

THOMAS CAROTHERS

DEMOCRACY POLICY UNDER OBAMA

REVITALIZATION OR RETREAT?



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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WASHINGTON DC ■ MOSCOW ■ BEIJING ■ BEIRUT ■ BRUSSELS

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SUMMARY

UPON TAKING OFFICE in January 2009, President Barack Obama inherited a democracy promotion policy badly damaged from its prior association with the war in Iraq and with forcible regime change more generally. The Bush years had also seen a decline in America's reputation as a global symbol of democracy and human rights as well as rising fears of a broader democratic recession in the world.

The new president and his foreign policy team responded at first by stepping back from the issue, softening U.S. rhetoric on promoting freedom abroad, and taking steps to rebuild America's democratic standing. Contributing to this de-emphasis, President Obama undertook a broader effort to improve U.S. diplomatic engagement with a variety of nondemocratic governments, in Iran, Russia, and elsewhere. These initial moves triggered alarm and criticism from parts of the U.S. foreign policy community.

Starting in the second half of 2009, the pendulum swung toward greater U.S. engagement on democracy. Senior U.S. officials began to speak more regularly and forcefully on democracy and human rights. Like its predecessors, the administration was pulled into prodemocracy diplomacy as a result of democratic breakdowns or breakthroughs around the world, from Honduras and South Sudan to Belarus and Côte d'Ivoire. The Obama team also began to stake out its own approach to democracy policy, emphasizing multilateral engagement and various initiatives to bolster the broader normative and institutional framework for democracy support.

As popular uprisings spread across the Arab world in 2011, the administration faced its most important and high-profile democracy challenge. While the advance of political change in the Arab world could be a watershed moment for the region, it also threatens to jeopardize various American economic and security interests. The U.S. policy response has been correspondingly mixed, combining support for democratization where it appears to be occurring with a willingness to continue close ties with seemingly stable authoritarian governments.

The Obama team's overall engagement on democracy support is multifaceted and significant, and is rooted in a set of guiding principles that have helped revitalize the U.S. profile on the topic. At the same time, the administration downplays democracy and human rights in a number of nondemocratic countries for the sake of other interests. This inconsistency represents a familiar pattern rather than a change in U.S. policy.

The difference is that today, in response to growing multipolarity, the United States has moved away from any single, overarching foreign policy narrative rooted in the idea of remaking the world in the image of the United States. Debates about whether this new narrative is appropriate will figure in the partisan debates over foreign policy in the unfolding U.S. presidential campaign. Yet it is important to remember that most U.S. democracy engagement around the world is a matter of bipartisan agreement and to stay focused on the less visible but crucial issues that will bolster the credibility and power of U.S. democracy promotion in the future.

INTRODUCTION

UPON TAKING OFFICE, President Barack Obama faced a daunting array of inherited foreign policy headaches—a war off course in Afghanistan, a dysfunctional counterterrorism partnership with Pakistan, a still-bloody conflict in Iraq, an active threat from al-Qaeda in multiple regions, a moribund Israeli-Palestinian peace process, a collision course with Iran on its nuclear program, a broken relationship with Russia, and a belligerent, nuclear-armed North Korea. Further complicating this forbidding picture was a severe economic crisis at home and abroad, the harshest since the Great Depression.

If these troubles were not enough, a further foreign policy problem also awaited the new president—the seriously damaged state of U.S. democracy promotion. By closely associating democracy promotion with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and his war on terrorism, President George W. Bush greatly raised but at the same time tarnished the profile of this issue. In addition, his administration hurt America's standing as a global symbol of democracy and human rights through its serious legal abuses in the pursuit of the war on terrorism, especially against detainees and prisoners in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay. The negative consequences were manifold: an international backlash against democracy promotion that included extremely high levels of suspicion about the democracy agenda in the Arab world, a greatly heightened reluctance on the part of European and other international democracy supporters to be associated with

U.S. policies and programs in this area, and a marked decline in U.S. public support for democracy promotion as a priority of U.S. foreign policy.¹

The sobering state of democracy in the world further darkened this landscape for the incoming Obama administration. The momentum and sense of optimism about democ-

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racy's global fortunes that had marked the early post-Cold War years were gone by the time Obama became president. The number of democracies in the world had plateaued between 2000 and 2008, and analysts were warning of an emergent "democratic recession."² Many new democracies born in the heyday of the "Third Wave"

of democracy were struggling, able neither to turn their newly gained democratic forms into effective democratic performance nor show their citizens that this form of government could deliver them a better life. Moreover, China, Russia, and other authoritarian challengers were gaining strength and self-confidence, supporting autocrats in their neighborhoods, and holding themselves out as an alternative, nondemocratic model of development.

In this context of damaged U.S. prodemocratic credibility and grim global democratic prospects, President Obama and his senior foreign policy team perceived a clear need to recalibrate U.S. democracy policy. But how? Should they back away from the issue and concentrate their energies elsewhere? If so, should they just tone down the rhetoric and lower the U.S. profile on the issue or go farther and actually reduce the number and range of efforts on the ground aimed at supporting democracy? Or should they take a more forward-leaning approach and seek to reinvigorate U.S. democracy promotion, looking to command renewed interest in and respect for U.S. leadership in this enterprise around the world? And if so, what might reinvigoration consist of?

The administration's answers to these questions have emerged only gradually. After Obama took office and initially deemphasized democracy promotion, at least rhetorically, critics were quick to see signs of a major retreat and to object accordingly. Supporters cautioned patience and highlighted new elements and initiatives that emerged over time. In fact, elements of backing away, of continuity, and of revitalization have all appeared in Obama's policy over time, rendering black-and-white assessments elusive. And unexpected events, like the sudden eruption of political change in the Arab world, have complicated the picture even more than expected. Nevertheless, enough policy water has now passed under the bridge to allow some conclusions.

STEPPING BACK

THE OBAMA TEAM set out a changed rhetorical line on democracy support right from the start, softening the tone and modifying the message. Both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared to purposely avoid references to democracy support during their first months in power, and the rest of their foreign policy team followed suit. President Obama did not mention promoting democracy abroad in his inaugural address—a sharp contrast to President Bush’s second inaugural address, which had proclaimed a global freedom agenda for the United States. Clinton said little about democracy promotion in her confirmation hearings for the position of secretary of state. Her emphasis on “the three Ds” of U.S. international engagement—diplomacy, defense, and development—conspicuously omitted the potential fourth “D” of democracy.

When Obama and Clinton did begin to talk publicly about the issue, for example in Obama’s widely noted speech in Cairo in June 2009, they at first used somewhat more measured language and emphasized a set of cautionary messages intended to distinguish their approach from that of the Bush administration: They stressed that under their watch the United States would not seek to impose its form of government on other countries by force, not promote U.S.-style democracy but instead emphasize universal rights and principles, and not treat democracy as being just about freedom and elections. And, they promised, Washington would give attention to other elements such as the rule of law, justice, and dignity.

The Obama team applied this lowered rhetorical emphasis on democracy to the U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq. They stopped holding these countries out to the world as noble democratizing missions or glowing democratic success stories, instead focusing on the more limited goal of stability and openly acknowledging the limitations of what military endeavors had thus far achieved. When Afghanistan's elections in the summer of 2009 proved to be flawed by significant irregularities, the administration reacted with only subdued expressions of concern, accepting the necessity of working closely with President Hamid Karzai despite his serious political shortcomings. The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Christopher Hill, captured this antitriumphant line when he responded to a question in 2010 about whether Iraq could be a beacon of democracy in the Middle East. He replied, "I think if Iraq can get its own house in order, if they can sort of sort through these political issues which involve a lot of shoving and pushing between their political leaders, you know, they'll be okay. As for being some shiny city on the hill that is a beacon of freedom to others, I think maybe we'll leave that to pundits to describe."³

President Obama and his team further sought to reposition the United States on democracy policy by repairing America's own standing as a symbol of democracy. As one of his first acts in office, Obama issued orders to close the Guantánamo detention facilities, end the CIA's secret detention program, and prohibit the "enhanced" interrogation practices authorized by the Bush administration. The administration hoped that these and other reforms, such as an initiative to increase governmental transparency, would contribute to an improved U.S. global image. The Obama team also counted on the new president's popularity around the world and the compelling, prodemocratic story of his rise to power to help rebuild America's democratic standing.

