claims of cultural exceptionalism. The first major attempt to do this was the concept of 'Asian values' championed in the 1990s by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and the leader of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew. Proponents of this idea claimed that the preferences of Asian societies for order, social harmony and group loyalty made notions of freedom based on individual rights inappropriate in an Asian context. The 1993 Bangkok Declaration, drawn up by Asian governments as their contribution to the World Conference on Human Rights, was strongly influenced by these ideas. While purporting to affirm support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it insisted its application must respect sovereignty, cultural difference and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. Any attempt to apply external supervision of human-rights standards was equated with a form of imperialism.<sup>12</sup>

Vladimir Putin started articulating his own version of the same argument, under the banner of 'sovereign democracy' in response to the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Developed by his chief ideologue, Vladislav Surkov, 'sovereign democracy' is a form of rhetorical defence designed to forestall a 'colour revolution' in Russia – what Surkov calls the “soft takeover via modern ‘orange technologies’ when the national immunity to outside influence is lowered”<sup>13</sup> – and to label the democratic opposition as agents of foreign influence. According to this doctrine, there is no single definition of democracy and every country should therefore be entitled to define its own version in line with its own interests and needs. Holding Russia to some externally defined democratic standard becomes, by definition, an attack on its sovereignty. Yet, the sovereignty in

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11. Chen, pp. 7-8.

12. Final declaration of the Regional Meeting for Asia of the World Conference on Human Rights, UN General Assembly, 7th April 1993, available at: [http://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/other\\_documents/section1/1993/04/final-declaration-of-the-regional-meeting-for-asia-of-the-world-conference-on-human-rights.html](http://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/other_documents/section1/1993/04/final-declaration-of-the-regional-meeting-for-asia-of-the-world-conference-on-human-rights.html).

13. 'Surkov: In His Own Words', *The Wall Street Journal*, 18th December 2006, available at: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB116646992809753610>.

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## **There are even voices in the West prepared to welcome the newfound ability of countries to resist democracy as a sign that the era of Western domination has come to an end.**

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question is not the popular sovereignty that underpins the idea of representative government in any genuine democracy; it is the prerogative of states and their leaders, giving Putin a free hand to govern at will.

The conflation of sovereignty with the right to reject democratic standards – in other words, the right to suppress popular sovereignty in the name of state sovereignty – has been adopted by other autocrats and is routinely echoed in their statements. Venezuela, for example, has passed a Law on Political Sovereignty and National Self-Determination, stigmatising and restricting NGOs with foreign contacts (similar laws applied in Russia). Putin encourages this trend because he now sees Russia as the leading force in a global battle of ideas with the West. As Russia's official foreign-policy strategy puts it: "For the first time in modern history, global competition takes place on a civilizational level, whereby various values and models of development based on the universal principles of democracy and market economy start to clash and compete against each other. Cultural and civilizational diversity of the world becomes more and more manifest."<sup>14</sup> There are even voices in the West prepared to welcome the newfound ability of countries to resist democracy as a sign that the era of Western domination has come to an end. However, the sovereignty and self-determination it brings are for those at the top, not the bottom; the only real beneficiaries are the predatory elites, who are free to enrich themselves and monopolise power in the absence of popular constraint.

### **4. The league of autocracies**

Authoritarian regimes have moved beyond rhetorical support for each other. Without their Cold War sponsors, they have increasingly looked to each other to secure a measure of practical solidarity and collective protection against internal and external forces pushing them towards democracy. The world's two leading autocracies, China and Russia, have developed extensive bilateral ties with other autocratic regimes, based on diplomatic support; increased trade, financial aid, infrastructure development, natural-resource flows and arms exports. Beijing offers economic assistance and closer political ties, without human rights conditionality, helping to create what Stefan Halper has called "the China effect".<sup>15</sup> By providing an alternative to the support offered by international organisations and Western governments, which often require recipients to make commitments on things like good governance and anti-corruption, China undercuts democracy-promotion efforts and gives weaker authoritarian regimes an 'exit' option that increases their freedom of manoeuvre.

We might also talk of a 'Russia effect'. Russia has developed extensive bilateral ties with a significant number of authoritarian-led countries. Closer energy relations with China have been pursued as a way of overcoming Russia's international isolation, as a result of its role in provoking the crisis in Ukraine. There is also close energy co-operation with Iran, both bilaterally and through

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14. 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 12th February 2013, available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D).

15. Halper, S., *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (2010), pp. 75-101.

the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, and with Venezuela, which benefits from Russian technical expertise in developing its own energy sector. Both countries are major purchasers of Russian military equipment, as is Syria. The latter provides the Russian Navy with its Mediterranean base at Tartus. These autocracies, along with several others, benefit from Russian diplomatic protection, such as the softening of sanctions against Iran and the blocking of international action against Syria. Russia has received diplomatic support in return (most recently, in the UN vote condemning its annexation of Crimea, when Venezuela, Syria and Belarus voted against, China abstained, and Iran was absent).

