Promoting Democracy and Fighting Terror

By Tom Carothers


SPLIT PERSONALITY

When George W. Bush took office two years ago, few observers expected that promoting democracy around the world would become a major issue in his presidency. During the 2000 presidential campaign Bush and his advisers had made it clear that they favored great-power realism over idealistic notions such as nation building or democracy promotion. And as expected, the incoming Bush team quickly busied itself with casting aside many policies closely associated with President Bill Clinton. Some analysts feared democracy promotion would also get the ax. But September 11 fundamentally altered this picture. Whether, where, and how the United States should promote democracy around the world have become central questions in U.S. policy debates with regard to a host of countries including Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, and many others.

Although the war on terrorism has greatly raised the profile of democracy as a policy matter, it has hardly clarified the issue. The United States faces two contradictory imperatives: on the one hand, the fight against al Qaeda tempts Washington to put aside its democratic scruples and seek closer ties with autocracies throughout the Middle East and Asia. On the other hand, U.S. officials and policy experts have increasingly come to believe that it is precisely the lack of democracy in many of these countries that helps breed Islamic extremism.

Resolving this tension will be no easy task. So far, Bush and his foreign policy team have shown an incipient, albeit unsurprising, case of split personality: "Bush the realist" actively cultivates warm relations with "friendly tyrants" in many parts of the world, while "Bush the neo-Reaganite" makes ringing calls for a vigorous new democracy campaign in the Middle East. How the administration resolves this uncomfortable dualism is central not only to the future of the war on terrorism but also to the shape and character of Bush's foreign policy as a whole.

FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

It is on and around the front lines of the campaign against al Qaeda that the tensions between America's pressing new security concerns and its democracy interests are most strongly felt. The most glaring case is Pakistan. The cold shoulder that Washington turned toward General Pervez Musharraf after he seized power in 1999 has been replaced by a bear hug. In recognition of the Pakistani leader's critical supporting role in the war on terrorism, the Bush administration has showered Musharraf with praise and attention, waived various economic sanctions, assembled a handsome aid package that exceeded $600 million in 2002, and restarted U.S.-Pakistan military cooperation.

Bush officials insist that they combine their embrace with frequent private messages to Musharraf about the importance of returning to democracy. But during the past year the Pakistani president has steadily consolidated his authoritarian grip, a process punctuated by a clumsy referendum last spring and a sweeping series of antidemocratic constitutional amendments in the summer. Bush and his aides have reacted only halfheartedly to this process, publicly repeating tepid calls for democracy but exerting no real pressure.

This soft line is a mistake and should be revised, yet the complexities of the situation must also be acknowledged. Pakistan's cooperation in the campaign against al Qaeda is not a nice extra -- it is vital. In addition, a return to democracy in Pakistan is not simply a matter of getting an authoritarian leader to step aside. The two main civilian political parties have failed the country several times, and during the 1990s discredited themselves in many Pakistanis' eyes with patterns of corruption, ineffectiveness,
and authoritarian behavior. Democratization will require a profound, multifaceted process of change in which Pakistan's military will have to not only give up formal leadership of the country but pull out of politics altogether. Meanwhile, the civilian politicians will have to remake themselves thoroughly and dedicate themselves to rebuilding public confidence in the political system. Rather than erring on the side of deference to Musharraf, Washington should articulate such a long-term vision for Pakistan and pressure all relevant actors there to work toward it.

Central Asia, meanwhile, presents a mosaic of dilemmas relating to the tradeoff between democracy and security in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. need for military bases and other forms of security cooperation in the region has moved Washington much closer to the autocratic leaders of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Even Saparmurat Niyazov, the totalitarian megalomaniac running Turkmenistan, received a friendly visit from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in April 2002. At the same time, U.S. officials are pushing for reform in the region, emphasizing to their local counterparts that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the region's states to obtain significant outside support for the full set of economic, political, and social reforms necessary to join the modern world.