The Shadow of Engagement

These initial steps took place alongside a major push by President Obama to reinvigorate U.S. global diplomatic engagement, especially with hostile or semihostile states. He made Russia a leading case of this new approach. In February 2009 the administration launched a "reset" of Russia policy aimed at moving beyond accumulated tensions over Georgia, NATO expansion, and other conflictive issues to achieve a friendlier relationship with the Russian government, in the hope that greater Russian cooperation on various security matters of mutual interest would follow. Obama also tried to break the thick ice of U.S.-Iranian relations, sending two personal letters to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that made clear his interest in opening up a direct dialogue. He sent signals of possible openness to engagement to other leaders frozen out by past U.S. administrations, including Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Cuban president Raúl Castro, and the Burmese military junta.

President Obama and his team did not intend their pursuit of diplomatic engagement as a retreat from concern over democracy and human rights shortcomings in such countries. Obama officials argued in private that the cold shoulder of the past had not produced any noticeable gains for democracy in these countries. Iranian politics, for example, had become more authoritarian rather than less so during the Bush years. If the United States were able to open a line of direct communication with such leaders, they speculated, administration officials might earn greater receptivity for tough messages on democracy and human rights and eliminate these leaders' use of a perceived U.S. threat to justify their political crackdowns. Nevertheless, the new emphasis on engagement did mean toning down overt criticisms of these regimes' political shortcomings. As a result, some observers perceived it as backpedaling on democracy.

Tension between engagement and democracy support made itself acutely felt quickly on Iran. When Iran's deeply flawed elections in June 2009 provoked large-scale protests under the banner of the Green Movement and the Iranian regime cracked down harshly, the Obama administration faced a quandary. Should it avoid pointed criticisms of the election so as not to jeopardize potential engagement with the Iranian leadership on the nuclear issue or speak out forcefully in the hope of bolstering the protesters? The administration initially leaned toward a minimalist line on democracy. When the facts shifted (greater repression and stronger criticism of the Iranian government by other Western powers) it tilted toward a tougher rhetorical line. Obama officials justified the administration's initially circumspect stance on the Iranian protests as reflecting the president's desire not to hurt the protesters' domestic image by associating the U.S. government with their cause. Yet worries over harming the chances for engagement on the broader strategic agenda clearly inhibited the Obama response.

With Russia, the administration tried to mitigate the tension between engagement and democracy through a two-track approach. Alongside the primary track of engagement on security and economic matters of mutual interest, the administration pursued a second track focused on democracy and human rights. During Obama's first visit to Russia as president in July 2009, for example, he took time away from his meetings with Russian officials to give a speech at the New Economic School on the value of democracy and to meet with a group of independent civic activists. Attention to civil society was formalized through a working group on the issue under the umbrella of the new U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission.

Core Instincts

The initial recalibration on democracy promotion was not just a reaction against the negative legacy of the Bush approach. It also embodied some deeper core instincts of the

new chief executive and his top foreign policy advisers. As evidenced in his presidential campaign and in his early trips abroad as president to the Arab world, Turkey, and Africa, President Obama clearly resonated with the inspirational power of democracy and its centrality to the American place in the world. Yet that outlook was mixed with strong pragmatic instincts—a wariness of overstatement, a disinclination to lead with ideology, and the desire to solve problems through building consensus rather than fostering confrontation. And Obama appeared to be especially disinclined to put the United States in the position of imposing itself politically on other societies, telling others what to do, or assuming that the United States has all the answers. Applied to foreign policy, this pragmatism and wariness about imposition appeared to some observers simply as realism. But

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it was less about the core realist tenet of discounting the importance of democratic ideals vis-à-vis other interests than about finding a different, more effective way to pursue those ideals—a distinction the new president and his team struggled to articulate and put into practice.⁴

Obama's initial top foreign policy advisers—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Vice President Joseph Biden, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and National Security Adviser General James Jones—were all inclined toward traditional realism, although Hillary Clinton was clearly well versed in democracy and rights issues and interested in ensuring a place for them in the foreign policy agenda. Thus, unlike in the Bush and Clinton administrations, democracy promotion had no top-level champion in the Obama team (such as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake during the Clinton years or George W. Bush himself during his administration).

Criticism

As mentioned, the Obama team did not view its early moves as a major rollback of democracy support. Rather, administration officials saw them as a change of tone and of messaging, a prelude to putting into place a more considered approach over time. They did not, for example, make large-scale cuts in U.S. democracy aid or sharply curtail engagement on human rights. Yet some observers took it as a dramatic downgrading of democracy and sounded the alarm. Many of these voices came from the conservative side

of the aisle and were part of the initial partisan skirmishing over Obama's foreign policy. Writing for Fox News in September 2009, Doug Schoen lamented that "one of the core principles of American policy [democracy promotion] that has guided presidents of both parties over the past fifty years has been largely reversed."⁵ In early 2010, the *Wall Street Journal* regretted that, in its view, Obama had "changed the focus entirely" of U.S. foreign policy away from democracy concerns.⁶

The Cassandra-like quality of some of these reactions to Obama's initial recalibration on democracy promotion reflected in part the tendency of some observers to interpret relatively minor moves as major steps. For example, a comment by Hillary Clinton to reporters before her first trip to China in February 2009 that pressing Beijing on human rights "can't interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate change crisis and the security crises" triggered paroxysms of concern among some Washington observers.⁷ In fact, however, Clinton was just acknowledging a long-standing reality of U.S. China policy. Critics also made much of Obama's decision in October 2009 not to meet with the Dalai Lama. Yet while U.S. presidential meetings with the Dalai Lama have some modest symbolic importance, they have never counted for much against the broader U.S. willingness to maintain positive ties with the Chinese government despite its Tibet policy, a willingness that has dominated U.S. China policy for decades.

A decision by the Obama administration early in 2009 to cut funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for Egyptian civil society and to provide such assistance only to officially approved nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) elicited especially vociferous criticism in some quarters.⁸ The decision was a reflection of the Obama team's unfortunate determination to prioritize friendly relations with the Mubarak regime over democracy concerns. Yet though the Bush administration had allowed some USAID funding for unregistered Egyptian NGOs, it too had maintained such friendly relations with Mubarak ever since it backed away in late 2005 from its tentative efforts to push him on democratic reform. The funding for the unregistered NGOs had constituted only a tiny part of the overall pool of USAID Egypt, which mostly went to the Egyptian military. Continuing it or dropping it was a minor footnote in the long-standing U.S. embrace of the Egyptian strongman.

Critics of the new president's approach to democracy promotion sometimes proceeded from a mythic view of Bush's approach. They quoted the lofty promise of Bush's second inaugural speech—that "all who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors"—as though it was an accurate description of Bush policy in actual practice. They then pilloried Obama for any actions that fell short of this illusory ideal. In doing so they glossed over the utterly realist nature of the bulk of Bush foreign policy—the cooperative, continually forgiving relationship with a Chinese government moving steadily backward on political liberalization; the ardent embrace of Pakistan's military dictator, Pervez Musharraf;

the effort to look into Russian president Vladimir Putin's soul, see a democrat, and try to build a friendly relationship with him; the warm ties with Saudi Arabia and the other repressive Gulf monarchies; the wide-ranging support for Arab autocrats in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and elsewhere; the diligent pursuit of useful friendships with dictators in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian countries; the cozy ties with various undemocratic African governments useful to the United States on oil and counterterrorism; and much else.

At the same time, the exaggerated nature of some critiques did not mean there were no legitimate grounds to worry about the Obama administration's early commitment to democracy support. Critics were correct in pointing out that the new foreign policy team seemed determined at times to avoid the topic altogether and appeared to be unfamiliar with the accumulated learning about the issue from past administrations. It is notable in this regard that concern came from moderate Democrats active in the traditionally bipartisan community of core supporters of U.S. democracy promotion. Fred Hiatt of the *Washington Post*, for example, argued that during Obama's first months as president, "democratic allies felt that his focus was on improving relations with authoritarian powers, while democracy activists felt there was always some priority higher than theirs."⁹ In the *New Yorker*, George Packer noted that early Obama policy on democracy led to the perception that "this Administration will devote its energy to repairing relations with foreign governments, and will not risk them for the sake of human rights."¹⁰ Behind closed doors in democracy promotion organizations in Washington, longtime activists worried that the new administration was wobbly on democracy.

STEPPING UP

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION began to engage more actively on democracy promotion starting in the second half of 2009, as one part of the larger roll-out of Obama's overall foreign policy. It was not a sharp shift away from the initial cautious line but nevertheless did constitute a stepping-up, driven by at least four factors. The first was the very slow filling of the various slots at the White House, State Department, and USAID dedicated to democracy issues (the new assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor, Michael Posner, for example, did not take up his job until almost a year after Obama's election, and the two most senior positions at USAID fully dedicated to democracy issues were not filled until more than a year and a half after the election). As these officials came on board they activated the various existing processes and mechanisms within the policy bureaucracy relating to democracy promotion and in so doing widened and developed the administration's engagement on democracy promotion generally.