China's international linkages are even more extensive. Although shorn of the overtly confrontational and anti-Western language that often characterises Russia's authoritarian diplomacy, China's network of bilateral relations achieves many of the same objectives. When the World Bank revoked its financial aid to Chad in 2008, because the government spent much of it on arms instead of essential services like health and education, China stepped in with an aid package of its own. A similar thing happened in 2002, when China trumped the IMF by offering Angola loans with lower rates of interest and no anti-corruption conditionality, in exchange for oil; corruption levels in Angola soared to new highs in the years that followed. China has performed the same role closer to home, in relation to Cambodia and Burma, providing both countries with financial aid which other donors had withdrawn on human-rights grounds. The newly installed military junta in Thailand is also playing the 'China card' in an effort to deter Western criticism. The coup leader, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, has upgraded bilateral contacts and described Thailand as a "partner of China at every level". China's official Communist Party newspaper, *People's Daily*, has offered support in return, blaming Thailand's problems on multi-party democracy.<sup>16</sup> China's willingness to back authoritarian regimes isn't limited to trade and finance; Beijing provided diplomatic cover for the government of Sudan during its genocidal war in Darfur and even supplied weapons in breach of the UN arms embargo.

Authoritarian regimes increasingly act together at a multilateral, as well as bilateral, level. Historical precedents for this include the Holy Alliance, formed by the conservative powers of Europe – Russia, Prussia, and Austria – to suppress republican and democratic activity after the fall of Napoleon in 1815, and the Brezhnev doctrine, which used military force to keep satellite states loyal to Moscow during the Soviet era. A modern equivalent was the deployment of Saudi Arabian and UAE troops to Bahrain, under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council, during the mass anti-regime protests of 2011. However, the most far-reaching attempt to form a modern authoritarian international is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), formed in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

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16. Jory, P, 'China is a big winner from Thailand's coup', *East Asia Forum*, 18th June 2014, available at: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/18/china-is-a-big-winner-from-thailands-coup/>.

At first glance, most of the SCO's activities and positions fall within the framework of normal and legitimate multilateral diplomacy, but, as one observer has commented, a closer examination of its functioning shows that "the Spirit of Shanghai is strongly anti-democratic and primarily interested in regime survivability, thus reflecting the interests of its two most powerful members, as well as its other authoritarian members."<sup>17</sup> Statements and communiqués issued by the organisation give priority to stability, sovereignty, non-interference and diversity in international affairs, along with calls for a more 'democratic' world order. What this actually means is not a world in which there is more democracy, but one in which authoritarian regimes are accorded equal status and respect instead of being singled out for criticism and sanction for abusing human rights.

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) has condemned the SCO as "a vehicle for human rights violations" and has drawn attention, in particular, to its provisions on combating "terrorism, extremism and separatism".<sup>18</sup> According to the principle of 'mutual recognition', member states are obliged to recognise acts of terrorism, extremism and separatism designated as such by other member states, irrespective of their own domestic legal provisions. Given the propensity of all SCO states to indiscriminately label their domestic opponents, including peaceful and democratic ones, in such terms, these provisions amount to an agreement to work together to suppress internal dissent. FIDH reports numerous examples of individuals being extradited from one SCO state to another without respect for basic, international human-rights safeguards.

After the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the violent suppression of opposition protests in Uzbekistan in 2005, the SCO stepped up warnings about the risks of instability and extremism in the region, and the 2006 Shanghai summit agreed that: "Various forms of joint anti-terrorism military exercises within the territories of the SCO member states involving, among others, their defense authorities, will help enhance the efficiency of member states' joint anti-terrorism operations."<sup>19</sup> Since then, military exercises have been held under SCO auspices on a regular basis. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – comprised of six former Soviet countries – announced, this year, that it would cease all co-operation with NATO and seek closer ties with the SCO. A full merger of the two organisations is now under consideration. In 2005, the CSTO held military operations in Tajikistan that, according to the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, were intended to rehearse "the possible suppression of revolution" in one of its member states.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Ambrosio, T., *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (2009), p. 160.

18. 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Vehicle for Human Rights Violations', FIDH (2012), available at: [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sco\\_report.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/sco_report.pdf).

19. 'Joint Communiqué of Meeting of the Council of the Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', SCO, 15th June 2006, available at: <http://www.sctsc.org/EN123/show.asp?id=95>.

20. Ambrosio, p. 179.



# Surveying the Global Battleground

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The authoritarian surge of the last seven or eight years has been more evident in some parts of the world than others. However, there are very few regions where democracy is not currently under significant pressure. These include many of the places where democracy made its most encouraging gains during the later stages of the Third Wave. A survey of the main battlegrounds in the struggle between authoritarianism and democracy shows where the major stress points lie and some of the countries in which the outcome of this struggle is likely to be resolved over the next few years.