Surprisingly, it is in Uzbekistan, one of the region's harshest dictatorships, where this dual approach may pay at least modest dividends. President Islam Karimov has undoubtedly received a boost at home from the new diplomatic attention, economic aid, and military partnership with the United States. Yet for the first time since Uzbekistan became independent, U.S. officials are also meeting regularly with a wide range of Uzbek officials and conveying strongly worded messages about the need for change. And there are signs of nascent political and economic reforms, albeit small, tentative ones. Karimov is still very much a dictator with little understanding of or interest in either democracy or market economics. But he also seems to realize that some positive moves are necessary to ensure his own political future and that the increased external support post-September 11 is a real opportunity.

Unfortunately, in Kazakhstan the U.S. approach appears less promising. President Nursultan Nazarbayev displays no interest in meeting the United States even partway. Instead, he is using the new context to tighten his dictatorial hold on the country and is openly spurning U.S. reform efforts. Given Kazakhstan's sizable oil and gas reserves, and Nazarbayev's cooperation on both security and economic measures, he appears to have calculated correctly that the Bush administration is unlikely to step up its mild pressure for reform. If the United States is serious about trying to steer Kazakhstan away from potentially disastrous authoritarian decay, however, Washington will have to become more forceful.

Kyrgyzstan is a more ambiguous but still discouraging case. President Askar Akayev is less dictatorial than Karimov or Nazarbayev but has also slid toward authoritarianism in recent years. The Bush administration has made some effort to steer him away from this unfortunate path. But it has not taken full advantage of the Kyrgyz elite's obvious eagerness for a close security relationship with the United States to push hard on key issues such as freeing political prisoners or curbing corruption.

Running throughout all of the new U.S. security relationships in South and Central Asia is an institutional divide that weakens the administration's ability to balance security and democracy. The State Department has shown some real commitment to raising human rights and democracy issues with these countries. The Pentagon, on the other hand, often focuses more on the immediate goal of securing military access or cooperation and less on the politics of the relevant host government. Given the importance that foreign leaders place on the U.S. military, they may sometimes assume that friendly words from the Pentagon mean they can ignore other messages they are receiving. Ensuring a consistent U.S. front on democracy and human rights, therefore, is a prerequisite for a coherent approach.

Afghanistan is perhaps the most telling example of this challenge. The initial post-September 11 action by the United States in that country was of course not a downgrading of democracy concerns but a sudden step forward, through the ouster of the fundamentalist Taliban regime. But the conduct of U.S. military operations there has since undermined the administration's promises of a lasting, deep com-
mitment to democratic reconstruction. The Pentagon initially relied on Afghan warlords as proxy fighters against al Qaeda, arming them and thus helping them consolidate their regional power. This assistance helped entrench the centrifugal politics that threaten Afghanistan's weak new government. Ironically, the strategy seems also to have been a partial military miscalculation, leading to the escape of a significant number of al Qaeda fighters at Tora Bora.

At the same time, administration opposition to the use of either U.S. or un peacekeeping troops outside of Kabul, and significant shortfalls in the delivery of promised aid, make it impossible for the Karzai government to guarantee security, gain meaningful control beyond the capital, or achieve legitimacy by delivering peace to its citizens. Ethnic rivalries, the opium trade, and newly empowered local strongmen make a return to state failure and civil war a very real possibility. Despite the insistence of many U.S. officials in the immediate aftermath of September 11 on the connection between failed states and vital U.S. security interests, the Bush team's aversion to nation building has not really changed.

No easy solutions to Afghanistan's profound political problems are in sight. At a minimum, however, the administration must strengthen its commitment to making reconstruction work. This means not only delivering more fully on aid, but exerting real pressure on regional power brokers to accept the Kabul government's authority and working harder to establish an Afghan national army. No matter how pressing are the other fronts of the war against al Qaeda (such as the increasingly worrisome situation in northern Pakistan), the United States must fulfill the responsibilities for reconstruction that came with its invasion of Afghanistan.

