

CORE VALUES & SOUND POLICIES

democracy & *security*

PRAGUE, JUNE 5-6, 2007

Background Paper for the Conference on Democracy and Security

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An analysis of the relationship between democracy and security must begin by clarifying what is meant by *democracy*. This is no simple task, as democracy is a term and a concept with a long and convoluted history. It is also a highly contested concept in our own time. The literal meaning of democracy, as indicated by its etymological origin in ancient Greek, is the power or rule of the people. In contemporary terms, this principle is usually understood in terms of the rule of the majority, as expressed through free and fair elections. But it is almost universally recognized that majoritarianism by itself does not capture the contemporary understanding of democracy. As Leszek Kolakowski asserted in the very first issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, “The principle of majority rule does not by itself constitute democracy; we know of tyrannical regimes that enjoyed the support of a majority, including Nazi Germany and the Iranian theocracy. We do not call democratic a regime in which 51 percent of the population may slaughter the remaining 49 percent with impunity.”

For a regime to be considered democratic today, it also must protect the rights of individuals and minorities—in other words, it must guarantee the freedom or liberty of its citizens. Thus, democracy so understood is often called *liberal* democracy. In promoting liberal democracy, we are also promoting freedom.

Liberal democracies may differ considerably from one another, reflecting their different cultural heritages and institutional choices. If one looks at state policy toward religion, for example, one can find wide variations just within Europe, ranging from established churches to government support for multiple confessions to strict secularism. But to have a genuine claim to be a liberal democracy, a state must provide freedom of worship to its citizens. Liberal democracies also may differ among themselves in their policies toward such sensitive issues as abortion, capital punishment, and homosexual unions. But there are certain basic and universal standards of human rights that must be met by states that claim to be liberal democracies.

The relationship between the two components of liberal democracy—human rights and majority rule—is a complex one. They can and have been separated, not only in theory but in practice. Premodern democratic city-states were not liberal

(in the sense of protecting individual rights) and did not aspire to be. Some European constitutional monarchies were relatively liberal even if not democratic. Hong Kong under British colonial rule was exceedingly liberal even though its residents had very little voice in how they were governed. Yet in today’s world, majority rule and the protection of individual rights almost always appear in tandem. One clear proof for this is found in the Freedom House survey of Freedom in the World, which is based on assessments of freedom in two areas: political rights (which largely measure how free and fair elections are) and civil liberties (which measure individual freedoms). Both are measured on a 7-point scale, and the two scores for each country track remarkably closely to one another, very rarely being separated by as many as two points and never by more than that. So while popular majorities sometimes elect illiberal candidates, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that countries that regularly hold free and fair elections tend to protect individual rights, and vice versa.

A full explanation of this link is way beyond the scope of this paper, but I believe that the link, far from being accidental, is an intrinsic one. At the level of political theory, it resides in the intimate connection between the principle of human rights and that of human equality. If all human beings are equal in the politically decisive respect—their entitlement to human rights—then there can be no legitimate basis for political rule apart from the consent of the governed. From here it is a short step to the principle of the sovereignty of the people, and a historically longer but inevitable step to majority rule.

To repeat, however, this does not preclude candidates hostile to human rights or liberal values from sometimes winning elections. To what extent do such officials have a claim to democratic legitimacy? If the elections in which they prevailed were genuinely free and fair, I believe they do enjoy the degree of legitimacy that comes with popular endorsement. But even if the results of such an election cannot be rejected by the international community in the same way as the results of a fraudulent or unfair election should be, this does not mean that every freely elected government can be considered genuinely democratic.

Our goal should be to promote both aspects of liberal democracy—individual rights and majority

rule—even as we must acknowledge that these are sometimes in tension with each other. Which of them should take priority, whether in importance or in timing? In practice, I believe that this is a somewhat artificial question. I am aware, of course, of the argument that individual rights and hence the rule of law should take precedence, with elections postponed until much later. This is an argument that Thomas Carothers challenges in a forthcoming article in the January 2007 issue of the *Journal of Democracy* entitled “How Democracies Emerge: The ‘Sequencing’ Fallacy.”

Everyone can agree that it would be nice if peoples who gain the right to elect their leaders already have a strong tradition of the rule of law and the institutions that it requires. The question is how to get to that point. If power is held by an authoritarian ruler, what incentive will he have to promote the rule of law so long as he is not accountable to the governed? Consider the case of Egypt, which has been one of the largest beneficiaries of external assistance to promote the rule of law. The question of the appropriate timing for elections is a serious and difficult one, but if we insist that the rule of law must first take hold in a country, we could be waiting for generations. Elections may not belong at the outset of a democratization process, but it is unrealistic to think that they can be pushed to the very end.