## Asia

Asia is, in many ways, the key strategic battleground in this debate. It accounts for 58% of the world's population and is home to both the world's largest democracy (India) and the world's largest autocracy (China). It has produced some of the boldest ideological justifications for modern authoritarianism have been formulated, from the 'guided democracy' of Sukarno's Indonesia in the 1960s to the 'Asian values' debate of the 1990s. It is also the place where strategies of authoritarian modernisation have been pioneered and have enjoyed their greatest success and influence. While some of the countries that have pursued those strategies remain resolutely authoritarian, others have become stable and committed democracies.

According to Freedom House, the Asia-Pacific region was the only part of the world to record an improvement in democratic standards over the last five years. That progress has now stalled and may even have gone into reverse in a number of important countries. Across the region there is an emerging trend towards authoritarianism that includes the imposition of new controls on freedom of speech, restrictions on the independence of civil society, reduced opportunities for electoral competition, military interference in government affairs and the denial of political rights, many of which have only recently been extended or restored.

Great hopes have been attached to the political liberalisation and moves towards civilian government that began in Burma in 2010, but, so far, they have done little more than provide a democratic veneer for continued military rule. The media environment has actually deteriorated, with journalists routinely jailed for reporting the truth – including five journalists given 10-year prison sentences summer 2014. Aung San Suu Kyi recently described the reform process as “stalled”, and there has been no progress in agreeing changes that would allow her to stand for President or on the removal of the military's veto on changes to the 2008 constitution that entrenches its power. With their talk of ‘disciplined democracy’, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that what the Burmese military leadership are pushing through is not a transition to democracy, but a transition from one kind of authoritarianism to another.

Particular concern attaches to Indonesia, a country that, in many ways, set the benchmark for democratic change in South East Asia in the years following the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998. 2014 saw the election of Joko Widodo, the first President from outside the Suharto-era elite; but, the defeated candidate, Prabowo Subianto, a former army general, has refused to accept the result and seems determined to use his control of parliament to claw back power. A law passed in September 2014 scrapped direct elections for local and provincial officials. Although vetoed by the outgoing President, it is expected to be reintroduced along with other measures intended to curtail democracy. Prabowo speaks for the old Jakarta-based elite that resents the diffusion of

power across different regions and classes and hankers for a return to the authoritarian rule that protected its status in the past. Despite a breakthrough election, Indonesian democracy still faces enormous internal challenges.

A similar dynamic has produced a much sharper democratic regression in Thailand, where the military seized power in May 2014 – the country's second coup in eight years. The first coup, in 2006, removed sitting Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose pro-poor agenda halved poverty and established universal healthcare – achievements that conservative elements of the urban middle class saw as a threat to their interests and a sign that the poor were getting 'greedy'. In what is perhaps the most visible example of how middle-class rage is undermining democracy, these elements played a key role in organising mass street protests calling for the military to take power. The military duly obliged, stepping in to remove the government led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, who was trying to continue his policies. Since Thaksin and his allies have won every election since 2001, the military and the Bangkok elite that stands behind it have concluded that they can't win at the ballot box. Although initially promising to return Thailand to civilian rule in 2015, the military junta's timetable has slipped, with fresh elections postponed until 2016 at the earliest. In the meantime a new and even more restrictive constitution is being prepared with the intention of giving the conservative elite a permanent veto of political change.

Cambodia is another country that has moved in the wrong direction. Despite a promising start after the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, which brought an end to civil war and led to UN-supervised elections, the Cambodian People's Party gradually monopolised power under Prime Minister Hun Sen. Only a nakedly rigged election and brute force kept him in power in 2013. Electoral fraud and gerrymandering also allowed Malaysia's ruling party to retain office in 2013, despite losing the popular vote. Like Vladimir Putin, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak, responded to mass demonstrations by unveiling new repressive measures. Critical journalists and opposition leaders have been charged with sedition, and the government has revived laws allowing detention without trial. Whereas a peaceful transfer of power seemed possible a few years ago, it is clear that the current Malaysian leadership intends to cling to office by any means necessary.

Democracy in South Asia remains under considerable stress. In its latest annual report, Freedom House downgraded both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, over deteriorating democratic standards. President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka is accused of using the standard, new authoritarian techniques to consolidate power: intimidating journalists, using administrative resources, harassing the opposition and subordinating the judiciary. Having abolished term limits, he is seeking a third term in the early presidential elections called for January 2015. Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina increasingly resorts to the same methods, censoring the media and imposing tight legal restrictions on the scope of political opposition. She was re-elected in January 2014, at parliamentary elections that were heavily rigged and had been boycotted by the main opposition parties. Afghanistan has similarly failed to build durable democratic institutions after more than a decade under international supervision. The outgoing President, Hamid Karzai, secured power through deeply flawed elections and turned Afghanistan into the third-most corrupt country in the world, according to Transparency International. Disputed presidential elections in 2014 eventually led to a power-sharing agreement between the two top candidates, leaving the leadership of the country to be decided by a closed process of elite bargaining rather than at the ballot box.