RIPPLE EFFECTS

The tensions posed by the war on terrorism for U.S. support of democracy abroad have quickly spread out beyond the immediate front lines. Southeast Asia is one affected region. Indonesia has become an important theater in the U.S. antiterrorist campaign, because of U.S. fears that al Qaeda leaders are taking refuge there and that the country's numerous Islamist groups are connecting with extremist networks. The White House continues to support Indonesia's shaky, somewhat democratic government. But in a setback on human rights policy, the administration has proposed restarting aid to the Indonesian military. That aid was progressively reduced during the 1990s in response to the Indonesian forces' atrocious human rights record and was finally terminated in 1999, when Indonesian troops participated in massacres in East Timor. Administration officials have downplayed this decision to renew military aid, stressing that most of the proposed $50 million package is directed at the police rather than the military. But the willingness of the U.S. government to enter into a partnership with a security force that just a few years ago was involved in a horrendous campaign of slaughter and destruction against civilians sends a powerful negative message throughout the region and beyond. Some officials argue that the new training programs will give U.S. military personnel a chance to instruct their Indonesian counterparts in human rights. But U.S. officials repeatedly made the same argument in defense of these programs in previous decades, right up to when the Indonesian military committed the human rights abuses that sank the relationship.

Malaysia's leader, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, is another beneficiary of a changed U.S. foreign policy. Mahathir has made himself useful to Washington by arresting Islamic militants, sharing intelligence, and cooperating in other ways with an antiterrorist campaign that neatly dovetails with his authoritarian domestic agenda. And in response, Washington's previous critical stance toward the Malaysian leader -- highlighted in Vice President Al Gore's much-publicized call for reformasi during his visit to Kuala Lumpur in 1998 -- has been reversed. Top U.S. officials now laud Mahathir as "a force for regional stability" and "a model of economic development that has demonstrated tolerance," and President Bush praised him at an amicable joint press conference after Mahathir's visit to the White House in May 2002.

An emphasis on democracy and human rights is also in question in U.S. policy toward Russia and China. Russia's new role as a U.S. ally in the war on terrorism has progressed less smoothly than some
initially hoped, with significant continuing differences over Iraq, Iran, Georgia, and other places. Nevertheless, President Bush regards President Vladimir Putin very favorably and has not pressed the Russian leader about his shortcomings on democracy and human rights, such as in Chechnya or with regard to maintaining a free press. Somewhat similarly, the Chinese government has been able to leverage the new security context to solidify a much friendlier U.S.-China relationship than seemed likely in the early months of 2001, when the Bush administration appeared to view China as threat number one.

In both cases, however, the change is more of degree than kind. Bush's surprisingly personal and warm embrace of Putin started before September 11, with Bush getting "a sense of [Putin's] soul" during their meeting in Slovenia in June 2001. And at no time prior to September 11, whether under Bush or Clinton before him, was the Russian government subjected to any significant U.S. government criticism for Chechnya or any of its other democratic flaws. With respect to China, it is true that September 11 did block movement toward a new hard-line policy from Washington that some administration hawks may have wanted. But the current relatively positive state of relations, with mild U.S. pressure on human rights greatly outweighed by an ample, mutually beneficial economic relationship, is not especially different from the overall pattern of the past decade or more.