A number of critics, including Fareed Zakaria, Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, have argued that elections (especially premature ones) tend to exacerbate ethnic and other differences within a society and may provoke internal or international strife. This conceivably has been true in some instances, but we must ask whether such differences would more smoothly be resolved in the absence of elections. If one looks at a variety of “postconflict situations” over the past two decades, it is hard to argue that foregoing elections helps to bring about either the rule of law or civil or international peace. Consider Afghanistan after the fall of Najibullah in 1992 or the Congo after the fall of Mobutu in 1997, both situations where no elections were held, and where the results were calamitous.

A further difficulty lies in finding legitimacy for whoever will govern prior to the holding of elections. In past centuries, nondemocratic forms of legitimacy such as monarchy still held considerable sway in the world, making it possible

in some cases for kingdoms gradually to move toward liberal democracy. This model may still be viable in a few Arab monarchies, but in most of the world it is no longer an option. Take the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. Let us stipulate in both cases that it would have been desirable to devote much more time to strengthening the rule of law and state institutions before proceeding with elections. But who would have ruled in the meantime? A local strongman? A government essentially propped up by the occupying powers or other external forces? The international community? Surely the chances of effectively building a rule of law would be greater under external supervision, but this brings us perilously close to reviving colonialism in a new guise—something that not only is morally problematic but is clearly beyond the power (or at least the willingness) of the West to do on a global scale.

This brings us to the relationship between liberal democracy, which is a regime that governs at the level of the nation-state, and the international realm. There are two reasons why a liberal democratic state must be concerned about the character of regimes beyond its borders. First, inasmuch as liberal democracy is based on an appeal to universal principles (albeit principles that must be implemented within a particular state), a liberal democratic state cannot simply be indifferent to abuses of human rights elsewhere. Second, a liberal democracy, perhaps even more than any other kind of regime, must worry about the safety of its citizens, and liberal democracies are much less likely to be a source of serious security threats to one another.

The latter proposition, often labeled “the democratic peace” thesis, has been hotly debated among scholars, but I think the evidence is strong that democracies hardly ever make war on one another. This is especially true if the analysis focuses on liberal democracies and not simply states that have at one time held free elections. Thus liberal democracies have a long-term interest, both moral and pragmatic, in promoting the spread of liberal democracy.

Asserting that much is probably not very controversial these days. After all, most advanced democracies, as well as the world’s leading international and regional organizations, provide various forms of assistance to encourage democratic

development. (Authoritarian governments, of course, are increasingly seeking to criminalize or otherwise thwart the receipt of such assistance by NGOs in their own countries, but that is a different story.) For democratic governments, the real issue arises when democracy promotion conflicts with other security goals and interests. In my view, even those of us who favor a vigorous effort to promote democracy abroad must acknowledge that this cannot be the *primary* foreign policy goal of even the most fully liberal democratic state. Precisely because such a state derives its democratic legitimacy from the consent of its own citizens, its highest priority must be the security of those citizens and the preservation of its own liberal democratic institutions.

In many, if not most, cases, the imperatives of security and democracy promotion will point in the same direction. Yet it cannot plausibly be denied that sometimes immediate and urgent security goals must trump at least short-term democracy-promotion goals. The kinds of compromises such situations compel are well known. The classic example, of course, is the alliance of the democracies with Stalin's Russia in the war against Nazi Germany. (As Winston Churchill famously put it, he was prepared to ally with the Devil himself to defeat Hitler.) But on a lesser scale, the need to do business with unsavory and undemocratic governments comes up all too frequently, as in the need for intelligence cooperation in the struggle against terrorism.

Moreover, no liberal democratic state can pursue policies designed to promote democracy abroad without taking into account their costs in blood and treasure. When these costs are relatively low, there is a strong case for bearing them. The same may be true even when the costs are high, if they also promise to purchase strong gains in security (this is how many initially saw the war in Iraq). But it would be utterly unrealistic to expect liberal democratic states to promiscuously resort to the use of force to overturn authoritarian governments, especially when the latter are firmly established and present no urgent security threat.

For this reason, there will inevitably be double standards when it comes to military intervention in the name of democracy or human rights. The "international community" (with the liberal democracies at its core) may be willing to use

force in places like Haiti or Liberia or Afghanistan. Perhaps one day it will even bring sufficient force to bear in Darfur. But it will certainly never take similar steps to come to the aid of the Chechens or the Tibetans. Of course, when we speak of military action by the international community, we mean its use of national armies from countries that have agreed to support a particular intervention. It is the nation-state that still supplies the muscle for enforcement at the international level, and that is most unlikely to change.