Second, the increased engagement was also a response by the Obama team to the minor firestorm of criticism their initial recalibration set off in Washington policy circles. Some of Obama's advisers, especially in the White House, were surprised and somewhat wounded that what they had viewed as a needed cooling-off and rethinking of democracy support had been taken by some as, in the words of one longtime commentator on democracy issues, Joshua Muravchik, an "abandonment of democracy."¹¹

Third, as every U.S. administration of the past several decades has experienced, urgent, unexpected events in the world, both democratic breakdowns (like the 2009 coup in Honduras and the 2010 postelection crisis in Côte d'Ivoire) and breakthroughs (as for example in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011), pulled the administration into greater prodemocracy engagement.

Fourth, the disappointing results of engagement in several key countries reduced the inhibitions of many administration officials about speaking bluntly on democracy and human rights in these places.

The Role of Rhetoric

Formal policy declarations and speeches constituted one element of the Obama team's stepped-up line on democracy promotion. The administration's first National Security Strategy (issued in May 2010) incorporated several references to the goal of supporting democracy, underlining that "America's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are essential sources of our strength and influence in the world."¹² After initially avoiding the topic, both President Obama and Secretary Clinton began speaking repeatedly on democracy promotion. Obama followed up his June 2009 statements in Cairo about democracy with more on the issue in a speech in Accra the following month. At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2009 he devoted part of his address to democracy support. The next year at the same forum he went further, speaking at length about democracy and calling on other nations to stand up for human rights and open government around the world. Hillary Clinton gave a major speech on human rights at Georgetown University in December 2009. The following year she spoke forcefully on the importance of global democracy and the U.S. commitment to fostering it at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., in January, in Kraków in June, and elsewhere.

Infused from the 2008 presidential campaign with a vivid belief in Obama's rhetorical power, some of the president's advisers tended to overestimate the importance of rhetoric as a form of prodemocracy engagement (a tendency not unique to the Obama administration). The perils of mistaking speechmaking for policymaking became apparent fairly quickly. It was not long after Obama's eloquent statements about democracy in Cairo, for example, that observers both in the region and in Washington began asking pointed questions about what actual follow-up would result from the pleasing prodemocracy rhetoric. Devoid of any underlying policy plan, the Cairo speech ended up becoming more of a political punching bag of unfulfilled expectations than a forward step. Nevertheless, the spate of speeches coming from the administration did at least indicate a high-level interest in the topic and a willingness to speak out on it.

SPEAKING OUT

President Obama, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009

“But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.”

President Obama, United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY, September 23, 2009

“I admit that America has too often been selective in its promotion of democracy. But that does not weaken our commitment; it only reinforces it. There are basic principles that are universal; there are certain truths which are self-evident—and the United States of America will never waver in our efforts to stand up for the right of people everywhere to determine their own destiny.”

Secretary of State Clinton, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., December 14, 2009

“This Administration, like others before us, will promote, support, and defend democracy. We will relinquish neither the word nor the idea to those who have used it too narrowly, or to justify unwise policies. We stand for democracy not because we want other countries to be like us, but because we want all people to enjoy the consistent protection of the rights that are naturally theirs, whether they were born in Tallahassee or Tehran. Democracy has proven the best political system for making human rights a human reality over the long term.”

President Obama, United Nations General Assembly, New York, NY, September 23, 2010

“Civil society is the conscience of our communities and America will always extend our engagement abroad with citizens beyond the halls of government. And we will call out those who suppress ideas and serve as a voice for those who are voiceless. We will promote new tools of communication so people are empowered to connect with one another and, in repressive societies, to do so with security.”

President Obama, U.S. State Department, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2011

“We have the chance to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator. There must be no doubt that the United States of America welcomes change that advances self-determination and opportunity ... The United States supports a set of universal rights. And these rights include free speech, the freedom of peaceful assembly, the freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders—whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa or Tehran ... it will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy.”

Prodemocracy Diplomacy

A second element of the intensified engagement was an increased tempo of prodemocracy diplomacy, the bread-and-butter of U.S. democracy promotion, which tends to be much less in the public eye than speeches and formal policy statements but ultimately more consequential. Such actions entail the focused application of a range of tools—such as diplomatic cajoling or arm-twisting, high-level criticism or praise of foreign leaders, behind-the-scenes mediation, the application of economic carrots or sticks, and the activation of multilateral mechanisms—to try to reverse coups, halt democratic backsliding, resolve political standoffs, or bolster breakthroughs.

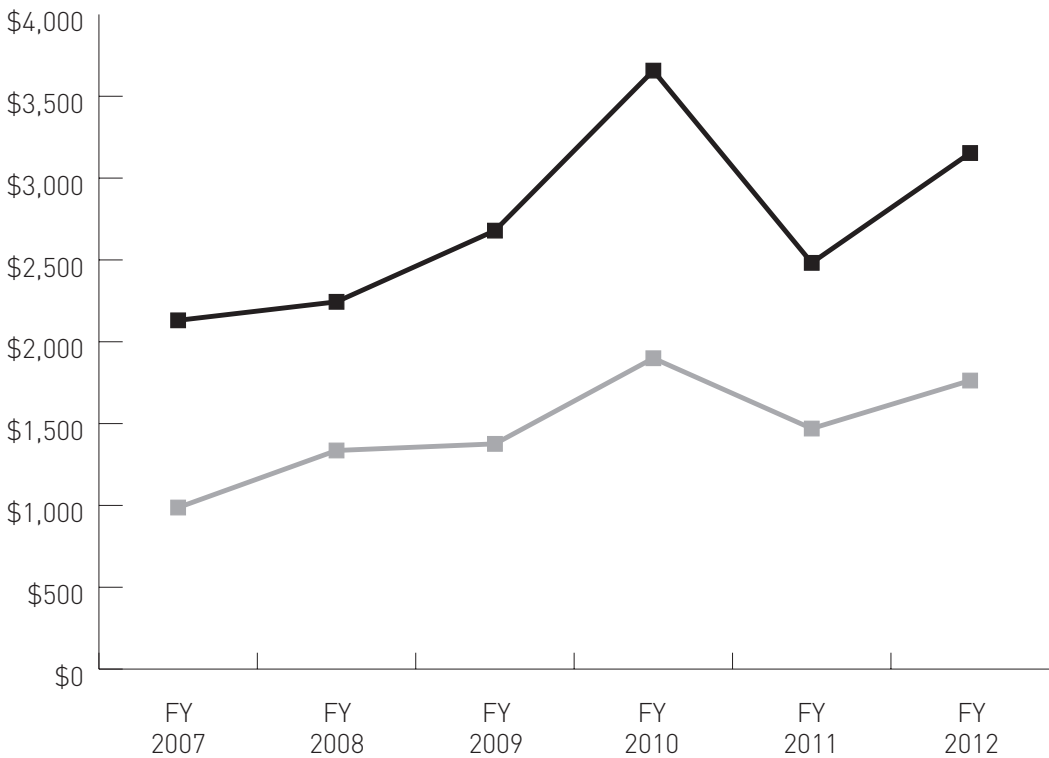
Thus, for example, after the coup in Honduras in June 2009, Secretary Clinton threw herself into an effort to find a positive diplomatic resolution. As Kenya struggled to make its power-sharing government work and to finally advance on constitutional reform, the administration lent substantial diplomatic support (including visits to Kenya by Vice President Biden and Secretary Clinton) and technical assistance to the process. Following Haiti's devastating earthquake in January 2010, the administration found itself immersed not just in a serious humanitarian relief effort but also an intensive diplomatic and assistance undertaking to help Haiti get through the national elections later that year. The administration maintained a policy of pressure against Belarus's dictatorial president, Alexander Lukashenko, and responded with new sanctions when he harshly repressed peaceful demonstrators protesting the country's rigged 2010 elections. Obama officials built on prior Bush administration efforts to help South Sudan move toward independence, providing sizable quantities of assistance and important diplomatic elbow grease for the holding of the January 2011 referendum on independence. After the flawed December 2011 Duma elections in Russia, Secretary Clinton called for a full investigation into allegations of fraud and electoral manipulation.