One can look even further afield and identify possible slippage in U.S. democracy policies resulting from the war on terrorism, such as insufficient attention to the growing crisis of democracy in South America or inadequate pressure on oil-rich Nigeria's flailing president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to turn around his increasingly poor governance of Africa's most populous nation. Ironically, and also sadly, however, the greatest source of negative ripple effects has come from the administration's pursuit of the war on terrorism at home. The heightened terrorist threat has inevitably put pressure on U.S. civil liberties. But the administration failed to strike the right balance early on, unnecessarily abridging or abusing rights through the large-scale detention of immigrants, closed deportation hearings, and the declaration of some U.S. citizens as "enemy combatants" with no right to counsel or even to contest the designation. The Justice Department's harsh approach sent a powerful negative signal around the world, emboldening governments as diverse as those of Belarus, Cuba, and India to curtail domestic liberties, supposedly in aid of their own struggles against terrorism. In the United States, an independent judiciary and powerful Congress ensure that the appropriate balance between security and rights is gradually being achieved. In many countries, however, the rule of law is weak and copycat restrictions on rights resound much more harmfully.

REAGAN REBORN?

Whereas "Bush the realist" holds sway on most fronts in the war on terrorism, a neo-Reaganite Bush may be emerging in the Middle East. In the initial period after September 11, the administration turned to its traditional autocratic allies in the Arab world, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, for help against al Qaeda. This move did not sacrifice any U.S. commitment to democracy; for decades, the United States had already suppressed any such concerns in the region, valuing autocratic stability for the sake of various economic and security interests. Over the course of the last year, however, a growing chorus of voices within and around the administration has begun questioning the value of America's "friendly tyrants" in the Middle East. These individuals highlight the fact that whereas the autocratic allies once seemed to be effective bulwarks against Islamic extremism, the national origins of the September 11 attackers make clear that these nations are in fact breeders, and in the case of Saudi Arabia, financiers, of extremism. Invoking what they believe to be the true spirit of President Ronald Reagan's foreign policy, they call for a change toward promoting freedom in U.S. Middle East policy. The core idea of the new approach is to undercut the roots of Islamic extremism by getting serious about promoting democracy in the Arab world, not just in a slow, gradual way, but with fervor and force.

President Bush is clearly attracted by this idea. Last summer his declarations on the Middle East shifted noticeably in tone and content, setting out a vision of democratic change there. According to this vision, the United States will first promote democracy in the Palestinian territories by linking U.S.
support for a Palestinian state with the achievement of new, more democratic Palestinian leadership. Second, the United States will effect regime change in Iraq and help transform that country into a democracy. The establishment of two successful models of Arab democracy will have a powerful demonstration effect, "inspiring reforms throughout the Muslim world," as Bush declared at the United Nations in September. As the policies toward Iraq and Palestine unfold, the administration may also step up pressure on recalcitrant autocratic allies and give greater support to those Arab states undertaking at least some political reforms, such as some of the smaller Persian Gulf states. The decision last August to postpone a possible aid increase to Egypt as a response to the Egyptian government's continued persecution of human rights activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim was a small step in this direction.

It is not yet clear how sharply Bush will shift U.S. Middle East policy toward promoting democracy. Certainly it is time to change the long-standing practice of reflexively relying on and actually bolstering autocracy in the Arab world. But the expansive vision of a sudden, U.S.-led democratization of the Middle East rests on questionable assumptions. To start with, the appealing idea that by toppling Saddam Hussein the United States can transform Iraq into a democratic model for the region is dangerously misleading. The United States can certainly oust the Iraqi leader and install a less repressive and more pro-Western regime. This would not be the same, however, as creating democracy in Iraq. The experience of other countries where in recent decades the United States has forcibly removed dictatorial regimes -- Grenada, Panama, Haiti, and most recently Afghanistan -- indicates that post-invasion political life usually takes on the approximate character of the political life that existed in the country before the ousted regime came to power. After the 1982 U.S. military intervention in Grenada, for example, that country was able to recover the tradition of moderate pluralism it had enjoyed before the 1979 takeover by Maurice Bishop and his gang. Haiti, after the 1994 U.S. invasion, has unfortunately slipped back into many of the pathologies that marked its political life before the military junta took over in 1991. Iraqi politics prior to Saddam Hussein were violent, divisive, and oppressive. And the underlying conditions in Iraq -- not just the lack of significant previous experience with pluralism but also sharp ethnic and religious differences and an oil-dependent economy -- will inevitably make democratization there very slow and difficult. Even under the most optimistic scenarios, the United States would have to commit itself to a massive, expensive, demanding, and long-lasting reconstruction effort. The administration's inadequate commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction undercuts assurances by administration officials that they will stay the course in a post-Saddam Iraq.