Let me now turn to the first question posed for Panel A: "Can international stability be built and maintained between states, some of which are free and democratic and some of which are not?" The answer, I would say, depends upon what one means by international stability. Does it designate the extraordinarily pacific relations that have existed among the advanced democracies since World War II—establishing what has been called a "zone of peace" in the world? If so, there is every reason to doubt that this kind of stability can spread to areas where nondemocratic governments hold sway. Therefore, in our own security interests, building a world of free and democratic states should be our long-term goal. This very proposition is eloquently stated in the opening paragraph of the National Security Strategy of the United States (March 2006):

"It is the policy of the United States to seek and support democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world. In the world today, the fundamental character of regimes matters as much as the distribution of power among them. The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. This is the best way to provide enduring security for the American people."

Yet, as the very next sentence of this document recognizes, "Achieving this goal is the work of generations." In the meantime, it is essential to preserve a certain degree of civility and cooperation in our relations with most nondemocratic states. There are numerous fields in which international cooperation is indispensable—disease control, environmental protection, and combating crime, the drug trade, and terrorism, to name only a few.

Moreover, no one seriously proposes a ban on all commercial relations with states that are not free and democratic.

It is certainly true that nondemocratic states, which cannot be presumed to represent the wills of their citizens, do not have the same claim to legitimacy and hence the same moral title to international recognition as democracies do. But unless we want to be in a state of perpetual isolation from or war against all nondemocracies, we must grant a certain degree of respect and recognition to their governments. For these reasons, there is a clear need for all-inclusive international organizations such as the United Nations and its specialized agencies.

But while prudence dictates an effort to maintain generally cooperative and peaceful relations with all but the most threatening or atrocious regimes, it would be foolish to expect to enjoy the same kind of friendly relations with unfree states as with fellow liberal democracies. For liberal democracies share common values and therefore also many common interests. Since they are averse to making war on one another, they do not pose mutual security threats, and thus they tend to be natural allies. The post-Cold War survival of NATO is no doubt the best institutional expression of this fact. Despite all its faults and fault lines, NATO embodies the shared security interests of the liberal democracies. It has already expanded to embrace many of Eastern Europe's new democracies, and it would not be surprising if, in the coming years, its membership were broadened to include liberal democracies even further outside the North Atlantic region.

I will leave it to the security experts to analyze NATO's military vices and virtues, but I would emphasize that it constitutes much more than just a military alliance. Jacques Rupnik, citing an expression of Aleksander Smolar, notes that Central and East Europeans have tended to perceive NATO, even more than the EU, as a "value-infused institution." Especially now that all its members are liberal democracies (though some might quibble about Turkey's entitlement to that designation), NATO represents not only the clearest organizational embodiment of the "Free World" but also the determination of free countries to work together to defend their democracies. The Kant scholar Susan Shell has even suggested that NATO, much more than the United Nations, is

the closest approximation in today's world to the "federation of free states" that Kant envisaged in his famous essay on *Perpetual Peace*.

Let me conclude with a brief historical reflection. In a mere two centuries liberal democracy has gone from a new and rare form of government to the dominant type of regime in the world. In past eras, when liberal democracies were few and far between, they could ill afford to let their foreign policies be guided by ideological considerations. Today, however, when a majority of the world's countries and most of its major powers have some claim to be democratic, the situation is very different. Not only is it possible for these states to give the question of democracy a key role in formulating their foreign policies, but there are profoundly practical reasons for them to do so.

One effect of the ideological hegemony of democracy has been to weaken other principles of legitimacy that in the past provided the basis for relatively decent if imperfect regimes. Increasingly, the world is divided between liberal democracies (or regimes that are striving or pretending to be liberal democracies) and regimes that are tyrannical or are tending in that direction. And it is states in the latter category that are the source of the growing security threats that confront us. Though these regimes differ greatly in many other respects, their leaders seem to be drawn together more and more by their common fear and hatred of liberal democracy--think of the unholy trinity of Ahmadinejad, Chavez, and Lukashenka. It is the tyrannical regimes that support terrorism and threaten not merely to acquire but to use nuclear weapons. Any illusions that might have emerged in the 1990s that the world was entering an era of peace or that the further expansion of liberal democracy would be smooth and inevitable have now been rudely dispelled. Liberal democracy has real and powerful enemies who are bent upon its destruction. We no longer have the luxury of pretending otherwise. Once again, as was the case during the Cold War, the imperative of maintaining our security and our way of life requires that we defend and support democracy.