## **Sub-Saharan Africa**

In the era of decolonisation in the 1960s, most of Africa's newly independent states held elections to choose their own leaders. However, one-party rule quickly became the dominant style of government, with military coups and violent conflict becoming the most common paths to political change. By the 1980s, there was little expectation that the cycle could be broken. In line with modernisation theory, most people considered Africa too poor and underdeveloped for democracy to take root. In the 1990s, a string of African countries managed to defy these low expectations by turning their backs on autocratic rule. By the turn of the century, the continent was being hailed as democracy's emerging success story. The spread of political freedom appeared to be steady and sustained, with the practices of electoral democracy gradually taking root and changes of leadership taking place more often at the ballot box than at the end of a gun.

Since 2006, when almost half of the countries in Africa were ranked as democracies, there has been a significant erosion of standards and Freedom House has recorded a net decline in freedom in each year except one. Africa has continued to suffer coups and political violence, including in the Central African Republic where a government that took power in 2011, following elections credited as free, was overthrown by a military coup in March 2013. The sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians that followed has led to more than 5,000 deaths and has displaced more than 600,000 people, reducing the country to the status of a failed state. Yet, it is the erosion of democratic standards in some of the countries that seemed to be making the most encouraging progress a decade ago that is perhaps the most telling indication of democracy's current trajectory in Africa. After a period in which elections offered a meaningful route to political change, the adoption of new authoritarian methods is once again narrowing choice and entrenching incumbent power.

Kenya elected a new President and parliament in 2013, with both elections said to mark an improvement on the disputed 2007 presidential vote that sparked widespread inter-communal violence. However, the new government of President Uhuru Kenyatta has chosen to use office to restrict media freedom and infringe the independence of civil society. Official intimidation of the media and self-censorship among journalists are already said to be common, and, in December 2013, two bills were passed giving the government wide discretion to impose restrictions and fines on media outlets that step out of line. Nearly 200 NGOs were deregistered in 2013 for allegedly breaching financial rules, many of them with a track record of investigating human-rights complaints against the government.

In Uganda, the legalisation of political parties and the lifting of restrictions on political activity since 2005 have not heralded the country's transition to a genuine multi-party democracy. As in 2006, the elections that returned President Museveni to power in 2011 prevented the opposition from competing on a level playing field, due to state-media bias and the widespread use of administrative resources to support the campaign of the incumbent. In fact, the political environment is becoming more repressive. New laws have been passed restricting freedom of assembly, and opposition leaders face increased harassment and arrest. A newspaper and two associated radio stations were temporarily closed in May 2013 after reporting allegations of a plot

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**In line with modernisation theory, most people considered Africa too poor and underdeveloped for democracy to take root.**

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to assassinate officials opposed to Museveni's son succeeding him as President.

The same trend can be found in Zambia, praised for the transfer of power that followed its 2011 presidential election, but where the new government of President Michael Sata has responded to rising dissent by arresting opposition leaders, restricting NGOs, and intimidating journalists. Public-order laws have been used to ban opposition protests and meetings, including some held in private. Critical journalists have been arrested, independent websites blocked and the national broadcasting licences of two radio stations revoked after they aired opposition statements. The ruling party has used procedural devices to remove opposition MPs, winning the resulting by-elections with the help of administrative resources and altering the parliamentary balance in its favour. It is increasingly difficult to envisage a peaceful transfer of power next time.

## **The Middle East**

The Arab world has, historically, been even more resistant to democratic change than sub-Saharan Africa. Lebanon, the only Arab country with an established tradition of democracy, succumbed to civil war, sectarian division, external-military intervention and the predations of the Arab-Israeli conflict, from the mid-1970s onwards. Elsewhere, the dominant forms of government were autocratic monarchism and personal dictatorship. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which removed the region's most brutal dictator, was partly intended, by its architects, as a means of breaking the logjam and stimulating wider democratic change. The 2011 Arab Spring carried greater hopes, as a spontaneous movement for democratic change from within the Arab world itself. However, in most countries, initial gains were quickly followed by a sharp regression of standards, as authoritarian tendencies reasserted themselves.

The case of Iraq provides a cautionary tale about the limits of military intervention and narrow electoralism in promoting democracy. Since the removal of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has held several rounds of regional and national elections internationally accredited as free and fair. Yet, the result has been a form of elected autocracy rather than multi-party democracy. The government of outgoing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was accused of centralising power and excluding non-Shia political forces. Close links have developed between the country's official security forces and Shia militias affiliated to the ruling parties that have been implicated in fostering sectarian violence. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed by violence and prosecutions directed at independent journalists and by the removal of broadcasting licences from critical media outlets. Iraq is also ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world and has no meaningful judicial independence, according to Freedom House. It remains to be seen whether the new government, still led by al-Maliki's Dawa party, can improve democratic standards sufficiently to overcome Iraq's deep internal divisions.