Furthermore, the notion that regime change in Iraq, combined with democratic progress in the Palestinian territories, would produce domino democratization around the region is far-fetched. A U.S. invasion of Iraq would likely trigger a surge in the already prevalent anti-Americanism in the Middle East, strengthening the hand of hard-line Islamist groups and provoking many Arab governments to tighten their grip, rather than experiment more boldly with political liberalization. Throughout the region, the underlying economic, political, and social conditions are unfavorable for a wave of democratic breakthroughs. This does not mean the Arab world will never democratize. But it does mean that democracy will be decades in the making and entail a great deal of uncertainty, reversal, and turmoil. The United States can and should actively support such democratic change through an expanded, sharpened set of democracy aid programs and real pressure and support for reforms. But as experience in other parts of the world has repeatedly demonstrated, the future of the region will be determined primarily by its own inhabitants.

Aggressive democracy promotion in the Arab world is a new article of faith among neoconservatives inside and outside the administration. However, it combines both the strengths and the dangers typical of neo-Reaganite policy as applied to any region. Perhaps the most important strength is the high importance attached to the president's using his bully pulpit to articulate a democratic vision and to attach his personal prestige to the democracy-building endeavor.

But two dangers are also manifest. One is the instrumentalization of prodemocracy policies -- wrapping security goals in the language of democracy promotion and then confusing democracy promotion with the search for particular political outcomes that enhance those security goals. This was often a
The administration demonstrated worrisome signs of the same tendency last April during the short-lived coup against Venezuela's problematic populist president, Hugo Chávez. Washington appeared willing or even eager to accept a coup against the leader of an oil-rich state who is despised by many in the U.S. government for his anti-American posturing and dubious economic and political policies. But given that it came in a region that has started to work together to oppose coups, and that other regional governments condemned Chavez's ouster, the administration's approach undermined the United States' credibility as a supporter of democracy. If democracy promotion is reduced to an instrumental strategy for producing political outcomes favorable to U.S. interests, the value and legitimacy of the concept will be lost.

The second danger is overestimating America's ability to export democracy. U.S. neoconservatives habitually overstate the effect of America's role in the global wave of democratic openings that occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, they often argue that the Reagan administration brought democracy to Latin America through its forceful anticommunism in the 1980s. Yet the most significant democratization that occurred in Argentina, Brazil, and various other parts of South America took place in the early 1980s, when Reagan was still trying to embrace the fading right-wing dictators that Jimmy Carter had shunned on human rights grounds. Excessive optimism about U.S. ability to remake the Middle East, a region far from ripe for a wave of democratization, is therefore a recipe for trouble -- especially given the administration's proven disinclination to commit itself deeply to the nation building that inevitably follows serious political disruption.

A FINE BALANCE

The clashing imperatives of the war on terrorism with respect to U.S. democracy promotion have led to a split presidential personality and contradictory policies -- decreasing interest in democracy in some countries and suddenly increasing interest in one region, the Middle East. The decreases are widespread and probably still multiplying, given the expanding character of the antiterrorism campaign. Yet they are not fatal to the overall role of the United States as a force for democracy in the world. Some of them are relatively minor modifications of policies that for years imperfectly fused already conflicting security and political concerns. And in at least some countries where it has decided warmer relations with autocrats are necessary, the Bush administration is trying to balance new security ties with proreform pressures.