The political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire of late 2010 to early 2011 proved to be an especially active though relatively little noticed case of the administration's prodemocracy diplomacy. When President Laurent Gbagbo refused to relinquish power after losing a runoff election against Alassane Ouattara on November 20, 2010, the administration worked on multiple fronts to help resolve the crisis in favor of a democratic outcome—working closely with other interested external actors to step up travel restrictions and financial sanctions against Gbagbo and his inner circle, secure UN authorization for direct action to protect citizens, and support the joint UN peacekeeping and French military force that helped dislodge Gbagbo in April 2011.

The administration complemented its prodemocracy portfolio with active human rights diplomacy. Much of this has followed the line of previous administrations—such as publicly criticizing egregious human rights violations when they occur, privately expressing concerns to key foreign officials in response to rights problems, and monitoring

global practices through the annual State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. The Obama team also increased U.S. engagement on the multilateral side of human rights support, rejoining the UN Human Rights Council and working within that institution to try to give it new life. Obama’s ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, and other members of the administration’s UN team have been especially engaged players in the UN human rights domain.

U.S. GOVERNMENT SPENDING IN SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE ABROAD
 (IN \$ MILLIONS)



- Total U.S. government spending in support of democracy, human rights, and governance abroad
- U.S. government spending in support of democracy, human rights, and governance abroad (excluding Iraq and Afghanistan)

FY2007–FY2011 figures reflect final appropriations; the FY2012 figures are requested amounts.

Source: foreignassistance.gov

Beyond diplomatic engagement, the administration, like its predecessors stretching back to the 1980s, also supported democracy in dozens of countries through democracy aid programs funded by USAID, the State Department, and the National Endowment for Democracy and implemented by a wide array of U.S. and other organizations receiving those funds. U.S. democracy aid had increased fairly steadily from the mid-1980s through the end of the George W. Bush administration, with the increases during the Bush years primarily concentrated in the large assistance efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration has maintained this level of commitment, with U.S. government spending on democracy, governance, and justice abroad rising slightly from \$2.24 billion in fiscal year 2008 to \$2.48 billion in fiscal year 2011 (see chart on previous page). As part of a broader set of reforms aimed at revitalizing USAID, the largest funder of U.S. democracy programs, the Obama team upgraded the main center of democracy and governance work within USAID's organizational hierarchy.

When Engagement Stalls

The administration's stepped-up democracy promotion efforts gained some additional impetus from its lack of progress on positive diplomatic engagement with some nondemocratic states. As engagement hit walls in various places, the Obama team gave greater public attention to the political shortcomings of some potential partners. This was especially true toward Iran, where engagement proved particularly fruitless. As the Iranian

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regime continued to defy the United States and the rest of the international community over its nuclear program and increased repression at home, the administration adopted stronger rhetoric and actions in support of human rights there. President Obama's 2011 Nowruz address to the Iranian people was

significantly more critical of the Islamic Republic than his initial 2009 remarks urging engagement, saying that the regime "cares far more about preserving its own power than respecting the rights of the Iranian people."¹³ The Obama team also adopted several rounds of targeted sanctions against Iranian officials accused of human rights abuses.

Faced with continual push-back from China on politics and rights, the administration adopted a somewhat tougher line on these issues within the larger framework of its efforts to get along with the Chinese government. Secretary Clinton's January 2010 speech on

Internet freedom specifically criticized increased Chinese censorship and called for an investigation into allegations that China hacked the email accounts of human rights activists. Clinton delivered an even stronger critique in a major speech in January 2011, pointing to specific Chinese rights abuses and defending the United States' right to speak out on these issues.¹⁴ President Obama met with the Dalai Lama twice, in February 2010 and July 2011, and called publicly for China to release Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo.¹⁵

THE LONG GAME

AS THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION engaged more actively on democracy issues, some officials in positions of responsibility for this policy area began talking about the importance of also developing what they called “the long game” on democracy support. They acknowledged the importance of effective engagement in the day-to-day cut and thrust of prodemocratic diplomacy—timely responses from White House and State Department briefers to events signaling democratic backsliding, high-level diplomatic engagement at key political junctures, well-crafted signals by ambassadors to key counterparts on breaking democracy and rights issues, and so forth. But they believed that the United States could invest more in bolstering the place of democracy support in the normative and institutional frameworks that undergird international politics. Greater attention to this long-term aspect of international democracy support would, in their view, align with broader defining values of Obama’s foreign policy, such as multilateralism and consensus building. And its emphasis on indirect, quieter measures rather than high profile gestures would sit well with the heightened sensitivities in many parts of the world about democracy promotion as political interventionism.

The long game did not take shape as a formalized policy line or single package—it emerged piece by piece as a loose collection of related undertakings or initiatives, including:

- *Encouraging a greater democracy support role for rising democracies:* Recognizing the growing international weight of emerging democratic powers such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey, the Obama administration has made a point of trying to stimulate the interest and involvement of such countries in supporting democracy in their own regions and globally. In his 2010 UN General Assembly speech Obama told rising democracies “we need your voices to speak out,” reminding them that “part of the price of our own freedom is standing up for the freedom of others.” In visits to Delhi, Jakarta, Brasilia, and elsewhere Obama emphasized to his counterparts the value of engaging in international democracy support and explored areas of possible cooperation. The administration also emphasized the potential contribution of civil society organizations in these countries to international democracy support, both in directly sharing their democratic experiences abroad and in pressing their own governments to give more attention to democracy and human rights in their foreign policies. In this vein, the administration pledged \$15 million to Indonesian civil society organizations to help them share their democracy and human rights experiences abroad.¹⁶
- *Promoting international consensus on and commitment to open government:* The administration views open government as a useful entry point for engaging new international actors on democracy support because the concept encompasses central elements of democracy, including government accountability and citizen participation, while engendering fewer suspicions than explicit discussions of democracy promotion. It is also an area where rising democracies have some unique expertise, from India’s right to information law and technological innovations to Brazil’s experience with participatory budgeting. Obama announced cooperation on open government initiatives with India and Brazil during trips to those countries. Then in September 2011 he launched the multilateral Open Government Partnership (OGP). This initiative, cochaired by Brazil, asks member countries to make commitments to improve transparency and empower citizens which can then be internally and externally monitored. It also seeks to serve as a platform for civil society organizations and governments to share innovative open government tools and strategies.
- *Advancing transnational work on anticorruption:* The Obama team has worked to strengthen international norms on anticorruption, seeing this as another productive area for multilateral cooperation that contributes to fortifying underlying values of democratic governance. President Obama and Secretary Clinton have spoken frequently about the costs of corruption and the administration played a leading role in pushing the G20 to adopt an action plan to combat corruption. The United States helped set up a new peer review system

OPEN GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP

The Open Government Partnership (OGP), launched in September 2011 by eight governments and nine civil society organizations at an event hosted by U.S. president Obama and Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff, is a public-private partnership that seeks to advance accountable and transparent government.¹

The new initiative has a number of notable features, including:

- **A leading role for rising democracies and civil society organizations:** Brazil is currently cochairing the partnership with the United States. Indonesia and Mexico are slated to serve as chairs in the near future. Civil society organizations also have a seat on the Steering Committee alongside and equal to governments.
- **Entry criteria:** Countries must meet several requirements in order to join the OGP, including making their budgets public, enacting a law that guarantees the public's right to information, establishing disclosure rules for public officials, and ensuring space for citizen participation in policymaking. Governments that meet minimum eligibility requirements are then required to develop a participatory country plan with commitments to improve transparency, citizen participation, accountability, and technology and innovation. Forty-two countries are currently in the process of developing commitments in order to qualify.
- **Internal and external monitoring:** The OGP requires both a self-evaluation of member countries' progress toward their commitments and an independent assessment conducted by local experts and reviewed by an international committee.
- **Networking and information sharing:** The OGP aims to provide a platform for governments and civil society organizations to share open-government innovations and expertise on how to address specific problems.

Proponents of the OGP hope that membership in the organization will become an attractive enough incentive to spur countries to adopt reforms in order to meet the eligibility criteria and take the assessment process seriously.