Tunisia appears to be the only country to have achieved a lasting measure of democratic change as a result of the 2011 Arab Spring. The moderate, Islamist Ennahda party that came to power in country's first free elections accepted defeat to the secular opposition in further elections held under a new constitution in October 2014. Elsewhere, though, there has either been no change, a reversion to authoritarianism or a descent into violent conflict. The Gulf monarchies have remained in power, with negligible concessions, after quelling protests in Bahrain. Syria and Yemen are mired in violent civil conflict. Libya has held two rounds of elections since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, but the country faces a violent Islamist insurgency and the authorities are unable to reign in the armed militias fighting for control of the streets. Human-rights defenders face intimidation or murder and authorities show little tolerance of media criticism, with independent journalists subjected to detention or deportation.

In Egypt, the overthrow of the Mubarak regime was hailed as the Arab Spring's most important

victory in 2011; so, the subsequent failure of Egyptian democracy must rank as its greatest disappointment. In June 2012, the country's first free presidential elections were won by the Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi. By November, he had claimed the right to rule by decree and had put himself above judicial review, in order to railroad through a new constitution. Media outlets were subject to censorship, and journalists critical of Morsi were charged with defamation. Mass protests, against a background of declining government popularity, gave the military an excuse to step in and seize power in June 2013. The military-backed interim government proved to be even more repressive, banning the Muslim Brotherhood and other religious parties, closing down critical media outlets and violently putting down protests with the estimated loss of 1,000 lives. In June 2014, the coup leader, General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, was elected President in an election that fell below international standards. Egypt has spent three years transitioning between one form of authoritarianism and another.

## **Latin America**

In the 1970s, Latin America was synonymous with military dictatorship, with highly repressive military regimes installed in many countries – including Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Those regimes were among the first casualties of democracy's Third Wave, as freely elected civilian governments took office one by one during the 1980s. For the last quarter of a century, Latin America has become one of the most stable and democratic parts of the world. Freedom House currently ranks 24 countries in the region as 'free', 10 as 'partly free', and only one as 'not free'.

Apart from Cuba, which remains a one-party state, the country most frequently criticised for poor democratic standards is Venezuela. Under the 14-year rule of its late President, Hugo Chávez, power was gradually consolidated, as many important checks and balances on the executive were stripped away. Biased coverage of state television, the abuse of administrative resources and control of the National Electoral Commission helped to guarantee election victories for the ruling party; the intimidation and takeover of pro-opposition news outlets inhibited freedom of expression; parliament controlled judicial appointments; and individuals who signed opposition petitions found themselves blacklisted from state employment and public services. On the Russian model, critical NGOs have been subjected to official harassment and risk sanction if they host foreign guests who criticise the government.

Chávez's Vice-President, Nicolás Maduro, succeeded him, after narrowly winning flawed elections in 2013, and Venezuela remains a source of controversy and concern. On the credit side, the Chávez years featured a strong focus on social reform and poverty alleviation in a continent that urgently needs it. The rise of inequality and economic insecurity generally, across the world, is one of the most serious threats to democracy in the aftermath of the global financial crisis; something about which Western elites have been far too complacent. It is also hard to avoid the conclusion that what some voices on the right really object to about Venezuela's 'Bolivarian revolution' is the radicalism of its social policies rather than its retreat from democracy. Yet, the flip side of this has been the willingness of some on the left to give Venezuela a free pass on its use of authoritarian methods. A genuine social democracy cannot be built by trampling on political democracy; on that point there can be no compromise.

## **Europe**

The threat to democracy in Europe is most obviously represented by Russia's authoritarian turn under Vladimir Putin and his attempt to reassert influence over countries that were once within the Soviet orbit. Hopes of a liberal thaw during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev came to nothing, and Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 marked a further narrowing of

political freedom as mass protests were met with even more aggressive forms of punishment and intimidation aimed at silencing opposition politicians and civil-society movements. Belarus remains firmly within Putin's authoritarian embrace, and Ukraine looked like it was heading the same way under Viktor Yanukovich, who followed the new authoritarian template of turning the state into an instrument of personal power after he was elected President in 2010. When mass protests followed his decision to break an election pledge to sign an association agreement with the European Union, Yanukovich ordered his security forces to fire on demonstrators, killing more than a hundred. His subsequent ejection from office, on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2014, was followed by Russian military intervention: first to annex Crimea, then to create separatist areas, under Russian control, in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Through these interventions and his earlier war against Georgia, Putin's civilisational competition with the democratic world has acquired an overtly military dimension; he is prepared to meet the encroachment of democratic ideas within his sphere of influence with violence.