More broadly, in many countries outside the direct ambit of the war on terrorism, the Bush administration is trying to bolster fledgling democratic governments and pressure nondemocratic leaders for change, as have the past several U.S. administrations. Sometimes diplomatic pressure is used, as with Belarus, Zimbabwe, and Burma. In other cases, Washington relies on less visible means such as economic and political support as well as extensive democracy aid programs, as with many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, southeastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Central America, and elsewhere. Quietly and steadily during the last 20 years, democracy promotion has become institutionalized in the U.S. foreign policy and foreign aid bureaucracies. Although not an automatically overriding priority, it is almost always one part of the foreign policy picture. Partly to address "the roots of terrorism," moreover, the administration has also proposed a very large new aid fund, the $5 billion Millennium Challenge Account. By signaling that good governance should be a core criterion for disbursing aid
from this fund, President Bush has positioned it as a potentially major tool for bolstering democracies in the developing world.

Although the new tradeoffs prompted by the war on terrorism are unfortunate, and in some cases overdone, the fact that U.S. democracy concerns are limited by security needs is hardly a shocking new problem. Democracy promotion has indeed become gradually entrenched in U.S. policy, but both during and after the Cold War it has been limited and often greatly weakened by other U.S. interests. President Clinton made liberal use of pro-democracy rhetoric and did support democracy in many places, but throughout his presidency, U.S. security and economic interests -- whether in China, Egypt, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, or various other countries -- frequently trumped an interest in democracy. The same was true in the George H.W. Bush administration and certainly also under Ronald Reagan, whose outspoken support for freedom in the communist world was accompanied by close U.S. relations with various authoritarian regimes useful to the United States, such as those led by Suharto in Indonesia, Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, the generals of Nigeria, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party of Mexico.

George W. Bush is thus scarcely the first U.S. president to evidence a split personality on democracy promotion. But the suddenness and prominence of his condition, as a result of the war on terrorism, makes it especially costly. It is simply hard for most Arabs, or many other people around the world, to take seriously the president's eloquent vision of a democratic Middle East when he or his top aides casually brush away the authoritarian maneuverings of Musharraf in Pakistan, offer warm words of support for Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, or praise Mahathir in Malaysia. The war on terrorism has laid bare the deeper fault line that has lurked below the surface of George W. Bush's foreign policy from the day he took office -- the struggle between the realist philosophy of his father and the competing pull of neo-Reaganism.

There is no magic solution to this division, which is rooted in a decades-old struggle for the foreign policy soul of the Republican Party and will undoubtedly persist in various forms throughout this administration and beyond. For an effective democracy-promotion strategy, however, the Bush team must labor harder to limit the tradeoffs caused by the new security imperatives and also not go overboard with the grandiose idea of trying to unleash a democratic tsunami in the Middle East. This means, for example, engaging more deeply in Pakistan to urge military leaders and civilian politicians to work toward a common vision of democratic renovation, adding teeth to the reform messages being delivered to Central Asia's autocrats, ensuring that the Pentagon reinforces proreform messages to new U.S. security partners, not cutting Putin slack on his democratic deficits, going easy on the praise for newly friendly tyrants, more effectively balancing civil rights and security at home, and openly criticizing other governments that abuse the U.S. example. In the Middle East, it means developing a serious, well-funded effort to promote democracy that reflects the difficult political realities of the region but does not fall back on an underlying acceptance of only cosmetic changes. This will entail exerting sustained pressure on autocratic Arab allies to take concrete steps to open up political space and undertake real institutional reforms, bolstering democracy aid programs in the region, and finding ways to engage moderate Islamist groups and encourage Arab states to bring them into political reform processes.

Such an approach is defined by incremental gains, long-term commitment, and willingness to keep the post-September 11 security imperatives in perspective. As such it has neither the hard-edged appeal of old-style realism nor the tantalizing promise of the neconservative visions. Yet in the long run it is the best way to ensure that the war on terrorism complements rather than contradicts worldwide democracy and that the strengthening of democracy abroad is a fundamental element of U.S. foreign policy in the years ahead.