¹ The current members of the Steering Committee are the governments of Indonesia, the Philippines, Norway, Mexico, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Brazil as well as the Institute for Socioeconomic Studies (INESC), Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad (IMCO), the Africa Center for Open Governance, Twaweza, the National Security Archive, the Transparency and Accountability Initiative, the Revenue Watch Institute, and the International Budget Partnership.

under the UN Convention Against Corruption and was one of the first countries to submit itself for review. The administration has also supported multilateral initiatives to help recover stolen public funds and legislation to require U.S. mining and energy corporations to report payments to foreign governments.¹⁷

- *Reforming the Community of Democracies:* To broaden the international consensus around democratic norms, the Obama administration has also supported efforts to reinvigorate an existing forum: the Community of Democracies, initially established in 2000. The State Department is trying to advance the evolution of the community from an occasional diplomatic forum to a source of effective

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multilateral democracy support. U.S. officials worked closely with Lithuania during its presidency of the community to reform the organization's governing council, set up new working groups on practical areas of activity, and establish a Democracy Partnership Challenge to pair interested transitional democracies with

the resources and expertise of more established democracies.¹⁸ The United States is cochairing with Poland a task force under the aegis of the challenge to help Moldovan democracy and has pledged \$5 million to the initiative.¹⁹

- *Engaging with civil society abroad:* The State Department's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review emphasized the need for diplomatic outreach beyond foreign governments, stating that engagement with civil society organizations abroad should become "a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy."²⁰ Secretary Clinton has delivered several major speeches on the subject and has met with gatherings of civil society groups during some of her foreign trips. She has also instructed U.S. embassies and assistant secretaries traveling abroad to engage directly with civil society organizations and pledged greater diplomatic, financial, and technical support to civil society groups.²¹ The State Department formalized this outreach in February 2011 with the launch of a Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society. This initiative includes five working groups, chaired by senior State Department officials, examining governance and accountability, democracy and human rights, women's empowerment, religion and foreign policy, and labor.²²
- *Linking democracy and development support:* President Obama and Secretary Clinton have publicly emphasized the connection between democracy and

development in the belief that democracy support will get a better hearing abroad if it is tied to the goal of a better life for poor people. The 2010 Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development, the first of its type, flagged democratic governance as one of the central elements of sustainable development outcomes.²³ In a June 2011 speech, USAID administrator Raj Shah highlighted the connection between democracy and development, contending that “without political reform, we’re not helping to develop countries; we’re delivering services, undermining our chances for long-term success.”²⁴ USAID is seeking ways to integrate democracy and governance more extensively into its assistance in socioeconomic areas such as health, agriculture, and education. In addition, the Millennium Challenge Corporation recently revised its eligibility criteria relating to civil and political liberties, creating a “hard hurdle” for democracy.²⁵ The administration has also sought to elevate the place of democracy in international development norms and lobbied successfully for inclusion of references to human rights and democracy in the outcome document of the 2011 High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea.

These various initiatives hold some promise. They represent useful attempts to engage in meaningful ways with new global actors, from rising national powers to ever more influential civil society groups. They take seriously the importance of the multilateral normative framework underlying international democracy support, a framework often neglected by Washington. They are sincere experiments in a domain that seemed a few years back to be in a state of both intellectual and practical exhaustion. The concern of some democracy promotion activists early in Obama’s tenure that such initiatives would distract from the hard daily work of prodemocracy diplomacy has not come to pass—the Obama team has shown itself capable of pursuing both the short game while trying to build a long game.

Yet it is too early to tell how significant this long game will prove to be in the years to come. The Open Government Partnership is interesting and enjoys multilateral buy-in. But the real weight of its suasive mechanisms is still unknown. The positive movement at the Community

of Democracies is encouraging, but the embedded tendency of the community toward lowest-common-denominator diplomacy has sunk prior efforts to move it beyond just being a convener of high-level talk shops. As for civil society dialogues, they generate goodwill, but will they deliver meaningful results?

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Sustainability is also a significant challenge for what so far are largely enthusiasms of some current political appointees. Institutionalizing these ideas will thus be hard given the aggravated polarization in Washington, and even more so in a period ahead likely marked by reductions in operating budgets and a tough paring of priorities. Understandably enough, these initiatives reflect key elements of the worldview of the current team, especially its emphasis on multilateralism. Yet central to embedding such initiatives in the policy bureaucracy so they last through successive administrations—as exemplified by the notable longevity of the National Endowment for Democracy—is full buy-in by senior Republicans as well as Democrats.

THE ARAB SPRING

AFTER OBAMA TOOK OFFICE, some democracy promotion proponents in Washington hoped he might make Middle East democracy a priority. With his potential appeal to many Arabs, given his personal background and his early opposition to the Iraq war, Obama seemed to have a promising base from which to try to rebuild the emphasis on Arab democracy that Bush had usefully initiated but then muddied so thoroughly. But after Obama raised the issue in his June 2009 Cairo speech, he let it slide, due to the surfeit of other preoccupations and the preference of his foreign policy team for the apparent ease and comfort of the familiar default mode of supporting Arab autocrats in return for help on various economic and security matters. When Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak stayed true to his authoritarian form by manipulating and undermining Egypt's 2010 parliamentary elections, the Obama administration made little fuss. An interagency team did meet during the autumn of 2010 to examine the prospects for political reform in the region. And Hillary Clinton made a pointed speech in Qatar in January 2011 in which she warned Arab leaders that citizens of many Middle Eastern countries had "grown tired of corrupt institutions and a stagnant political order."²⁶ Yet the default mode nevertheless remained securely in place. Thus when popular uprisings erupted throughout the region starting in Tunisia in December 2010, the administration faced a defining question on democracy support: Should it now shift gears and put democracy at the core of its policy in the Middle East?

Once the dam broke in Tunisia, political change unfolded at breakneck speed in the region. Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fell just a month after protests erupted against him. President Mubarak left the scene even more quickly, his thirty-year hold on power evaporating just eighteen days after major protests broke out in Cairo on January 25. Libya descended quickly into civil war, with anti-Qaddafi forces seizing control over a whole swath of the country almost before the world took notice of their existence.

The regional wave of political awakening was unpredicted and continually defied expectations as it spread. After Ben Ali fell, many observers predicted Egypt would stay calm. They were almost immediately proven wrong. After Mubarak was driven out, few analysts predicted Syria would experience significant upheaval. Syria was soon riven by political unrest. By March it was impossible to tell where the region as a whole was headed politically. Although optimists heralded the events as a historic democratic wave washing over the Arab world, many analysts worried that the initially promising political openings would go awry and substantial parts of the region would veer into chaos, civil war, or renewed authoritarianism.

As it scrambled to respond to these events, the Obama administration immediately confronted the profoundly mixed nature of U.S. interests in the region. In outbreaks of authoritarian collapse and incipient democratization elsewhere during the past

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several decades, a strong U.S. interest in supporting political change was evident. In Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example, the United States saw helping those countries complete their attempted democratic transitions not just as a worthy ideal but as crucial to ensuring a successful endgame to the

Cold War. The prospect of democracy transforming the Arab world was exciting for a U.S. administration grappling with an international system in which democracy had until then seemed to be at best holding steady or even losing ground. Yet many in the U.S. policy community, both inside and outside the administration, worried that the main U.S. security and economic interests in the region—including close cooperation on counterterrorism, reliable access to Gulf oil, countering Iran, and ensuring Israel’s national security—might well be harmed rather than helped by the arrival to power of popularly elected Arab governments.

Embracing Change

The result of these varied interests has been a policy of divergent parts. The administration has embraced movement away from authoritarianism where it has occurred, usually (though not always) in a cautious, incremental way. The United States had no active role in the collapse of Ben Ali's presidency in Tunisia, given both the speed of the change there and the relatively low U.S. diplomatic profile in the country. In the post-Ben Ali period, the administration has spoken out in favor of a democratic transition and funded programs to support it, including assistance for elections administration, civic education, and political party development. It praised Tunisia's October 2011 elections and pledged to work with the victorious Islamist Ennahda party.

The administration's policy toward Egypt has naturally been much more complicated given the significant U.S. interests at stake and the long history of political cooperation with the Mubarak regime. When protests broke out in January 2011, President Obama and his team initially held to the idea that Mubarak could survive the protests and preside over a reform process. On January 25, Hillary Clinton told reporters that "our assessment is that the Egyptian Government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people."²⁷ As the demonstrations intensified, however, Obama got on the side of change. On February 1, he spoke with Mubarak on the phone and afterward publicly declared that "an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now."²⁸

After Mubarak made a major speech on February 10 but failed to announce his resignation as many had expected he would, President Obama expressed frustration at the lack of change and said that "the Egyptian government must put forward a credible, concrete and unequivocal path toward genuine democracy, and they have not yet seized that opportunity."²⁹ This policy evolution by the United States was not fast enough for some in Egypt (and in the United States) who were disappointed by what they saw as a lingering U.S. attachment to the Egyptian dictator. The administration's preference for a top-down negotiated transition led by the Egyptian vice president, Omar Suleiman, as well as occasional mixed signals—such as U.S. envoy Frank Wisner's February 5 comments that Mubarak should lead any transition—fed skepticism that the United States was not serious about democratic change. At the same time, the administration's line did evolve quickly when viewed in the larger context of several previous decades of steadfast support for Mubarak. The change in the U.S. stance was fast and decisive enough to upset the Saudi leadership, which was aghast at what it saw as a hasty abandonment by the United States of a longtime ally.