There has also been a perceptible deterioration in democratic standards within the European Union itself. Rising public discontent as a result of the global financial crisis and its negative impact on jobs and living standard in Europe have translated into a rise in support for populist and extremist parties. Although none of these parties have managed to gain power in an EU member state, they have contributed to a climate of intolerance and disillusionment with the political process that should be a source of concern to committed democrats. The impact of populist ideas is most worryingly evident in Hungary, where the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban has used the constitutional majority secured in 2010 to compromise judicial independence and media freedom. The government has packed a strengthened media regulator with its own supporters and has withdrawn state advertising from independent media outlets. There is also evidence that private companies have withdrawn advertising in case they lose public contracts. The government has used its majority to increase control over judicial appointments and restrict the power of the constitutional court. There are also problems to do with judicial independence, media freedom, and the rule of law in some of the other new EU member states. These issues remain unaddressed and may even be getting worse.

# Towards a Democratic Internationalism

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Democracy's problems cannot be dismissed as a few bumps along the road. The idea of political freedom faces a concerted challenge on multiple fronts and is now firmly on the defensive. Authoritarian regimes have become stronger and more confident as the economic and political crisis of liberal democracy has unfolded over the last decade. Where the political tide is shifting, it is now doing so in an authoritarian direction. It will continue to do so unless the democratic world develops new and more-effective ways of projecting its values at a global level. Any strategy for democratic revival has to start by facing up to a number of uncomfortable conclusions arising from the analysis above.

**Democracy is not inevitable.** The idea that economic development would lead inexorably to democracy has proved to be as erroneous as the old Marxist assumption that capitalism would lead inexorably to socialism. Politics is not determined by economics alone; China has already passed the \$6,000-per-capita GDP threshold regarded by some as the trigger for internal democratic change.<sup>21</sup> Yet, its emerging middle class seems more than content with the status quo, suggesting that authoritarianism can be reconciled with rapid economic and social development. At the same time, several countries which fall below that threshold have managed to build and sustain democratic institutions. Strategies based on putting economic engagement first need to be rethought. Countries like China and Russia have succeeded in using their integration into the global economy to entrench authoritarianism.

**Democracy is losing the battle of ideas.** The assumption of a virtuous link between democracy and development achieved intellectual ascendancy in the 1990s, but is now openly rejected in many parts of the world. As Joshua Kurlantzick has noted, academic studies warn that democratisation doesn't always lead to stability and prosperity in the short-term; so, raising expectations can backfire.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, many of the countries that pursued economic and political liberalisation as a package in the 1990s came to regret the experience and turned away from democracy as a result. For example, opinion polls show that many Russians associate democracy with chaos and national decline. This trend is reinforced by obvious signs of political disaffection and crisis within the democratic world itself. Whereas liberal democracy was once seen as the only serious game in town, the emerging middle classes and aspirant elites of the Global South are often more likely to see China or Singapore as the role models of the future, providing an orderly route to modernisation and prosperity.

**The old tools don't work any more.** In the later stages of the Third Wave, there was an established toolbox for democracy-promotion that achieved significant results. Western governments would attach human-rights and governance conditionality to foreign-aid programmes and would fund civil-society activities and party-to-party exchanges to build political capacity. The National Endowment for Democracy and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy were products of this era. However, the moral, political and financial leverage that allowed these tools to work effectively has weakened with the reordering of world power and the shift to a more competitive

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21. Tong, S., 'Give me liberty and give me cash!', *Reuters*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2011, available at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/macroscope/2011/06/22/give-me-liberty-and-give-me-cash/>.

22. Kurlantzick, p. 182.

international system. The ‘China effect’ means that leaders inclined towards authoritarianism can now access foreign assistance and build diplomatic relations without having to moderate or change their behaviour. The ‘Russia effect’ has emboldened many of the same leaders to use sovereignty as a rhetorical shield and ban independent NGOs and opposition political movements from receiving foreign funding and support. Authoritarian regimes haven’t enjoyed this much wiggle room since the heyday of the Cold War.

The loss of liberal democracy’s ideological ascendancy and the blunting of traditional democracy-promotion tools are closely linked. The most important factor in generating popular demand for political change and maintaining pressure on the elites of transition countries to stick to the reform path during the Third Wave was the desire to move with the grain of history: it brought access to markets, new foreign investment and membership of the most prestigious international organisations. The democratic world was a club that others wanted to be part of. Tougher policing of human-rights conditionality and better-funded civil-society programmes will have limited impact unless that ‘pull’ effect can be recreated. In other words, the democratic world needs to accept Vladimir Putin’s challenge to engage in a global battle of ideas and to develop the collective means to win it decisively.