In the post-Mubarak period, the administration has attempted to support a successful democratic transition, regularly urging the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to carry forward its stated commitment to oversee a transition to elected

civilian rule. The support has been fairly consistent but very much within certain bounds. The administration has largely taken the SCAF at its word and continues to voice the belief both in private and in public that Egypt’s military leaders are sincere in their commitment to oversee a democratic transition. After an outbreak of renewed protests and a violent response by Egyptian security forces in November led to the deaths of several dozen persons, the administration did sharpen its language, with the White House press secretary stating on November 25 that “the United States strongly believes that the new Egyptian government must be empowered with real authority immediately.” But the administration has not ratcheted up pressure on the SCAF in more substantive ways (such as by questioning U.S. aid to the military) in response to its frequent political foot-dragging and its clear intentions to guarantee its prerogatives in any future regime.

Soon after Mubarak’s departure the administration made \$65 million of reprogrammed assistance available to support a democratic transition.³⁰ These funds have made possible large programs carried out by the two U.S. political party institutes—the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute—to strengthen political party development and democratic civic education as well as substantial support to the Egyptian NGO sector. The administration has also tried to put together a special assistance package for Egypt, with Obama announcing in May \$1 billion in debt relief and \$1 billion in loan guarantees. The administration, however, is still negotiating with Congress over the debt relief and the loan guarantees have yet to be completed.³¹

The Obama team’s most decisive support for the unfolding wave of political change in the region came in Libya. After an initial reluctance to intervene in Libya’s sudden civil war, Obama changed tack in March when the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) as well as European allies urged a no-fly zone and it looked as though Muammar Qaddafi was poised to crush the rebel stronghold in Benghazi. Convinced that a no-fly zone was insufficient, the administration supported

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UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force to protect civilians. It played a key role in the NATO intervention which, over the course of the next seven months, contributed significantly to the eventual rebel victory. During that campaign, the U.S. military led efforts to destroy Libyan air defenses and provided the majority of surveillance and refueling support to NATO, in addition to launching nearly 400 air strikes.³² And once Qaddafi was routed, senior U.S. officials traveled to Tripoli and pledged diplomatic and technical support to the National Transitional Council in the

hope of helping it consolidate its hold on the country and put together a feasible plan for building a democratic system.

In Syria and Yemen, the administration also sought to back the forces of change, although with some hesitation in Syria and trepidation in Yemen. When demonstrations first cracked the frozen surface of Syrian politics in March, the Obama team let out mixed signals. The administration did criticize Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's repressive response. But it still clung to the idea that Assad might pave the way for peaceful change, with Clinton in March drawing a distinction between Assad and Qaddafi and noting that many people believe Assad is a reformer.³³ This reflected the view of some in the Obama team that a collapse of Assad's rule might remove a potential peace partner for Israel and lead to dangerous chaos close to both Iraq and Israel. As the demonstrations in Syria widened and Assad's response

turned into the systematic slaughter of thousands, the administration shifted toward a clearer anti-Assad stance, ratcheting up diplomatic pressure on the Syrian strongman, progressively tightening economic

sanctions, and eventually, on

August 18, explicitly calling on Assad to step down. The U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, provided outspoken support for dissidents—even traveling to the restive city of Hama against Syrian government wishes.

In Yemen, the administration watched uneasily as mass demonstrations and important political defections buffeted longtime U.S. ally President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Despite the close U.S. counterterrorism ties to the Yemeni leader, the Obama team came around to the belief that Saleh's departure was necessary for Yemen to recover at least some basic stability. Administration officials repeatedly condemned the violence in the country and began pushing in April for a peaceful transfer of power. They strongly supported a modest Gulf Cooperation Council transition proposal, which Saleh repeatedly promised to sign but backed out of at least three times before finally agreeing to in November 2011. The Yemeni leader had shown more political lives than some of his regional peers, managing to return to the country in September after having fled, badly injured, in June, and holding onto power for a few more months despite U.S. pressure for him to agree to the GCC transition proposal.

In each of these countries the administration took steps to support democracy but avoided getting out in front of the roiling wave of political change. The U.S. intervention in Libya was a partial exception, but even in that case the administration only acted after pressure

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from other international actors and a clear humanitarian crisis. This cautious response reflected several legitimate concerns: 1) an uncertainty about the value of political change for some U.S. interests in the region; 2) a desire to avoid situations where the United States would break all ties with a leader buffeted by protests but then have to get along with him if he survived in power; and 3) the instinctive belief on the part of President Obama that the United States should avoid putting itself at the center of potential political change in other countries, out of concern both over discrediting those pushing for democracy and assuming a level of responsibility for events that the United States might be unable to fulfill. Valid arguments persist over whether the administration should have acted earlier and more decisively in favor of change in these different places. Yet these arguments are about timing and emphasis rather than basic direction—the administration has supported democratic change in meaningful ways in each of these cases. Elsewhere in the region, however, the picture is less positive.

Business as Usual

When massive protests broke out in Bahrain in February 2011, President Obama and other senior U.S. officials urged the Bahraini government to open a dialogue with the protesters and refrain from using violence against them. These efforts initially appeared to bear fruit,

with the monarchy promising some concessions and late in the month calling for dialogue. As tensions reached a breaking point between the government and the surging opposition in March, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates met with King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin

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Hamad al-Khalifa in Manama and urged moderation. Yet a vicious crackdown followed, bolstered by the entry of Gulf Cooperation Council troops into the country (at the request of Bahrain) just a few days after Gates's visit. Unwilling to jeopardize its relationship with a government that hosts the U.S. Fifth Naval Fleet and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and to risk a rupture of U.S.-Saudi ties, the administration basically swallowed this stinging setback to the advance of the Arab Spring. The administration voiced some displeasure at the Bahraini government's harsh line but went no further (for example, choosing not to openly explore the option of moving U.S. naval forces elsewhere). Since then the administration has praised the halfhearted reforms taken by the Bahraini government—highlighting, for instance, the creation of a commission of inquiry into human rights

abuses—but has not visibly pushed the government to introduce major changes. Overall, it appears eager to conduct business as usual, including moving forward on a \$53 million arms sale to the government. The proposed weapons deal encountered strong opposition in Congress and appears to be on hold for the time being.

The pull of countervailing security and economic interests has been strong in the rest of the Gulf as well. The United States has maintained cordial relations with its longtime autocratic allies (and with Saudi Arabia, it has labored to smooth over the upset caused by U.S. support for change in Egypt). These governments have so far been able to stave off the regional wave of sociopolitical unrest, largely thanks to their considerable financial resources, and the administration appears happy to keep operating in the mode of cozy relations with friendly tyrants that defined U.S. policy throughout most of the region for decades before.

Even in the two Arab monarchies where the United States has potentially more political influence than the Gulf and where larger protests have erupted—Jordan and Morocco—the administration has only very mildly spoken up for reform. And as the kings in both countries have resorted to their time-tested tactics of reform gestures designed to give the appearance of commitment to democratization but falling short of change at the political core, the administration has praised their efforts as examples of enlightened leadership. When Jordan's King Abdullah II visited Washington in May 2011, for example, having done very little to respond positively to the rising pressure from the street in Jordan for political reform, he was showered with a generous aid package and fulsome words of praise from Obama, who expressed his confidence that Jordan would move forward on reforms and be “a model of a prosperous, modern, and successful Arab state” under the king's leadership.³⁴

The Balance Sheet

The Obama administration has avoided some major potential mistakes in the fast-moving, treacherous policy waters of the first year of an enormously important period of Arab political change. President Obama personally steered the administration away from the tempting path of excessive caution in Libya, courageously joining an intervention that was probably crucial to Qaddafi's demise. And then in post-Qaddafi Libya and elsewhere in the region where leaders had fallen, he and his team stayed clear of any triumphalism, striking the right note of cautious optimism and seriousness of purpose. The administration has taken an important step toward overcoming profound Arab skepticism about the sincerity of the U.S. belief in Arab democracy by talking the talk and then in the case of Tunisia walking the walk with regard to accepting the popular will of Arab societies even if it takes the form of Islamist electoral victories.