The most compelling argument for democracy isn’t about the realisation of abstract political rights; it’s about the ability it gives people to reshape society in line with their needs and aspirations. In its periods of greatest success, democracy has been associated not only with the extension of political freedom, but also with material and social advancement. Because the priorities of government could be determined by the many, not the few, the extension of the franchise was accompanied by the provision of free education, rapid improvements in labour standards and rising social mobility. It is the severing of that link, as living standards stagnate and inequalities rise, which represents democracy’s greatest challenge; it fosters disillusionment and extremism at home and reduces democracy’s appeal abroad. More than economic recovery, the democratic world needs to focus on recovering its moral leadership.

The impetus for renewal must come from within the democratic world itself. Just as China and Russia are working with other countries to build a “World Without the West”,<sup>23</sup> through initiatives like the SCO and the BRICS group, democratic countries need to deepen their own relations and develop new forms of co-operation that allow them to build a ‘world without authoritarianism’. The guiding principle behind this approach should be democratic internationalism. Liberal democracies should see each other as their most important partners, privileging inter-democracy relations and seeking new and deeper forms of institutional co-operation. Membership of the group should bring economic and political benefits, including preferential trade access, economic support, diplomatic solidarity and collective security guarantees. The goal should be to create, within the international community, a democratic block strong and successful enough to act, once more, as a pole of attraction for emerging nations.

The democratic world has met the challenge of political renewal before, and done so in even more difficult circumstances than today. In 1941, with continental Europe firmly under Nazi control, Churchill and Roosevelt came together to formulate the Atlantic Charter, setting out a shared vision of a better world. It spoke of peaceful relations between nations, the right of all peoples to choose their own governments, economic collaboration, and “freedom from fear and want”.<sup>24</sup> The post-war economic and political institutions created in the spirit of the Atlantic

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23. Barma, N., Ely Ratner, and Steven Weber, ‘Welcome to the World Without the West’, *The National Interest*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2014, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/welcome-the-world-without-the-west-11651>.

24. ‘Forging A World Of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security In The 21st Century’, The Princeton Project (2006), available at: <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>.



Charter laid the foundations for the democratic reconstruction of Western Europe and a period of sustained economic and social progress. The same values should inform a new era of democratic internationalism and act as a spur to new kinds of institutional innovation today. Areas for priority action should include the following:

**1) A union of democracies.** The world needs universal institutions to deal with its biggest problems, like climate change, global economic reform and serious threats to international security. Yet, recognising the formal legitimacy of authoritarian regimes to negotiate on behalf of their countries should be accompanied by deeper co-operation and integration between democracies. The additional, moral legitimacy belonging to governments that represent the democratic will of their citizens should be the basis for a new alignment of global affairs. Numerous international organisations include democracy among their founding principles, but, very rarely has it been promoted as a goal in itself. Democratic internationalism needs a much stronger institutional focus. Several proposals aimed at achieving this were put forward in the 2000s, from opposite sides of the political spectrum. A Concert of Democracies was advocated by liberal Democrats like John Ikenberry, Anne-Marie Slaughter, Ivo Daalder, and James Lindsay.<sup>25</sup> A similar idea for a League of Democracies was taken up by conservative Republicans like John McCain and Robert Kagan.<sup>26</sup> These ideas failed to gain traction at the time, due to a lack of political will and the deep political divisions opened up by the Iraq War. It's time to take a fresh look.

In fact, the idea of a global democratic alliance already exists in embryonic form, through the Community of Democracies established in Warsaw in 2000. The Community has developed a permanent secretariat and has spawned a UN Democracy Caucus. However, its member countries have yet to imbue the organisation with the authority it needs to make a real impact; meetings are held at a relatively junior level and reach agreements of a mostly technical character. It's time to relaunch the initiative, with a new strategic focus. The Community should meet at heads-of-government level at least once a year, perhaps ahead of G20 summits or the UN General Assembly, to formulate common positions and provide strategic direction to the work of its members in other international organisations. Foreign Ministers should meet at least quarterly, to co-ordinate policy and agree common positions in response to the emerging international agenda. The Community should become a place where important decisions are taken and implemented. Its membership criteria and monitoring of compliance should be strengthened to reflect that fact. The emphasis initially should be on the democratic quality of participating nations instead of securing the widest participation.

A new global democratic alliance should operate according to the principle of solidarity. Authoritarian regimes currently find it too easy to play one democracy off against the other, using access to markets and raw materials to deter criticism of their human-rights standards. Russia plays the energy card aggressively, raising prices and even cutting off supplies to countries that challenge it. China uses trade access and diplomatic sanctions to a similar end. The democratic world needs to offer a collective response when one of its number is treated in this way. Support should be offered to countries subjected to politically motivated energy-supply interruptions. Authoritarian regimes that impose trade or diplomatic penalties against democracies that criticise their failure to respect international human-rights norms should expect to pay a price in return.

**2) Economic co-operation.** Those who framed the Atlantic Charter understood very well that democracy would stand or fall on the basis of its ability to provide material security and social

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25. Forging A World Of Liberty Under Law: US National Security In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2006.

26. Kagan, R., 'The case for a league of democracies', *The Financial Times*, 13th May 2008, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f62a02cc-20eb-11dd-a0c6-000077b07658.html#axzz3KAmm2gw2>.

progress. It was the depression of the 1930s that had given fascism its opportunity; that's why the Charter set as one of its goals "securing for all improved labor standards, economic advancement and social security".<sup>27</sup> The international economic framework set up at the Bretton Woods conference after the war sought to create an open world economy, but one that would also allow national governments to develop effective mechanisms of domestic welfare and social protection. The democratic world needs to pursue the same balanced approach today, as it attempts to build a durable economic recovery. Deeper economic co-operation and integration shouldn't just aim to increase trade and restore growth; it should also aim to restore the health and cohesion of democratic societies and set the kind of civilisational example that others would want to follow.

The ambition of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, to unite Europe and the United States in a single free-trade zone, is a laudable one, but should be framed in a way that supports the efforts of democratic governments to meet the aspirations of their citizens. Free trade needs to be pursued as a means to an end – social progress – not as an end in itself. It will not fulfil that goal if it is associated with rising economic insecurity and the weakening of cherished public services. The same principle applies in the developing world where, as Joshua Kurlantzick has argued, the effects of overzealous economic liberalisation under the auspices of the Washington Consensus have sometimes undermined support for democracy.<sup>28</sup> One area where democratic countries could work together to boost jobs and growth at home and abroad would be to press China to resolve the global economic imbalances caused by its accumulation of large financial surpluses. New rules are needed to limit surpluses that drain demand from the global economy and increase instability. China's access to global markets should be contingent on its willingness to frame its economic policies in a way supports global jobs and growth.

**3) Strengthening common defence.** Although it is a mistake to militarise democracy-promotion, the use of force in self-defence is sometimes unavoidable and democracies need to work together to support each other's security needs – external military support was crucial to sustaining democracy in Sierra Leone in 2000. Ukraine is currently the democracy facing the most direct military threat to its territorial integrity, in the form of Russia's ongoing assault. Other democracies should support Ukraine with the training and equipment it needs to prevent further violations of its territorial integrity and repel Russian efforts to break the country apart. The decision of many Western countries to supply only non-lethal equipment is a failure of responsibility that has encouraged Vladimir Putin to continue his aggression. The provision of military assistance sends important diplomatic signals; unfortunately, the US is currently sending the wrong signals. While it withholds vital equipment from Ukraine, it plans to proceed with the 2015 Cobra Gold joint-military exercises with the new Thai junta. All exercises with the Thai military should be cancelled until democracy is restored.

The values of democratic internationalism should also be reflected more clearly in NATO's external relations. Partnership for Peace is supposed to be based on democratic principles, but includes a number of countries with highly authoritarian governments. NATO should downgrade its relations with these countries and prioritise closer ties with other democracies, including those beyond the NATO area. A new category of association – Democratic Partnership – should be open to any country in the world that wishes to join and satisfies rigorous democratic criteria. This would become the most privileged category of NATO partnership, offering participating nations closer co-operation on training, better equipment, new intelligence-sharing opportunities and limited security guarantees (any member that came under military attack would be entitled to diplomatic and material support from the Alliance, short of a full Article 5 guarantee).

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27. Borgwardt, p. 304.

28. Kurlantzick, pp. 65-74.



# Conclusion

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Given the strength of the authoritarian backlash over the last few years, there has been remarkably little acknowledgment from democratic governments of the challenge that they face. Introspection caused by the global financial crisis and its after-effects provides only part of the explanation; the greater problem has been a lack of political imagination and will. After the risks and divisions of the Cold War, there is a reluctance to accept that democracy is once again under sustained ideological assault. Until that changes, there is a risk that the authoritarian advance will continue unchecked. The democratic world can recover its poise, as it has done in the face of previous crises; but, it requires awareness of the threat and a willingness to act collectively. As of now, both conditions remain worryingly absent.





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After three decades of almost continuous expansion, the democratic world faces a powerful authoritarian challenge that has halted and started to reverse the spread of democracy at a global level. Unlike the totalitarian regimes of the past, this new authoritarianism uses sophisticated techniques adapted to the age of globalisation and digital communications. To regain the initiative, democracies need to join forces in order to fight and win the battle of ideas. They need to overcome the disunity and introspection caused by the War on Terror and the global economic crisis, and show that democracy continues to embody the universal aspiration for a better future.

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**‘If you believe in the cause of freedom, then proclaim it,  
live it and protect it, for humanity’s future depends on it.’**

Henry M ‘Scoop’ Jackson  
(May 31, 1912 – September 1, 1983)  
US Congressman and Senator for  
Washington State from 1941 – 1983



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