President Obama appears to have embraced the spirit of change in the region and pushed U.S. policy at least partially out of the deep groove of comfort with friendly tyrants. His speech of May 19, 2011, was an articulate expression of his intention in that regard, with its clear declaration that it will “be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy.”³⁵ Administration officials insist he is deeply committed to this agenda. Yet pulling along the entire policy bureaucracy, especially a U.S. security establishment long accustomed to extremely close military and intelligence ties to the whole series of autocratic regimes in the region, is a slow and difficult task. White House staff drafted a presidential policy directive after the President’s May 19 speech setting out a detailed framework for a new, prodemocratic U.S. posture in the region and tasking every involved U.S. agency to draw up a strategy to support it. Yet the draft languished in the interagency policy process and still was not adopted more than six months after the speech.

Moreover, well-crafted and well-delivered though it was, Obama’s address attracted little attention either in the region or at home. To the extent that Arabs tuned in, they focused on the last part of the speech, which dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and

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they did not hear anything that changed their broadly negative perception of Obama’s line on that issue. The speech had no real list of policy deliverables, either in terms of clear diplomatic lines in the sand (on Syria for example) or substantial economic measures to support those transitions that were already under way. And the aid measures that Obama announced, such as the investment credit and

debt relief for Egypt, were notable mostly for their modesty compared to both the hopes of many Egyptians and Tunisians and the aid pledge Saudi Arabia had already made. They also looked paltry compared to the U.S. aid response to the postcommunist countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, the manifest inconsistencies of U.S. policy on the ground—especially the limp U.S. reaction to the crackdown in Bahrain, which was still fresh on people’s minds at the time—undercut the attractive words at the podium. Hillary Clinton was notably frank when she explained in a November 2011 speech on the Arab Spring that given U.S. concerns about terrorism, energy, and regional security, “there will be times when not all

of our interests align. We work to align them, but that is just reality.”³⁶ Yet this was the same basic argument that U.S. officials offered again and again in the years prior to the Arab uprisings to justify the U.S. attachment to its dictatorial friends.

Overall, since the start of 2011, it has been hard to escape the impression of a policy apparatus frequently behind the curve of events, soft on old, backward-leaning friends in the region, and unable to connect well to the new currents of political thinking and action among young Arabs. With more than half the Arab world still locked in authoritarianism a year after the onset of popular upheaval across the region, the administration has yet to make clear whether it is seriously interested once and for all in moving beyond that old paradigm, or whether it intends to keep pursuing the line that has defined its response so far: a divided policy marked by sincere but reactive support for Arab political progress when it does occur but no real proactive support for democracy where dictatorship persists.

PARTIAL REVITALIZATION

STEPPING BACK from a focus on any one region or thematic area of emphasis, one can see that by the end of 2011, the main elements of democracy policy under Obama had become fairly clear:

- Regular public statements by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton highlighting democracy issues.
- Multifaceted efforts to work against democratic breakdowns or backsliding and to support democratic breakthroughs or ongoing democratic transitions in many countries using diplomatic engagement or pressure, economic carrots and sticks, the activation of multilateral mechanisms, and other methods.
- The continuation of assistance to nearly 100 countries to support the building blocks of democracy including civil society development, democratic governance, free and fair elections, political party strengthening, media development, the rule of law, civic education, and human rights activism.
- A set of long-term initiatives to bolster international norms and institutions supportive of democracy and human rights.

These various efforts operate from an informal set of guiding principles that seek to position the United States as a positive, cooperative, and respected international actor on democracy issues:

- Emphasizing the universalism of democracy and human rights norms.
- Associating democracy with other less politically sensitive public goods like development, justice, transparency, and effective governance to broaden its appeal.
- Looking for multilateral approaches and demonstrating a willingness to play a supporting role and let other actors take the lead in some high-visibility efforts to advance democracy.
- Avoiding putting the United States out in front of local prodemocratic actors in contexts where they may suffer from a close association with the United States.

The Obama approach does represent at least a partial revitalization of U.S. democracy policy from its troubled state at the end of the Bush years. Obama has succeeded in greatly diminishing the damaging association of democracy promotion with the Iraq war and with unilateral, forcible regime change generally while still pursuing active prodemocracy diplomacy in many places. The U.S. participation in the 2011 Libya intervention did not rekindle that association. The fact that the intervention operated under a UN Security Council resolution, came in response to an Arab League call for outside intervention, and did not involve U.S. ground troops helped avoid inflaming old wounds.

Today, fewer people in the Middle East or other parts of the Muslim world devote time to denouncing the evils of U.S. democracy promotion than earlier in the decade. Many Arabs are certainly still furious about U.S. policy in the region and Obama's popularity there is very low. But the issue of U.S. democracy promotion is no longer the focal point of concern—Washington's policy vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is once again paramount. In fact, in the new context of Arab political change, some Arabs are frustrated with Obama for not being more assertive on democracy support.

In parallel fashion, the earlier hostility in European policy circles toward U.S. democracy promotion has faded considerably, though some European observers still cling to the notion that the U.S. approach is much more interventionist than European efforts. European foreign ministries and aid agencies engaged in democracy support no longer steer clear of any association with U.S. initiatives and now often seek partnerships with U.S. actors. Within the broader U.S. foreign policy community, democracy promotion no longer stirs up the controversy it did during the Bush years and is not taken as a code word for military intervention.

At the same time, the extremely hostile view of democracy promotion that emerged in Russia, China, and some other nondemocratic places after the Iraq war and the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine persists. Many officials in these countries are still gripped by the fear that all outbreaks of large-scale political protest in the world are the work of a sinister U.S. hand artfully cloaked in the garb of civil society assistance or political party support.

The earlier trend in many countries toward highly restrictive laws governing external funding for civil society and other related efforts to block democracy assistance continue. Although the backlash against

democracy promotion in many nondemocracies arose

in response to specific events and a certain geopolitical context in the middle years of the last decade, it has grown roots that reach well below the surface of any specific U.S. or other Western policy changes.

The fractious governance that has wracked U.S. political life in the past few years has dealt a blow to the appeal of American democracy to others.

Another key element of Obama's attempted revitalization of U.S. democracy support—the restoration of America's standing as a symbol of democracy and human rights in the world—has encountered choppier waters. The administration has taken some corrective actions with regard to U.S. respect for law and rights in its counterterrorism policies, and Obama enjoys a better reputation generally in the world on human rights than did Bush. But the president has not accomplished his signature goal of closing Guantánamo. In addition, bowing to congressional pressure, the administration reversed its earlier decision to hold civilian trials in New York for detainees accused of planning the September 11 attacks.³⁷ The administration has also been criticized by human rights advocates for failing to hold any current or former U.S. officials accountable for past abuses and instead adopting many of the Bush administration's legal positions in order to block lawsuits by former detainees seeking redress for illegal detention, rendition, and torture.³⁸

The gains achieved by the modest improvements in U.S. human rights policy at home have been overshadowed by other negative developments during Obama's presidency. The fractious governance that has wracked U.S. political life in the past few years has dealt a blow to the appeal of American democracy to others. The titanic efforts that the administration put into trying to enact health care reform astonished many foreign observers both because of the amount of time and energy required for the U.S. system to attempt a major reform and the deep sociopolitical divisions the effort highlighted. Even more importantly, the semiparalysis of governance that has prevailed since the Republicans gained a majority in the House of Representatives in 2010—most floridly

on display during the battle in the summer of 2011 over raising the debt ceiling—is causing many people at home and abroad to ask whether U.S. democracy is capable of dealing effectively with the multiple serious challenges facing the country. In this context, it becomes all the more difficult for Americans to try to tell the Chinese, Russians, or anyone else that the United States has the basic political answers about how to run a country effectively. How much of the blame for the current dismal state of the functioning of U.S. democracy should be apportioned to President Obama as opposed to various other actors or structural features of the U.S. political system is of course a matter of considerable and basically unresolvable debate. But the crippling effects of this parlous state on his attempted revitalization of America's standing as an effective global symbol of democracy are unquestionable.

RETREAT OR READJUSTMENT?

TAKEN TOGETHER, the various elements of the Obama approach constitute an important engagement on democracy promotion. Yet in the larger perspective of Obama's overall foreign policy, they represent only a secondary emphasis alongside the central areas of concern that have taken up most of the administration's time and energy: pursuing counterterrorism, including through the war in Afghanistan, the related conflict in Pakistan, and the larger struggle to combat al-Qaeda on multiple continents; ending the war in Iraq; managing relations with a rapidly rising China; resetting relations with a recalcitrant Russia; trying to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions; attempting to facilitate a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and last but by no means least, trying to avoid further international economic instability and crisis.

Democracy support figures in some of these endeavors, such as the aid to support pluralistic political development as part of the exit strategy in Iraq and the effort to maintain a viable human rights track in the relationship with Russia. On the whole, however, democracy support is not a major element of any of the main areas of attention and effort in Obama's foreign policy despite his rhetorical affirmation at the United Nations of an overarching commitment that "America will never waver in our efforts to stand up for the right of people everywhere to determine their own destiny."³⁹ A possible exception is the new prominence of democracy concerns in U.S. policy toward the Arab world, as a result of the tide of political change there. But as discussed above, democracy

support so far appears to figure prominently in U.S. relations only with a minority of Arab countries.

The real weight of the administration's broadly stated commitment to democracy and human rights is also undercut by its pursuit of friendly ties with many nondemocratic governments for the sake of countervailing economic and security interests. This includes the familiar, long-standing cases of useful friendships with the autocratic governments in the Persian Gulf and the basically cordial relationship with the Chinese government despite its relentless domestic repression. But it also includes other countries less in the limelight. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Obama administration maintains friendly or at least mutually productive relations with undemocratic governments in

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Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan (where the government was autocratic until the ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 brought a partial return to democracy) for the sake of various benefits, especially logistical cooperation relating to the war in Afghanistan and access to oil and gas. In sub-

Saharan Africa, growing U.S. concern about Islamic extremists in Somalia and elsewhere, along with the growing number of oil discoveries, have prompted the administration to largely put aside democracy and human rights concerns for the sake of good relations with governments in Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda.

Does this larger reality of Obama's foreign policy—democracy being only a secondary emphasis overall and downplayed in many places for the sake of other interests—represent a retreat relative to U.S. democracy policy of the last several decades? Answering this question requires stepping very carefully through the confusing thicket of rhetoric and reality that perennially surrounds U.S. democracy promotion. Certainly the Obama line represents a change in tone. A succession of previous U.S. presidents wove democracy promotion into the three central narratives of U.S. foreign policies of the last several decades: 1) in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan framed the final phase of America's long struggle against Soviet communism as a campaign to advance democracy in the world; 2) in the 1990s, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton made the expansion of democracy's global frontiers a defining element of America's post-Cold War international engagement; and 3) in the first decade of this century, George W. Bush tied his war on terrorism to a declared global "Freedom Agenda."

COUNTERVAILING INTERESTS IN AFRICA

As oil and counterterrorism concerns have risen on the U.S. policy agenda for sub-Saharan Africa during the past ten years, both the Bush and the Obama administrations have downplayed democracy and human rights in a growing number of countries for the sake of cooperation on these issues. Some current examples include:

- **Angola:** With Angola becoming a major oil exporter, the United States works assiduously to maintain friendly relations with Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos, despite his serious democratic deficiencies. In May 2009, Angola and the United States signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement to boost bilateral trade. In July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Assunção Afonso dos Anjos of Angola established the U.S.-Angola Strategic Partnership Dialogue.
- **Equatorial Guinea:** President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has ruled Equatorial Guinea with an iron hand since 1979, earning consistently abysmal scores from Freedom House. The country has become Africa's fourth-largest oil exporter, however, and the focus of U.S. relations with Equatorial Guinea is business, with little mention of politics. The United States is the single largest foreign investor in the country, primarily in the oil sector.
- **Ethiopia:** Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is a strongman ruler who eschews democratic niceties like free and fair elections but enjoys the status of valued ally in Washington, thanks to his active support of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, especially in Somalia and Yemen.
- **Rwanda:** Rwandan President Paul Kagame tolerates little opposition and his government is regularly accused of serious human rights abuses. But he has earned the status of useful partner of the U.S. government and his country is a major aid recipient, thanks to his contribution of peacekeeping troops in Darfur and his ability to make progress on socioeconomic development.
- **Uganda:** With Ugandan troops helping combat the Somali extremist group al-Shabab and the Ugandan government cooperating in other ways on U.S. counterterrorism efforts, President Yoweri Museveni largely gets a pass from Washington on his consistently undemocratic practices.

All three of these narratives were transformational accounts that cast the United States in the role not just as the primary determiner of the international security order but as a reshaper of the domestic political trajectory of many other countries. Today, no such narrative for U.S. foreign policy exists. The multiple fronts of Obama's foreign policy are not interconnected parts of one larger struggle and are not about remaking the world in the image of the United States. They are about the United States trying to protect its security and economic well-being in the face of myriad diverse challenges.

This absence of a central narrative, and one in which democracy promotion would have a natural place, is not a failing of President Obama and his foreign policy team. Rather, it is a reflection of the state of the world. After the Cold War framework of U.S. foreign policy ended, the international security landscape became increasingly heterogeneous, sparking a need for a matching heterogeneity of U.S. policy engagement. Acceptance by the U.S. foreign policy community and U.S. public of this heterogeneity was delayed for two decades—first by the initial post-Cold War conceit of America as a lone superpower that would dominate the international stage like a sort of benign maestro conducting a positive-sum symphony of economic and political globalization, and then by the post-9/11 perception that America's foreign policy once again should be structured around a single, dominant threat. But those two alternative visions have faded. The realities of a messy world, brimming with large, medium, and small threats of all sorts, require a parallel diversity of U.S. foreign policy endeavors. Greater multipolarity means a less dominant role for the United States, even though U.S. power remains formidable. This changed picture comes as a readjustment in the place of democracy promotion in the foreign policy agenda.

This change is unsatisfying to some, especially those who are dissatisfied with the fact of growing multipolarity and crave the reconstruction of a single, transformational narrative for U.S. foreign policy, one that is all about U.S. power and strength. It is likely that the debate over U.S. foreign policy in the unfolding presidential election campaign will play out as an argument across this larger divide. Democracy promotion may well get pulled into that debate as it is sometimes treated as a proxy for the larger issue of how assertive America should be in the world, especially toward hostile powers.

In tracing the evolution of foreign policy narratives over time, however, it is important not to end up shadowboxing with illusory images from the past. The place of democracy in the stated foreign policy agendas of the past three decades was impressive, but the actual policies on democracy that went on underneath the artful canopies of these story lines were always much more mixed than the soaring words implied.

Thus, Ronald Reagan's stalwart commitment to freedom coexisted with many continuing U.S. friendships with repressive autocrats, whether President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, President Suharto of Indonesia, President Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, the

various pro-U.S. autocrats in the Middle East, and others. President Clinton's attachment to bolstering democracy in a globalizing world gave significant deference to economic and security interests that undergirded friendly U.S. relations with dictatorial regimes throughout the Arab world and important parts of Central Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. President George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda" did not override the imperative of security cooperation with Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf, the value of intimate ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, and the utility of going easy on various African autocrats sitting on oil or helping with counterterrorism. All of these presidents kept their scruples on democracy and human rights sufficiently in check to get along reasonably well with the Chinese government.

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Thus, the unevenness of Obama's commitment to democracy abroad is more a continuation of a decades-long pattern than a change or a retreat. Moreover, it is true that as a result of a changed international landscape, the United States no longer has a central engagement on democracy promotion at the heart of its geostrategy similar either to the struggle to end Soviet tyranny or the early post-Cold War effort to help ensure the success of democracy in postcommunist Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Yet the United States remains engaged, as it has been for decades, in supporting democracy in numerous ways, large and small, in a very large number of places. In fact, the United States remains the most active and important supporter of democracy in the world.

Nevertheless, sustaining and sharpening the U.S. global role on democracy support remains a continual work in progress. Partisan debates over grand foreign policy narratives are a natural and necessary part of U.S. presidential campaigns. So, too, are the pointed clashes over how hard the United States should push some high-profile hostile governments, such as Iran's, on their democratic shortcomings and human rights failings. But these arguments can mask the fact that by far the vast majority of the daily work of democracy support is a matter of bipartisan agreement. And they may fail to highlight the less visible but often equally crucial issues for bolstering U.S. democracy support in the years ahead, whether under Democrats or Republicans, including: injecting at least some serious prodemocratic content into U.S. relations with putatively helpful autocrats; keeping as much democracy aid intact as possible in the coming almost certain wave of serious cuts in U.S. foreign assistance; completing the institutionalization of new

prodemocratic policy frameworks and mechanisms toward the Arab world to replace decades of default support for Arab autocrats; deepening the effort to build constructive ties with the growingly active non-Western arena of international democracy support; and above all, never losing sight of the powerful connection between the health of democracy in the United States and the credibility and power of U.S. democracy promotion abroad.

NOTES

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